

Playful spaces, space for emotions

Espacios lúdicos, espacio de emociones

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Abstract

This study unfolds through a pedagogical experience conducted in a space dedicated to playful activities, aiming to analyze the emotions generated by this space. The objective of this research is to understand the emotions evoked by the playful space, referred to as the "bubble." The space was conceived as a place that could help improve the students' social conditions and explore how play practices could contribute to emotional management and enhanced resilience. A phenomenological and hermeneutic methodology was employed for analyzing the collected data, which was gathered through a questionnaire administered via interviews. Preliminary results indicate that the students expressed emotions of joy, happiness, fun, and confidence.

Resumen

El presente trabajo se desarrolla a través de una experiencia pedagógica, la cual se desarrolla en un espacio en el que se llevan a cabo actividades lúdicas, tratando de analizar las emociones que genera ese espacio. El objetivo de esta investigación es conocer qué emociones genera el espacio lúdico, llamado burbuja. Se pensó en el espacio cómo un lugar que podría ayudar a mejorar sus condiciones sociales y cómo las prácticas de juego podrían contribuir a una gestión de las emociones y a mejorar su resiliencia. La metodología fue de carácter fenomenológico y hermenéutico para el análisis de la información recabada, la cual fue realizada a través de un cuestionario a través de entrevistas. Los resultados previos muestran que los estudiantes expresan emociones de alegría, felicidad, diversión y confianza.

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Objective	Methodology	Contribution
To understand what emotions the play space, called the bubble, generates	A phenomenological and hermeneutic methodology was employed for analysing the collected data, which was gathered through a questionnaire administered via interviews	Recognizing that play spaces help manage emotions and therefore strengthen resilience in students

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Objetivo	Metodología	Contribución
Conocer qué emociones genera el espacio lúdico, llamado burbuja	La metodología fue de carácter fenomenológico y hermenéutico para el análisis de la información recabada, la cual fue realizada a través de un cuestionario a través de entrevistas.	Reconocer que los espacios lúdicos ayudan a gestionar las emociones y por ende fortalece la resiliencia en las y los estudiantes.

Games, Playfull and emotions

Juego, Lúdica y emociones

Area: Promotion of frontier research and basic science in all fields of knowledge

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Introduction

In classrooms, there are not only concerns about teaching methods or learning rhythms, but also social and emotional issues. Classrooms are mirrors of macrosocial realities; they are the place where previous socializations converge. One of these realities that seeps into classrooms is the various forms of tense relationships, such as hostile glances, whispering, not greeting each other, placing backpacks next to chairs to isolate oneself from others. These conditions are a call to the task of educating, because they need to be humanized.

As a result of the above, this led to the idea that play could help improve social conditions, and certain play practices contributed to this. From there, the decision was made to go further and create a playful space for constant work. Situations continued to arise that prevented free play from flowing, with expressions such as: 'we have history', meaning that they have experienced aggression and emotional distancing, as well as an idea of internal competition: 'I have to earn my place and be the best', 'I'm tired of helping my classmates, they won't let me get ahead'. Added to the above are social context conditions, such as the use of screens, 'I'm afraid to be myself, what if someone is recording me and uploading it to the internet?' In an environment of insecurity and lack of smoothness, it is not possible to build playful, loving and congratulatory spaces; there will always be reserve in being genuine, although there will always be a presence of diverse emotions.

As can be seen in the above lines, the management of emotions in university students is still in development, and it is still difficult for them to manage them. To help develop emotions, self-knowledge is required, but above all, self-recognition of those emotions that become thick, that is, recognition of how the body expresses those emotions, in order to subsequently achieve emotion management. It is also necessary to know that emotions will always be present, at every moment of the day and in the different spaces in which we live.

In order to achieve continuity in the management of emotions, the aim was to create an environment of trust and free expression through play and art.

The first step was to build a safe place where there is no fear of being, but also the confidence to be contained and to contain, and even more so to be in a place to be happy. The objective was a playful space to experience emotions for the construction of emotional bonds. For Bauman [2002 and 2010], this is a time when social structures that do not provide support for people to relate to others with love are weakening, as insecurity, uncertainty and mistrust in proximity to others are experienced [Bauman and Donskis, 2015], leading to a loss of tenderness and giving way to scenarios of violence, indifference and little social commitment. How can a playful space contribute to loving relationships in the classroom? The creation of a playful space implies a territory to be inhabited from a playful and emotional perspective, from imagination, collaboration, festive encounters and loving treatment.

For this study, a theoretical framework was constructed that recovered the central idea of what a playful space is and its link to emotions. The playful space was conceptualised as an intentional space that transcends the physical to encourage play, enjoyment and encounter. The playful space is a constant construction that fosters rootedness, expression of emotions and social learning.

The methodological study described, which was phenomenological and hermeneutic in nature, sought to experience this playful space in order to observe and describe the emotions triggered. Through techniques such as participant observation, field notes and interviews, the subjective experiences of the participants were recovered. The results highlight that play allows emotions to surface and be managed, fosters resilience and creates emotional bonds through tenderness, which is crucial even in university education to train emotionally competent professionals.

Background

The experience of being in school spaces, such as the classroom, has a meaning in itself: a square, inflexible design, specific furniture for teaching and learning activities, and an arrangement that allows for the development of classes. Proposing a different space implies reconfiguring school spaces.

The construction of a playful space is not only the physical space, but also the meaning it takes on day by day; hence it is a constant process, a yes sustained in time and space, a commitment to be there based on trust, which in turn allows the development of social, cognitive and emotional skills that enable one to be and exist in the world. The play space is not only a question of attitude, a desire to be, but also of feeling rooted and belonging to a physical place that allows for the deployment of specific practices.

The play space is an intentional space that is set up to encourage play among its participants. It is a place with toys, games and furniture [Moreno, 2012] available to invite enjoyment and interaction. This invites us to redefine the space, to inhabit it with joy, to give it a different meaning in life and to create an idea of a happy world, which means taking a leap into fun and allowing ourselves to feel emotions.

According to research carried out by Bowen, Bravo, Delgado, Pico and Sánchez [2025, p. 498] the implementation of playful activities in the classroom has a positive effect on the development of emotional intelligence, since through a series of playful activities, students are able to identify their emotions, as well as manage sadness or anger, and make decisions under a scheme of balanced emotions through reflective thinking. Therefore, the use of playful activities in the classroom is a viable strategy for achieving different pedagogical objectives, but also for training citizens with the ability to manage their emotions and thus interact in a healthy and positive way.

Muñoz [2024, p. 167] comments that emotional intelligence refers to feelings and emotions in human beings, which have universal forms of expression, and it is through the experience of play that these emotions and feelings are expressed naturally. Buitrago [2021, p. 5] defines feelings as lasting emotional states, while emotions are defined as immediate responses to the environment. This is where playfulness plays its greatest role, as the emotions expressed during play are natural expressions at their finest. Emotional intelligence is precisely the ability to control, understand and identify our feelings and emotions, recognising them in others and directing and balancing them, according to Jurado [2009, p. 1].

Consequently, emotional intelligence not only allows us to manage our emotions but also to recognize them in the people we interact with, which enables a healthy and open relationship with others.

It is necessary to make a digression with regard to the culture of the school space. The playful space is made possible by reinterpreting a space through play and emotion, creating and expressing what lies within, discovering new abilities and skills. Iuri and Villafuerte [2022] argue that experience produces a benefit in intellectual development and understanding of the world, because it helps to distance oneself from culture and imagine new horizons. It also produces emotions that provoke pleasant sensations, leading to immersion in play, that is, a process of questioning the world for its order, seeking answers, as well as giving free rein to one's emotions. Play makes it possible to construct new meanings of life, new ways of communicating the inner world through love and tenderness.

Emotional intelligence is a concept developed by Salovey and Mayer, who coin this concept as a way of controlling and regulating one's own feelings and those of others in order to master thought and behaviour. [Correa, 2021]. Human beings are, by nature, emotions and feelings from the moment they are born. Emotions are universal expressions of how human beings feel and, of course, of recognizing emotions in others.

This allows for the development of empathy, the management of one's own emotions and the development of those emotions. Emotional intelligence develops mainly from the early stages of life, but it is important that it continues to develop throughout life. However, there is a belief that, in university education, emotional intelligence should not be worked on in the classroom and that students arrive at educational institutions with all the necessary skills.

But the reality is that even at university level, it is necessary to continue supporting students in the development of their emotional intelligence, because this allows them to adapt authentically, overcoming different adversities and difficulties, while at the same time learning from experience, all of which is reflected in their resilience.

The development of students' emotions also takes place in the classroom, through academic activities themselves and, of course, through the various educational activities carried out in the classroom. From the theoretical proposal of emotional intelligence, progress is made in the development of different skills that go hand in hand with it, such as social and emotional development, as it contributes to the way people relate to each other; and cognitive development, because it allows students to develop their critical thinking and creativity. Being able to manage emotions allows each individual to achieve positive mental health that helps them deal maturely with the different situations they face throughout their lives. And, of course, we cannot forget learning, as this occurs naturally when the emotions generated are positive, giving way to natural learning.

Nieves, Muñoz and Hernández [2024, p. 41] comment that play is about committing to containing impulses or managing negative emotions and, through reason, being in control of oneself; it is about assuming an “as if” attitude based on emotion and reason, suspending that which separates. In the same way, playfulness allows emotions to be shown, but at the same time, it allows those that are not part of the game to be contained. In other words, it allows for the management of one's own emotions in order to continue developing skills in the way they relate to others. This involves an act of resilience, which most often manifests itself as an obstacle in different playful activities and within the classroom. Acuña emphasizes the importance of continuing to develop emotion management throughout the university professionalization process, as shown in the following lines:

Among the factors involved in a student having a high level of resilience to face the challenges encountered during their professional training is emotional intelligence, which is known as a person's ability to recognize their own emotions, recognize the emotions of others, express their emotions appropriately, and discriminate between the positive, negative, sincere, and hypocritical emotions of others. In other words, when one has adequate emotional intelligence, one can cope with adverse situations and find the most assertive ways to overcome difficulties. [Acuña *et al* 2021, p. 3].

Continuing to develop emotional intelligence in university students is of utmost importance, because its development has an impact on their personal and social lives and on their future when they enter the workforce. Playfulness plays an important role in this area, because it has an impact on both their learning of the subject matter and on their interaction with the group and with the rest of society. Playfulness allows emotions to surface that are often suppressed in academic and training spaces. On the other hand, if these types of activities are not carried out, the training of future professionals is compromised, without considering that they will also work with people in their future work environment.

Methodology

The main objective was to experience a playful space for the experience and recognition of emotions, with the aim of encountering others with tenderness and triggering positive emotions. The research sought to observe and describe the forms of play and emotions experienced, based on the meaning given to each of the playful activities and their emotions [Schwartz, 2006]. The research was non-experimental and descriptive in nature because the immediate context of play was observed for the description and analysis of the phenomenon, based on the genuine expressions of what triggers the playful encounter, in order to understand what emotions the space generates.

In order to study the experiences from the perspective of emotional intelligence theory, it was necessary to use phenomenological and hermeneutic methods as a way of recovering, describing and interpreting the subjective experience of enjoyment and the recognition of emotions. Investigating the experience of play as a moment of multiple emotions and identifying the internal factors that give meaning to that moment of existence and that can be extended to everyday life can be approached from phenomenology, a method that brings to light and shows the person from their subjectivity [Heidegger, 2014].

In a second stage, work was done to understand these experiences. To do this, it is necessary to reorganize the experiences and understand how the subject assimilated them in their daily life.

Heidegger [2014] mentions that interpretation consists of perceiving how something is as something, explaining the purpose of things in their development for projection into the world. Recovering the life experience involved recovering those things or situations that limit or diminish existence, as well as those that enhance the emotional encounter, from emotions, ways of naming oneself in the world, and what makes one enjoy the encounter with the other.

Methods, techniques, and instruments

emotions of pleasure or displeasure in life, which limit one from being what one desires. The aim of the interview was for the person to give a biographical account of themselves, recounting their life experiences, those moments they consider most significant [Moriña, 2017], the emotions they generate, and what it meant to them to hear stories and the lessons they learned from these experiences.

Internal participant observation invited them to take on the role of another player in the activities to share joys and fears and to live the moment in an empathetic and committed way. This allows students to continue developing the management of their emotions and, of course, the recognition of them in themselves and in others. At other times, I was an external observer, without inferring or modifying the experiences of describing and recording how the session unfolded [Girardi, 2011].

The field diary was used as a tool for recording experiences in the play space. Another research technique was the interview, which allowed them to use their own voice to express fears, anger, confusion, as well as longings, hopes and desires. The aim of these experiences was to recognise situations that limit and enrich the emotional bond.

Ethical considerations

This project is based on safeguarding human dignity, for which voluntary consent is essential, and was therefore provided to all participating students.

Results

La Burbuja: a playful space

A playful space is one that invites play and happy moments, and this is what characterizes La Burbuja, because what it has awakened in the students is a space for play and enjoyment, from the physical space itself to the experiences that take place there. 'A space with cheerful colours, with plenty of things to do, which is open to creativity,' it is a space that invites you to leave the seriousness of the classroom behind and enter a time when anything is possible through creativity. La Burbuja has a set-up of spaces and games that can provide students with a moment of motor movement through dancing, or an exercise in imagination to paint a mural or become a city builder through a board game. It is a space that triggers multiple alternatives in proportion to the different personalities of the students, who become potential players in the playful space through the imagination and creativity brought into play.

The play space fulfils its purpose by awakening the desire to play, creating an atmosphere that invites encounter and a feeling of freedom. The space awakens the intrinsic well-being of sharing and coexisting with others, strengthening the idea of being a group. When spontaneous laughter is encouraged, it becomes a channel for releasing tension and expressing emotions in a genuine way. Joy becomes a common language that opens channels for communication and cooperation. The play space fulfils its task when play ceases to be a mere activity and becomes a meaningful experience of human encounter.

Emotions in the bubble

The results show a variety of emotions in their different stages, which are shown below

1. Responsibility for managing the bubble

Most of the time, when you take responsibility for something, such as managing the bubble, which involves administering it, cleaning it before and after carrying out activities, organizing materials and seeing what else can be incorporated to make the experience enriching, as well as organizing with colleagues who are invited to the space itself, management skills are required.

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This entails a responsibility that generates different types of emotions, from fear and anxiety, which is triggered by decision-making and, at other times, by not feeling confident that one has the necessary skills for its administration. Similarly, students are pursuing a degree in management, which involves organizing activity spaces, materials and, above all, human capital management, which goes hand in hand with the aim of enjoying recreational experiences in a specific space. In turn, they report feeling very happy and cheerful.

2. Upon entering and remaining in the bubble

The students refer to entering the bubble as a feeling of happiness and tranquillity, as they know it will be a space where they can leave behind the stress and anxiety that comes with studying for a profession. Other students report feeling calm, joyful, and loving, as well as enthusiastic because they know they will have a peaceful and fun time. Similarly, what triggers all these positive feelings is that they consider it a space where they can leave stress and anxiety behind and enjoy themselves as friends, which they also value as a space where they can release all their academic stress. The bubble space, through play, allows them to be open to creativity, feeling free and unrestricted, even being able to laugh without feeling ashamed and, of course, playing with their classmates.

3. Emotions after the bubble experience

The students who have participated in this playful experience in the bubble comment that after their stay in it, they feel less stressed, as being together with their friends helps them to lower their stress levels. They also say that being in the bubble makes them feel happy and relaxed, excited, cheerful, more alive and less worried, and more confident in themselves. It also generates negative feelings, such as frustration, when they see that there are people who do not take care of the space and do not really take advantage of the opportunity to experience play as a tool to reduce stress and have a good time.

4. Leaving the bubble space

In general, students comment that they feel less stressed after leaving the bubble. They comment that in this space they can relax with their friends, but there are also those who report that it is an emotional roller coaster due to the conflict caused by leaving the bubble.

They also express that having a space for play and relaxation has greatly improved the integration and relationship between group members, keeping them more united and confident as they have fun and laugh together. In turn, they say that they feel more connected, integrated and not excluded. In conclusion, the students say that the bubble is a great responsibility, not only because of the space, but also because of the satisfaction of having revived such a beautiful space that manages to spark joy and happiness.

Discussion

Play ceases to be a mere activity and becomes a meaningful experience of human encounter in a playful space, a space that evokes joy, genuine expression of emotions and the ability to build strong bonds between peers, becoming moments that enrich the emotional and social dimension of the students. The bubble is a space for play but also for the expression of emotions.

The playful space, designed for play and exploration, acts as a catalyst for emotions such as joy, surprise, enthusiasm and fun. This moment is what Moreno [2012] called emptiness, which is the release from the everyday, letting down one's guard or ceasing to be in the mode of duty. It is what allows one to experience new emotions, stimuli and sensations that give way to experiences filled with tenderness. This safe environment allows emotions such as joy to flourish spontaneously, which is essential for psychological well-being and the creation of memorable and positive experiences.

This experience of emptiness is the possibility of renewing energy, of giving oneself over to play [Moreno, 2012 and Daniela, 2016] and being able to fill oneself with the new, and that is where emotional management begins, because the playful space invites people to face challenges, rules and social interactions that naturally evoke a range of emotions, including frustration, fear or anger, and this helps emotional regulation, because playing is a kind of 'as if' and allows for the experimentation of the new. The space acts as a safe 'training ground' where it is permissible to feel and, at the same time, practise regulating these impulses to maintain the cohesion of the game, thus fostering resilience and emotional intelligence.

For Huizinga [2014], play is a kind of role-playing, and this makes the moment an empathetic encounter, because it is pleasant to be with others and the world; the playful space generates empathetic connection and encounters filled with tenderness. Both Huizinga [2014] and Moreno [2012] mention that sharing a playful experience generates emotional harmony among players.

The playful space is par excellence the expression of emotions and complicity [Jiménez, 2007]. Collective laughter, complicity in a strategy, or the open expression of emotions create a bridge of mutual understanding. This not only allows us to recognise our own emotions, but also to read and interpret those of others, strengthening empathy and emotional bonds through tenderness and trust.

As can be seen in the results, the bubble as a playful space generates positive emotions, from happiness, tranquillity, laughter and integration among the participants and members of the different groups involved in the bubble project. In this way, it can be seen that spaces of this type help young university students to continue managing their emotions and, in this way, to forge future professionals in a comprehensive manner, as future citizens of the world, with human qualities, which are necessary in these times.

Conclusions

For a recreational space to fulfil its function of bringing joy and triggering positive emotions, it needs to be appropriated and a commitment made to be an active player who uses their imagination and creativity. The recreational space is a place to be genuine.

In addition to all of the above, it can be inferred that recreational spaces, such as the bubble, have a positive impact on young undergraduate students, as they allow them to manage their emotions and strengthen their resilience in the face of the different situations they encounter in their daily lives. In this way, the recreational space can be considered a strategic tool in the training of future professionals, who will face the vicissitudes of working life, based on their experience in the classrooms of their training.

Declarations

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Authors' contributions

Mayra Araceli Nieves Chávez assisted with the fieldwork, literature review and writing of this paper.

Beatriz Elena Muñoz Serna assisted with the fieldwork, literature review and writing of this document.

Availability of information

Available with ethical restrictions.

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Background

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