Designing Provocative Education Environments for Teacher Training Emancipatory Practices

DOI: 10.47050/66515314.220–241

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This chapter introduces a teaching collaboration practice with students of the National University of Education in Ecuador who will become early childhood teachers. It is the aim of this experience to design provocative educational environments within university classrooms to inform emancipatory practices in teacher training. In doing so, students are encouraged to think on their own learning practices as an emancipatory source for developing a culture of collaboration, participation and critical thinking. In this light, classes described across the chapter show the didactic strategy of educational provocation as a teaching method that allows for mentorship, formative assessment and the active participation of apprentices. Against this background, the methodological approach is based on the inspiring experience of Reggio Emilia to elaborate on provocations' didactics and the concept of the environment as a third teacher. Then, it is debated whether there is an emancipatory potential in creating provocative educational environments that mediate the pedagogic relations among teachers, students, content and the world of children.

Keywords:

early childhood
emancipation
environment
provocations
teacher training

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Introduction

It is well known in early childhood education how school environments promote children learning (Castro Pérez & Morales Ramirez, 2015; Vecchi, 2013; Fraser, 2012; Rinaldi, 2009; Hoyuelos, 2005; Ceppi & Zini, 1998; Gandini, 1998); however, scarce research has been conducted on how environments encourage university students' learning, especially in teacher education. Against this backdrop, this pedagogic experience promotes thinking about the relevance of understanding the environment as **a third teacher** in early childhood teacher training. With the objective of thinking on appropriate educational environments with/for children, future teachers are invited to experience a provocative educational environment designed for their own learning process through a lively approach that helps to reflect on the importance of creating adequate learning environments in early childhood education. In this sense, this work is inspired by the pedagogic approach of Reggio Emilia that introduces the environment as a relevant actor in promoting children's learning.

Following from the above, this paper elaborates on a teaching collaboration practice with first-semester students of the Early Childhood Education bachelor's degree at the National University of Education (UNAE), Ecuador. This teaching practice suggests designing provocative educational environments within university classrooms to inform emancipatory practices in teacher training. Also, in this practice, it is asked whether there is an emancipatory potential in creating provocative educational environments that mediate the pedagogic relations among teachers, students, content and the world.

The experience is informed by the university's Pedagogic Model (UNAE, 2017) that encourages critical thinking through emancipatory pedagogic practices in favour of equity, diversity and inclusion. Furthermore, it focuses on the development of research skills in/for teaching and the link with the community during that process. More particularly, the experience was held in the subject named "Diagnostic Approach of Educational Policies in Specific Educational Institutions in coordination with the subject Subjects and Educational Contexts". The first subject is part of the pre-professional practices done at schools, and allows for theoretical and experiential learning. It is worth mentioning that students attend early childhood schools to learn from practices from the very beginning of their course. In the first cycle

of their course, they only attend school six times, once a week; then, they are able to reflect at the university about their experiences and are asked to do an integrated project based on a problem concerning educational policies in early childhood. The problems vary across each semester of their teacher training, and the frequency of their attendance at schools also varies across their teacher training; with each cycle, pre-professional practices are increased in frequency, as is their permanence at school. A pre-professional practice in the last semester of the course reaches a nine-week-period of daily attendance at school. Accordingly, the higher the training stage of the students, the more responsibility they have during their pre-professional practices. Across their teacher training programme (from first to ninth semester), students have three common axes that orient their practices, that is, to observe, to accompany, and to experience.

In addition, the subjects taught during the teacher training programme engage with practical situations, problems, cases and projects worked on in class in relation to school practices. Against this background, an arranged provocative environment in early childhood teacher training is presented with the aim of designing emancipatory educational environments for/with children, inspired by the pre-professional practices of the students.

Theoretical framework

The article bases its theoretical discussion on inspiring educational and emancipatory practices in early childhood education. In particular, the Reggio Emilia pedagogic approach is developed, specifically, in its way of understanding and conceptualising the environment to promote learning. In this sense, the main issues concerning the environment as the third teacher in the Reggio approach are described to enhance debates about environments that promote emancipatory learning processes with students who will become early childhood teachers.

The Reggio Emilia approach

The northern Italian community of Reggio Emilia is known worldwide for its approach to childhood, based on a **pedagogy of listening**, in which the design of environments is thought to develop **the hundred languages of children**, as described by Loris Malaguzzi, to give full expression to the many potentialities of children.

The origin of the Reggio Emilia approach is found during the post-World War II period, where citizens and families organised themselves to promote a nursery school that was engaged in and responsible for the future of children with a political and social commitment (Stegelin & Cecconi, 2013). By that time, Malaguzzi was a teacher, who joined the community's efforts and developed what is now known as the Reggio Emilia approach. In the late 1960s, the schools were included in the municipal system; this allowed an increase of efforts in the development of the educational project centred on the child. This initiative continued growing in the community itself but also internationally.

In this educational setting, children are able to experience and make their own selections of projects, becoming active participants in the construction of the learning process. The child is the subject of rights, the participant of her/his own knowledge construction. The artistic interventions and the collaborative work between teachers and artists are rather central to introduce the aesthetic dimension in the learning process. Children are strengthened in their potential for learning with multiple emotional, relational, sensory and intellectual resources that allow them to explore different languages, ways of thinking, ways of doing, ways of understanding, ways of living, ways of participating, and ways of experiencing with others. In this light, children, teachers and families are all part of the educational project.

Provocations in the Reggio Emilia approach are also central to stimulate a learning process **with no wrongs**; they are understood as activities that invite creativity, imagination, and exploration (Vecchi, 2013). Though materials for experimenting are provided, the outcomes, relations, and projects that derive from that setting are unexpected and created by children, either individually or in groups. Thus, provocations allow for experiencing, provoking interest and curiosity, and stimulating ideas and connections with oneself and with others.

In the Reggio Emilia approach, research represents another essential dimension of the educational project that becomes visible through careful pedagogic documentation. The latter is an integral part of the educational and didactic strategy to make the child's voice visible. Also, the concept of **progettazione** might be related to a pedagogic principle that encourages and provokes a teacher-child relationship, which facilitates autonomous learning paths for children. At the same

time, this concept is associated with an emergent curriculum that inspires strategies of thought and action, respectful and supportive of the learning processes of both children and adults, which accept doubts, uncertainty and errors as resources.

The environment as the third teacher

Malaguzzi elaborated on the environment as a third teacher, a space that responds to the needs of children and teachers, allows them to communicate with others, reveals children's works, and shows their interests and questions in a flexible way (Malaguzzi, 2001). In this sense, Hoyuelos (2005) also indicates that schools should be organised and designed by children, teachers and families, in which they should feel welcome and able to participate. Hoyuelos also highlights the dialogue between pedagogy and architecture, taking into account the aesthetics of pedagogy and vice versa.

Moreover, Rinaldi (2009) argues that experiences lived in the classroom leave memories in the environment, personal and collective stories that make spaces more lively for children, teachers and families. The environment is modified and transformed in relation to the projects and learning experiences of children and adults through a constant dialogue.

The Reggio Emilia schools give importance to participation at different levels, and the environment helps to build this culture of participation, of sharing, of connecting with others. Thus, spaces are connected with one another, the rooms open onto a central **piazza**, and children move freely from one space to the other. The "inside–outside school" relation is also an important one in which to think about the environment as a source of participation; a space that allows for exploration, provokes curiosity and enhances autonomous learning. Also, it is an **atelier**, a space that promotes art, creativity and interactions among the **atelieristas**, the children and the teachers; it provides a place for experimenting with various materials and for doing research (Ceppi & Zini, 1998).

The above-mentioned concepts in the Reggio Emilia approach invite us to reflect on the need to create learning paths for teacher education students that accompany their own autonomous and even emancipatory learning process that might then impact on their relation with children and families.

Methodological approach

The context

The educational practice elaborated in this paper took place in the Early Childhood Education bachelor's degree at the UNAE. As already mentioned, this experience was conducted with first-semester students. The graduate profile of the students, who aim to become early childhood teachers, is oriented towards the development of professional, research, teaching and pedagogic management competences that support the democratisation of the daily life of children while promoting educational environments for listening to children. In this way, the goal is to train teachers with the capacity to critically analyse the particular contexts of childhood in connection with their conceptual studies and bases of pedagogy and educational research¹.

The Early Childhood Education bachelor's degree plays a central role in the teaching-learning processes in early childhood; it contributes to socio-educational proposals and to strengthening the participation of the educational actors, that is, the teachers, the children, the family, the educational centre, and the community.

In this project, therefore, it is suggested to work with environments that are prepared to provoke significant learning as an emancipatory experience. Hence, in the classes described in the next section, an experience with an educational provocation environment will be presented that provokes thoughts about the design of a child-friendly space, linked to the proposal of thinking about an emancipated childhood.

In this paper, the experience involved students in the "Diagnostic Approach of Educational Policies in Specific Educational Institutions" subject. The group was quite small, as only 13 students were registered (12 women and 1 man); usually, groups' average number of students varied from 15 to 40 people. In this class, the environment was organised according to the Reggio Emilia approach with regard to the didactic strategy of educational provocations. Correspondingly, the process was documented with photographs, narratives and observations that allowed the educational experience to be analysed.

1 For more information, see the official website of the UNAE at www.unae.edu.ec/educacioninicial.

The thematic unit described in this paper was associated with the last unit of the semester, which was *The educational challenges of the 21st century*.

The expected learning was to *Analyse the current challenges of Early Childhood Education in the Ecuadorian educational context, specifically, in the context of pre-professional practices*.

The conceptual contents suggested for this thematic unit were to *Analyse current challenges of education in the digital age, professional problems, and the teachers, children, family and community relations in early childhood education*.

The procedural contents were to *review and analyse the Early Childhood Education curriculum* (Ministerio de Educación, 2014a) in relation to the students' experiences during their pre-professional practices. From this analysis, a topic that represented a challenge for the schools that the students attended for their pre-professional practices was selected and, according to the students' observations, the challenge resulted in building school environments that were designed after attentively observing and actively listening to the children's needs.

The attitudinal contents in play were to *value the importance of the context in the educational field in Early Childhood Education*.

The teaching strategies proposed to fulfil the goals of the unit were to work with **problem-based learning projects** through **educational provocation** in relation to the current challenges of early childhood education in the Ecuadorian context.

The resources and teaching aids that supported the proposal were used with the **flipped classroom** method. The latter is an important teaching method for the problem solving approach in which various resources and teaching aids are used, such as videos, books, photos and artistic interventions. To encourage critical thinking at each stage of the work, a formative three-step evaluation approach was suggested – (1) self-evaluation, (2) co-evaluation (student-student) and (3) hetero-evaluation (student-teacher) – that engaged a critical analysis, reflection, design and interpretation of a child's space based on the artistic works, texts and cases provided.

To support the analysis, reflection, design and interpretation of a child-friendly space, the texts by Cabanellas and Eslava (2005)

and Ceppi and Zini (1998) were provided. In addition, the students were stimulated to do some searches to review additional literature.

The evaluation was based on the reading of texts, artistic creations and the assembly of the space in the classroom. Also, the analysis and interpretation of the students' personal work were considered, and they were asked to choose the work of a partner to interpret. The interpretation of the work of their partner was uploaded to the virtual classroom to stimulate the discussion.

Moreover, in this work, the pedagogic relation was understood as the sayings and doings that compose a particular kind of practice that includes both the teachers and the students (Schatzki, 2001). Following Schatzki, "practices are inseparable from arrangements while arrangements channel, prefigure, facilitate, and are essential to practices" (2012, p. 16). Accordingly, the classroom arrangement and, in this particular case, the educational provocations "make it possible to constitute practices in a space-time" (Schatzki, 2012, p. 17). From this point of departure, the arrangement of the environment, in terms of teaching and research practices at the university, encouraged interaction and collaboration among teachers and students.

Provocations

The preparation of the environment and classroom arrangement were very carefully designed, and a wide range of materials was provided to the students. It was important, following the Reggio Emilia approach, that the organisation of the environment responded to an educational purpose and to the needs of the students, too.

In the Reggio Emilia approach, many of the provocations occur in the *atelier*, though they are not limited to that workshop space. The work that happens in the *atelier* combined with didactic strategies helps to motivate, listen and interact with children. The aesthetic sense of the workshops stimulates creativity, imagination and the expression of different ways of doing and saying things through verbal and nonverbal languages (Catini, 1999). Accordingly, in this pedagogic practice, the environment was carefully organised, with the aim that students (who were studying to become early childhood educators) started thinking, from the very beginning, about appropriate spaces that respected the time and autonomy of children in order to build a school environment that took actively listening to children as a point

of departure. That listening was put into practice in the relation with children during the students' pre-professional practices in early childhood schools. This interaction with children and the observations made during their practices allowed the students to engage with critical reflections about adequate environments that might emerge from actively listening to children's needs through their **hundred languages**.

Following from the above, the classroom at the university was prepared to welcome the students with various materials and devices to use for the project in order to create a school environment that respected the spaces, times and territories of childhood.

Pedagogic documentation

During the project, the educational experience was documented by photographs with the permission of the students. For the analysis of the experience, the narratives of the students in the form of texts produced, delivered and uploaded to the virtual classroom were used as a source of analysis. In addition, the participant observations made by the teacher and the notes written about the happenings, sayings and doings of the students in interaction with the materials, the suggested literature, and their searches and experiences with the electronic devices offered in the classroom were valuable sources of information to analyse the work, as suggested in the educational provocation didactic strategy.

Provoking educational environments

In this chapter, an arranged provocative environment in early childhood teacher training is presented with the aim of designing emancipatory educational environments for children, inspired by the Reggio Emilia experience.

Following on from the above, the experience of university students who will become early childhood teachers of thinking on their own teaching practices as an emancipatory source for developing a culture of collaboration, participation, and critical thinking from the early stages of their course will be presented. In this light, classes described across the paper show the didactic strategy of educational provocation as a teaching method that allows for mentorship, formative assessment and the active participation of apprentices with a critical thinking perspective. In addition, it is discussed whether there is an emancipatory

potential in creating provocative educational environments that mediate the pedagogic relations among teachers, students, content and the world.

The aim of the classes was to analyse the current challenges of early childhood education in the Ecuadorian context. For this reason, the following project was suggested: to design a school environment that respected the spaces, times and territories of childhood. In doing so, a review and analysis of educational policies and the early childhood education curriculum (Ministerio de Educación, 2014a) was the starting point to discuss the challenge of creating child-centred environments that promote participation, learning, family and community relations. Likewise, the curriculum guide developed by the Ministry of Education also was analysed (Ministerio de Educación, 2014b).

With this challenge in mind, the project suggested was based on a problem, that is, the current challenges for early childhood education to promote learning from a child's participatory approach that respects the spaces, times and territories of childhood. In this sense, the concept of learning environments in relation to the design of child-friendly spaces was addressed.

The classes described below include a work process that was carried out in four meetings of five hours each, including both face-to-face and autonomous work. The presentation of the classes shows the didactic strategy of educational provocation as a teaching method that allows for mentorship, formative assessment and the active participation of apprentices with a critical thinking perspective.

Class 1: In the first meeting, students were presented with the proposal of working on the project of designing a child-friendly space that allows for children's learning and participation. Also, the bibliography was delivered in the virtual classroom to work with a flipped classroom teaching approach. Three texts related to working in spaces set up for children were selected. The texts suggested an integrated vision of architecture and pedagogy that respected the spaces, times and territories of childhood.

Class 2: Students were encouraged to read the texts autonomously, which were then discussed in class, in workgroups, with the teacher's facilitation, who asked and responded to some questions that emerged in relation to the texts. To motivate the discussion, some questions were asked to the students, based on their reading of the texts: What draws your attention the most concerning the texts?

What words, concepts, or themes are new for you? What did you know about the texts? How do the texts relate to your pre-professional practice? These questions inspired group discussions, debates, and were a starting point for a new task.

Class 3: Preparation of the workspace. The classroom was previously arranged to facilitate and stimulate artistic interventions that gave continuity to the reflection process initiated in the previous meetings. The classroom was set up for the creation of a child-friendly space, made by the students, who were inspired by the texts they had worked on previously and by their opinions on how they imagined a child-friendly space that respected the times and territories of childhood. Likewise, the observations made during their pre-professional practices were taken into account for their projects.

Students were invited, first, to get to know the space/classroom; second, a presentation of the artistic works of Oteiza and Mondrán took place; and last, the exploration of the materials started. In addition to the diverse materials that were presented, some electronic devices and texts that were worked on in previous meetings were also available for students to interact with.

The students' instruction was to design a child-friendly school environment that could be expressed in a concrete or an abstract way. Students needed to show that the space took into account concerns and discussions suggested in the texts provided, as well as other literature brought in by the students. They had to review the texts that focused on the discussions about children's spaces and represent their opinions and observations on their artistic work/projects.

The pictures below show their projects in different stages of development (all pictures were taken by the author of this paper with the permission of the students):

Figure 1: Preparing the classroom

Figure 2: Some materials

Figure 3: Discovering the materials

Figure 4: Experiencing

Figure 5: Planning

Figure 6: Working

Figure 7: A work in progress

Figure 8: Another work in progress

Class 4: The creation of the children's space continued; by the end of the encounter, each of the students had to have prepared their sample

in the classroom space created and set by them. At the end of the session, a time to observe the works of other students was organised. Each student needed to choose the creation of a partner to interpret and to generate a reflection on her/his proposal. The reflection was shared in a forum of the virtual classroom to be discussed, too. In addition, each of the students made an interpretation of their own work, which was delivered to the teacher. Furthermore, that interpretation had to be related to the texts read and analysed, and also had to show the students' opinions and experiences that motivated them to create their projects. Additionally, all the different stages of their projects were part of the evaluation of the subject that included the creation of the child-friendly spaces, the debates, the reflection and the interpretation of a school environment design that started from listening to children's needs and respected the spaces, times and territories of childhood. Below, pictures of some of the final works are shared:

Figure 9: Some projects

Figure 10: Some more projects

In order to share the evaluation process, a piece of work by one first-semester student interpreting her own work is shown below:

A world for the child

Building livable environments is not easy, as the suggested activities of early childhood should not be carried out under the programmes and authoritarian control of adults; on the contrary, they should search to promote situations where children can play and be free in their growth. These places should allow children to interact with other children; children with adults; and children with teaching materials, and with natural environments, too. Exploration activities will have a greater impact if they are carried out in different environments, for example, outside the classroom, in green spaces, in contact with water, earth, and air, among others.

For Ceppi and Zini [1998] the particular use of outdoor spaces where children can easily build and undo as much as they want is important. To remain in interaction with natural environments can be suggested through outdoor play.

Thus, in my design of a space, nature is taken into account. Also, it is suggested to work with shadows and projections inside and

outside. All the experiences that children have in the environment allow them to prepare for life. Therefore, my model has a large outdoor space where children will be responsible for taking care of and picking vegetables and some fruits that they decide to plant.

In Reggio Emilia schools, there is a large central meeting point that becomes a square or a place to walk side; this place can be used as a space for representation, so that the centre that I design has a pool inside the centre with little fish that can be fed by children, and in addition to that there are small gardens and small benches suitable for children. [Cabanellas & Eslava, 2005]

The division of children into classrooms or groups according to their age will not be left aside; however, there is a place for some common spaces organised for meetings and relationships. [ibidem, p. 165] So far, I have observed the need to create two blocks of classrooms where each educator will manage a certain age group, and the central part will be used for integrated activities where any adventure can originate.

On top of that, Cabanellas and Eslava [2005] suggest an acoustically isolated establishment to allow adequate rests or naps, so in my design, there is a room where comfortable furniture is placed for children to rest.

Furthermore, the design includes areas for workshops, and there are also autonomous units for adults such as offices, a meeting room, dining rooms, and bathrooms, among others as proposed by Cabanellas and Eslava. [ibidem]

Similarly, there is a place built for locating and using mirrors as a game; mirrors of various sizes and shapes allow a child to explore and experiment through the reflection of his/her image. [ibidem]

Finally, children have the right to grow up and to learn in safe and pleasant places, where they can express their feelings and emotions.

Next, an example of an interpretation of the above work by a partner:

Theme: Reflective description of the ideal space for a children's centre.

The task of designing what we believe is the ideal children's space was a great challenge for everyone; from the works presented, I chose this project because it seems to me the one that can best explain

the distribution of the place, and it is really focused on the layout of a suitable environment for children. In general, the whole project has a central part in which the majority of the rooms will be located, and there is one room with an oval shape that leads to finding a point where everyone can group and converge to socialise. In addition, this space is at the centre of her work. The location of the spaces is neat, and that would allow children to enjoy a "physically organised pedagogical space", as elaborated by Cabanellas and Eslava. [ibidem]

In this space, significant attention is given to the natural environment that should surround children in an ideal place, which is why, in places where a room or workshop is not located, there are green spaces so children can get in touch with nature, enjoy the outdoors and experiment with all their senses.

In this space, workshops are placed around the centre of the school, which are equally surrounded by nature, wherein they can further develop their ability to imagine and to create. These rooms would follow the model described in the text "Children, Spaces and Relations", where there are workshops with specific people, apart from the educator, to guide children through the experiences they can have in that space and the creations they can make to be later exhibited in a place visible to the rest of the school. [Branzi et al., 1998]

This design catches my attention because it puts into practice several of the tips we have reviewed to create the right place for children; it gives them order along with the ability to choose, in a colourful environment surrounded by nature, that makes her whole school environment project a comfortable place for all who enter it: parents, educators and, most importantly, children.

The projects shown in the pictures above, as well as the two pieces of written work that two students submitted for the evaluation process, invite us to start a discussion on how the design of provocative educational environments may inform emancipatory practices in early childhood teacher training.

Some concluding thoughts

In this complex and uncertain world, teachers should be educated in a continuing process of questioning and reflection that allows them to face with certainty, beyond contents and disciplines, their

relations with practices, education and society that are central to training the new teachers and researchers who will transform education. In this light, education at university might prepare students to do research based on their own practices and intercultural relations in order to develop an autonomous and critical thinking approach that pushes emancipation. It is important, therefore, to encourage students to think critically. At the same time, this critical thinking might be linked to previous evidenced-based research and scientific thinking that allow students and teachers to build their knowledge and to contribute to the development of learning and teaching pedagogic practices (Tur Porres & Valdiviezo, 2018; Elen, 2016).

The arrangement of the environment, following the didactic strategy of educational provocation, is an interesting method of encouraging critical thinking and developing an emancipatory approach in teacher practices. In this educational experience, activities that occur in the space and time of the university subjects accompanied a reflective practice at school, too. In addition, it has been observed that provoking educational and critical environments allowed students to engage with a pedagogy of listening for/with children.

In this sense, engaging with practices in the school context and interacting with teachers and children allowed for the creation of conditions of participation while at the same time critically reflecting on "what" was going on inside the classroom regarding the interplay between the teacher, the students, the content and the children. The introduction of educational provocation insights helps to enhance teaching strategies to make any educational content potentially emancipatory, in which teaching stimulates learning. It is therefore important in this practice to account for the environment and educational provocation's approach as a way to bring the world of children into the classroom, as well as to engage with the individual and collective actions that allow for social/educational transformations.

Moreover, a conclusion from this educational practice is that emancipatory practices are not a matter of reaching certain aims or of fulfilling particular functions, but rather are a characteristic of the educational process and pedagogic practices at stake, in which the design of provocative educational environments might play an important role within teacher training. Since the aim of provocations in the Reggio Emilia approach allows for the development of a particular

learning disposition and potentiality that help with experiencing the construction of knowledge as a process and not as an outcome, it is suggested that educational provocations should be included as a teaching strategy in teacher training practices.

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