



SoTL in Process

Let's Play! Engaging College Students in Mini Play Sessions, Perspectives, and Reflections

ABSTRACT

This in-progress study explores the integration of play sessions into higher education classrooms as a strategy to reduce student stress and enhance overall well-being. With increasing levels of stress and mental health challenges among college students, faculty often struggle with providing adequate support, particularly as most are not trained mental health professionals. Through initial play sessions conducted in two different courses, students reported significant shifts from negative emotions, such as stress and overwhelm, to more positive states of happiness, excitement, and calmness. This aligns with existing research suggesting that structured play and wellness activities can improve mental health and reduce stress. The study also considers the potential for play sessions to offer a low-barrier, creative approach for faculty to foster a more supportive and engaging learning environment. Over the next academic year, routine play sessions will be implemented across five courses, with pre- and post-surveys used to assess their impact on student stress levels, focus, readiness for class, and overall engagement. The findings from this study aim to contribute to the growing body of research on wellness pedagogy, offering insights on the long-term benefits of integrating play into higher education settings. Further exploration is needed to systematically gauge the levels of impact over time and determine the broader implications of this approach for student well-being and academic success.

KEYWORDS

play in high education, play pedagogy, wellness pedagogy, wellness in higher education

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the mental health of college students has become a growing concern, with significant implications for students' academic success and overall well-being. Having taught in higher education for almost two decades, I have observed a noticeable increase in anxieties, depression, stress, and feelings of being overwhelmed among my students. Frequently, they arrive to class fatigued, having rushed from one course to another with minimal sleep, leaving them feeling depleted and exhausted. Under such circumstances, it is challenging for students to fully engage in course content. This article explores the integration of wellness pedagogy, particularly play pedagogy, as an approach to support student mental health and enhance their learning experiences.

Background: Current landscape of health and wellness on college campus

Recent research indicates a significant rise in mental health issues among college students. Studies show that more than 60 percent of college students meet the criteria for at least one mental health problem (National Education Association 2023). Specifically, a 2022 study found that 71 percent of college students reported increased stress and anxiety due to the pandemic's impact

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(Healthy Minds Network 2023). Additionally, 44 percent of students report symptoms of depression, and 37 percent experience anxiety (Healthy Minds Network 2023). Chi Baik and colleagues surveyed over 2,700 undergraduate students to explore what could be done to improve student well-being. The responses strongly suggest that college faculty can support mental health in the classroom and significantly reduce stressors through pedagogical approaches that center on student well-being (Baik, Larcombe, and Brooker 2019). However, research also shows that faculty struggle with determining the extent of their involvement in supporting students' mental health (Field 2023; Pope-Ruark 2024). Faculty are content experts, not necessarily trained mental health clinicians. While they want to be available to support students, they are concerned about making mistakes, along with the additional demands on their time and their own mental health and wellness

Institutional initiatives and culture: HealthEU

Universities are actively addressing the current mental health challenges students face by expanding wellness initiatives through enhanced programming, offering training and various resources to support students, faculty, and staff (Abrams 2022; Field 2023). Responding to the current mental health climate on campus, I was eager to participate in initiatives that support student well-being. One particular initiative included being a part of the Wellness Pedagogy Scholars Community of Practice. This program focused on a holistic approach to student well-being in the classroom, recognizing the interconnectedness of physical, mental, and emotional health. Over 16 weeks, a community of like-minded faculty engaged in critical self-reflective conversations and development activities aimed at promoting student wellness in the classroom. As a nationally board-certified holistic health coach, this experience felt like a homecoming for me professionally. It reaffirmed my commitment to student well-being by merging my expertise in education and wellness.

In response to our institution's call to develop health-centered courses, I designed a course where students could come together and hit the pause button, given the high stress and overwhelm many students experience. "Joyful Living: Embracing Gratitude for a Balanced Life" was created to provide a nurturing space for students to examine their current levels of mindfulness and practices of gratitude. Studies have shown that practices of gratitude can significantly reduce stress by promoting positive thinking and emotional well-being (Howells 2014). Throughout the semester, students explored and experimented with different strategies, discovering what worked best for them. They maintained gratitude journals to reflect on their state of mind and practices they tried, and students set personal goals to support their emerging practices.

Defining wellness pedagogy

Wellness pedagogy integrates the principles of well-being into teaching practices in order to support the holistic development of students. It includes the implementation of mindfulness strategies, which are essential components, since they help reduce stress and anxiety while enhancing focus and emotional regulation (Duong, Aebersold, and Mahavongtrakul 2023). This approach may address the rising rates of anxiety and depression among students, which have been exacerbated by the pandemic (Nails et al. 2023). By incorporating wellness pedagogy into the classroom, educators can create a more supportive learning environment that improves students' mental health, reduces stress, and enhances overall academic performance by promoting resilience (Duong, Aebersold, and Mahavongtrakul 2023). Studies have shown that implementing mindfulness strategies in the classroom can significantly reduce students' stress and anxiety levels while improving focus and emotional regulation. These practices contribute to better overall well-being and academic performance, leading to a more conducive learning environment (Hrach 2021).

Implementing wellness pedagogy

Wellness pedagogy offers a framework for creating a supportive classroom community where students can thrive, with an emphasis on building authentic relationships and fostering connections among peers and faculty. At the same time, it encourages students and staff to take responsibility for their wellbeing and contribute to a healthy, inclusive learning environment. By integrating mindfulness practices, faculty can empower students to engage in self-care outside the classroom, fostering resilience and balance without requiring faculty to step into roles as mental health clinicians. From the moment students enter my class, I work to establish this sense of community through personalized approaches, such as playing their chosen music and initiating engaging conversations (Dobkins et al. 2023; Eaton, Hunsaker, and Moon 2023; Gopalan and Brady 2021; Murphy et al. 2020). These interactions, supported by strategies like “getting to know you” surveys, exit tickets, informal conversations, and “coffee meetups,” help me understand students’ backgrounds, interests, and challenges, allowing better support for their well-being and engagement. Research underscores that strong relationships and a sense of community in the classroom significantly enhance student engagement and well-being (Dobkins et al. 2023; Eaton, Hunsaker, and Moon 2023; Murphy et al. 2020). Integrating aspects of wellness pedagogy, such as play, has proven particularly effective in transforming the learning experience and alleviating the pressures students face. My observations confirmed what I was seeing across my classes: students are stressed and overwhelmed. The need for wellness pedagogy integrated into higher education has never been more apparent. One powerful aspect of wellness pedagogy that I have found particularly impactful is the concept of play, which can transform the learning experience and alleviate some of the pressures students face.

Defining play

Although play is often seen as a childhood activity, its benefits extend well into adulthood, and it can be highly effective in the classroom. (Cavanagh 2021; James and Nerantzi 2019). “Play is the work of children,” a phrase coined by Maria Montessori, highlights the importance of play in a child’s development (Montessori 1964). Through play, children naturally explore, learn, and make sense of the world. Play helps develop crucial skills such as problem-solving, creativity, social interaction, and emotional regulation, laying the foundation for future learning and development (Montessori 1967; Saracho 2021; Vygotsky 1978).

While gamification and roleplaying can be considered playful pedagogies (Sailer 2020), for the purposes of my exploration, I am specifically referring to unstructured play using creative tools. This approach encourages creativity, problem-solving, and emotional resilience by allowing students to explore and interact in a less structured environment, promoting overall well-being (Koeners and Francis 2020). Unstructured play with creative tools provides students with the freedom to express themselves, experiment with ideas, and develop a sense of autonomy, essential for their mental and emotional health (Hrach 2021; James and Nerantzi 2019; Koeners and Francis 2020).

Research demonstrates that intentional and engaging learning experiences, designed to involve students in practices that promote mindfulness, joy, and creativity can significantly enhance students’ mental health. Feedback from students has shown the positive impact of these holistic approaches, with many students reporting that they felt less stressed, more relaxed, and better able to focus on their studies (NEA 2023). These outcomes align with findings that engaging, joyful learning experiences can improve student mental health and academic engagement (Lipson et al. 2022).

Play as wellness pedagogy

Recognizing the significance of play, many educational philosophies prioritize its integration into the curriculum. In higher education, play can be a vital component for college students' mental health and well-being, providing stress relief, relaxation, and a better overall mood (Cavanagh 2021; Hrach 2021; James and Nerantzi 2019; James and Brookfield 2014). The *Pedagogy of Play* (PoP) research project from Project Zero at Harvard emphasizes that play-based learning thrives when the right conditions are established, which include offering students choice, fostering curiosity, and encouraging enjoyment (Project Zero 2023). These elements contribute not only to deeper engagement but also to emotional and social well-being, showing that playful learning can foster both academic and personal growth. Embracing playful activities in college settings contributes to students' holistic development and academic success. Research has highlighted the effectiveness of play-based learning approaches in higher education, demonstrating these strategies' ability to enhance student engagement, creativity, and critical thinking skills (Hrach 2021; James and Nerantzi 2019; Parkin 2024). Encouraging college students to participate in brief play explorations can cultivate mindfulness and well-being, allowing them to focus on the present moment and fully engage in enjoyable activities (Hrach 2021). These playful experiences offer a break from academic stressors, helping to reduce anxiety and promote relaxation. Further, incorporating play into their routine can increase students' motivation and engagement in their academic pursuits, leading to enhanced overall well-being and productivity (James and Nerantzi 2019).

To explore the integration of play and wellness pedagogy in the classroom, I reflected on a wellness pedagogy scholars meeting where we engaged in play with Lego®. This experience highlighted the value and importance of play, particularly for me as an early childhood educator with graduate training in play-based learning. Inspired by this, I decided to apply similar strategies in my courses, specifically by incorporating play sessions into the beginning of class in order to observe their impact on student engagement and well-being.

Methods

To explore the impact of engaging in mini-play sessions with my students, I secured Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for this study. This approval allowed for the implementation of play sessions followed by a short qualitative survey to gather student feedback. The survey consisted of five open-ended questions designed to elicit reflections on students' feelings before and after the play session, their experiences during, and any noticeable changes in their stress levels.

The study involved a total of 30 participants across two different classes. Initially, the play sessions were introduced in my *Joyful Living* class. After observing a positive impact, I extended the study to my teacher education class. The play sessions were designed to allow unstructured engagement with creative tools, promoting relaxation and stress relief. Surveys were conducted with all participants across the two classes, providing valuable insights into their emotional states and stress levels before, during, and after the play sessions.

I received a mini teaching and learning grant from Elon University's Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning to purchase boxes of Lego®, chenille stems (pipe cleaners), and pencil boxes for storing supplies. During the sessions, students participated in structured mini-play activities using these creative tools for approximately 20 minutes. The sessions were designed to be both engaging and relaxing. Students were asked to put away their devices and choose how they wanted to play—some opted for pipe cleaners, others for Lego®. Some shared a box, while others combined materials. Initially, students were simply asked to play without guidance or expectations. As they engaged, I walked around, conversing with them as they shared their creations with me and

their peers. I observed some students in conversation, others focused intently on their tasks, and some laughed. After about seven minutes, I asked students to share their creations with peers. Then, I encouraged them to disassemble their creations, select new materials, or switch to different play items. Finally, I asked them to create an image of something that brought them joy over the past week. After five minutes, students shared their artifacts with the class, showcasing representations of joyful moments, including images of friends, flowers, food, and an elaborate chenille stem design of a lake with a tree.

Following the play session, students completed a qualitative survey with five questions: How did you feel before the play session? How do you feel immediately after the play session? Describe your experience during the play session. Did you notice any changes in your stress levels after the session? If so, please describe. Any additional comments or observations? Surveys were administered at the end of each session in both classes, with responses collected anonymously to ensure candid feedback.

Qualitative responses were analyzed to identify common themes and patterns using in vivo coding (Saldaña 2016), “commonly used in qualitative data analysis, is to extract key terms and concepts directly from participants’ own words, thereby increasing the likelihood of accurately capturing the meanings inherent in their experiences” (Stringer 2014, 140). I compared the feedback between both classes to assess the consistency of the observed effects. The goal of this study was to determine the potential benefits of incorporating unstructured play sessions into the classroom environment, particularly in reducing student stress and enhancing overall well-being. The positive feedback from both classes suggests that such interventions can be a valuable addition to educational practices.

Findings

Observation of play

As the students engaged in play, I noticed the room’s energy shift—the air seemed to relax and the overall mood lightened. Students actively engaged in constructing, building, crafting, and creating. Some were laughing and talking quietly with friends. In our reflective conversation after the mindfulness experience, I noticed students using words like fun, happy, creative, nostalgic, and “I felt like a child.” The activity transported them to a different place, creating a lighter atmosphere in the room, with more smiles and visibly relaxed shoulders. When it came time to share their creations with the class, the excitement was palpable; students were genuinely enthusiastic and encouraging of one another. Witnessing this change, I was curious to see if the same would happen in my education course. I used the same structure and engaged my teacher candidates in a mini play session before starting our formal content. These students experienced similar emotional and physical changes; they reported feeling less stressed and recalling childhood memories, and students described the experience with words like giddy, happy, excited, and nostalgic. Although the survey was brief and intended to capture initial reflections, it confirmed my observations about the positive impact of incorporating play into the classroom

Student reflection

The survey, conducted among 30 respondents across two classes, provided valuable insights into the emotional states and stress levels of students before, during, and after play sessions. Initially, students were asked how they felt prior to engaging in play. A majority reported negative emotions, with 43.33% (n=13) feeling tired and 30% (n=9) feeling stressed. Other negative emotions included feeling overwhelmed, anxious, upset, angry, unengaged, or trapped in their own thoughts. Only 13.33% (n=4) of students reported feeling good before the sessions.

During the play sessions, there was a notable shift in emotional states. The majority of students experienced positive mood changes, with 23.53% (n=7) feeling happy, 23.53% (n=7) feeling excited, 20.59% (n=6) feeling calmer, and 17.65% (n=5) reporting increased focus. Additional positive emotions included creativity, joy, nostalgia, contentment, relaxation, and fun. Only 5.88% (n=2) of students continued to feel stressed during the sessions.

Following the play sessions, 47.06% (n=14) of students reported feeling less stressed, 20.59% (n=6) felt more relaxed and calm, and 14.71% (n=4) felt happier, more focused, and better prepared for class. While some students noted no change or continued stress, others reported feeling lighter, silly, or nostalgic. A strong majority of students, 93.33% (n=28), expressed positive support for incorporating more play breaks into their routines. The primary reasons cited were stress reduction, enhanced mindfulness, increased engagement and focus, and opportunities for creativity. This initial data suggests that play breaks have a predominantly positive impact on students' well-being and academic engagement. This leaves me wondering: what if I replicated this initial study in a more consistent manner across multiple classes, conducting pre- and post-play session surveys with more in-depth questions?

As I plan for the upcoming academic year, I aim to explore the impact of incorporating mini-play sessions into my five courses. These sessions will take place during the first five to seven minutes of the one hour and 40-minute class, which meets twice a week. This brief, yet purposeful, time allows students to engage in play, fostering a sense of community and promoting mental well-being, while ensuring that the majority of the class remains dedicated to course material. The sessions will be implemented four times during the semester, with students completing pre- and post-surveys to assess their stress levels, class readiness, focus, and the effects of these activities. My goal is to create a supportive learning environment that fosters community and enhances students' mental health.

Conclusions and next steps

Research indicates that students today face unprecedented stress and mental health challenges, leaving many faculty members unsure of how to best support them. My initial exploration into the benefits of play suggests it can significantly reduce stress and feelings of overwhelm. Students often report feeling tired and stressed before play sessions but experience a noticeable shift toward positive emotions, like happiness and calmness, during and after. This aligns with research showing that structured play can improve mental health and reduce stress. Implementing play sessions could offer faculty a simple yet effective strategy to support students' well-being, boosting mindfulness and readiness to engage in the classroom. Further research will help assess the long-term benefits of this approach.

Throughout the next academic year, I will integrate these play sessions into all five of my courses, documenting their impact through both qualitative and quantitative data. Data will include student reflections, emotional states, my own observations, and metrics like student engagement and sense of community. The surveys will measure stress, readiness for class, focus, and the overall impact of play. Additionally, I will reflect on the process to refine the integration of play into my teaching.

In conclusion, preliminary data suggests that incorporating play sessions into the classroom is a promising approach to enhancing student well-being and academic engagement. As students face increasing stress and mental health challenges, the need for innovative support strategies is critical. By integrating play into education, we provide a creative outlet that reduces stress, fosters mindfulness, and strengthens classroom communities. As I continue to explore the impact of these sessions, the insights gained will inform how educators can use play to create more supportive and

engaging learning environments. The potential benefits are significant, offering a powerful tool to address pressing challenges in higher education.

DISCLOSURE

Artificial intelligence technology, ChatGPT, was used in the two stages of the research and during the writing process. After conducting an analysis of findings using In Vivo coding, AI was used to confirm prevalent themes for quality assurances. AI was also used in the final stages of the writing process to identify any redundant information and for final editing.

ETHICS

Research was approved by the Elon University ethics review board.

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