Experiential learning and the development of social skills in education: a systematic review of the last five years

El aprendizaje vivencial y el desarrollo de habilidades sociales en la educación: una revisión sistemática de los últimos cinco años

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Abstract

The main objective of this article was to analyze the development of the literature on experiential learning and social skills in education. To this end, the most relevant concepts and theories of experiential learning were explored, as well as definitions focused on social skills within education, which allowed us to understand the evolution and impact of these topics on educational processes. In addition, a systematic analysis was conducted to support the various approaches identified and establish relationships between experiential learning and the development of social skills in students. The methodology employed was the PRISMA systematic review method, through which an initial search of 97 articles published between 2019 and 2024 was carried out in the Redalyc, Scielo, Latindex, and Web of Science databases. Subsequently, after applying rigorous selection criteria, 30 representative authors were considered. The results show that experiential learning is fundamental for the comprehensive development of students. However, gaps persist, as teacher guidance and support are required to achieve effective and meaningful student participation.

Keywords: education, social skills, knowledge.

Resumen

El presente artículo tuvo como objetivo principal analizar el desarrollo de la literatura sobre el aprendizaje vivencial y las habilidades sociales en el ámbito educativo. Para ello, se exploraron los conceptos y teorías más relevantes del aprendizaje experiencial, así como las definiciones centradas en las habilidades sociales dentro de la educación, lo que permitió comprender la evolución y el impacto de estas temáticas en los procesos formativos. Además, se realizó un análisis sistemático que permitió sustentar los diversos enfoques identificados y establecer relaciones entre el aprendizaje vivencial y el desarrollo de competencias sociales en los estudiantes. La metodología empleada fue el método PRISMA de revisión sistemática, mediante el cual se llevó a cabo una búsqueda inicial de 97 artículos publicados entre 2019 y 2024 en las bases de datos Redalyc, Scielo, Latindex y Web of Science. Posteriormente, tras aplicar rigurosos criterios de selección, se consideraron 30 autores representativos. Los resultados evidencian que el aprendizaje vivencial es fundamental para el desarrollo integral de los estudiantes; sin embargo, persisten vacíos, ya que se requiere la guía y acompañamiento del docente para lograr una participación estudiantil efectiva y significativa.

Palabras clave: educación, habilidades sociales, conocimiento.

Introduction

Globally, the need to reform educational practices is becoming increasingly urgent to effectively fulfill the responsibility of educating young people by equipping them with the necessary skills to thrive in today's society. In this regard, schools must be organized in a way that transforms learning into a continuous and fluid academic process (Orozco & Mejía, 2019). According to Acosta & Barrios (2023), a self-learning school that self-organizes and adapts its internal processes to enhance the capacities, potential, skills, and competencies of its teaching staff can better respond to the changing demands and needs of students.

On an international level, UNESCO, in its regional report on the SDG 4 Education 2030, points out that one of the main issues in Latin America is inadequate experiential learning and insufficient development of social skills among both teachers and students, leading to negative consequences such as emotional distress in the school environment and the breakdown of human relationships (UNESCO, 2022).

In this context, Zorrilla & Mazzitelli (2021) emphasize the importance of promoting diverse learning strategies that foster significant changes in the educational environment. Therefore, it is necessary to establish guidelines that assist students in understanding what is taught and applying academic knowledge in everyday situations (Westermeyer & Osses, 2021).

Furthermore, Aragón & Cabarcas (2023) argue that the goal of scientific education is to promote scientific knowledge and civic preparation to develop individuals who are reflective, critical, responsible, and committed to the planet and the resolution of its problems. However, Aguirre et al. (2021) caution that many science teachers continue to employ traditional pedagogical approaches and face challenges in incorporating contextualization into their teaching. Similarly, Parga & Piñeros (2018) believe that teachers must modify their curricular approach by adopting experiential activities that encourage students to explore science, technology, and the environment.

Experiential learning aims to enhance individuals' various capabilities by fostering the development of social skills such as critical thinking and creativity, as well as promoting responsibility for one's actions. According to Quispe (2019), this type of learning occurs in environments where cognitive capabilities are combined with direct experience, transforming knowledge into sensations, feelings, and emotions. Although this was theoretically possible before, experimental practice and application in specific contexts facilitate and enrich knowledge acquisition.

Therefore, experiential learning is fundamental as it supports the comprehensive development of both students and teachers, facilitating the integration and evolution of the social skills necessary for their performance. In this framework, the present research article addresses the central issue: What are the advances and theoretical contributions concerning experiential learning and social skills?

This research is socially justified as it will provide relevant information on these variables, which can be utilized in future studies. Additionally, it aims to identify the most significant theoretical contributions in the field to understand experiential learning strategies that promote a more transparent and efficient pedagogy. Thus, the main objective is to establish the development of the literature on experiential learning and social skills, while the specific objectives are to identify the most prominent concepts and theories in experiential learning and to determine the definitions that emphasize social skills in the educational context.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to analyze various research articles related to experiential learning and social skills. To this end, a systematic review was conducted that involved searching for and analyzing relevant scientific articles to draw well-founded conclusions. Complementarily, a non-experimental, narrative, and systematic approach was designed, allowing for the collection of multiple sources of information to identify and differentiate relevant data from irrelevant information, thus facilitating subsequent analysis. The information obtained also contributed to enriching the discussion by comparing the perspectives of different authors.

The initial search considered 87 articles, selected and evaluated according to specific criteria. Among the inclusion criteria, it was established that the articles must have been published between 2019 and 2024, within the five-year period defined for peer review. Additionally, the studies were required to describe or contextualize experiential learning and social skills. Finally, language was considered, accepting only articles written in Spanish or English, provided that translations were available.

Regarding exclusion criteria, articles published outside the established date range were discarded, as well as those addressing variables unrelated to experiential learning and social skills. Texts written in inaccessible or unclear language, which hindered rigorous analysis, were also excluded.

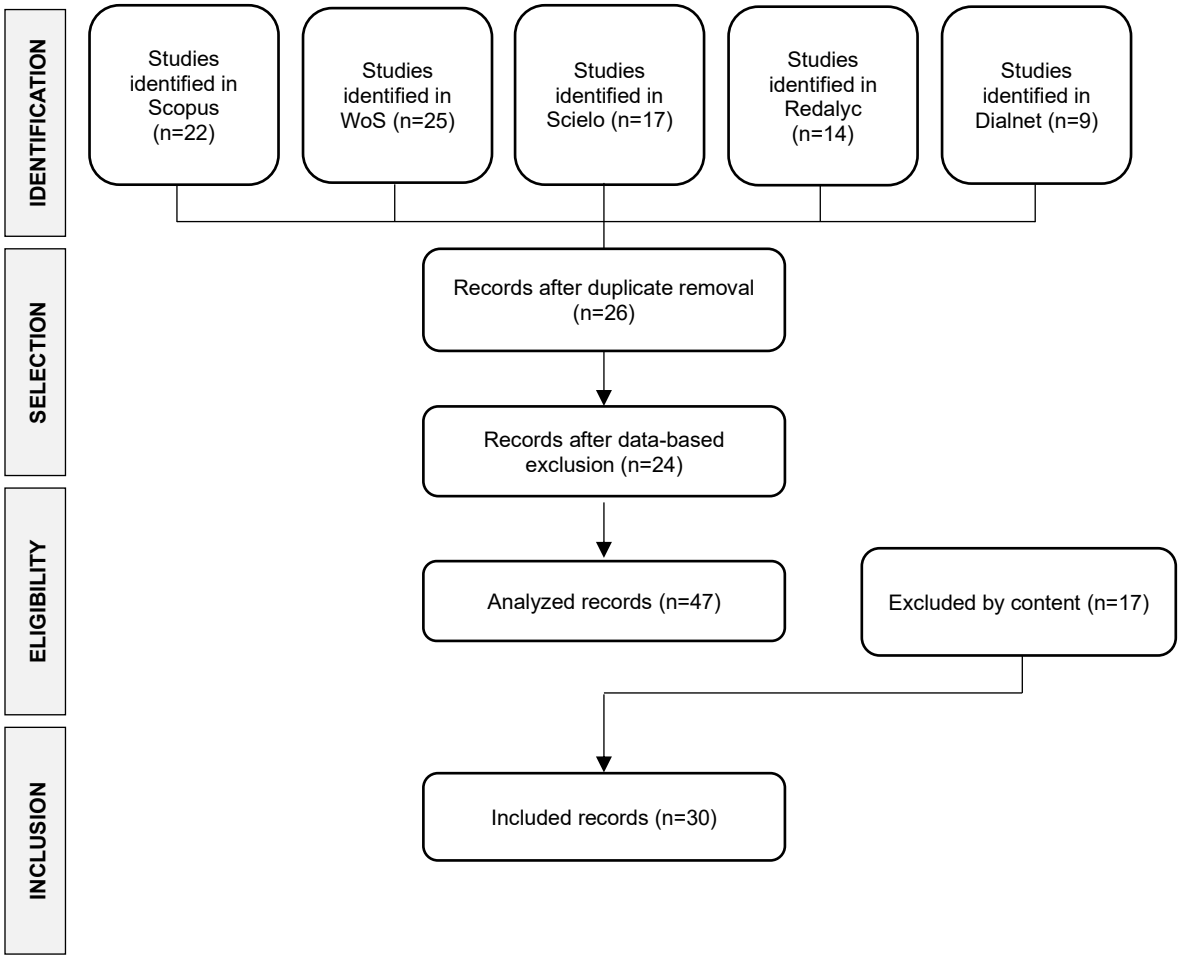
Selection process

During the article selection process, the search was conducted exclusively in the databases Redalyc, Scielo, Latindex, and Web of Science, as well as in the thesis repositories of various national and international universities. This approach allowed for the analysis of research that included both variables of interest. The search was specifically conducted using each keyword: experiential learning, collaborative learning, social skills, soft skills, and meaningful learning. This way, a thorough and relevant collection of the necessary information for the study was ensured.

Data extraction process

First, duplicate studies in the databases were eliminated through title filtering, which identified 26 research articles published on different platforms. Subsequently, in a second stage, a temporal filter was applied to select only articles published within the established range; during this process, 24 studies published in 2020 were excluded, as the number of investigations that year was limited at the beginning of the search. Specific filters were also applied to limit the year of publication. Additionally, 17 studies that, while related, did not focus directly on experiential learning or social skills but rather on similar variables were discarded. Finally, the review included a total of 30 articles that met the established criteria for analysis.

Figure 1
PRISMA method



Results and discussion

In developing the results, the most relevant contributions related to experiential learning and social skills were identified and analyzed across various scientific articles to debate and support the theories and definitions found.

Firstly, significant experiential learning aims to highlight individuals' multiple skills, promoting their development in areas such as critical thinking, creativity, and responsible decision-making, encouraging them to take responsibility for their actions. According to Quispe (2019), this type of learning occurs in environments where individuals combine their cognitive abilities with direct experience. In this process, knowledge transforms into sensations, feelings, and emotions, facilitating a deeper and more receptive acquisition of knowledge, especially through experimental practice in specific contexts (González & González, 2024; Montes-Osorio & Deroncele-Acosta, 2023; Pacheco et al., 2024).

Moreover, experiential learning is a pedagogical method designed for students to acquire knowledge meaningfully through real experiences. However, for this to happen, it is essential that students recognize and accept that the process requires active, critical, and collaborative participation, where risks are taken and mutual support is encouraged, thus ensuring a differentiated educational experience. In this sense, Barrios (2022) argues that experiential learning should be a planned process that not only relies on experimentation but also includes expression, reflection, and generalization of experiences for application in various situations. This approach emphasizes the importance of a continuous cycle of action, reflection, and new action, which underpins active learning (Beñítez-Chavira et al., 2023; Berrio, 2024; López Mite & Véliz Aráuz, 2024).

Pozo & Vigo (2020) highlight that experiential learning constitutes a valuable tool, as it allows for critical analysis of processes, the acquisition of meaningful knowledge through reflection, and the application of what has been learned in work or daily life. In a world characterized by constant changes and accelerated intellectual development, the ability to learn directly from experience has become an essential lifelong skill (Castañeda Zapata et al., 2024; Lara et al., 2024; Muñoz-Pérez, 2023).

Similarly, Barrios (2022) explains that experiential learning occurs when an individual engages in collaborative activities, critically reflects on their experiences, draws meaningful conclusions through introspective evaluation, and integrates that learning, leading to changes in their thinking and behavior (Picho et al., 2023; Villca et al., 2023). In this regard, Hidalgo (2023) states that experiential learning fosters the ability to learn from direct personal experience, facilitated by self-knowledge. This process generates a sense of responsibility towards what has been learned and promotes long-term knowledge retention. Additionally, it encourages self-discovery, reflection, and the transfer of learning from recreational or educational activities to daily life, stimulating exploration, creativity, curiosity, experimentation, and the search for diverse solutions. It also promotes cooperation and open communication while generating satisfaction and joy in the educational process (Aliaga et al., 2023; de Souza Vieira et al., 2023; Mitchell & Perrotti, 2023).

Regarding social skills, Almaraz et al. (2019) define these competencies as behaviors that enable individuals to express their feelings, needs, and beliefs in various contexts. The development of these capabilities is influenced by factors such as education, sociocultural environment, and personal experience. As children acquire social skills, they can establish more effective relationships with others. However, some individuals may face limitations in these skills, potentially leading to emotional and behavioral issues. Fortunately, these skills can be strengthened through practice and the learning of new interpersonal and communicative strategies applicable both in school and at home (Kalantidou & Brennan, 2024; León et al., 2024; Vasconcelos-Vásquez & Ugalde Naranjo, 2024).

Furthermore, Núñez et al. (2019) emphasize the importance of social skills in the educational context, noting that how students develop and employ these skills positively impacts their academic performance. The ability to interact effectively with the environment, work in teams, and communicate clearly are key aspects for achieving academic success. Therefore, understanding these skills allows for an appreciation of their comprehensive influence on learning.

Finally, it is essential to highlight that a lack of social skills can lead to significant difficulties in collaborative work, provoking feelings of insecurity, anxiety, depression, and anger. This lack of cooperation, often stemming from distrust, communication issues, and the absence of social competencies, hinders the achievement of common goals. Thus, developing these skills is crucial for promoting a healthy work environment and strengthening teamwork (Moretti et al., 2024; Pérez et al., 2024; Perlado & Trujillo, 2024; Andreu et al., 2024; Gutiérrez Santana et al., 2024; Menegaldo & Bortoleto, 2024).

Conclusions

Based on the analysis of the selected documents, it is concluded that experiential learning is fundamental for the comprehensive development of students. However, gaps in its application are identified, as the guidance of an expert, in this case, the teacher, is essential to facilitate active and direct participation from students. Therefore, implementing experiential learning strategies in educational institutions offers numerous benefits, significantly contributing to academic progress and the holistic development of learners.

In this regard, its incorporation is necessary, as this methodology fosters the development of social skills in students, which are key to improving their educational performance and enhancing their problem-solving abilities—competencies that will be valuable both inside and outside the classroom.

Moreover, social skills constitute an essential component of learning, as the connections, skills, and attitudes an individual develops enhance their personal growth. This allows for more comprehensive and sophisticated thinking, facilitating the generation of quick and effective solutions, as well as the establishment of positive intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships.

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