

THE ROLE OF HUMOR IN THE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP AND IN TENSION MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of humor and ludic strategies in the teacher-student relationship and in the management of tensions within the educational environment. Drawing on a mixed-method approach, the research explores the perceptions of students enrolled in initial teacher training programs and of lower secondary pupils regarding the pedagogical value of humor. The theoretical background highlights humor as a multidimensional communicative tool, capable of facilitating emotional regulation, enhancing motivation, and supporting cognitive processing when used responsibly. The methodology involved the application of a structured questionnaire integrating Likert scales, frequency scales, semantic differentials, and open-ended items. Quantitative results indicate that humor is perceived as contributing to a relaxed classroom atmosphere, increased engagement, and improved understanding of content, while qualitative responses emphasize its role in reducing anxiety and strengthening the sense of safety. At the same time, participants acknowledge the risks associated with inappropriate or excessive humor, particularly in sensitive contexts or disciplinary situations. The findings suggest that humor is valued as a complementary pedagogical strategy, not as a substitute for professional competence, and that its effectiveness depends on context, intention, and relational sensitivity. The study concludes that humor and ludic elements can enhance the quality of educational interactions when integrated consciously and ethically, supporting a human-centered model of teaching based on empathy, flexibility, and mutual respect.

Keywords: communication, educational climate, humor, ludic strategies, teacher-student relationship;

INTRODUCTION

The use of humor by teachers represents an essential dimension of education, exerting a positive influence on learning processes and interpersonal relationships. Recent studies suggest that humor can serve as an effective technique for enhancing educational quality by creating a relaxed and cheerful environment for students and by facilitating their understanding of instructional content. Gheorghe (2023) conceptualizes humor as an emergent phenomenon within group communication, with implications for leadership processes, member engagement, and satisfaction, emphasizing its relational and contextual nature.

The present micro-study aims to investigate the role of humor and ludic elements in the teacher-student relationship, examining the perceptions of students enrolled in teacher training programs and those of lower secondary pupils. The study is grounded in the premise

that humor, when used responsibly and calibrated to context, can become a pedagogical tool with significant impact on the learning atmosphere, motivation, and engagement. Through the administration of a structured questionnaire composed of closed-ended items and through the metaphorical analysis of the ideal teacher's image, the research sought to highlight both the positive dimensions of humor and ludic practices, as well as the risks associated with their excessive or inappropriate use.

The results confirm that humor is perceived as a defining trait of the effective teacher, being associated with empathy, flexibility, and approachability. Most respondents indicated that humor contributes to a relaxed classroom climate, reduces tension during assessment moments, and facilitates comprehension of the taught content. Likewise, ludic elements were valued as means of diversifying instruction and stimulating engagement, though not as a central teaching strategy. The qualitative analysis of open-ended responses revealed positive experiences in which teachers' humor reduced stress and strengthened the sense of safety, as well as situations in which its use was perceived as inappropriate, underscoring the importance of pedagogical discernment.

The image of the ideal teacher, shaped through metaphors and semantic scales, reflects an educational model centered on humanistic dimensions: closeness, empathy, flexibility, and innovation. In conclusion, the study supports the conscious integration of humor and ludic elements into teaching practice, not as substitutes for professional competence, but as enhancers of an authentic educational experience grounded in trust, mutual respect, and the joy of learning together.

1. CONTEXT AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The role of humor in educational settings has been increasingly examined within contemporary pedagogical research, reflecting a broader shift toward understanding teaching as a relational, affective, and communicative process rather than a unidirectional transmission of knowledge. In modern classrooms, humor and ludic elements are viewed as communicative strategies that can enhance the emotional climate, support cognitive engagement, and strengthen interpersonal connections between teachers and students. These dimensions, however, require careful calibration, as their effectiveness depends on context, intention, and the relational sensitivity of the educator.

A substantial body of literature highlights the pedagogical value of humor, emphasizing its multifaceted functions in the learning environment. Humor has been associated with tension reduction, increased motivation, improved comprehension, and the strengthening of teacher-student relationships (Cornett, 2001; Jonas, 2000; Suplicz, 2012). From a cognitive perspective, humor engages complex mental processes, including divergent thinking, recognition of incongruity, and emotional attunement. Tisljár (2011, 2016) argues that humor is not merely a spontaneous reaction but a sophisticated social signal that reflects group cohesion and contributes to a positive learning climate. These findings suggest that humor can serve as a pedagogical tool that supports both emotional regulation and cognitive processing.

Despite its benefits, humor in educational contexts also carries potential risks. When used inappropriately—through sarcasm, ridicule, or aggressive joking—humor can damage the teacher-student relationship, generate anxiety, or undermine students' self-esteem (Pap, 2006; Gürtler, 2005). Bagdy and Pap (2004) similarly warn that humor may become harmful when it targets personal vulnerabilities or reinforces power imbalances. Suplicz (2012)

emphasizes that humor is constructive only when it communicates inclusion and solidarity—“laughing with,” rather than “laughing at.” These distinctions underscore the need for teachers to exercise discernment and emotional intelligence when integrating humor into their instructional practices.

The literature on communication in education further supports the idea that humor must be embedded within a broader framework of assertive and empathetic interaction. Assertive communication, defined as the ability to express thoughts and emotions clearly and respectfully, is essential for establishing balanced and trusting teacher-student relationships (Bishop, 2008). Bábosik (2003) highlights that the quality of this relationship significantly influences students’ academic performance and emotional well-being. Within this communicative framework, humor can function as a relational bridge, facilitating openness, reducing hierarchical distance, and fostering a supportive learning environment. However, its effectiveness depends on the teacher’s ability to adapt humor to students’ developmental level, group dynamics, and situational demands.

Research on teacher identity and professional formation also provides insight into the perceived role of humor in effective teaching. Studies examining the image of the ideal teacher reveal a consistent emphasis on humanistic qualities such as empathy, patience, fairness, and approachability, alongside professional competence (Horváth, 2015). Metaphorical analyses of teacher roles—such as “parent,” “coach,” or “guide”—suggest that students value educators who combine expertise with relational warmth and emotional support (Vámos, 2003). Within this conceptualization, humor emerges not as a superficial trait but as a meaningful component of the teacher’s relational repertoire, contributing to a relaxed and engaging classroom atmosphere. Nonetheless, the literature also indicates that humor cannot compensate for insufficient pedagogical competence; rather, it enhances the effectiveness of teachers who already demonstrate strong professional and interpersonal skills.

The integration of humor into teaching requires adherence to several pedagogical conditions. Jonas (2000) and Lazarus et al. (2011) argue that humor is most effective when it is relevant to the lesson content, spontaneous, or self-ironic, and when it avoids targeting students in ways that could cause embarrassment or discomfort. Lovorn (2008) further notes that humor can support learning by making content more memorable and by reducing performance-related anxiety, particularly during assessments. However, excessive or poorly timed humor may disrupt classroom discipline or distract from instructional goals, highlighting the need for balance between relaxation and academic rigor.

In addition to humor, ludic strategies have gained attention as tools for enhancing engagement and diversifying instructional methods. Activities such as educational games, interactive challenges, and playful tasks can stimulate motivation and participation, especially when aligned with learning objectives. Forgács (2007) emphasizes that social interaction and emotional involvement are key components of effective learning, and ludic elements can facilitate both. Yet, as with humor, ludic strategies must be applied judiciously to avoid trivializing content or undermining the seriousness of certain educational contexts.

Overall, the literature suggests that humor and ludic elements hold significant potential for enriching educational interactions when used consciously, ethically, and in alignment with pedagogical aims. They contribute to a human-centered model of teaching that values emotional connection, mutual respect, and the joy of learning. At the same time, researchers consistently caution that these strategies require sensitivity, contextual awareness,

and professional judgment. Taken together, these theoretical perspectives highlight the pedagogical potential of humor and ludic strategies, while also emphasizing the need for contextual sensitivity and professional judgment. Building on this conceptual foundation, the present study examines how future teachers and lower secondary pupils perceive the role of humor in educational interactions and how these perceptions manifest across different dimensions of classroom experience.

2. METHOD

Participants

The study was conducted on a mixed sample of 51 participants, consisting of students enrolled in the teacher training program (Level I and Level II) at the Department for Teacher Education, as well as lower secondary pupils from the classes in which the authors carry out their teaching practice. The student participants had prior exposure to pedagogical practice, including lesson planning and classroom observation, which enabled them to provide informed perspectives on teacher behavior and instructional strategies. The lower secondary pupils contributed direct experiential insights regarding the presence and effects of humor and ludic elements in everyday classroom interactions. This dual-perspective sampling strategy allowed for a comparative and multidimensional understanding of how humor is perceived across different stages of educational experience.

Instruments

Data were collected using a single, comprehensive questionnaire designed to capture both quantitative and qualitative dimensions of participants' perceptions. The instrument integrated multiple types of scales:

- **Likert-type items** with five response levels ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree,"
- **frequency scales** (from "never" to "very often"),
- **semantic differential scales** (e.g., "distant – approachable," "rigid – flexible"),
- and **open-ended items** aimed at eliciting richer, narrative-based responses.

The questionnaire explored several thematic areas, including the perceived role of humor and ludic elements in teaching, the teacher's communication style, emotional safety, and the metaphorical image of the ideal teacher. Open-ended questions invited participants to describe essential teacher qualities, situations in which humor is inappropriate, positive experiences involving humor, and ludic activities perceived as motivating.

Procedure

The questionnaire was administered online in a single stage to ensure consistency and to avoid fragmented responses. Participants completed the instrument individually and anonymously, which encouraged honest and reflective answers. The online format facilitated accessibility for both university students and lower secondary pupils, while also ensuring uniformity in the administration process. Prior to participation, respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and the voluntary nature of their involvement.

Data Analysis

The analysis followed a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques. Quantitative data were processed descriptively, focusing on frequency distributions, percentages, and visual representations such as bar charts and comparative figures. These analyses highlighted trends related to the perceived effects of humor, the frequency of ludic strategies, and the relational impact of teachers' communication styles.

Qualitative data from open-ended responses were analyzed through thematic coding. Recurring themes were identified, grouped, and interpreted to capture participants' subjective experiences and nuanced perspectives. Themes included essential teacher traits, contexts in which humor is contraindicated, positive classroom experiences involving humor, and preferred ludic activities. This dual analytic strategy allowed for a comprehensive understanding of both measurable tendencies and deeper interpretive insights regarding the role of humor in educational interactions.

3. FINDINGS

The following section presents the main findings of the study, organized according to the quantitative and qualitative results obtained from the questionnaire. Each subsection highlights a specific dimension of participants' perceptions, supported by the corresponding figures.

Quantitative Findings

Perceived Effects of Humor

As shown in Figure 1, participants overwhelmingly associated humor with a more relaxed and engaging learning atmosphere. Most respondents indicated that humor helps reduce anxiety, increases attention, and facilitates a more approachable teacher-student relationship. These results suggest that humor is perceived not merely as entertainment, but as a pedagogical tool that enhances emotional comfort and cognitive openness.

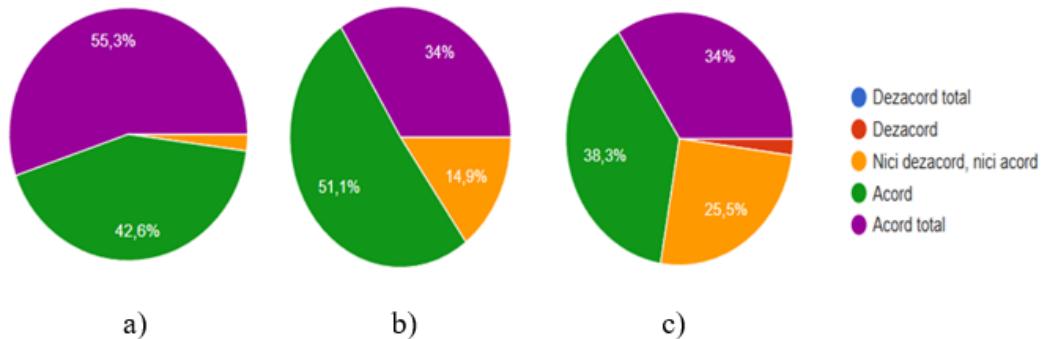


Figure no. 1. Positive Effects of Humor and Ludic Elements (classroom atmosphere, engagement, understanding)

- a) *Humor contributes to creating a relaxed and pleasant classroom atmosphere;*
- b) *Ludic elements stimulate student/pupil engagement;*
- c) *Humor facilitates the understanding of the taught content*

Perceived Effects of Ludic Elements

Figure 2 illustrates participant's perceptions of ludic strategies in the classroom. Respondents reported that playful activities are motivating, especially when they are meaningfully connected to the learning objectives. The data show that ludic elements are valued for their ability to stimulate curiosity, sustain engagement, and create a dynamic learning environment.

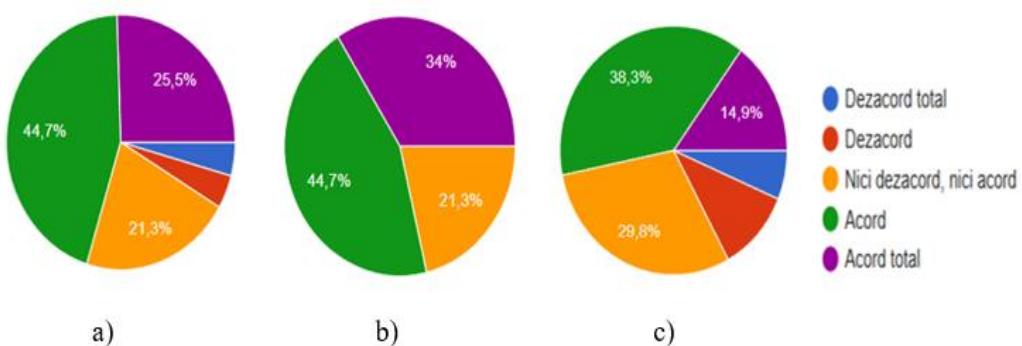


Figure no. 2. Risks and Limitations (tension management, discipline)

- a) *Humor is effective in managing tense situations;*
- b) *Ludic elements are suitable for group activities;*
- c) *Excessive use of humor may negatively affect discipline.*

Combined Impact on Engagement

According to Figure 3, both humor and ludic elements contribute to increased participation and willingness to collaborate. Participants noted that these strategies help them feel more confident in expressing ideas and asking questions. The combined effect appears to strengthen group cohesion and reduce the perceived distance between teacher and learners.

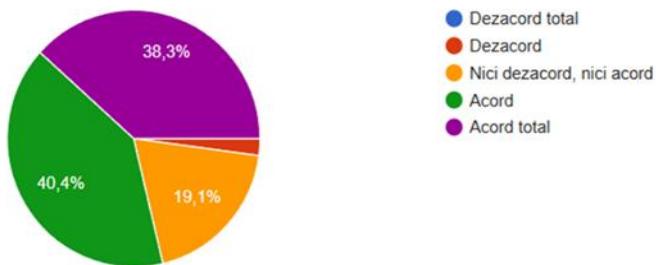


Figure no. 3. Teachers who use humor are perceived as more approachable

Teacher Communication Style: Assertiveness

Figure 4 shows that assertive communication is strongly associated with clarity, structure, and emotional safety. Participants perceived assertive teachers as more consistent, fair, and predictable, which contributes to a stable learning environment. This communication style was also linked to higher levels of trust.

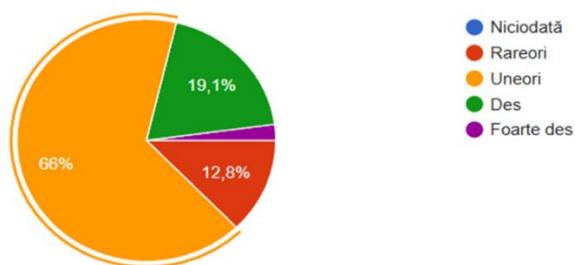


Figure no. 4. Teachers use humor during lessons

Teacher Communication Style: Empathy

As presented in Figure 5, empathetic communication was rated as essential for maintaining a supportive classroom climate. Respondents emphasized that empathy helps teachers understand students' needs, respond appropriately to difficulties, and create a sense

of belonging.

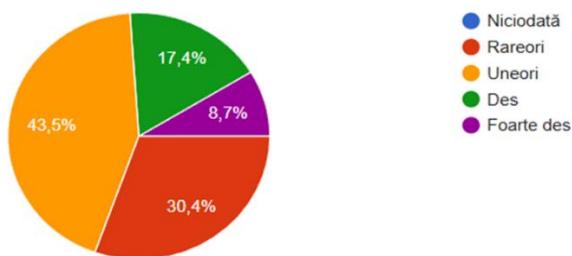


Figure no. 5. Teachers integrate ludic elements into activities
Humor Within Communication

Figure 6 highlights that humor is perceived as most effective when integrated into a respectful and inclusive communication style. Participants indicated that humor enhances clarity and reduces tension when used appropriately, but becomes counterproductive when it shifts toward sarcasm or ridicule.

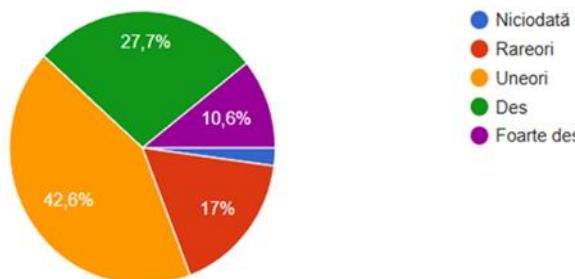


Figure no. 6. Teachers provide examples from everyday life
Perceived Risks of Inappropriate Humor

According to Figure 7, respondents expressed concerns about humor that targets students or trivializes sensitive topics. Such instances were associated with discomfort, reduced participation, and a negative emotional climate. These findings reinforce the importance of intentional, ethical use of humor.

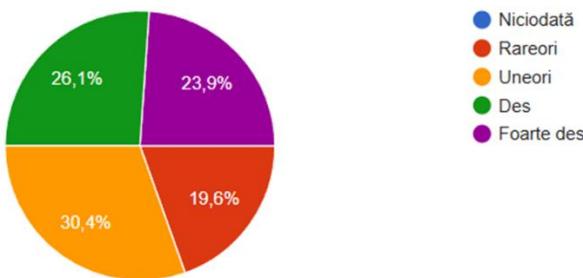


Figure no. 7. Teachers provide rapid and specific feedback
Emotional Climate in the Classroom

Figure 8 shows that humor contributes to a more positive emotional climate, particularly during challenging tasks. Participants reported feeling more at ease and more willing to engage when the teacher used humor to normalize mistakes or reduce pressure.

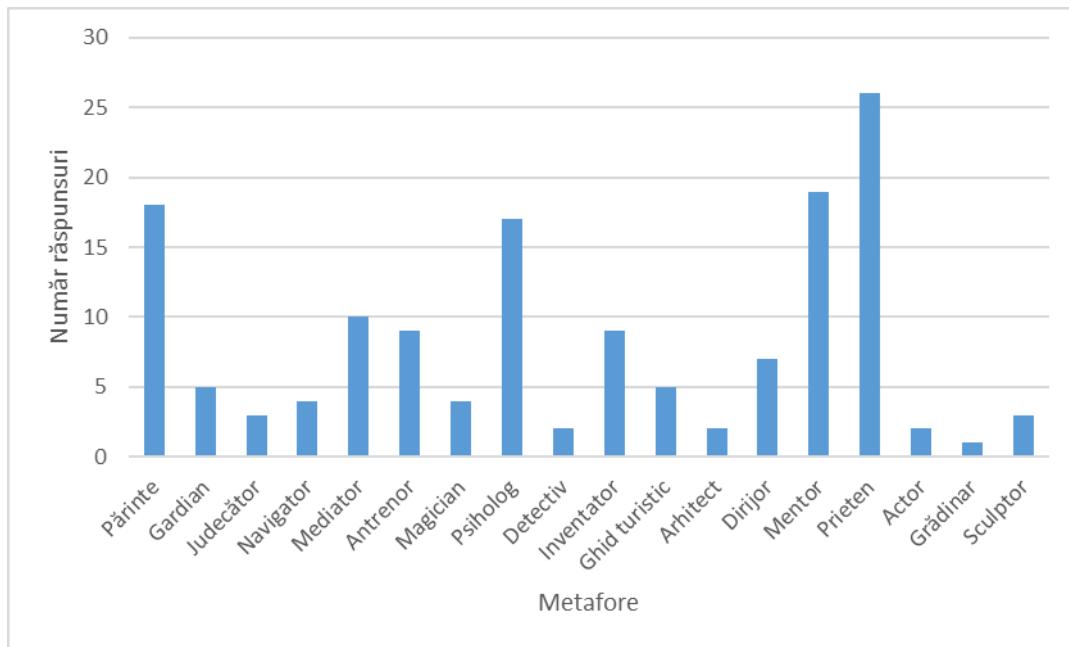


Figure no. 8. The ideal teacher's image (metaphorical)

Comfort in Asking Questions

As illustrated in Figure 9, students feel more comfortable asking questions and expressing difficulties when humor is used appropriately. This suggests that humor can function as a relational bridge, reducing fear of judgment and encouraging academic risk-taking.

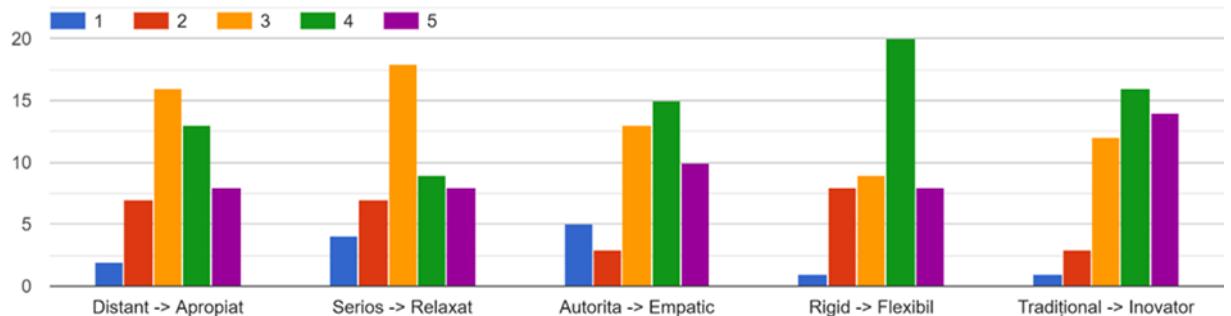


Figure no. 9. The ideal teacher's image (semantic differential scale)

Group Cohesion and Collaboration

Figure 10 indicates that humor and ludic strategies enhance group cohesion. Respondents noted that shared humorous moments and collaborative playful activities strengthen peer relationships and foster a sense of community.

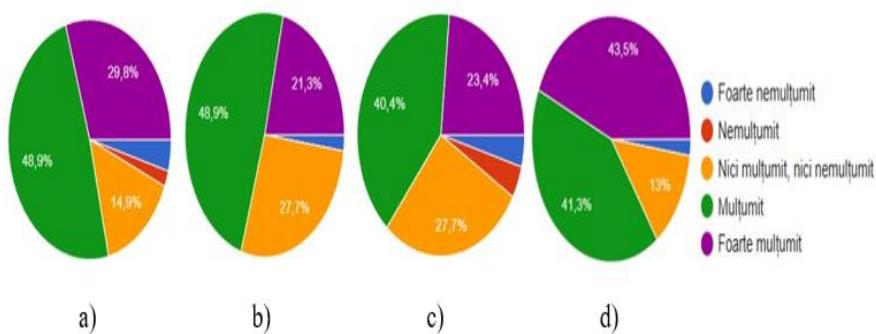


Figure no. 10.

- a) I am satisfied with the way teachers use humor;
- b) I am satisfied with the way teachers introduce ludic elements;
- c) I feel safe to answer, even when I make mistakes;
- d) Humor reduces tension during assessments.

Qualitative Findings

Essential Teacher Qualities

Participants described the ideal teacher as empathetic, patient, fair, and approachable. Many emphasized the importance of creating a safe space where students feel respected and encouraged. Respondents frequently mentioned clarity, warmth, and the ability to balance seriousness with humor as defining traits.

Contexts in Which Humor Is Inappropriate

Several respondents highlighted situations where humor should be avoided, such as moments involving discipline, emotional distress, or sensitive topics. Humor was also considered inappropriate when directed at students or when it risked reinforcing stereotypes. These insights underline the need for ethical discernment in the use of humor.

Positive Experiences Involving Humor

Participants recalled numerous positive experiences in which humor helped them overcome anxiety, understand difficult concepts, or feel more connected to the teacher. These moments often involved spontaneous, self-ironic, or content-related humor that supported learning without distracting from it.

Preferred Ludic Activities

Respondents expressed a preference for interactive games, role-play scenarios, and problem-solving challenges. They appreciated activities that combined fun with cognitive engagement and encouraged collaboration. Ludic strategies were valued most when they were purposeful and aligned with the lesson's objectives.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the significant role that humor and ludic elements play in shaping the emotional climate, engagement, and relational dynamics within the classroom. Overall, the results align with previous research emphasizing that humor, when used intentionally and ethically, contributes to a more relaxed atmosphere, strengthens teacher-student rapport, and supports cognitive processing. At the same time, the study reveals important nuances regarding the boundaries and potential risks associated with humor, particularly in relation to discipline and emotional safety.

First, the quantitative data indicate that students perceive humor as a facilitator of learning, especially through its capacity to reduce anxiety and increase attention. These perceptions are consistent with studies suggesting that humor enhances motivation and lowers affective filters, thereby creating conditions conducive to deeper understanding. The fact that participants associated humor with a more approachable teacher image reinforces the idea that relational proximity is a key factor in effective pedagogy. Humor appears to function as a relational bridge, reducing hierarchical distance and encouraging students to participate more openly.

Second, the results regarding ludic elements show that playful activities are valued when they are purposeful and aligned with learning objectives. Participants emphasized that ludic strategies stimulate curiosity and sustain engagement, particularly in collaborative contexts. This finding resonates with contemporary pedagogical models that advocate for active, student-centered learning environments. However, the qualitative responses also underline the importance of balance: ludic elements are appreciated when they support learning, but they may lose their effectiveness if perceived as superficial or disconnected from the content.

Third, the study highlights the importance of communication style in mediating the effects of humor. Assertive and empathetic communication were both associated with emotional safety, clarity, and trust. These findings suggest that humor is most effective when embedded within a broader communicative framework characterized by respect, consistency, and sensitivity to students' needs. In contrast, humor that borders on sarcasm, ridicule, or trivialization of sensitive topics was perceived as harmful, potentially undermining students' confidence and willingness to participate. This reinforces the ethical dimension of humor in education: teachers must remain attentive to context, individual differences, and the emotional states of learners.

Another important insight concerns the perceived risks of excessive humor. While humor can reduce tension, participants noted that overuse may compromise discipline or distract from instructional goals. This tension between spontaneity and structure reflects a broader pedagogical challenge: integrating humor in a way that enhances, rather than disrupts, the learning process. The findings suggest that moderation and intentionality are essential, and that humor should complement—not replace—clear expectations and consistent classroom management.

Finally, the qualitative data regarding the ideal teacher image reveal a strong preference for educators who combine warmth, empathy, and clarity with the ability to use humor judiciously. Students value teachers who create a safe space for mistakes, who normalize challenges, and who use humor to humanize the learning experience. This perspective aligns with socio-emotional learning frameworks, which emphasize the importance of supportive relationships and positive emotional climates in fostering academic success. Taken together, these findings contribute to a nuanced understanding of humor as a pedagogical tool. Humor and ludic elements are not merely accessories to instruction; they are integral components of an emotionally responsive and engaging learning environment. However, their effectiveness depends on the teacher's communicative competence, ethical discernment, and ability to balance playfulness with structure.

The study thus underscores the need for teacher training programs to address not only content knowledge and instructional strategies, but also relational and emotional competencies, including the intentional use of humor.

CONCLUSION

The micro-study offered a comprehensive perspective on how humor and ludic elements are perceived in educational practice, both by pre-service teachers and by lower-secondary students. The combined quantitative and qualitative analyses showed that these dimensions are not mere rhetorical embellishments, but meaningful pedagogical tools that contribute to a positive classroom climate, stimulate engagement, and strengthen teacher-student relationships.

Respondents consistently associated humor with teacher approachability and relational closeness, confirming the initial assumption that students value humor as a defining trait of the effective teacher (Figure 3, Figure 8). This perception aligns with broader research suggesting that humor humanizes the instructional process and reduces hierarchical distance.

The findings also confirmed that positive humor is perceived as beneficial for classroom atmosphere, collaboration, and motivation. Students reported that humor relaxes the learning environment and reduces tension during assessments, reinforcing the idea that emotional comfort supports cognitive engagement (Figure 1, Figure 10). At the same time, the study revealed important nuances regarding the boundaries of humor. While humor and ludic elements can ease tension and facilitate group interaction, their role in managing conflicts and maintaining mutual respect appears more limited. This partially confirms the third hypothesis: humor may help in sensitive situations, but respondents emphasized the risks associated with inappropriate or excessive use (Figure 2, open-ended responses). These insights highlight the need for discernment and ethical sensitivity in the use of humor.

Another significant conclusion concerns the influence of previous school experiences and affective context on the construction of the teacher's image.

The metaphors and personal accounts provided by participants indicate that perceptions of the ideal teacher are shaped by real interactions and emotional memories, confirming the fourth hypothesis (Figure 8, Figure 9). The ideal teacher profile that emerges from the data combines professional competence, empathy, flexibility, and relational openness, with humor functioning as a complementary but defining component of this image.

Finally, the study confirms that humor is appreciated when used in moderation, as a complementary strategy rather than a dominant one. Respondents indicated that teachers use humor and ludic elements "sometimes" or "often," but rarely "very often," suggesting a preference for balance and intentionality (Figure 4, Figure 5). This supports the fifth hypothesis and reinforces the idea that humor is most effective when integrated thoughtfully into pedagogical practice.

Overall, the results demonstrate that humor and ludic strategies can be successfully incorporated into teaching, provided that teachers show empathy, contextual awareness, and professional judgment. These elements contribute to a relaxed atmosphere, foster student engagement, and help reduce tension, yet they cannot replace competence, clarity, or firmness. The ideal teacher that emerges from this micro-study is an empathetic, flexible, and approachable educator, for whom humor represents an essential but well-calibrated component in building an authentic and supportive educational relationship.

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