

Educating For Sociability and Learning for Citizenship: Developing Communicational Skills and Mediation in Educational Contexts

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Abstract: *This text concerns a program about the Promotion of Social and Communicational Skills and Mediation (PSCSM) developed with children aged between 10 and 13 years in a non-formal educational institution. The program of intervention had, as its purpose, the promotion of social and communicational competencies and mediation, thus enabling the children involved to have a healthy and responsible sociability in the different contexts in which they find themselves: family, school, peer group, amongst others. It was developed over 13 sessions with objectives and activities intentionally planned with the view of promoting competencies of communication, co-operation, responsibility, a critical spirit, solidarity, autonomy, respect, integration, inclusion and the recognition of rights and duties. This work was carried out with an action-research methodology that resorted to various techniques and instruments to gather and record information. The results obtained showed the impact and benefits of the program and they also revealed the necessity of educational institutions investing in the promotion of an ethical literacy and the empowerment of the children and young people for healthy sociability and active citizenship.*

Keywords: *Education, Mediation, Communication, Empowerment, Social Competencies.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of a critical spirit is one goal and a commitment of education for the 21st. Century, as underlined in many documents and standards of an educational and social nature. This commitment implies the involvement of all of the community and its social and educational organizations and the adoption of active and participative methodologies in the construction of democratic societies.

The process of progressive democratization on the past century with its particular visibility in the school and in education has been influenced by a mixture of conservatism, neo-liberalism and social anomy “in which the transformation – for some – has lost the values that traditionally guided social life and made worse by the absence - from the perspective of communities and social organizations - of alternative values” [1: 142-143].

Naussbaum [2] emphasizes three essential values that must prevail in democratic, globalized and multi-cultural societies to promote citizenship: i) the development of the capacity of self-criticism and of critical thinking about their own traditions and customs; ii) the capacity of seeing themselves, as a member of a State and of a heterogeneous world; and iii) the capacity of putting themselves in the place of other people.

The educational contexts whether formal, non-formal or informal in their role, purposes, functions and heterogeneity of their publics, define themselves as appropriate scenarios for the development of competencies and communicational, personal and social skills in the field of an education for citizenship. Simultaneously, this is an important challenge and each time more urgent in view of the characteristics of current society, where, as Bonafé-Schmitt [3: 30] highlights, they exhibit “communicational pathologies, which necessitate the restoration of interrupted mediations and the

need for developing new processes of management of social relationships in accordance with a general model of “permanent negotiation” or complying with an “ethics of dialog”.

Social and educational practices, like negotiation and mediation, strengthen critical thinking and allow the opening up of ways of interaction, whose logic is linked to a basis of the recognition of differences and of identities. These practices contribute to the valuing of difference, working towards autonomy and interdependence, discovering diversity and strengthening mutual recognition [4].

In this sense, it is important to work from the earliest ages on communicational and social skills in a preventive perspective of social and educational mediation. These skills can be developed in various contexts with formal and non-formal education being especially appropriate for their promotion and development. Educational institutions welcome intakes marked not only by personal but also social, cultural, economic and family differences, amongst others. The differences are such that they frequently lead to conflicts; as Bonafé-Schmitt [3: 30] stresses: “the traditional institutions are confronted with ever more difficult situations for controlling these new types of conflict (...). They raise new problems linked to social identity, equal rights, personal fulfillment and quality of life”. So, the necessity and relevance of developing projects and specific programs for communicational empowerment and social interaction are perceived. The program, which is expounded here, resulted in a strategy of preventive and formative mediation.

It is considered that mediation goes beyond the limits of being merely a specific technique for resolving conflicts, as it can have an educational potential for the prevention of conflicts. The educational and social potential of the mediation focused on here prepared the children and young people with skills and tools of empowerment, by stimulating learning that contributed towards their comprehensive training, as will be shown by the results of the program of intervention.

The socio-educational mediation resulted in an educational activity, generating multiple and alternative learning among the parties in conflict or interacting with difficulties, thus promoting a reflexive posture, as an alternative to an impulsive posture. It was also a social activity, because it stimulated mutual understanding, thus promoting an appreciation of diversity and recognition of difference, as well as the making of clear decisions and dialogue [5]. In formal educational and school contexts socio-educational mediation “represents, in this way, a learning of the acceptance of responsibility by the students for improving the relationships at the heart of the school, thus developing new sympathies, which favor a better school and extra-curricular environment” [3: 36].

The programs facilitating and promoting social and communicational skills and mediation in school contexts have proved to be important contributions at the level of education for citizenship, for dialogue and for cohesion and social responsibility. These programs, implemented in different countries ([6], [7], [8], [9], [10], [11], [12]), started to be implemented progressively in Portugal from the middle of the 1990s and they are not yet sufficiently developed in the present day.

Although they have had a very moderate implementation, it is possible to see how the programs of mediation and education for citizenship are important in schools for the assumption of critical, responsible and cohesive educational communities, where the different participants – students, teachers, parents and educational guardians, managers – feel truly recognized, valued and involved in a common project [4].

Various experiments in the field of conflict resolution and education for peace in schools have shown important educational potential and results, particularly at the level of preventing indiscipline and violence.

Mediation programs and/or the facilitation of communication have promoted an understanding of conflict and they aim to empower the participants in the school community with the skill to use communication and with dexterity for managing and solving problems in a constructive and co-operative way. They value the development of skills and competencies that maximize co-operation, communication, regard for diversity, the positive expression of emotions and the resolution of conflicts.

These programs incorporate a strategy of training and prevention and they have, as their objective, the positive development of children and young people with a view to the strengthening of interpersonal relationships and the prevention of violence [7]. One can highlight in this respect, what the Commission on Violence and Youth of the American Psychological Association (APA) [13] recommended for work under the theme of youthful violence; namely,

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- Interventions in early childhood directed to parents;
- Interventions centered in the school, which can be given in a healthy context, through effective programs aimed at the prevention of violence;
- Promoting consciousness of cultural diversity and commitment of members of the community in the planning, implementation and evaluation of interventions;
- Educational programs for reducing preconceptions and hostility, which are factors that lead to hateful and violent behavior.

These recommendations are substantiated in the conclusions made from the study carried out by this Commission with respect to their psychological investigation into violence, which sustain that it is not a random, uncontrollable or inevitable occurrence. This conclusion also allows one to anticipate that it is possible to intervene in the life of young people in order to reduce and prevent their involvement in violence, particularly by means of education in the field of prevention and resolution of conflicts.

Mediation - viewed as a form of personal and social development - facilitates communication and mutual understanding by promoting an active citizenship and the building up of healthy social environments. In this way, mediation consists of a “multi-faceted action, with (Trans) forming potentialities, whose objective is train for responsibility and co-operation” [14: 257]. If, on the other hand, the majority of children, young people and adults lack the competencies to resolve positively and constructively their conflicts [7: 31], it is believed that the students will feel attracted and fascinated with provoking, watching and discussing conflicts [15: 95].

It falls to the mediators, through creative strategies and specific techniques, to take on the role of favoring situations that facilitate and encourage the participation of all of the participants, thus contributing to social regulation and cohesion, the creation of a healthy social environment and bringing about in children, young people and adults values such as group spirit, social consciousness, democracy, acceptance of the point of view of others and a critical spirit. In other words, it gives them the tools that allow them to exercise their future role as active citizens [5].

The Promoting Social, Communicational Skills and Mediation (PSCSM) program [16] was conceived from the premises mentioned earlier to respond to the identified needs and it turned out to have a potential for facilitating and reinforcing the relationships between the diverse participants and the even more diverse contexts in which the children and young people were integrated; namely, school, center for free time activities (CFTA), family, community, amongst others.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Objectives

The PSCSM program was implemented through various sessions using activities planned for the promotion of competencies of communication, conflict resolution, co-operation, self-regulation, mutual aid, co-responsibility, integration, autonomy, solidarity, amongst others, which thus enabled the comprehensive development of the children and young people. The main objective was to promote social, communicational and mediation skills. The following specific objectives were associated with this general objective: i) To prevent school failure; ii) To prevent inappropriate social conduct; iii) To build social and communicational skills; and; iv) To develop negotiating and mediation skills.

2.2. Population

The program was thought up and designed for children and young people aged between 10 and 13 years old, who were attending the Portuguese Second Cycle of education and who were in their fifth and sixth year of schooling. A total of 30 children participated and they were divided into two groups (Year 5 and year 6). Both groups contained children of both sexes, who were distributed equitably. All of the children attended a CFTA (Center for Free-time Activity) run by a non-formal educational institution of the Municipal Council of Braga, Portugal.

During an initial diagnostic phase in the CFTA, these children were characterized as demotivated and inattentive during the carrying out of activities. They resisted the acceptance of institutional and social rules and standards, lacked solidarity, were irresponsible allied with immature and inappropriate behavior for their age (“childishness”) and verbally and physically violent (although this last

characteristic was very isolated). Also they did not carry out the punishments imposed and made abusive use of the new technologies that triggered some of the described behaviors, like the lack of concentration during the carrying out of the CFTA activities.

The participation of these children in the program was voluntary. They were asked to sign an attendance sheet but this was only for obtaining feedback about the number of participants in each of the sessions.

2.3. Methods and Materials

The methods chosen conformed to the qualitative and constructivist paradigm of intervention-research in which theory and practice interact continuously. In other words, they were centered on action-research (AR), which aims to understand in order to act, by giving an active voice to the actors involved in the process.

Action-research, like mediation, calls for active participation, a critical spirit, co-responsibility and reformulation of positions, thereby making a transforming activity take shape through human action, which implies dialogue, commitment and change, besides giving voice to the participants, committing them to and involving them throughout the process of development and implementation of the program. In this way, it strengthened the production of knowledge and increased the value of the reformulation of practices. Besides this, this methodology was appropriate for the “social situations with the objective of improving the rationality and fairness of their educational or social practices, as well as the understanding of these practices and of the situations in which they take place” [17: 9]. AR does not apply theory to practice; it is developed from the local context.

This methodological option materialized from the definition of techniques and instruments of intervention-research from the original diagnosis to the evaluation phase of the program. In the initial phase of the diagnosis, documental analysis, direct observation and semi-structured interviews were carried out. With respect to documental analysis, this focused on the educational project, the internal regulations of the institution and even the files of some of the children and young people. Through direct observation some of the information gathered by other techniques was confirmed (for example, the resistance to rules obtained in the interviews). Five semi-structured interviews were also undertaken and these were applied individually by the teachers of the first and second cycles and by the co-ordinator of the institution.

With respect to the implementation and evaluation of the PSCSM program various principal instruments for recording information stand out: field notes; session plans; written post-session records in student learning diaries and audio-visual recordings. Another instrument used for evaluation throughout and at the end of the program by the participants was a journal called “The writing of a dialog”. This instrument was devised and used to make a written record of feedback from the children at the end of each session. It also had the objective of giving visibility to the work of the team and to the importance that each child or young person had in the implementation of this group. At the end of each session two or three volunteers would be asked to write a brief comment about the session; namely, if they considered the subject matter interesting, if the knowledge imparted and the skills worked on were useful, if they liked or did not like the work, what was the importance of the content provided, etc. The comments were unrestricted and anonymous. The diary was made up of personalized pages, which contained three balloon shapes for feedback. It was inside these balloons that the children wrote their comments.

2.4. Presentation of the PSCSM Program

The PSCSM Program consisted of 13 sessions of 60 minutes each, which were implemented twice per month. Participation in the sessions was voluntary and each participant signed an attendance sheet at the end of each session. Table 1, shows how the main objectives and activities of each of the sessions were organized.

Each session started with a review of the previous session with the purpose of sounding out the learning achieved and to understand what the children stressed. Also it was an opportunity for

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somebody that had not been present in the previous session to get to know the subject matter and the skills developed. Throughout each session the objectives of each activity were explained.

Table1. Organization of the PSCSM Program sessions [16]

Session	Objectives	Activities
1	To develop interpersonal relationships, self-confidence and dialogue To create group relationships and identification	Spider Web game
2	To develop interpersonal relationships, self-confidence and dialogue Recognition of participation and group cohesion	Passing messages in a circle game
3	Recognition of participation and group cohesion	Passing messages in a circle game The group: a vehicle for rules and values
4	Listening to and understanding others	The group: a vehicle for rules and values Journalist in Dialogue.
5	Reinforcing a sense of responsibility To develop the capacity for dialogue and argumentation skills	Dialogue about the school: the perspective of its protagonists Debate: The school is...
6	To develop the capacity for reflection, self-regulation and critical thinking	Debate: Where I learn Hangman game
7	To understand the feelings of "others" and situations related with emotions	Ugly Duckling game. Miming of feelings
8	To understand the feelings of "others" and situations related with emotions	Card game about feelings
9	To understand the feelings of "others" and situations related with emotions	Group work: What our eyes tell us... Interpretation of the Lyrics of Songs
10	To recognize the importance of dialogue, co-operation, co-responsibility, negotiation and reflection	From Dialogue to Mediation
11	To recognize the importance of dialogue, co-operation, co-responsibility, negotiation and reflection	Discovering the mediator inside of you
12	To carry out simulations of mediation practices	From Dialogue to Mediation: simulated conflicts.
13	Dialogue: review of highlights from previous sessions To identify learning achieved	Dialogue: review of highlights from previous sessions

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The implementation of the PSCSM program took place over five months with two sessions per month. Although participation in the sessions was voluntary, all of the children had a systematic participation, which demonstrated motivation and satisfaction throughout the sessions. This aspect is so much more important, as the children that participated in program were diagnosed as disinterested and unmotivated in the context of the CFTA. Besides the effusive welcome that the children gave to the Mediator before the sessions started, the teachers of the institution also recognized the strong motivation of the children to participate in the program.

Initially there was a major difficulty with the participation on the part of the female children, who in the first two sessions showed themselves to be more timid and apprehensive in formulating their opinions in comparison with their male colleagues.

Throughout the sessions, the participation and positive interaction between the various children of the group increased, as well as did recognition of the importance of their manifesting their opinion, listening to colleagues and understanding their own feelings and emotions and those of the others.

In spite of always being asked to participate in the decisions of the group (definition of rules, aspects that they liked to work on in the sessions, continuing the theme in the following session), the progressive uptake of talking skills stood out, even though this was more evident in the fifth year group than the sixth year one. In this latter group, the two penultimate sessions of the program were more agitated, perhaps, because they were getting near to the time of the national assessment exams and at that time the children were tenser.

The objectives and activities of each session were fulfilled and internalized by the majority of the participants, who were capable of formulating questions about the subjects, reflecting about them and identifying alternatives consistent with the situations presented.

Besides the live observation of the performance of the children, there was also their oral and written participation; namely, the diary ‘The writing of a dialogue’, which permitted the identification of interesting indicators of behavior that revealed the acquisition of some social and communicational skills; particularly, interaction and open-mindedness with the others, collaboration, recognition of their own feelings and those of others, acknowledgement of behavior and self-criticism.

In Table 2 various indicators are identified from written records of the participants in the program, which showed recognition of the appropriateness of the planned learning outcomes, due to the implementation of the PSCSM program. Explicitly these were: i) interpersonal relationships, self-confidence and dialogue; ii) group relationships and identification; iii) group participation and cohesion; iv) listening to and understanding others; v) the feeling of responsibility; vi) dialogue and argumentation; vii) a capacity for reflection, self-regulation and critical thinking; viii) the feelings and emotions of “others” and themselves; and ix) dialogue, co-operation, co-responsibility, negotiation and reflection. Underlined also in these indicators were personal satisfaction with participation in the program, which was based to a large extent on the records. Moreover, also highlighted was their capacity for self-criticism.

The transcribed records also showed up prominent aspects related to the methodology and dynamic of the sessions – ‘I liked it very much’, ‘It was a fantastic experience’ ‘I loved it’, ‘I liked it a lot’, ‘It was entertaining, I would like it to be repeated’ – that applied to recognized learning and, even so, they emphasized the satisfaction based on the learning that they achieved. Another important indicator was their capacity for recognizing their own behavior and adopting a critical attitude concerning the same.

Table2. Learning indicators related to social and communication skills

Indicators	Recorded comments
Satisfaction with training session(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>For me it was a fantastic experience</i> – <i>I liked to get together with my friends and play</i> – <i>It was an entertaining session</i> – <i>I liked all of the sessions and would like this to be repeated</i>
Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>I learned what is a group</i> – <i>We know ourselves better with each other</i> – <i>We learned what is a group, we were united and worked together</i> – <i>We learned the duties and the rights doing interviews</i>
Satisfaction with learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>Today the session was very interesting, we liked to interact among ourselves</i> – <i>I liked this session because we spoke about the education</i> – <i>I liked this session because we spoke and we got to know more about bullying and other problems</i> – <i>Today we learned how the others felt, it was very cool</i> – <i>I loved this session because we spoke about the feelings of people and I would like to return to repeat this activity</i> – <i>I liked the session because we learned (about) feelings, we spoke freely and it was very entertaining;</i> – <i>This class was very entertaining, I learned that it did not solve problems “by fighting”</i> – <i>I liked these months immensely, I learned a lot.</i>
Recognition of own behavior and self-criticism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>In this session we learned what is mediation, but we did not behave very well</i> – <i>I liked the classes very much and there is not a better way</i>

The learning mentioned and observed throughout the progress of the behavior of the children participating in PSCSM program permitted us to discover the impact of the program on the

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acquisition of social and communicational skills in the short term, which had greater visibility in the fifth year group than in the sixth year group.

The study also confirmed the potential of the program in promoting the development of the capacity for self-criticism and critical thinking and thinking about putting themselves in the place of other people, which are essential capacities for the construction of democratic societies, as stressed by Naussbaum [2]. Also it told about its impact on the promotion of suitable communication and mutual understanding amongst peers and with adults and its potential for responsibility and co-operation [14]. Equally it can be reported that it confirmed the impact of other programs with common objectives, where the children and “students felt attracted and fascinated in provoking, observing and discussing conflicts” [15: 95].

4. CONCLUSION

Although it is not possible to state that the children acquired mediation skills, it is believed that the acquisition of social and communicational skills is a predictor of them being able to attend mediation programs as equals with success in the training and practice of mediation.

For a greater consistency of the evaluation of the impact of the program it will be necessary to monitor the children later on and to carry out a longer evaluation for at least the following year after the implementation of the program and in different contexts, such as school, social group and family. That did not happen, therefore, the validation of the study is provisional, so its replication and further evaluation in the medium and the long term is recommended.

On the other hand, it is considered that the program implemented is not substantial enough for the acquisition of mediation skills, so it is considered that a separate program and one that is sequential to this one must be conceived; namely a Program for the Acquisition of Mediation Skills (PAMS).

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