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EMOTIONAL SKILLS AND SCHOOL SUCCESS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF A PROGRAMME OF SYSTEMIC INTERVENTION

Ana Paula Cardoso (a), Manuela Ferreira (b), Sofia Campos (c)*, Sara Felizardo (d), João Duarte (e)
*Corresponding author

(a) Instituto Politécnico de Viseu, CI&DETS, Escola Superior de Educação, Viseu, Portugal, a.p.cardoso62@gmail.com
(b) Instituto Politécnico de Viseu, CI&DETS, Escola Superior de Saúde, Viseu, Portugal, mmcferreira@gmail.com
(c) Instituto Politécnico de Viseu, CI&DETS, Escola Superior de Saúde, Viseu, Portugal, sofiamargaridacampos@gmail.com
(d) Instituto Politécnico de Viseu, CI&DETS, Escola Superior de Educação, Viseu, Portugal, sfelizardo@esev.ipv.pt
(e) Instituto Politécnico de Viseu, CI&DETS, Escola Superior de Saúde, Viseu, Portugal, duarte.johnny@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper presents a research aimed at understanding the contribution of an integrated and systemic intervention programme called Develop+ targeted at the development of appropriate social and emotional skills in students with disruptive behaviours, as well as their parents and teachers. The exploratory study was developed using an action-research methodology. The intervention was conducted over six months and included a baseline pre-test with a set of instruments and a post-test. The convenience sample involved six students from two 7th year classes of a school in the central region of Portugal, five parents and ten teachers. After the intervention, five students perceived very significant changes in their behaviours and only one didn't feel any change in the way she has been behaving. Parents and teachers revealed a rather favourable perception regarding their participation in the programme, considering that it helped them to perceive some behaviours and practices less adjusted to their educational action. The results highlight the importance of a systemic intervention programme applied to students who display disruptive behaviours. The programme revealed an improvement of personal and social skills associated with a higher academic achievement. Also, the results demonstrated that parents and teachers' emotional competences and well-being are quite important in developing and maintaining positive relationships with students required for their adaptation to school.

Keywords: Emotional skills, students, parents, teachers, 3rd cycle of basic education.

1. Introduction

The OECD Report (2017) draws attention to the high rate of early school attrition among young people in Portugal compared to other European countries, advocating the need for several educational policies in order to provide a quality education to all students. These macro systemic policies presuppose the need to implement effective programmes adapted to the diverse realities of education that promote school success, in specific contexts of School Groupings. More specifically, programmes that allow the improvement of the relational climate in the school, and contribute to a greater professional satisfaction, while enhancing parental competencies will hopefully, result in the motivation and involvement of students in the teaching-learning process.

In this context, it should be stressed that school achievement is a multifactorial phenomenon, in which the type and the quality of the interpersonal relationships that are established are crucial for the harmonious development of young people, in their concomitant condition of students, children and citizens, and it is fundamental to promote the socio-emotional competencies of all those who are involved in the educational relationship. However, there remains a need for a systemic approach that could simultaneously integrates students, parents and teachers as true agents for change.

The theoretical review about programmes that impact on social and emotional competencies, both in teachers and students as well as in parents, highlights the adaptive value of emotional intelligence (EI) used to respond to daily life challenges. Lopes and Salovey (2004) mention that such programmes decrease behavioural problems, emphasizing the role of emotions and the importance of emotional regulation in learning and academic performance.

One of the most respected theorists in this field, Daniel Goleman (2014) defines EI as "the capacity of a person to motivate herself and to persist despite the frustrations; to control the impulses and to postpone the reward; to regulate her own state of mind and to prevent discouragement from subjugating the faculty of thinking; to feel empathy and hope "(Goleman, 2014, p. 54). This author also clarifies that EI is the competence that allows identifying, expressing and understanding emotions as well as assimilating emotions on mind and regulating their own and others' positive and negative emotions. Thus, individuals who have high levels of EI, both men and women, are open and sociable, expressing their feelings in an appropriate way and able to withstand stress (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). These characteristics, in turn, increase the likelihood of peer acceptance and an adapted social life (Lopes, Salovey, Côté, & Beers, 2005).

In the school context, evidence from studies that focus on IE as a predictor of academic success (Matthews, Zeidner, & Roberts, 2002; Mayer, Salovey, Caruso, & Sitarenios, 2001, Lopes & Salovey, 2004). As attested in the literature, the development of emotional and citizenship skills of children and young people allows the reduction of disruptive behaviours as well as improves the capacity to manage stress and establish suitable interpersonal relations (Saarni, 1999; Sánchez, Ortega, & Menesini, 2012). The emotional training provided by parents is a protective factor for children, reducing levels of aggression (Chan, Rhodes, Howard, Schwartz, & Herrera, 2013). The promotion of teachers' personal and professional competencies benefits several relational areas with impact on educational success (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Tylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Greenberg, Weissberg, Zins, Resnik, & Elias, 2003; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2007).

With this in mind, this article presents a systemic intervention programme entitled Develop+ which is structured for training/support and monitoring sessions, directed to students with significant behavioural changes, their parents and teachers of the Class Council. The problems identified in these students are those that cause learning difficulties, low self-esteem and self-concept, relational difficulties with teachers and colleagues, problems of internalizing nature (anxiety, depression, isolation) and externalizing nature (delinquent behaviours, aggressive behaviours and others), which unleash a vicious cycle in which these problems activate other problems. The challenge is to intervene in the educational environment (teachers), family relationships (parents) and students with the aim of interrupting and rectifying these cause-and-effect sequences.

The present intervention is intended to develop assertive parenting in collaboration with parents and constructive teaching with teachers while improving students' competencies of citizenship which promote the discipline and the school attainment. The main objectives of this programme are: to improve the relational climate of the participants involved; to increase educational success, the well-being and quality of the educational environment; to decrease inappropriate/disruptive behaviour; to promote the development of emotional and social skills and active and responsible citizenship skills; and improve students' motivation empowering school success.

2. Problem Statement

This research aims to identify the contribution of an integrated and systemic intervention programme for the development of social and emotional skills in students with disruptive behaviours attending the 3rd cycle of basic education. The programme will also target their parents and teachers for interventions.

3. Research Questions

To what extent does an intervention programme for the development of socioemotional skills (Develop+) promote appropriate personal and social behaviour of students who show disruptive behaviour, in conjunction with altering their parents and teachers´ personal and relational skills?

4. Purpose of the Study

The literature has references to several intervention programmes with the purpose of altering children's personal and socioemotional skills. However, there is still a need for a systematic and integrated approach seeking to promoting school success, that involve, in a single study, and simultaneously, students, their parents and teachers. In fact, such an approach would provide a broader insight into the interconnected factors in order to improve social and emotional skills required that can promote a higher student achievement.

5.   Research Methods

An exploratory study was developed using action research methodology. This seeks to change a particular situation in the sense of improving it as well as produce knowledge about the changes in social reality, with the participation of the actors themselves with a view to overcoming the duality of theory and practice (Noffke & Somekh, 2010; Cardoso, 2014). In this case, it includes constructing and implementing an intervention programme called "Develop+" aimed at developing students' socio-emotional skills and their school motivation, in conjunction with their parents and teachers´ personal (well-being and emotional intelligence) and relational skills (Campos, Ferreira, Cardoso, Duarte, Felizardo, & Chaves, 2016; Cardoso, Ferreira, Campos, Duarte, Chaves, & Felizardo, 2016; Ferreira, Duarte, Campos, Chaves, Felizardo, & Cardoso, 2017).

The study was conducted over a period of six months and included an initial pre-test evaluation with a set of instruments and a post-test using the same instruments. The initial planning was subject to successive reformulations, based on the reflection and evaluation of the sessions, in which the session monitors specialized in Psychology and Health, carried out through the implementation phase following a cyclical process of planning/action/reflection that is characteristic of this methodological approach (Cardoso, 2014).

The convenience sampling involved six 7th grade students; 4 boys and 2 girls aged between 12 and 14 who had been displaying disruptive behaviours and school failure and were part of two different classes of a school from the central region of Portugal; five parents; 4 females and 1 male aged between 34 and 43 years; all married, two of them with 6th grade, another two the 9th grade and one with 12th grade; and ten teachers; 6 males and 4 females aged between 44 and 52 and all married, except for one. All the teacher participants have a degree; one with a master's degree and four others with specialised training, respectively in school administration, special education, teaching and educational guidance. The teachers have between 10 and 26 years of teaching. Most of them hold tenure in their school group, and they teach several different subjects: Portuguese, mathematics, history, geography, physical education, technological education and religious and moral studies.

The programme Develop+ included 12 sessions (in addition to pre and post-test sessions), conducted on a weekly basis; each session lasting 120 minutes per session. All the ethical and informed consent procedures were met, and the data confidentiality was respected, as were the participants' autonomy and freedom.

The activities and tasks carried out with the **student** sample focused on the following areas: self-esteem and self-concept, self-knowledge, communication and expression, emotional self-regulation in social interaction behaviours, the improvement of their future perspective, school motivation, and the construction of a life and moral development project. The methodologies used were dynamic, participative, integrated and varied, such as group dynamics activities, thematic discussions (topics ranging from violence and bullying, family relationships, peer relationships, sexuality, etc.), case studies, moral dilemmas, watching films, evaluation and self- evaluation questionnaires (Campos et al., 2016).

To collect the students' data, the Portuguese version of the ASEBA battery was used (Achenbach System of Empirically Based Assessment (Achenbach, 1991; Achenbach and Rescorla, 2001 & 2002)). This instrument assesses the emotional and behavioural problems in children/teenagers aged between 6

and 18. The ASEBA battery - for school age period – includes evaluation tests to be completed by the parents: the Child Behavior Checklist - ages 6-18 (CBCL 6-18; an 118-item with 3 open-ended questions questionnaire; it includes items that provide sociodemographic and other contexts' data about the child/teenager's behaviour); by the teachers - the Teacher's Report Form (TRF; a 112-item and **3** open-ended questions questionnaire) and by the child/teenager himself/herself- the Youth Self Report (YSR; a 112 item with 3 open-ended questions questionnaire; it includes items about how they perceive their own behaviours, skills and problems, as well as some socio-demographic information). Also, the questionnaires incorporated competence scales, syndrome scales, internalization/externalization scales and Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5–APA, 2013) oriented scales. The scoring for the ASEBA scales was done according to the Portuguese standards. As far as the psychometric qualities of the questionnaire, the results regarding the internal consistency with reference to Cronbach's Alpha, showed overall suitable values (Campos et al., 2016).

The activities and tasks developed with parents were diversified and, in the first phase, were directed towards the greater difficulties faced by them in dealing with problematic teenagers at home. This was accomplished in order to raise awareness of the importance of students' perceptions for the effective need of school, for the development of communication and expression skills as well as emotional self-regulation, to obtain a better emotional and social interaction. In the second phase, activities and tasks focused on the organization of home study and the implementation of effective relational strategies. Participatory and varied methods were used to involve parents, including thematic debates (emotional management and their relevance in the relational context, parent-child and parent-teacher relationship, study organization methodologies, training for an assertive education, and so on), case studies, movie viewing, group dynamics, etc. (Ferreira et al., 2017).

The activities and tasks advanced with the teachers were also varied and were initially directed at the greatest difficulties they faced in dealing with troubled students in the classroom, to raise awareness of the importance of students' perceptions for an effective pedagogical relationship, for the development of communication skills and expression as well as of emotional self-regulation with a view to improving social and educational interaction. In the second phase, the activities and tasks focused on critical analysis and reflection of key educational issues such as the urgency of change and innovation in education, the importance of teachers' receptivity to pedagogical innovation, as well as approaching and promoting new teaching-learning methodologies, in order to respond to individual needs and the diversity of student learning styles. Participatory methods and reflective practices have been applied, covering thematic debates (classroom management, emotions and their relevance to the pedagogical context, the teacher-student and student-student pedagogical relationships, pedagogical innovation and factors associated with it, etc.), case studies, films, group dynamics, enhancing classes using innovative methodologies, etc. (Cardoso et al., 2016).

To collect data from parents and teachers, a questionnaire was used to obtain sociodemographic information, the PANAS (Positive and Negative Affect Schedule), of Watson, Clark and Tellegen (1988), in the Portuguese version reduced and adapted by Galinhas and Ribeiro (2005), the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS), of Dinner (1984), adapted to the Portuguese population by Simões (1992) and the Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS, 2002), adapted by Rodrigues, Rebelo and Coelho (2011).

Concerning the psychometric qualities of the various scales specifically, the results of internal consistency, Cronbach's Alpha, reveal, in general, adequate values.

A short evaluation session questionnaire was also applied at the end of the programme, after the focus group session that was attended by all the participants (students, parents and teachers). With regard to pre-test and post-test results, the students' data mentioned that they felt motivated and that they would like to be involved with the programme until the 9th year of schooling. The parents and teachers' data of the positive and negative affect constructs, satisfaction with life and emotional intelligence were also taken into account in our reflection.

6. Findings

The analysis of the collected data made it possible to verify the positive contribution of the programme of social skills development, emotional intelligence and motivation for school learning, applied to students with disruptive behaviours, in terms of the perception of behavioural changes from parents and students. Among the students, five perceived very positive changes in their behaviours and only one student maintained his/her perception (Campos et al., 2016).

The results obtained highlight the positive contribution of the training programme in the promotion of personal and parental skills, namely the parents' perceptions regarding positive and negative effects, satisfaction with life and emotional intelligence, as well as with the promotion of emotional management skills at home and the improvement of parent-child relationship interaction (Ferreira et al., 2017).

The results also highlight the training programme's positive contribution towards promoting personal (well-being and emotional intelligence) and professional skills of the teachers in terms of their perceptions regarding the positive and negative effects, satisfaction with life and emotional intelligence as well as in with regards to promoting emotional management skills in the classroom and improving pedagogical interaction (Cardoso et al., 2016).

Based on the analysis of the final assessment questionnaires, the parents and teachers showed a favourable perception regarding their participation in the programme. They all agreed that the proposed objectives were fully met. Regarding the methodology used, they considered that it was very or totally adequate, both at a theoretical and practical level, and that the learning resulting from their participation in the programme will have repercussions on the improvement of their parenting or professional activity respectively. Most of the participants considered that the contents were appropriate and adjusted to the beneficiaries, the language used was very clear and assertive and the available materials were useful and appropriate for the work undertaken. In terms of final assessment, all five parents and six teachers rated the programme as excellent (Cardoso et al., 2016; Ferreira et al., 2017).

When the focus group was conducted at the end of the intervention, the parents and teachers reiterated their positive appreciation with regard to the impact of the intervention on improving their parenting skills and professional activity, respectively. They said they enjoyed the relaxed and informal atmosphere under which the training and the participation as well as the discussions took place during the various sessions. All parents and teachers considered that the intervention should have started at the beginning of the school year in order to have a greater impact on the various participants and to allow

them time to make the recommended changes. In addition, there should have been more systematic contact between the various participants (students, parents and teachers) and not just at the end of the systemic programme sessions, with the view to have a better understanding of their needs and expectations (Cardoso et al., 2016; Ferreira et al., 2017).

Several parents stressed the importance they had for their personal and relational development with their children to intervene in the problem of emotional interaction; a dimension they consider fundamental to work with children who reveal behavioural problems, with a view to creating a positive and empathic atmosphere. Parents highlighted cases of children whose behavioural improvements were evident, sometime after the systemic intervention, with the expectation that this training can translate into positive school results. One parent stressed the relevance of the approach to learning new behaviours and the need to change relational practices in order to motivate children to learn, making them more participatory and involved in the activities to be developed in school.

The majority of the teachers emphasised the importance the intervention had for their personal and professional development regarding the issue of pedagogical interaction; a dimension they consider important to work with these students who have behavioural problems, with a view to creating a positive and empathic classroom environment. One of the teachers stressed the importance for her of the task which consisted of "discovering" what students thought about teachers. She had no awareness of the impact that certain behaviours had on students in the classroom. For example, what she regarded as "speaking loudly" was perceived by students as "screaming/yelling". The act of "scolding" was seen as "getting angry" or "lecturing." (Cardoso et al., 2016). The teachers also pointed out cases of some students whose improvements in behaviour in the classroom were evident for some time after the systemic intervention. The expectation is that this training can translate into positive educational outcomes. One of the teachers stressed the importance of approaches with new teaching methods and the need to change pedagogical practices in order to motivate students for learning, making them more engaged and involved in classroom activities.

7. Conclusion

Students with disruptive behaviours are especially susceptible to lack of school interest and lack of motivation to study. Oftentimes, they use the lack of support from parents and from their teachers as an excuse for dropping out of school (Lund, 2014). It is therefore necessary to use a variety of strategies that promote socio-emotional development, motivate such at risk students to remain in school and mobilize them to participate in learning for as Pace, Mullins, Beesely, Hill, & Carson (1999, p.151) mention, "children who have significant emotional and behavioural problems respond less positively to others and this elicits fewer positive responses and more negative responses from others". Systemic intervention programmes which could involve all educational agents (students, parents and teachers) can substantially reduce rates of school failure, since they address this problem in an integrated and holistic way.

The perceived improvement in the behaviour of students involved in the systemic intervention programme, as well as the favourable opinion of all the participants in the Develop+ programme, reinforces the importance of developing social and emotional skills in order to promote school success. The way people recognize, express and manage their emotions, the way they recognize them in others,

and how they relate to others, determine the quality of established relationships and the learning environment, which are both facilitators of learning.

The results are consistent with those found by Esturgó-Deu and Sala Roca (2010) and also by MacCann, Fogarty, Zeidner and Roberts (2011), which highlight the lack of capacity for emotional self-regulation and self-control as primary factors of students' disruptive behaviour. The second study also underlines the importance of coping strategies for more effective management of emotions and the ability to establish more constructive relationships. Benefits at the level of parental intervention translate into improvements in personal and parental skills (positive affections, wellbeing levels, self-awareness, communication skills, self-control, knowledge needed to identify and manage their emotions) which are reflected in the creation of a more empathic relational environment and reduction of emotional stress.

These results are aligned with those of others' intervention programmes (Cacheiro & Martins, 2012; Costa & Faria, 2013; Paula, 2012), which emphasize the fundamental role of emotions in human development. Parents' responses to the emotions expressed by their children have important consequences in developing the capacity for emotional self-regulation and the development of coping strategies to deal with daily situations.

Teachers play a key role in promoting emotionally rich learning environments, in which students feel accepted and understood (Corcoran & Tormey, 2013). The results related to teachers concur with those obtained by Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins (2004), Jennings and Greenberg (2009) and Lopes and Salovey (2004) who showed a positive impact of programmes to develop teachers' emotional skills in various relational areas in the educational context, that also influence their job satisfaction (Brackett, Palomera, Mojsa-Kaja, Reyes, & Salovey, 2010).

The teachers reiterated the importance of reflecting on topics related to pedagogical interaction in the classroom, so as to be able to respond better to students. To this end, they stressed the need for teachers to innovate their pedagogical methods, not overdoing "lectures", and to develop their own emotional skills in order to deal with these students more effectively. It is important that teachers are aware of the consequences of their behaviours for students, so as to contribute to a classroom context which is more empathic and productive.

From the analysis of the systemic intervention programme, some practical implications for a future intervention in this field are highlighted. First, it is important to be aware of and reflect on what the students think about their parents, teachers and school, for only through this knowledge based on reciprocal perceptions, can we understand the real impact of our behaviours on them. Second, it is necessary to promote effective parent-child interactions, able to change maladaptive behaviours, which involves proper emotional management and more dialog. Third, it is important to improve pedagogical interactions (teacher-student and student-student) as they could support and motivate students in the teaching-learning process. Fourth, it is crucial to rehearse and implement new didactic approaches that are active, participatory, and student-focused, conducive to greater academic achievement and well-being.

Acknowledgments

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