Development of a social and emotional learning program using educational dance: A participatory approach aimed at middle school students

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ABSTRACT

Participatory research with children and adolescents may increase their responsiveness toward interventions. This study focuses on the development of a program to promote social and emotional skills in middle school students, using educational dance. The main goal was to assess students' social and emotional needs and their interests in education through art activities, duly supported by the opinions of experts. Initially, focus groups were conducted and a questionnaire given out to students (N = 22), in addition to interviews with school representatives (N = 2). Next, students (N = 6) participated in a workshop and responded to a questionnaire. Experts (N = 3) then evaluated the program. Results revealed (a) students' social and emotional needs; (b) that music and dance matched students' interests; (c) students' high interest and satisfaction with the program; and (d) that the experts' assessment served to validate the program. Implications for practice and research are discussed.

1. Social and emotional learning in schools

Major changes occur in the transition from infancy to adolescence, especially in terms of family and social relationships and physical growth and development (Eccles, Templeton, Barber, & Stone, 2003). Hence, the onset of adolescence is marked by demanding developmental tasks which may result in emotional difficulties and risk behaviors (Social & Character Development Research Consortium, 2010). Programs under the common title Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) have been developed in school settings in a number of countries (Humphrey, 2013). These interventions set out to develop contents related to a broad set of social and emotional skills in the domains of self-awareness (e.g., the ability to recognize one's emotions), social awareness (e.g., the ability to take the perspective of others), self-management (e.g., the ability to regulate one's emotions), relationship skills (e.g., the ability to establish rewarding relationships) and responsible decision-making (e.g., the ability to make constructive choices) (Collaborative for Academic, Social & Emotional Learning, 2015; Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, & Gullotta, 2015).

The results of a meta-analysis and of three large-scale reviews on the impact of SEL programs point to positive effects in children and adolescents’ behavior, attitudes and school performance (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Payton et al., 2008). More specifically, SEL programs may help to increase pro-social behaviors, to reduce conduct and internalizing problems, to promote positive attitudes towards the self, others, and school, and to enhance school success. These findings highlight the importance of this type of intervention in educational settings.

2. Education through art and social and emotional learning

Art in education may be used to promote cultural diversity (UNESCO, 2006) by different artistic expressions to promote children and youths’ development (Sousa, 2003). Educational programs that are sensitive to cultural diversity ought to use accessible and relevant materials for students with different cultural backgrounds (Martines, 2008; Merrell & Gueldner, 2010). Artistic activities encourage the use of culturally relevant materials such as music, dance, and other artistic expressions (e.g., painting) representing different cultures. Moreover, considering that artistic activities are focused on body and non-verbal expression and communication, education through art may help to overcome cultural and linguistic obstacles (Cochran, 1996).

School interventions need to cover cultural diversity issues as a result of increasing multiculturality and the poor cultural adaptation of the vast majority of current educational programs (Martines, 2008). The needs of children and youths who are more vulnerable to marginalization and exclusion (e.g., ethnic minorities) should be considered (UNESCO, 2005). Therefore, programs developed in school contexts should contain inclusive practices to guide students towards understanding their own cultural background, as well as those of others, thus,
enabling them to positively deal with a multicultural society (Kennedy, Bronte-Tinkew, & Matthews, 2007). Furthermore, by adapting educational programs to cultural diversity, their effectiveness will be broadened to target a larger spectrum of students (Merrell & Gueldner, 2010).

Education through art may also facilitate the development of children and adolescents’ social and emotional skills, since physical and emotional development appear to be interrelated (Damásio, 2010; Nummenmaa, Gleeran, Harib, & Hietanen, 2014). In fact, the results of a number of studies (Wright, John, Alaggia, & Sheel, 2006; Wright, John, Rowe, & Duku, 2009; Wright, Alaggia, & Krygsman, 2014) suggest that artistic programs have a significant impact on reducing the emotional difficulties experienced by children and adolescents, as well as on enhancing their social skills, namely relationship, conflict solving and team work skills.

3. Participatory research and intervention with youth

Participatory research methods focus on the co-production of knowledge, and set out to understand children and youths’ experiences in unthreatening contexts (Horgan, 2017). Several authors (Fattore, Mason, & Watson, 2007; Hill, 2006) have defended the need to give voice to children and adolescents in research, particularly to engaging youths in the development of programs aimed at them (Nabors, Ramos, & Weist, 2001). Interactive group methods are frequently used in participatory approaches such as storytelling, role-play, mapmaking and artistic activities as a basis for group discussion (Horgan, 2017). These approaches seem to be associated with an increase in the interest and participation of children and adolescents in the programs, focusing on understanding the contents and activities that are more appealing and suited to them (Heary & Hennessy, 2002; Wyatt, Krauskopf, & Davidson, 2008). Thus, children and youths are seen as active participants in the research process (Horgan, 2017).

Interventions geared towards children and youths come up against the difficulty of maintaining the interest and motivation of their target population, especially when they are perceived as an extension of the school day (Watts, Witt, & King, 2008). Thus, most after-school programs present drop out and low attendance rates (Gottfredson, Cross, Wilson, Rorie, & Connell, 2010; Gopalan et al., 2013; Hayes, Chapple, & Ramirez, 2014). Programs that use artistic activities appear to match students’ interests and satisfaction (Hutzel, Russell, & Gross, 2010; Wright et al., 2006). This is particularly important given the fact that participants’ responsiveness influences the efficacy of interventions (Low, Ryzin, Brown, Smith, & Haggerty, 2014; Pettigrew et al., 2015; Schultes, Stefanek, van de Schoot, Strohmeier, & Spiel, 2014). Therefore, education through art may help to promote the participation of students in programs at school.

One of the main features associated with effective SEL programs is the use of active and interactive forms of learning based on movement, participation, manipulation, and practice (Gullotta, 2015). Practice helps to develop skills and youths appear to learn best by experiencing and doing (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010). However, SEL programs are usually delivered through classroom-based verbal instruction (Merrell & Gueldner, 2010). To our knowledge, education through art activities has not yet been studied as a means to make SEL programs more relevant and appealing to students.

4. The present study

The aim of the present study is to present the development of a school SEL intervention, targeting Portuguese middle school students, by using educational dance activities in the education through art domain. This research focuses on participants’ needs and interests through a participatory approach, complemented by expert opinions. In an attempt to incorporate cultural sensitivity into the program, the intervention was grounded in a case-study of a Portuguese middle school in a multicultural area of Lisbon. The school’s population was mostly composed of students from a low socio-economic background, and almost half of them were of migrant origin, mainly from Brazil and Portuguese-speaking African countries. The school’s educational aims were based not only on the promotion of academic skills, but also on the social dimension of learning and inclusive practices. Thus, this particular school was deemed an appropriate context for the development of a multiculturality-sensitive SEL program.

The two stages of the program’s development are presented in this study, in line with the literature on program development and evaluation (Berkel, Mauricio, Schoenfelder, & Sandler, 2011; Fernández-Ballesteros, 1995; Juste, 2006). The first stage aimed to ascertain the program’s relevance and usefulness. Two main issues were taken into consideration: (a) identifying students’ needs; and (b) understanding students’ interest in the type of program activities. Focus groups were conducted with a sample of middle school students who subsequently answered a questionnaire. Additionally, interviews were carried out with two school representatives. The second stage aimed to test potential means of actions in order to analyze the advantages and drawbacks of the program. Hence, the content and procedures of the program were tested through a workshop with students based on a preliminary version of the program’s manual. Students completed a questionnaire which evaluated their responsiveness to the program’s contents and activities. Additionally, a second version of the program’s manual was evaluated by a panel of experts, based on a questionnaire. The efficacy and quality of the program’s implementation were evaluated through other studies (Pereira & Marques-Pinto, 2017a, 2017b).

The study was approved by the Scientific Council of the Faculty of Psychology of the University of Lisbon, the entity responsible, at the time, for the ethical and scientific evaluation of research projects, and was conducted upon authorization from the administrative school council. The students whose parents gave their informed consent voluntarily participated in the study in classrooms at the school. The data was collected by one of the researchers, who also collected students’ socio-demographic data. The interviews with the school representatives were held in their own offices.

The Experiencing Emotions program is grounded in other programs and in the literature on SEL (Merrell & Gueldner, 2010; Ciarrochi & Mayer, 2007) and educational dance (Payne, 1997; Sousa, 2003). The program targets the school environment and is an after-school program comprising 12 hourly sessions divided into three units. This intervention aims to develop social and emotional skills in five main areas: self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills and responsible decision-making. The program also includes contents on multiculturality, due to the increasing cultural diversity in schools and in society at large, as well as to the lack of SEL programs comprising such contents. The program’s main structure and contents may be consulted in Appendix A, in addition to examples of activities. The intervention uses educational dance activities with the purpose of working implicitly on the social and emotional and multicultural contents of the program with the students, alternating the experience with moments of reflection and group discussion on program content. Dance forms and music from different cultures are used to develop the specific activities and contents related to multiculturality. The program follows an action-reflection approach as may be observed in Appendix A. All sessions begin with an educational dance warm-up exercise to prepare the body and to promote group cohesion. The main activity consists of an educational dance exercise focusing on body and non-verbal expression and communication, using movement, dance and usually music. Finally, a group discussion on the contents of the session and its connection to the main activity is conducted by the facilitator.
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