Development of socio-emotional and creative skills in primary education: teachers' perceptions about the Gulbenkian XXI School Learning Communities Project

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Introduction

It would be hard, we would go so far as to say almost impossible, to find a text on key skills for the twenty-first century that fails to mention the rapid advance of science and technology, the swift rate of social change, and the unpredictability that the future holds. We cannot, in fact, remain oblivious to these factors, as many of the students who attend our schools today will have jobs that have not yet even come into existence (World Economic Forum, 2016). Schleicher (2018) states that the educational community's greatest dilemma is that cognitive skills, which, he argues, are the easiest to teach and test, are those which, in turn, "that are also easiest to digitize, automate and outsource" (p. 231). The author states:

> schooling today needs to be much more about ways of thinking (involving creativity, critical thinking, problem solving and judgement), ways of working (including communication and collaboration), tools for working (including the capacity to recognize and exploit the potential of new technologies) and about the capacity to live in a multi-faceted world as active and responsible citizens (p. 31).

In the same vein, Trilling and Fadel (2009) propose two sets of core skills that top the list for twenty-first century jobs, namely: the ability to quickly apply new knowledge; and knowing how to apply twenty-first century core skills (i.e., problem solving, communication, teamwork, use of technology, innovation, etc.) (Trilling and Fadel, 2009, p. 11).

The report *Student Profile on Leaving Compulsory Schooling* was drawn up to serve as a political guideline for educational organization and to contribute "to the convergence and articulation of decisions inherent to the various

dimensions of curriculum" (Ministério da Educação, 2017, p. 8). It defended a humanist approach that assumes that the biggest challenge facing schools is to prepare our children and young people for an uncertain future. Ten categories of skills are presented that must be developed throughout all academic disciplines, namely: languages and reading; information and communication; reasoning and problem solving; critical and creative thinking; interpersonal relationships; personal development and autonomy; well-being, health and the environment; aesthetic and artistic sensibility; scientific, technical and technological knowledge; and awareness and mastery of the body. Sousa-Pereira and Leite (2019) posit that the *Student Profile on Leaving Compulsory Schooling* will lead to changes in pedagogical practices that will "promote critical thinking, autonomy, solidarity and attention to others, the ability to make decisions, and to live in a pluralistic and ever-changing society" (p. 120).

Schools, therefore, face a major challenge. It is in schools that our children and young people spend most of the day; it is school that exerts a major influence on their socialization and that poses for them increasing cognitive, social, and emotional challenges (Durlak et al., 2011). The need arises to devise programs that nurture young people's socio-emotional and creative skills in schools. A bibliometric study of the implementation of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) programs in Portuguese schools concluded that such programs were few in number and that most of said studies stemmed primarily from academic research (Cristóvão et al., 2017). We are not attempting to argue that socio-emotional skills are not taught in schools, but that, as stated by Pinto and Raimundo (2016) "the challenge is to do so intentionally, effectively and positively" (p. 18). If we accept the assumption that intentionality is necessary, our attention is called to the importance of teachers' roles in nurturing the development of socio-emotional and creative skills as well as the importance of emotion in teaching practice. Research has pointed out the close relationship between teachers' socio-emotional skills and the effectiveness and quality of the teaching-learning process, in addition to the development of students' socio-emotional skills (Cejudo and López-Delgado, 2017, p. 30).

Thus, it is opportune to look into the perceptions of teachers who have had the opportunity, for the first time in their careers, to be trained in developing socio-emotional and creative skills and to put into practice programs for promoting these skills in their students. Learning about the experience of these teachers will enable us to highlight the importance of SEL programs and the need to implement them in schools, as it calls attention to the benefits that have arisen for both teachers and students.

Importance of Implementing SEL Programs in Schools

Interest in nurturing socio-emotional skills in schools has been increasing due an awareness that they are fundamental for student success, not only in school but later in adulthood.

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