

## ***Project “Positive Attitude”: Promoting school success through social and emotional abilities development. Design for elementary and middle school students, in Portugal***

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### **Resumo**

En este artículo se pretende analizar y estudiar el desarrollo del Proyecto “actitud positiva” durante los tres primeros años de funcionamiento. El objetivo principal de este proyecto es la promoción de habilidades sociales, autoestima y el auto-concepto social y emocional de los estudiantes de primaria y secundaria. Por ello, el proyecto implica a toda la comunidad escolar.

*Palabras claves:* habilidades sociales, autoestima, auto-concepto social y emocional, actitud positive, programa

### **Projecto “actitud positiva”: Promoviendo el éxito escolar a través del desarrollo de habilidades sociales y emocionales. Diseño para estudiantes de primaria y secundaria, en Portugal**

### **Abstract**

This article aims to analyze and explore the development of the Project “Positive Attitude” during the first three years of functioning. This project’s main objective is the promotion of social skills, self-esteem and the social and emotional self-concept of elementary and middle school students. For doing so, the project involves all the school community.

*Keywords:* social skills, self-esteem, social and emotional self-concept, Positive Attitude, program

The present article presents and describes the design and premises of Project Atitude Positiva. This project has been active in a medium size municipality north of Lisbon, implementing strategies to promote school success in an area that still has a lot of rural characteristics. Since 2007, as part of the Doctoral studies of the project’s coordinator, the project has been linked to a thesis carried out at the University of Coimbra. These circumstances have led to a continuous presentation of yearly results in a series of national and international congresses and symposiums, numbering more than communications presented, as well as to the collaboration with other national projects. However as the Project is now striving to widen its area of implementation, it is useful to look back at the premises and evolution of this project in order to extract lessons for the future.

Project Atitude Positiva was born from a request made by the municipality of Torres Vedras to an association named Académico de Torres Vedras (ATV, at the time a youth association with a municipal scope of action). In 2003, there were 3 different projects who

were being proposed by 3 different school groupings and associated partners to get municipal and national funding (from a national institute for prevention, IDT). Each project identified needs and problems that were quite similar<sup>2</sup>, but not a unified response on how to deal with such needs and problems.

So ATV was brought as a partner in order to unify the 3 projects and to create unified responses and mechanisms that were more probable to fulfil the conditions for funding from the national institute. This unified response was thought out and researched during a 6-month period and it followed the suggestions presented in a (then) recent article about that type of interventions (Greenberg, Weissberg, O’Brien, Zins, Fredericks, Resnik, & Elias, 2003), advocating the use of Social and Emotional Learning. Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is the process of developing fundamental social and emotional competencies in children (Weissberg, Resnik, Payton, & O’Brien, 2003). These authors propose that SEL programming

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<sup>2</sup> The main identified problems were high dropout levels, premature abandonment of school, high failure rates, difficulties in social adaptation and self-management, as well as low levels of information about the consequences of alcohol abuse and drug use.

is based on the understanding that (1) many different kinds of problem behaviors are caused by the same or similar risk factors, and (2) the best learning emerges from supportive relationships that make learning both challenging and meaningful.

Further negotiations followed and the project could only be put into practice during the 2004/2005 school year. The main goals included the improvement in social and emotional competencies of the school's students, as well as the promotion of their well being. The initial project was composed of 4 actions:

1. Information, half hour sessions were created for presenting the project. 33 of these sessions were carried out in schools and meetings with other associations and services. The 28 sessions carried out in schools were directed at different target populations: 18 for students, 4 for teachers, 3 for auxiliary staff and 3 for parents;
2. Evaluation and assessment procedures for the SEL program, as well as a continuing needs evaluation. Individual interventions like counseling were included (even though they are the exception and not the rule);
3. A Social and Emotional Learning program for middle school students (composed by 10 sessions, 1 hour each) which was carried out in 18 classes, training for teachers (25 hours), auxiliary staff (42 hours) and parents (18 hours);
4. Atitude Positiva Website, this site included information about several areas of adolescent's life, as well as means of direct contact with project's staff if need.

These actions followed the logic that enhancing student strengths and preventing problems such as violence, drug use, or dropping out is most effective when multiyear, integrated efforts develop children's social and emotional skills (Greenberg et al., 2003). These authors concluded that this is best done through effective classroom instruction, student engagement in positive activities in and out of the classroom, and broad parent and community involvement in program planning, implementation, and evaluation.

In the end of the school year the results from this year were presented in a series of venues (schools, meetings and reports). During the meeting for the analysis of results made for all 5 municipal projects being funded by the national institute, a request was made for the project to be amplified to all 6 of the Torres Vedras Municipality school groupings. However the Torres Vedras

municipality decided to become the primary funder for the project, guaranteeing up to 80% of its budget. The Project's team was enlarged from 1 to 4 psychologists (even though they split up 3 full time schedules). This is in line with recommendation by CASEL that if a school hasn't adopted a SEL program before, it is best to start with a smaller effort and then try to build on that sketch if it is successful (CASEL, 2005).

At next school year (2005/2006) 3 further programs were approved, created and applied: these were the Social and Emotional Learning Program for 4th graders; the program for the promotion of school adjustment in the transition to the middle school named *Transição Positiva* (Positive Transition); and the program for the promotion of school adjustment in the transition to secondary school named *Transição Positiva para o Secundário* (Positive Transition - Secondary School). The basis for this enlarged project were the guidelines suggested by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2005), that include the notions that: a) programs or teaching methods can be piloted in one school, or in one or several grades in several schools; b) program is school-based and has sequenced lessons intended for a general student population; c) There are at least eight lessons in one of the program years; d) There are either lessons for at least two consecutive grades or grade spans, or a structure that promotes lesson reinforcement beyond the first program year.

Further goals were drawn: the reduction of school failure and absenteeism in the 5th grade (the year after a transition occurs) and a reduction in the difference in school adjustment between student that came from rural and urban schools.

## Design

### Rationale

It is widely accepted that an SEL program that is seen as just another prevention program will not have the same impact as one that is chosen intentionally, purposefully, and effectively and then fully integrated into the school (CASEL, 2005; Greenberg, Domitrovich & Bumbarger, 2001; Greenberg et al., 2003; Weissberg, Kumpfer & Seligman, 2003a; Weissberg, Resnik, Payton, & O'Brien, 2003). CASEL (2005) defends the use of systematic, well-designed SEL programs, starting in preschool and extending through high school, in order to create the framework for addressing children's academic and social-emotional needs in a safe, healthy, and caring school community. However, for the successful implementation of SEL programming requires certain basic pre-requisites, we will elaborate on how Project Atitude Positiva tried to fulfil these requirements:

**Leadership.** Active and public support from the school principal and other educational leaders has a significant impact on the quality of program implementation (Nataraj Kirby, Berends & Naftel, 2001). Project Atitude Positiva was born from requests made by the school ruling body of the time (Executive Council), and has since maintained a strong cooperation to the school's ruling structures<sup>3</sup>. In the present the Project has not only maintained direct connections to the principal's cabinet in but as been recognized as an important partner by some school groupings, as can be exemplified by the fact that Project is a part of the General Council in 2 of the school groupings as representatives of the local community.

**Integration of core SEL concepts with all school activities.** Bringing an SEL lens to all school-related activities helps students to see the relevance of SEL lessons to many aspects of their lives. Project Atitude Positiva is integrated with school disciplines, being offered in collaboration with schools in the curriculum of Civic Formation. In other schools (mainly primary schools) the project's activities are integrated with other activities or a part of the regular schedule.

**Professional development.** To be truly effective, professional development needs to be on going, collaborative, reflective, and based on knowledge about the adult learning. The psychologists who work at Project Atitude Positiva continue to try to develop their skills, taking part in congress and symposiums annually as well as pursuing further academic degrees. Some of the present staff interned at Project Atitude Positiva as a part of their requirement to obtain a University Psychology Degree, and the coordinator of the project has been pursuing doctoral studies since 2007 in the University of Coimbra.

**Infrastructure.** High-quality SEL programs are supported by on-going social marketing of the effort to stakeholders, a strong financial or resource base, and school-family-community connections. The Project is founded on sound *financial* (the main source is municipal funding, analyzed and renewed every 2 years) and its resource base has been constructed since 2004.

**Assessment and evaluation.** On-going evaluation enables schools to improve SEL instructional practices and determine if they are actually making a difference in children's lives. There is a continuous effort to assess and evaluate the impact of the Project upon the students. Assessment instruments have been created when needed, other have been improved upon, and there has been a continuous renewal of evaluation procedures in order to more adequately assess the impacts the programs have.

CASEL (2005) emphasizes that, for most schools, it takes three to five years to choose and implement a program to build SEL skills, integrate SEL with academic programming, and forge supportive school-family community partnerships. So, for a program to succeed there is a need for stability but, at the same time, for improving procedures and methodology. For the balance between these two needs to be achieved great attention was paid to following guidelines that permit effective SEL programming. The guidelines followed are recommended by CASEL (2005) and listed below:

1. The programs are grounded in theory and research incorporating approaches that demonstrate beneficial effects on children's attitudes and behavior through scientific research.
2. The programs are supposed to teach children to apply SEL skills and ethical values in daily life, by developing responsible and respectful attitudes and values about self, others, work, health, and citizenship.
3. Project Atitude Positiva focuses on building connection to school through engaging classroom; it uses diverse training methods to engage students in an atmosphere of responsibility with a commitment to learning thrive. It tries to nurture students' sense of emotional security and safety, and it creates opportunities to strengthen relationships among students, teachers, other school personnel, and families.
4. Project Atitude Positiva provides developmentally and culturally appropriate instruction. It offers developmentally appropriate classroom instruction, including clearly specified learning objectives, for each grade cycle. It also emphasizes cultural sensitivity and respect for diversity.
5. The programs try to enhance school performance by addressing the affective and social dimensions of academic learning. It promotes student's social and emotional competencies that encourage classroom participation and positive interactions with teachers. It uses training methods, such as problem-solving approaches and cooperative learning, intended to motivate students to learn and succeed academically.
6. Project Atitude Positiva tries to involves families and communities as partners by involving school staff, parents, and community members in applying and modeling SEL-related skills and attitudes at school and at home.

<sup>3</sup> There have been a lot of changes happening in the structure of the Portuguese school administration. Presently the executive body for the school is the principal, assisted by his cabinet.

7. The staff of Project Atitude Positiva is involving in establishing organizational supports and policies that foster success. The psychologists working in Project Atitude Positiva have an active participation in program planning, in guaranteeing adequate time and resources, and always strive to be aligned with school grouping policies.
8. Provides high-quality staff development and support. It offers well-planned professional development for all school personnel. This includes basic theoretical knowledge, modeling and practice of effective teaching methods, regular coaching, and constructive feedback from colleagues. Project Atitude Positiva offers, every year, 72 hours of training for parents, 50 for teachers and over 100 hours of training for auxiliary staff.
9. Incorporates continuing evaluation and improvement. It began with an assessment of needs to establish a good fit between the school's concerns and SEL programs. It continues gathering data to assess progress, ensure accountability, and shape program improvement. As established earlier, Project Atitude Positiva started as response to needs felt by the school. Those needs were further analyzed and this led to the creation of 3 new programs in the Project's second year.

According to Elias (2006), effective SEL programs begin at an early age and continue through high school. They also work to develop five core social and emotional competencies in students (CASEL, 2009); we took these competencies as a basis for creating the programs. The competencies below have been proposed by several authors (CASEL 2005, 2009; Elias, 2006; Greenberg et al., 2003; Weissberg et al., 2003a) with relatively similar definitions:

**Self-Awareness.** Knowing what we are feeling in the moment; Identifying and cultivating one's strengths and positive qualities having a realistic assessment of our own abilities and a well grounded sense of self-confidence;

**Social Awareness.** Identifying and understanding the thoughts and feeling of others; being able to take their perspective; appreciating and interacting positively with diverse groups.

**Self-Management:** Monitoring and regulating emotions so they facilitate rather than interfere with the handling of situations; establishing and working toward

the achievement of short- and long-term pro-social goals; being conscientious and delaying gratification to pursue goals; persevering in the face of setbacks and frustrations.

**Relationship Skills.** Using verbal and nonverbal skills to express oneself and promote positive and effective exchanges with others; Handling emotions in relationships effectively; establishing and maintaining healthy and rewarding relationships based on cooperation, resistance to inappropriate social pressure, negotiating solutions to conflict, and seeking help when needed.

**Responsible Decision Making.** Making decisions based on an accurate consideration of all relevant factors and the likely consequences of alternative courses of action, respecting others, and taking responsibility for one's decisions. Generating, implementing, and evaluating positive and informed solutions to problems.

### Present Design

The project is presently composed by 5 actions that encapsulate several activities:

1. Presentation and Information – The main activity are the 1/2 hour sessions designed to present the project and its staff to the school population (and others). During a school year at least 54 sessions take place in the school setting<sup>4</sup> and other 3 or 4 sessions in municipal events. Another activity is the presentation of the results of the different programs that compose the project in 2 congresses annually.
2. Evaluation and assessment – This action encapsulates the assessment and evaluation procedures for the SEL programs, and the school adjustment program, as well as the continuing yearly needs evaluation. Individual interventions like counseling are also included (even though they are the exception and not the rule), spanning about 35 children each year;
3. Two Social and Emotional Learning programs: one for 4th graders (composed by 12 sessions) and the other one for middle school students (composed by 13 sessions) which was carried out in 48 classes spawning 6 school groupings. This action also covers training for teachers (25 hours), auxiliary staff (84 hours) and parents (42 hours);

<sup>4</sup> Presentation and information sessions are arranged for different audience: parents, teachers, auxiliary staff.

4. *Transição Positiva* (Positive Transition) the school adjustment promotion program, created to support the transition from primary school to middle school (composed by 15 sessions) which was carried out in 20 classes that come from small primary schools out of the city;
5. *Atitude Positiva Website* ([www.atitudepositiva.org](http://www.atitudepositiva.org)), this site includes news about the program, information about several areas of adolescent's life, as well as means of direct contact with project's staff if need.

The focus of the project is the 3 main programs. These programs, although they target different populations, are always directed at full classes and not only children with difficulties. They were created in order to compose a multiyear, multilayered intervention. Taking this into consideration, these programs include various activities and were composed from several sources. Modules were developed with specific goals in mind, and have been modified continuously during the first 2 years of Project *Atitude Positiva*.

Activities used in the 3 programs, have mostly, been adapted from other national and international programs. Only about 25% to 30% of the activities are completely new. However, almost all activities have been adapted and fitted to the program's objectives. The main used sources of reference for the Social and Emotional Learning Programs were: *Crescer a Brincar* (Moreira, 2001); *I Can Problem Solve* (Shure, 1999); the *ARISCO* handbook (ARISCO, 2002), *Salto Gigante* (which they identify as being based on the *Galatea* program, Musitu, 1999); *Programa de Promoção de Competências Sociais* (Matos, 1997).

Each program has a different structure as listed below:

I. Social and Emotional Learning Program 4th Grade (2005-2010)

This program is composed of 12 weekly 1 hour sessions:

- 1<sup>st</sup> Session - Presentation of the psychologists, participants and the program;
- 2<sup>nd</sup> session - Initial evaluation;
- 3<sup>rd</sup> session - Focuses on the development of Self-Awareness and Social Awareness through the recognition, identification and expression of emotions);
- 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> sessions are focused on the promotion of Relationship Skills and Self-Management;
- 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> sessions are dedicated to enhance-

ment of Self-Esteem thus, being more focused in Self-Awareness;

9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> Sessions are more focused in Responsible Decision Making, but also have activities more related to the promotion of Social Awareness.

12<sup>th</sup> Session is last and is devoted to the final evaluation.

II. Social and Emotional Learning Program Middle School (6th to 9th Grade, 2004-10)

This program is presently composed of 13 sessions<sup>5</sup>.

1<sup>st</sup> session is dedicated to the presentation of the psychologists, participants and the program;

2<sup>nd</sup> session is the initial evaluation.

After the 2<sup>nd</sup> session the results obtained are analyzed, conjointly with the data gathered in the needs evaluation in the beginning of the year. After this analysis and a talk with the class director 2 (out of 5) possible modules are chosen. This choice reflects the class's profile and should reflect the best answer to those specific needs. 13<sup>th</sup> session is the last and it is where the final evaluation takes place.

III. There are 5 possible modules possible to be chosen:

- a. Promotion of Self-Management and Relationship Skills (5 sessions)
- b. Promotion of Relationship Skills (5 sessions)
- c. Promotion of Social Awareness (5 sessions)
- d. Responsible Decision Making (4 sessions)
- e. Enhancement of Self-Awareness (5 sessions, only offered since 2006)

Each of the possible modules are more focused in one (or two) of the core social and emotional competencies in students, but also have more general activities combining all 5 competencies. There are also more basic and more advanced modules prepared for the three first modules mentioned above in order to cover different ages and also to provide more options for classed who have already taken part of the program.

Relatively to the *Transição Positiva* (Positive Transition) – Program for School Adjustment Promotion in the Transition to Middle School the main sources of references were the program *Salto Gigante* (Sousa, 2003, in Coelho, V., Soares, B., & Sousa, V., 2009), as well as suggestions for activities proposed by Akos and Galassi (2004) and Maclin and Hunter (2004).

<sup>5</sup> Originally, in Project's first year there were only 10 sessions. From 2005 onward there were 12 sessions, and since 2009 there are 13 sessions.

#### IV. Programa Transição Positiva – Transition to Middle School 2006-10.

This program is presently composed of 20 sessions<sup>6</sup>, 1 hour each:

- 1<sup>st</sup> Session - Presentation of the psychologists, participants and the program;
- 2<sup>nd</sup> session - Initial evaluation;
- 3<sup>rd</sup> session – Discussion of what’s going to change in the 5th grade, in 5 big areas: friends, school space, teachers, disciplines and rules;
- 4<sup>st</sup> and 5<sup>st</sup> Session - Identification, discussion and activities about causes for concern and positive anticipation of changes;
- 6<sup>st</sup> – Training to use schedules and evaluation sheets;
- 7<sup>st</sup> and 8<sup>st</sup> sessions – Talk with colleagues that are in the 5th grade about their experiences;
- 9<sup>st</sup>, 10<sup>st</sup> session – Talk with a 5th grade class;
- 11<sup>st</sup>, 12<sup>st</sup>, and 13<sup>st</sup> sessions - Visit to the middle school. Pedy paper and other activities
- 14<sup>st</sup> Session Promotion of Social and Emotional Competencies
- 15<sup>st</sup> Session – Final Evaluation.

#### Assessment and Evaluation

There has been a continuous effort in improving evaluation procedures. This effort has led us to try to find the more appropriate instruments that were available. The initial choice favored instruments that were adapted to the Portuguese context had been used in similar investigations and were available for purchase in Portugal. Gradually, during the last years some instruments have been abandoned in favor of others more relevant, recent or more adequate to the goals of the project.

A balance had to be struck between having an evaluation system that permits comparisons between the various years of application of the programs and finding the best current evaluation procedures available. A compromise between these two factors was established by re-evaluating and possibly changing evaluation instruments only once in every three years.

We have followed the suggestions emitted by CASEL (2005), that to find evidence of effectiveness their main interest in a program’s evaluations was to find evidence that the program produced positive outcomes in student behaviors as shown by well-designed studies. CASEL (2005) criteria for well-designed studies included: a) Pre-test and post-test assessment; b) A comparison group; c) Measures of student behavior

change (not just changes in student attitudes).

The instruments used during this period are listed below, organizing by which program they were used with. SEL program 4th grade:

Self-Concept (AF5, AutoConcepto Forma 5 - Garcia & Musitu, 2001); 30 items, 5 dimensions of self-concept;

Self-Esteem (SDQ – Self-Description Questionnaire I, General Self Scale – Marsh, 1992), 8 items;

Social and Emotional Competencies (BAS-3 – Bateria de Socialización - Silva & Martorell, 1995), 75 items, 5 dimensions.

Questionnaire for Evaluating Social and Emotional Competences –Teacher’s version (Coelho, Ribeiro & Sousa, 2006) which has been substituted by the reduced version (Coelho & Sousa, 2009) since 2009;

Satisfaction Scale (Coelho, Freitas & Sousa, 2006), 9 items.

SEL program 6th – 9th grade:

Self-Concept (AFA, AutoConcepto Forma A – Musitu, Garcia & Guterrez, 2004); 36 items, 4 dimension of Self-Concept;

Self-Esteem (SDQ – Self-Description Questionnaire II, General Self Scale – Marsh, 1992), 10 items;

Social and Emotional Competencies (BAS-3 – Bateria de Socialización - Silva & Martorell, 1995), 75 items, 5 dimensions. Which has been substituted since 2009 by the Questionnaire for Evaluating Social and Emotional Competences (Coelho, Sousa and Soares, 2008) which has 50 items and 6 dimensions;

Questionnaire for Evaluating Social and Emotional Competences –Teacher’s version (Coelho, Ribeiro & Sousa, 2006) which has been substituted by the reduced version (Coelho & Sousa, 2009) since 2009;

Satisfaction Scale (Coelho, Freitas & Sousa, 2006), 9 items.

School Adjustment Promotion Program – Transição Positiva:

Self-Concept (AF5, AutoConcepto Forma 5 - Garcia & Musitu, 2001); 30 items, 5 dimensions of self-concept;

Self-Esteem (SDQ – Self-Description Questionnaire I, General Self Scale – Marsh, 1992), 8 items;

Stress Associated to the Transition (QASE – Siperstein & Wenz-Gross, 1997, adapted by Pereira & Mendonça, 2005) – 49 items, measures 3 dimensions of school stress;

Self-Efficacy and Worries (EPTE – Coelho, Gomes & Sousa, 2005), 13 items, measures self-efficacy and specific worries about the transition;

Evaluation and attendance sheets (emitted by the schools);

Satisfaction Scale Transição Positiva (Coelho, Freitas & Sousa, 2006), 8 items.

<sup>6</sup> Of which 5 take place in the 5th grade after the transition.

## Brief conclusive notes

As noted above there has been a continuous effort made in order to try and improve evaluation procedures.

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