

Developing Social Skills in the Prison Context – Results from the Implementation of a Training Program with Prisoners

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Abstract

Non-formal education programs play an important role in the rehabilitation process of prisoners. It provides the opportunity for prisoners to engage in useful activities in the prison context, improves their employment prospects after release, facilitates the process of their personal development and transformation and enhances their prospects of developing the motivation, autonomy and responsibility to gain control over their lives after their release. This study aims to present the results of a non-formal education program developed within the context of a curricular internship project, carried out at a Penitentiary Establishment, located in the North of Portugal. The project is part of the third year of a Bachelor Degree programme in Social Education at Portucalense University, which took place from October 2018 to June 2019. The project was organized in four main phases: diagnosis, planning, execution and evaluation. The methods for data collection used were document analysis, observation and questionnaires. The participants in the training program included ten prisoners who kindly volunteered to participate in the training program. The pedagogical strategies used in the training were: role-playing, brainstorming, and self-evaluation grids. The results revealed a positive view by participants and changes in their individual behaviour. Implications of the study and future work will be presented and discussed along the paper.

Keywords: Social Education, Prison Education, Non-Formal Education, Development of Social Skills, Training Programme

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1. Introduction

Prison education, in particular, non-formal education programs play an important role in the rehabilitation process of prisoners. It provides the opportunity for prisoners to engage in useful activities in the prison context, improves their employment prospects after release, facilitates the process of their personal development and transformation and enhances their prospects of developing the motivation, autonomy and responsibility to gain control over their lives after their release. By developing prisoner's knowledge and skills, this can assist them in their reintegration process and help prevent future crimes. Research has shown the importance of education programs for prison inmates. These include, for instance, the promotion of social cohesion, the re-integration of ex-inmates into the community, the provision of knowledge and skills for employment and self-employment through entrepreneurial activities (Quan-Baffour & Zawada, 2012).

Literature on the impact of education in prison is not recent (Duguid, 1992; Ubah & Robinson, 2003). When searching for answers to the objectives or goals of prison education and the educational practices to achieve these goals, Duguid (1992) refers that these prison education objectives must include the following dimensions: 1) educating for dispositions rather than skills; 2) becoming a citizen – engagement with the conventional; 3) personal growth and self-esteem; and, 4) social engagement. The author concludes that three essential components are crucial to put theory into practice and translate what could or should be done into real action in terms of prison education. The first component refers to the intrinsic value of education and the role played by teachers in the prison context. Teachers should be seen as educators, not trainers- “they teach people something and in the process change their lives. Education doesn't just ‘add’ something. It develops” (Duguid, 1992, p. 42). This idea is also aligned with the educational perspective of Paulo Freire, who recognizes that both educator and the one who is being educated, educate themselves mutually, in a reciprocal process, in which they both grow (Freire, 2002). Building an ethical or moral dimension into education is also an important issue for prison education (Duguid, 1992). Developing critical thinking is a powerful way to prepare prisoners for real world issues, such as environmental issues, gender equity, citizenship, responsibility, etc. It is important to “sharpen the students' critical sense so they can see the actions of their friends – and their own actions – in a critical light” (Duguid, 1992, p. 43). The third and last objective of education in prison, according to Duguid (1992) is to make students believe in the power of education to transform, using democracy as a learning device. This includes a real focus on citizenship and political development. Duguid concludes that “action is the key. Students must have opportunities to put ideas into action, especially new ideas they might have learned from you. It's the

teacher's task to create or discover those opportunities for action - a tough job in a prison" (Duguid, 1992, p. 43). This study presented in this paper aims to present the results of a training program developed in the context of a non-formal education process developed at a Penitentiary Establishment, located in the north of Portugal. This project was part of a curricular internship project (Costa, 2019), integrated in the third year of a Bachelor Degree programme in Social Education, at Portucalense University, Porto. The study took place from October 2018 to June 2019.

2. Context of the Study

The Portuguese Prison System is under the responsibility of the Ministry of Justice, which carries out its tasks at this level through the Direção-Geral de Reinserção e Serviços Prisionais (DGRSP). Regarding legislation, the Code for the Enforcement of Penalties and Liberty deprivation Measures (Código da Execução de Penas e Medidas Privativas da Liberdade, approved by Decree-Law 115/ 2009, 12 of October), together with General Regulation of the Prison Establishments (Regulamento Geral dos Estabelecimentos Prisionais, approved by Decree-Law 51/ 2011, 11 of April), are the most relevant diplomas to understand how the system works (APAC, 2021). The imprisoned population is distributed in 49 Penitentiaries (EPS) throughout the Portuguese Mainland and Islands. These can be male-only, female-only or mixed. In 2019, a total of 12,793 individuals were arrested, of which 93.3% were men and 6.7% were women.

The study reported in this study was carried out at a Penitentiary Establishment, located in the North of Portugal. On the date of the intervention, the prison establishment was classified as a High Security Level and a High Degree of Management Complexity. With an architectural layout similar to an "H", its construction is based on a "pavilion" system, characterized by the construction of large buildings relatively distant from each other, all of them autonomous with respect to dining halls, work spaces and leisure, with the prison area consisting of three wings. It welcomed inmates convicted in Closed and Open Regimes, consisting, at the time, of 396 individuals. With guidelines for the establishment and maintenance of an adequate insertion in the local community, collaborative partnerships existed for inmates under open outside prison regime, with several local entities. The services available at this establishment are diverse, covering areas such as health, school and vocational training or employment, as well as socio-cultural and sports activities. The labor occupation offered the agricultural sector; the workshop sector; gardening; shoe store, among others. In June 2019, in the educational area, 85 inmates attended school and 44 professional courses. Higher education is provided by the Open University. In this place there was still a space reserved for religious practices. In regard to human resources, two groups are identified: civilians and those of surveillance personnel. The first group has the function of technical intervention, management and administration of institution. The second group's mission is to maintain disciplinary order and vigilance over all prisoners. At the top of the hierarchy, the Director of the establishment preceded by three Deputies and a Commissioner. There are four re-education technicians, each of whom is in charge of a certain number of prisoners, as well as the management of some sectors. The Prison Guard Corps consisted of 1 Prison Commissioner; 1 Head Chief; 7 heads; 28 Main Guards and 65 Guards.

3. Methodology

The study presented in this paper aims to provide answer to the following research questions:

- Do the educational training programs developed by the Penitentiary Establishment meet the needs and demands of prisoners, mostly regarding the development of their social skills?
- How can social skills be effectively developed in the prison context?

Since working the social-affective and the holistic dimension of individuals leads to a more effective reintegration and, consequently, a more positive decision-making process, the main objective of the study was to design an educational training program based on the development of social skills. Skills such as assertiveness, self-realization, self-esteem, social support, empathy and cooperation were some of the main skills selected to take part of the programme. The focus on these skills was supported by previous literature and studies based on the social reintegration and rehabilitation and process of prisoners (Amaral, 2008; Parente, 2006). The activities and ideas presented in these studies were adapted to the specific context and participants of our study. The design of the programme and its objectives also considered the principles of prison education argued by Duguid (1992).

The research design was based on a case study (Yin, 2014), as it looks at a particular context and aims to provide rich, detailed and descriptive information about it. For data collection, the study focused on qualitative methods such as document analysis, participant observation and open-ended questionnaires. The participants in the study include ten prisoners (n=10) who volunteered to participate in the training program.

Ethical issues and procedures were carefully considered during all phases of the study. A letter was sent to the General Board of Prison Services and Reinsertion (Direção Geral de Reinserção dos Serviços Prisionais - DGRSP), presenting the Research Protocol and the authorization request to develop the study and internship in the selected prison context.

4. Phases of the Project

In this section, we describe the development of the project where the educational training programme was integrated. This project was developed according to the four main phases identified by Pérez Serrano (2008), which include the following: diagnosis, planning, execution and evaluation.

4.1. Diagnosis Phase

The first phase of the project started with a needs diagnosis in order to fully understand the prison context and define the ‘knowledge gaps’ linked to the analysis of individuals’ training needs and the preparation of responses to these needs. According to Pérez Serrano (2008, p. 29), “the aim of the diagnosis phase is to get to know the reality, as this reality is of vital importance for the development of the project”. During this phase, the methods for data collection used were document analysis, observation and open-ended questionnaires. Based on the document analysis of the educational programs implemented at the penitentiary establishment and open-ended questionnaires to a group of prisoners selected previously by the Reeducation Professional, it was possible to come to the conclusion that even though the DGRSP central services offered rehabilitation and reintegration programs, these were found to have a poor impact on prisoners, according to the vulnerabilities identified by the participants in our case study. Data allowed to conclude that the intervention strategies used by the education programs were not sufficiently dynamic and therefore important social competences for the prisoners’ reintegration were not being developed. Hence, according to these first conclusions, the project was planned to complement the existing training activities.

4.2. Planning Phase

Based on the diagnosis carried out in the first phase of the project, the training program was planned. Each one of the social skills included in the program was developed at a specific session: teamwork, empathy, cooperation, assertiveness, social support, self-esteem and self-realization. The main pedagogic strategies used in the training program were based on self-reflection and individual and group dynamics. The following table summarizes each of the sessions.

Table 1. Presentation of the Training Sessions

Sessions	Topic of the Session	Objectives	Duration
1st Session	Welcome Session. Teamwork.	- Get to know each other better; - Share expectations; - Develop teamwork skills	20 min
2nd Session	Empathy	- Identify benefits of active listening; - Enhance skills for active listening.	50 min
3rd Session	Cooperation	- Develop positive group relationship skills; - Enhance individual collaborative attitudes in achieving common goals;	50 min
4th Session	Assertiveness	- Use appropriate verbal and non-verbal language; - Practice attitudes that favor authentic and effective communication.	50 min
5th Session	Social Support	- Recognize the benefits of supportive behaviors; - Develop capacity to support peers.	50 min
6th Session	Self-esteem	- Deepen the knowledge of oneself; - Minimize gaps regarding social integration.	50 min
7th Session	Self-accomplishment	- Recognize that attitudes are conditioned by self beliefs; - Recognize the mobilizing force of phrases that impel action.	50 min
9th Session	Closing Session. Overall Evaluation.	- Identify how development of social skills addressed during the program enhances Positive Decision Making.	50 min

4.3. Execution Phase

In the execution phase of the project, the project is put into practice (Perez Serrano, 2008). Activities focused on presenting situations to which the prisoners should bring forward the best solutions and justify their answers. These activities allowed transversal engagement, as well as the exchange of individual experiences and knowledge, which was extremely crucial for the decision-making process. The pedagogical strategies used in the training were: role-playing, brainstorming, and self-evaluation grids. These tools enabled the participants to identify individual fears and to deeply reflect on their choices and behaviors.

4.3.1 1st Session - Teamwork

In this initial phase, and with the objective that prisoners make themselves known, as well as their expectations

regarding the program, each participant shared a fear with the group; a dream and life goal. Bearing in mind the importance of interpersonal relationships, this session ended with a dynamic between peers in which each pair would have to reach a defined object. This object, placed in the opposite direction where the pairs were located, each pair would have to move over a sheet of newspaper without touching the floor or tearing the sheet. The pair who reached the object as quickly as possible and without breaking the rules would be the winner. All of them opted for different strategies, without any being successful according to the rules outlined. Despite this, group spirit stood out, according to the commitment and unity of each of the participating pairs.

4.3.2 2nd Session - Empathy

This second session aimed to develop empathy skills in prisoners, For Jardim (2007), this social competence occurs when the person "assumes the role of the other as a descriptive reference" (p. 104). The activity focused on becoming aware of the difficulty of listening empathetically, identifying the benefits of being empathetic and developing attitudes that favour active listening. To accomplish this goal, a text was read, reflecting and reinforcing the importance of developing attitudes that enhance active listening and the difficulty in putting this competence into practice. Bearing in mind that empathy is associated with altruism, in which an emotional fusion emerges, it was intended that the participants developed skills in understanding the needs, feelings and problems of others, without judging them.

4.3.3 3rd Session - Cooperation

Cooperation was the social competence that was worked on in this session. It was intended to develop the capacity for positive group relationship, the perception of the importance of individual collaborative attitudes for the achievement of a common goal and to evaluate the degree of collaboration of the participants towards cooperation. Thus, through the reading of the text "My old typewriter" in which the content emphasized the existence of a typewriter with a broken key and the importance of that key among the other twenty-three to write a text. This example served to reinforce the importance of each member of a group. Participants reflected on the importance of individual contribution to the good functioning of groups, as well as team work to achieve goals effectively. Emphasizing the fact that man is a social being and the impossibility of living without contact with others, devaluing individualism in favor of positive interaction. The importance of the relationship was also mentioned and how attitudes of cooperation can influence decision making.

4.3.4 4th Session - Assertiveness

According to Amaral (2008, p. 110), assertiveness "requires methodical training, and it is necessary to have an understanding of the following aspects: type of behavior that causes a certain situation; avoid mimicry and intonation contrary to what is verbalized; description of the reactions themselves as opposed to assessing the actions of third parties; express in a positive way instead of adopting a critical stance". Thus, it was considered that, by developing this social competence in prisoners, they could improve their inclusion process in a situation of confinement, as well as their future reintegration in the context of freedom. Inspired by the work of (Rijo & Sousa, 2007), a check list of dysfunctional behaviors at work was created, with the aim of minimizing, developing and enhancing more assertive behavior styles. The inhibition and fear that were included in a passive behavior style, the aggressiveness, arrogance and impulsivity in an aggressive style, were the behaviors that were worked. Subsequently, with the objective that the participants realized the importance of practicing behaviors that favour authentic, effective and calm attitudes, as well as the use of verbal and non-verbal language appropriate to the transmitted messages, a role playing was developed under the theme "Which educator do you prefer?". This activity was divided into three parts, in which educators personified different profiles: the Aggressive, Passive and Assertive Educator. With this activity, we intended to demonstrate that there is an alternative behavior model to dysfunctional behaviors, highlighting the advantages of assertive behavior.

4.3.5 5th Session – Social Support

The aim was to develop the capacity to support peers, to understand the positive effect of supportive behaviours and to raise awareness of the benefit of social support. Three volunteers were asked to participate, each representing a situation:

- 1) Imagine a situation in which a colleague needed to be valued. What would you do and what would you say to confirm its importance?
- 2) Imagine that someone confides a depreciative assessment of yourself. What words do you think he needs to hear?
- 3) Imagine a situation in which someone asks you for material help. How would they react?

Subsequently, all participants would have to complete the following evaluation grid, answering the following questions: What expression did I support most? What is the attitude of the participants that you consider most effective? What have I learned from this dynamic? We intended to demonstrate the importance of capacity

development that enables the establishment of mutual benefits and support that minimize vulnerabilities in social networks.

4.3.6 6th Session – Self-esteem

The objective of this session was for the participants to deepen their self-esteem competence, through self-knowledge. They needed to fill in the JOHARI Window (designed by Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham, 1995) that works as a facilitator of self-knowledge and that allows confrontation with oneself and with others. The procedures for carrying out the activity were as follows. Participants would have to choose photos from magazines previously cut out. In groups of two, each one shows their colleague their window and expresses the reason for having distributed them that way. The task was completed by evaluating the activity, according to the grid prepared for this purpose. This tool is based on the assumption that as the area is expanded, known or open, the more the individual knows about himself, through awareness and acceptance of his or her potential and limitations and that of others. Human personality in interaction with others is classified in this window. Thus, this model considers that an individual, when entering into a relationship with another, manifests:

- 1) Open Area or Arena - dimension of the individual who is known, both by the other, as for himself (name, social role, behaviour, feelings and motivations);
- 2) Blind or Blindspot Area - refers to the dimension of behaviours, feelings, and motivations that are perceived by others, but not by the person himself;
- 3) Private Area or Facade - the person's hidden part (feelings, motivations and most intimate aspirations, which are not known by those around him, but only by himself);
- 4) Deep Area - the collective and personal unconscious of the individual, unknown to himself and others.

When people interact, the open area tends to expand. Usually there is a gradual transition from the private area to the open area and, if the interaction is authentic and the communication environment is favourable, a transference of elements from the blind area to the open area, giving rise to the individual's awareness some of its characteristics. It should be noted that it is possible that during the interaction the passage of parts of the deep area to the open area or to the other two areas. Johari's Window is advantageous for the enhancement of self-knowledge, insofar as it provides a kind of mind map about the interacting "I", making it possible to become aware that there are already known aspects, but that there are also other strangers, and the individual may have access to these characteristics through introspection as well as interaction. After completing the JOHARI Window, each participant would have to fill in the evaluation grid, including the questions: What feelings do the photos that I choose arouse in me? Comparing my photos with that of colleagues, which is the most similar and the most equal? Taking into account that the enclosure environment may jeopardize the self-esteem of individuals, we intended to minimize this type of gaps that may imply the integration of individuals.

4.3.7 7th Session – Self-accomplishment

It was sought that, the participants identified some individual fears, as well as, perceived that the acts practiced by them, namely the decision making, are conditioned by the way that the individual believes or not in himself. We intended that the participants identified a few individual fears, as well as, perceive that the acts, namely decision making processes, are conditioned by the way the individual believes or not in himself. In the activity, participating students, individualize fears and later rewrite those fears in the form of courage and in a positive way. This activity ends with the sharing and discussion in the group about the learning that the confrontation of the two behavioral postures had brought. It was intended that, after the dynamics and respective discussion / reflection on it, emergence of the feeling of fascination and mobilizing force of phrases that want to drive action, as well as the perception that personal fulfillment depends, to a large extent, on the individual believing in his potential, decentralizing himself in assumptions of self-incapacity.

4.4. Evaluation Phase

The last phase, focused on the evaluation of the education program, was based on qualitative feedback collected from the prisoners involved in the study. The results revealed a positive view by participants and changes in their individual behaviour. started to develop in a positive way, as well as later, as shown by the re-education professional who monitored them afterwards. This group of prisoners was characterized by heterogeneity, despite some similarities in their life histories, with the majority of subjects being self-centered in nature. The benefit in this kind of groups is considered to come from this same diversity. It is believed that in some cases, there was a stimulus to moral reasoning, not only promoted by the activities implemented, but also by the sharing of experiences. Some made a point of sharing the feedback of their participation in the program: "Participation in this experience was very enlightening, in the sense of being aware of our own difficulties..." .. "I appreciate the possibility of being able to have participated in this program...". It is considered that the verified attendance of all participants, in which their presence was marked by participatory and sometimes emotional postures. These individuals, when asked about the importance of the program in their personal and

social training, considered that it was an opportunity to promote new learning and reflections on their life path. They agreed that the program had a positive effect on the training of containment, listening skills, empathy and decision-making. During the sessions, there was also a general evolution in terms of the ability to share and trust the group.

5. Final Remarks

The study presented in this paper aimed to analyse the principles underpinning the existing educational training programs in a specific penitentiary establishment and how social skills could be effectively developed in the prison context. For this, based on a diagnosis carried out in the first phase of the project, an educational training program was designed, including the development of the following social skills: teamwork, empathy, cooperation, assertiveness, social support, self-esteem and self-realization.

Findings from our study allow us to conclude that the pedagogic strategies used in the training program were considered to be effective and promoted self-reflection and also group cooperation, while contributing to the development of prisoner's social skills. It was possible to observe the existence of a positive correlation between the development of social skills and more appropriate decision-making by prisoners. These decisions can be considered as protective factors allowing these individuals to face the restart of life in freedom, more confident, avoiding the risks of recurrence. The educational program implemented was based on contemporary principles in which the purpose of the prison sentence is understood as the reintegration of the individual into society, which cannot represent a "mortgage" of life. The opportunity to work with prisoners in groups, contrary to prison routines and discuss matters, with another depth, may have contributed to the possible change of individuals. Non-formal education has a predominant role here, through sociocultural activities and personal development, in which Social Education may have a useful and strategic role in this field. According to Lopes (2011), the intervention in Social Education is grounded on "change, transformation, awareness, training, problem solving, development, accountability, promotion of the spirit criticism, self-determination, and social promotion, which should culminate in improving the quality of life of individuals and communities in which we intervene" (2011, p. 13). According to feedback collected from the participants in the training program, the social educator was able to provide the favorable conditions to engage prisoners in this process of self-reflection and personal development.

However, despite the positive guidelines that point to minimizing the gap "between walls", it is important to mention that several threatening factors are still visible for a more open institution. In fact, in the light of Abrunhosa (2000, p. 186) "all its architectural magnificence evokes in the observer the feeling of distance, of interdiction, of cutting between two worlds: those on the inside and those on the outside. The rule of isolation is, moreover, characteristic of total institutions". Also, findings from a recent study (Clark & Rydberg, 2016) reveal that, contrary to research on educational participation and recidivism, those involved in prison educational programs are more likely to commit misconduct infractions than those who are not involved in these programs. Future research to understand the implications and future directions needed for education programs in the prison context are still needed.

This study presents an important contribution for the development of educational programs in the prison context, as it explores ways in which social skills and personal development of prisoners can be planned, implemented, and evaluated.

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