

**CONCENTRATION, RELAXATION AND SELF-AWARENESS
TECHNIQUES IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOL: the extracurricular
experiences that collaborate with an intercultural curriculum in high
school**

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ABSTRACT

Entering High School represents a new and special moment in the lives of many students in which little by little new things, challenges and discoveries will appear, accompanied by feelings of insecurity, anxiety, expectation, and performance charging. This paper reports on collaborative experiences among Physical Education and Psychology professionals who, through an intercultural curriculum, developed techniques of concentration, relaxation and self-awareness with 75 high school students from a public school in Juiz de Fora (MG). Through cognitive games at school, massages with gadgets and meditation in green areas of the city, we elaborate weekly "ágoras" (i.e., modular courses) per quarter of the school year, seeking well-being and life quality for students, goals that were achieved, as indicated by the content analysis of class evaluations.

Key-words: Concentration. Relaxation. Self-consciousness. High school. Intercultural curriculum.

**TÉCNICAS DE CONCENTRACIÓN, RELAJACIÓN Y
AUTOCONOCIMIENTO EN LA ESCUELA PÚBLICA: las
experiencias extracurriculares que colaboran con un currículo
intercultural en la escuela secundaria**

RESUMEN

La entrada en la Enseñanza Media representa un nuevo y especial momento en la vida de muchos estudiantes en que, poco a poco, aparecerán novedades, desafíos y descubrimientos, acompañadas de sensaciones de inseguridad, ansiedad, expectativa y cobranza por desempeño. Este texto relata experiencias de colaboración entre profesionales de la Educación Física y de la Psicología

que, a través de un plan de estudios intercultural, desarrollaron técnicas de concentración, relajación y autoconciencia con 75 estudiantes de secundaria de una escuela pública en Juiz de Fora (MG). A través de juegos cognitivos en la escuela, masajes con aparatos y meditación en áreas verdes de la ciudad, elaboramos ágora (módulos) semanales por trimestre del año escolar, buscando el bienestar y la calidad de vida de los estudiantes, objetivos que se lograron, según lo indicado por análisis de contenido de evaluaciones de clase.

Palabras clave: Concentración. Relajación. Conciencia de sí mismo. Enseñanza Media. Currículo intercultural.

TÉCNICAS DE CONCENTRAÇÃO, RELAXAMENTO E AUTOCONSCIÊNCIA NA ESCOLA PÚBLICA: as experiências extracurriculares que colaboram com um currículo intercultural no ensino médio

RESUMO

A entrada no Ensino Médio representa um novo e especial momento na vida de muitos estudantes em que, aos poucos, aparecerão novidades, desafios e descobertas, acompanhadas de sensações de insegurança, ansiedade, expectativa e cobrança por desempenho. Este texto relata vivências colaborativas entre profissionais da Educação Física e da Psicologia que, por meio de um currículo intercultural, desenvolveram técnicas de concentração, relaxamento e autoconsciência com 75 alunos de Ensino Médio de uma escola pública de Juiz de Fora (MG). Por meio de jogos cognitivos na escola, massagens com aparelhos e meditação em áreas verdes da cidade, elaboramos ágoras (módulos) semanais por trimestre do ano letivo, buscando bem-estar e qualidade de vida dos alunos, objetivos que foram alcançados, conforme indica a análise de conteúdo das avaliações das aulas.

Palavras-chave: Concentração. Relaxamento. Autoconsciência. Ensino Médio. Currículo intercultural.

Introduction

In 2005, when we arrived at the João XXIII College of Application (UFJF) to teach Physical Education class, we found that the students were very agitated and, especially, the High School (HS) students were very scattered. That's when we heard that Physical Education (PE) was good for nothing and should not have specific content, but only sports. Faced with this challenge, we began to develop the idea that without a body concept, no curriculum content would make sense.

Later, in 2014, the school created a School Support Center¹, consisting of a multidisciplinary technical body, defined in its basic structure by the professional areas of Pedagogy, Psychology and Social Work. These professionals worked to provide support to students in their educational process, considering the psychological, pedagogical and social aspects, as well as to elaborate, coordinate, execute and evaluate work proposals within their competence, focusing on preventive actions, continuous or punctual, individually or collectively.

Given this institutional structure and its many possibilities, in pedagogical meetings, we approached ideas that pointed to the perception that the life of a high school student is full of novelties, discoveries and challenges, which may carry feelings of insecurity, anxiety, demotivation, mood alteration, cognitive distraction, among others. These reactions could be related to different factors present in school life, such as performance demands, competitiveness, family and/ or school pressure, test anxiety (GONZAGA, 2016), difficulties with professional choice (PAGGIARO & CALAIS, 2009), affecting the mental health of this audience, as well as the whole integrity of their body identity.

The Brazilian student is among the most anxious in the world (FERREIRA, 2017). The stress students are exposed to causes different physical and emotional changes. According to Fagundes et al (2010), these reactions can cause impatience and loss of concentration, being directly correlated to problems and learning difficulties, discouragement, memory impairment, irritability, among other consequences. In this sense, Busnelo et al (2009) point out the need to elaborate actions aimed at mitigating the impact of adverse situations that affect learning and, consequently, school performance.

The need to build joint interventions on the issue has encouraged us to experiment with concentration, relaxation, and self-awareness techniques in an

¹ Access to the School Support Center website can be done through the link: <http://www.ufjf.br/joaoxxiii/atendimentos/nucleo-de-apoio-escolar/>.

Agora² in public high school. From the discussions about an intercultural education (CANDAU, 2012) during this work, we have deconstructed discrimination regarding these techniques, as well as articulating PE practices that value cultural diversity, rescuing popular knowledge that produce states of concentration, relaxation and self-awareness of the students, and providing experiences that help them overcome their difficulties with the routine of school and home life.

Unrestricted dialogue between project participants is one of the main guidelines for a critical practice committed to the improvement of vocational education and training (TERRA, 2007), and, thus, we carry out weekly interventions with conversation circles, experiences, reflections about feelings and sensations. In this article, we aim to report on three experiences that had positive impacts on students' health and school life, in addition to collaborating with a more democratic, fair and supportive curriculum in the Colégio de Aplicação João XXIII College (Cap) of the Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora (UFJF).

1. Methodology

This study is exploratory, with Agora format modules for twenty-five interested³ students, aged 15 to 17 years; from different social classes (our students enter the institution by public draw); regularly enrolled in High School and willing to experience the techniques for one intensive week every three months.

In the first moment of the work, with a meeting held in some space of the institution (classroom or amphitheater), there is initially a reception for students.

² This space exists in the student curriculum to allow students and teachers to discuss topics relevant to school life.

³ It is important to note that the Agora are subjects held during the night and are compulsory for being part of the college's MS curriculum. Within a to-do list, the student must perform a minimum quarterly workload. The present activity has become much sought after by the students and, sometimes, the coordinators needed to prioritize the participation of the graduating students, that is, they are in the 3rd year of high school, because they are close to the conclusion of the segment.

We held a welcoming conversation in order to contextualize and explain to them the proposal, exposing its justification and relevance, highlighting the objectives of the intervention and pointing to the importance of discussing the theme of mental health of high school students. In addition, a short schedule of work, to be carried out over the following days, is provided. This moment serves as a warm-up to mobilize students to engage in the dynamics and interventions that will be carried out. Through written evaluations⁴, photos and reports, we set up a record of the state of the art of the agora in every school year, that allowed us to do the content analysis (BARDIN, 1977) of the material.

In the following, we will cover more specifically and in more depth the examples of three dynamics performed.

2.Results and discussions

The activities of cognitive games take place on the first day of the Agora, in some room or in the college amphitheater. They need to be quiet spaces, away from noise, with tables and chairs that make students comfortable, as being in calm environments sharpens perceptions and allows students to have a better relationship with themselves.

The group is divided into teams around a table and then they are given two games: memory game and puzzles. Initially, they try games with fewer pieces, then supposedly with less difficulty to perform. Later, they receive games with a larger number of pieces, thus generating a situation that supposedly can lead to greater difficulties and challenges. During the activity, students are also grouped in different ways: into smaller groups and into larger groups so that they can experiment with different forms of collective arrangements. As students play, the coordinators make observations and notes, seeking to grasp aspects of individual and group dynamics: How do they respond to challenges? How do they deal individually and collectively with difficulties? What is their level of frustration?

⁴ At the end of the Agora, the coordinators handed out a six-question questionnaire to participants to record their impressions, opinions and criticisms of the activities.

What paths do they seek for problem solving? At the end of the activities, students are offered a group space to share their experiences and sensations. At this moment, invariably different reports arise regarding the difficulties experienced, with games with more pieces generating the most embarrassment. Feelings of frustration, anger, anxiety and disbelief arise, as well as reactions and feelings of resilience, coping, persistence, commitment and focus.

The benefits achieved by these games are the possibility of acquiring insights, greater self-perception and self-knowledge of students about some psychological and cognitive processes involved in everyday life and school life. The games allow a bridge for them to get to know each other better and to recognize complex situations, trying to build other ways to enhance their school skills, as indicated by Ramos & Rocha (2017). In a work proposal using small group games, the authors concluded that cognitive games were related to relevant changes in attention levels, increased interest and willingness to pay attention, and increased problem solving and persistence. We believe that our proposal has achieved short-term qualitative results in students' personal and school lives, although it has not been our objective to evaluate the maintenance of these benefits over the medium and long term. We believe that for these benefits to become broader and more consolidated, it is necessary that the intervention be continuous, which has not yet been possible to structure.

From the discussions about an intercultural education (CANDAU, 2012), we have deconstructed the discriminations about the goals of games that, for many, is just for play. After this moment, we articulate these PE practices with cultural diversity through the benefits of concentration added to the ability of memorization, categorization, communication, attention, perception, assessment of situations, sequence of thought, among others, available in games from all corners of the world. Soon after, we retrieve popular and scientific knowledge about these games that encourage students to compete individually and collectively. Finally, we promote knowledge that helps our students overcome

their daily difficulties by offering examples of creative games, as they become more autonomous to exercise such a skill when alone.

The massage activity occurs in different public spaces outside the school environment, such as in a reserved area of the Mariano Procópio Museum or the BR 040 Lookout, which depends on transportation from the university itself. The idea is always to do near silent places, in contact with nature and with the presence of scenic beauty, with green areas (LONDE & MENDES, 2014) and / or with a wide visual for mountainous horizons. We realize that in this way we can achieve a more significant sense of relaxation and tranquility.

There are different forms of massage, made by different professionals. The modality we choose revolves around the massage with various balls⁵ and with oriental appliances⁶. The purpose of these massages is to relax the body in such a way that feeling becomes more important than acting, something difficult to perceive in our culture, but which can be stimulated by school work.

Massage has many benefits recognized in various audiences (students, workers, groups of pregnant women, babies, among others). In general, it is found that massage reduces anxiety and stress, provides a feeling of muscle relaxation, and increases the perception of self, body and senses (CASSAR, 2001).

To prepare the class, we guarantee a serene space with pleasant music; with different materials from everyday life; with pairs of students to touch each other and then exchange that function; with calm speech and with control of adversity, so that students do not worry about outside noises. After explaining how the dynamics will happen, we control the contact time with each device that is 2', depending on the number of students at the moment.

From the curricular discussions of the school (CANDAU, 2012), we have deconstructed discriminations about the goals of massage as purely erotic,

⁵ Ball massage of different sizes, shapes and weights comes with Pilates techniques and is often slipped along muscle groups that are contracted or need to be stimulated.

⁶ Massage with oriental appliances usually use wooden objects with different shapes that make compression, friction and sliding in the musculature.

therefore related to the historical process of building this experience and affecting the involvement of the most Puritan students. After that, we articulate these PE practices with cultural diversity through the benefits of relaxation coupled with the ability to disconnect from tumultuous environments, react calmly in adverse situations, break free of any thoughts, among others, available in different types of massage from China, Japan or Thailand. After presenting this proposal, we retrieve scientific knowledge about these massages that stimulate students to rest with physiological appropriation of their bodies. Finally, we promote knowledge that helps our students overcome their daily difficulties, offering examples of massage movements that bring safety and pleasure, as well as the possibility of generating other movements that could be applied outside the school environment.

Meditation activity takes place in different public spaces, such as Lajinha Park or public squares near the school. The idea is always to make this moment near wooded places, close to nature, because these spaces induce a feeling of relaxation, a different contact with the senses of sight, hearing, touch and smell.

The techniques of meditation were chosen from the experience of one of the coordinators of the proposal, the knowledge she has about these experiences and the positive feedback we have had from students. We use three simple techniques: guided meditation⁷, breath-focused meditation⁸, and body scanning⁹. The objectives are the desire for the fluidity of thoughts, arousing body awareness and arousing curiosity through the sensations in various resting positions.

⁷ In this technique, a guide directs students' thoughts, leading them to specific places, pleasurable sensations, liberating reflections. Through mental exercise there is the possibility of rewinding a process beyond what was created at the time of the activity.

⁸ Breathing activities, also known as diaphragmatic breathing. In this model there is the lowering of the diaphragm, at which time the person breathes in, and the elevation of it at the moment when the person breathes out of the lungs. Because breathing is quite different from what we are used to, the sense of well-being causes enthusiasm among students.

⁹ Anchoring the mind to the countless sensations of the body, imagining a journey through the blood of the body itself; feel wind sensations entering the brain; make the path of our neurons, among other possibilities.

Meditation has many benefits recognized both by those who experience their different practices, as well as by scientists who have been studying their effects. Generally speaking, meditation has been found to reduce anxiety and stress; helps bring focus more to the present; improves attention and concentration; provides better cognitive functioning; improves mood; enables greater sensations of relaxation, tranquility and peace; expands the perception about the self, the body and the senses (PIMENTEL, 2019). Ordinance no. 971/06 of the Ministry of Health included meditation and yoga, among other practices, in the 'National Policy for Integrative and Complementary Practices', following what the world has been systematizing for schools with stressed students (SPITZCOVSKY, 2016; DISITZER, 2018).

During the activity, we asked the students to lie down and relax. After a few minutes, we begin the exercises, inviting students to follow guided paths of self-awareness. From where they are, they are invited to stroll through different places, remember what happened the day before, imagine that it is a body part, among other adaptations.

Thus, we have deconstructed discriminations about the goals of meditations as religious and problematic, therefore related to the historical process of building this experience and affecting the involvement of the most skeptical students. After this time, we articulate these PE practices with cultural diversity through the benefits of self-awareness plus the ability to balance, focus, and well-being among others available in different types of meditation from India or Asia. Then we retrieve scientific knowledge about these meditations that encourage students to stay in a Zen zone regardless of conflict. Finally, we promote knowledge that helps our students overcome their daily difficulties, offering examples of meditation, signaling websites that teach techniques and building models that make students protagonists of their mental hygiene, according to the methodology suggested by Candau's intercultural education (2012).

3. Conclusion

Through written assessments, photos and reports, we realized that these spaces were important for students to have different experiences. Students were able to reflect on how their mental state may relate in different ways to their daily lives, their study routine, the quality of their learning, and their energy level to meet life's challenges. Focusing on 'the present and here now' reduces anxiety and allows for greater insight into life.

Through the activities, we understand that the students realized and valued the importance of having moments to stop, get in touch with the body in a different way, to slow down, to breathe with quality, to perceive themselves more broadly, to try to get out. from the busy and busy routine, to take care of themselves so that they can reframing their relationship with the study routine and with life, strengthening this process.

There was an appreciation of the students regarding the fact that the activity was performed outside the school space, in places permeated by the presence of natural elements that contributed to the achievement of the objectives of the proposal, that favored the meeting of relaxation states, stress reduction and sense of well-being. Interestingly, by presenting some different urban spaces, many students knew better the space where they live. Given the above, we realize that the work managed to meet an important need of those involved, which is to have spaces in the school that transcend the traditional classroom and that are geared to personal development, the improvement of life skills and skills involved in study, self-awareness and emotional empowerment.

In the short term, we notice positive benefits in the proposed fields. In the medium and long term, with more regular and continuous practices, we realize that greater benefits could be realized, both in terms of greater improvements in well-being, as well as in reducing indiscipline and improving relationships and interactions between the students.

To achieve the objectives, some technical precautions should be followed: perform the practice within a lay model; make a careful choice of the techniques

to be offered; and, in contact with students, make a contextualization about the offer of practice (the objective, which is something serious, is not a joke, but an educational proposal that has reflections on life). After all, deconstructing prejudices about school practices is only the first step. We still need to rescue alternative practices of our culture that interfere with our daily lives, articulate the content of activities with the curriculum focused on health beyond the issues of ethnicity, promote spaces for dialogue where students and teachers are more hopeful with the teaching-learning process.

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