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# SOCIO-SPORTIVE EXPERIENCE AND INFORMAL EDUCATION OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE: CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE CITIZENSHIP OF NEW GENERATIONS

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## Abstract

This presentation addresses the importance of socio-sports experiences, understood as an informal process of education in the construction of participatory citizenship of socially vulnerable children and young people. The study took place within the community of practices of a neighborhood, in Lisbon-Portugal. In fact, socio-sportive intervention can be configured as a space-time promoter of a multidimensional and empowerment vision of sustainable development of urban communities. It was through an on-site ethnographic observation study of the children's and youth experience in four informal sports activities - street football, capoeira, hip hop dance and the social circus - socially mediated by local community projects, that it was possible to identify collaborative practice models of collective construction of an integrative approach of informal education and sustainable social development, such as proximity social mediation, peer mentoring, popular education and collaborative action research. Informal models of education based on human rights, social justice and personal and social development, based on an ecosystem vision paradigm of urban development, through the expression of the children and youth trajectories and voices of the various community agents who collaborated in the course of research. The techniques used were participant observation, focus group, life stories and also open interviews with project leaders. The premise was that through sports it's possible to lead children and youth to educational attainment. The results let us perceive that, because it presupposes a setting of personal goals and the tentative to achieve them it implies persistence and continued work. Transferring these skills to the scholar domain, showed that their development in this area entails greater effectiveness in studying, making predict success in the future. It also implies the development of social relationship and teamwork skills. Combining informal education and sports is a rigorous, methodical, and holistic process, that takes the individual as a whole and as a multifaceted and complex being. The development of these competencies through informal educational methodologies assertively contributes, as was possible to see throughout this study, to the social inclusion to be done in a more sustained and consistent way.

Keywords: Socio-sportive, informal education, children, youth, ecosystemic vision

## 1 INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses the importance of socio-sports experiences, understood as an informal process of education in the construction of participatory citizenship of socially vulnerable children and young people. The social challenges that young people face, the family support and the context in which they are inserted are factors that influence their development process, often not allowing them to reach adulthood prepared, i.e. with the necessary social skills for life in society [1], [2]. Other variables that contribute to a good transition to adulthood, such as the type of relationship with peers and the contribution of educational agents, are added, and according to some authors [3], [4], confirm the need to intervene with different approaches in the development process of these young people, with a continuous character. The exclusion scenarios motivated by the increasing number of young people who could not integrate into society have been the target of various types of intervention [5].

However, it is considered that although a given young person may not show these signs, he/she may be at risk of social exclusion for being inserted in risk contexts or situations that increase the probability of facing difficulties in his/her integration in society [6]. The term "young people at risk" has been used in the literature [7], [8], when referring to young people involved in crimes such as drug trafficking, vandalism, violence and theft, who live in socially disadvantaged contexts with little or no family support.

Social projects that use sport, through methodologies of empowerment and valorisation of the civic competencies of young people at risk, have been appearing more and more, and this increase is largely

due to the special attention given to these practices by Community funding programmes. The concept of social inclusion through sport leads us,

for the development of personal, social, motor or other skills, capable of producing empowerment among the target groups in intervention, where good practices are aimed at the promotion of formative sport, i.e. favoring the ethical principles of sport and associated values among children and young people in a school environment or in situations of risk of discrimination [9].

The development of these skills seeks to promote behavioral change in the lives of young people, at individual, social, health and hygiene care levels, at educational level and in the future at professional level. The acquisition of skills and development of others through non-formal education in this type of project also allows emotional growth, since sport fosters a sense of belonging and gives young people the opportunity to interact with other peers in the same situation, causing joint learning.

Interpersonal relationships lead to the building of new friendships and allow, which is one of the added values of sport "the feeling of belonging", a sense of group/team unity. Even if they are teammates or opponents, it does not matter, what counts is the idea that everyone is part of a common project and that everyone is equal and deserves to be part of it, whether or not they have more or less talent to practice sport. This notion of participation also allows them to feel that they are contributing to something, that taking part in a social sportive project is more than just sport. It is also the prevention of anti-social and isolation behaviors of these young people, at the social level the intention is to prevent situations of violence and racism, since it is always underlying, the idea that sport is of and for all.

The Street Football Association Project has been implemented since 2009 and has grown exponentially year after year, with a significant increase in young people in the project, as well as receiving national and international awards and distinctions for the impact it has had. It is intended that, through sport, young people will: i) have opportunities to succeed and become progressively more integrated ii) can develop meaningful relationships with family, peers and peers and community (connections); iii) are able to care for others and feel cared; iv) are able to embrace school and demonstrate that they are capable in succeeding.

These social spaces for sharing experiences and coexistence allow an expansion of the action of educating and learning, insofar as what is at stake here is a process of formation, emancipation, humanization through active citizenship, of a better coexistence in society between individuals, which the school institution, through formal education, does not always manage to achieve [10].

Sport, in general, has enormous potential through its scope. However, the sport we intend to value here is seen as a prolific field of possibilities of response regarding the educational, cultural and health issues of contemporary society. More specifically, sport has a very direct and successful relationship with the issues of learning and education, in the sense that the rigor of training as well as all its methods allow young people to stimulate the logic of thought and reasoning while they develop as individuals.

This construction is done through the learning that the young person acquires in the most diverse moments of his life, sport allowing him to acquire values which are inherent to its practice [10]. It is through this civic, democratic, educational and long-term perspective of sport that opportunities for answers to social problems arise.

The learning methodology is based on learning by doing, on the interaction between the young person and the concrete situations they are experiencing. Usually there are no teachers but young people and facilitators who together build knowledge and skills in a horizontal relationship. The educator or facilitator can be more or less active in building learning experiences for the benefit of the young person. It is possible to increase the benefits of non-formal education for young people through the use of various methodologies such as peer education, project work, team projects and others. Young people are at the center of their own learning process and people working the project support them in this process.

## **2 METHODOLOGY**

The study took place within the community of practices of a neighborhood, in Lisbon-Portugal. In fact, socio-sportive intervention can be configured as a space-time promoter of a multidimensional and empowerment vision of sustainable development of urban communities [11].

It was through an on-site ethnographic observation study of the children's and youth experience in four informal sports activities - street football, capoeira, hip hop dance and the social circus - socially mediated by local community projects, that it was possible to identify collaborative practice models of

collective construction of an integrative approach of informal education and sustainable social development, such as proximity social mediation, peer mentoring, popular education and collaborative action research.

The techniques used were participant observation, focus group, life stories and also open interviews with project leaders, that will not that will not be presented in this paper. The premise was that through sports it's possible to lead children and youth to educational attainment. In this paper we will only address the street football results [11].

### 3 RESULTS

Informal models of education based on human rights, social justice and personal and social development, based on an ecosystem vision paradigm of urban development, can make a difference, it is in these privileged spaces of interconnection with the human mass that [12], that can be identified potentialities for creating new forms of organization and mobilizing concepts in affective and anti-oppressive care inspired by models of popular education [13], [14], which end up humanizing the technocratic tendencies emanating from public policies, mediating tensions between macro-meso-micro.

In the testimonies on *table 1* can be found reflected through the expression and voices of the youth, some trajectories of those who collaborated in the course of research.

*Table 1. Some Young Testimonies<sup>1</sup>*

Testimony 1	I always went here in the neighborhood [...] I liked the schools, the people I met, although we had our difficulties [...] We were [...] on the back foot, because in other schools we won't be good, we'll have difficulties, it's very rare that students manage to pass the year when they leave here. I had quite a few colleagues who missed classes [...] had to take care of the family, the younger siblings, others because they had no incentive to come to school. [...] I always had good grades until I reached grade 10, which was the change of school, it was being away from my friends completely in a new world, I couldn't go after the demands of the school [...] I failed. [...] I felt the difference a bit when I went to [...] the presentation, because everyone said: 'ah, don't say you're from the neighborhood and I don't know what' and I: 'I don't know why, if I'm from the neighborhood I'm going to lie?', I came and said it and everyone had this look on their faces: 'she's bad, she's going to hit someone'. [They think that the neighborhood is very violent. [...] I never thought the neighbourhood was dangerous. It was a huge surprise, because for me the neighborhood is just like all the others, it has its problems as usual, everyone has them, I was a bit surprised at the way they thought of the neighbourhood here, because I thought that [...] it was a well-known neighborhood, but not in a negative way... more for culture, for sports.
Testimony 2	This young man finished the 9th grade in PIEF, an achievement that some time ago was considered unattainable by the school group, by his mother and by the young man himself and that was only possible with the support of 'Bola P'ra Frente' where he truly learned to read and write, where he could contact with ICT, where he knows he was believed and trusted. Being able to see beyond the mask of a nervous, angry and undisciplined boy that [...] he wore [...] he discovered himself more sociable, sympathetic, calm and thoughtful. He saw himself capable of achieving things previously 'unattainable'. The fact of being able to have an internship and exert functions of peer tutoring, in the space of street football trainings and in the 'Bola' headquarters, enabled the young person to have motives of positive recognition, elevation of self-esteem, redefinition of himself, through a greater capacity of self-reflexivity and development of assertive relationships. In his own words: "I learned to respect my neighbor, to learn to listen without answering, I was and am a bit of an answerback. [Here I feel free, without worries, I already know how to comply with the rules, before I could not ... I like it here despite everything, I like it, it is nice to be here, you spend your time, you always learn something else. [I come to have fun but it has other uses, they teach us various things, we do activities which is also 'basof' [cool], I like it... they teach us to know more, before I was a kid, I couldn't read and I didn't know what was cool. [...] When you get older you gain more wisdom, it changed my personality, my temper. [...] For me, a football star is a respected person here in 'Bola', because they have acquired that trust over everyone [...] because the 'Street Football Association' is part of us, it is here in the neighborhood.
Testimony 3	I failed the 6th grade twice because of bad behaviour, many disciplinary absences and so I don't pass. I don't like to study [...]. I'm in the 6th grade normally. [I can't imagine doing the 12th grade, I don't know [...] maybe I'll have to emigrate, go to work, I don't care [...] my mother is sad, she says I should study, she punishes me, but it's no use and she forbids me to go out. [My brother is in the 8th grade, he failed last year and now he is in the PIEF, because he misses a lot, he stays at home, my mother doesn't know, she leaves the house, she comes in at 7 a.m. [...] When I hit the teacher, she wouldn't stop, then I got angry and kicked her, she was still in the 4th grade. She wanted me to do my homework, I was sulking. They changed my school. [...] Failing is demotivating. [...] I was bad, I hit them, the people who made me angry, because they upset me a lot, now, since I've been in street football, not anymore.
Testimony 4	I felt vulnerable and fragile, definitely from first to fourth year [...] because I didn't have the power [...] of fitting in that I have now [...] I seemed, perhaps, very strong, but at the same time I can see now that it was a weakness [...] I remember going to the board [...] our teacher [...] encourages the students to make fun of each other [...] I remember an episode [...] there was the thing of the best students, you felt who were the best and I can see now that there was no difference between me and them, right? That I could be as good or better than them and

<sup>1</sup> It is possible that some of the words translated loose sense, often this young people use their own language (slang).

	that those years [...] that's why I think they influenced me so much in who I am and the work that I have to do now throughout my life [...] I think she discriminated not only against me [...] it was wrong. [...] a discrimination [...] I did capoeira at kindergarten [...] I remember the teacher saying that I was an aggressive person [...] that was an aggressive thing, capoeira. [...] At school there were two mishaps [laughs]. [...] the sixth grade and there was the 12th grade. [...] I wasn't very lucky and I hadn't yet discovered that we make our own luck, so I didn't understand what I was doing at school [...] but what kind of education was I in? [I went to school just to go to school [...] because of the teaching, and because of the teacher too, let's be practical [...] I felt different [...] I was always seen as the 'Mary-boy', and even a bit by the teacher [...] and some of the educators [...] for playing ball, for dressing differently [...] because I always wore my hair short [...] I was not the conventional girl [...] I ran away from the standard and then [...] in the sixth grade it was that, okay [...] then I realized, I got a shock: 'ok, I failed, ooh this is a very bad thing' and then I started [...] that's when I changed a lot. [...] with sport I found a sense of meaning to be there, even if it was the sense of 'I am capable' and I started to apply myself more.
Testimony 5	If we are at school, sitting in a chair listening to the teacher and writing things down, that starts to bore us every day, while here [...] the example of training [street football], if the coach, for example, tells me to stop the ball, and it's not me, I'll be watching to see what he did wrong, so that I don't have to do it. If I was at school now I wouldn't be able to do it because I would be sitting in a chair paying attention to the sector, but for a subject that sometimes doesn't interest me, it's theoretical, it never interests me, I like the practical part of animation better, it's different.
Testimony 6	For example, 'S,' hates school, but if we ask him to make an attendance list or stay there in the space to control the time he controls. He's dealing with things he can do at school, control, timetable and [...] he's internalizing. [...] he values them a lot. [...] At school: 'ah, if you're not here to study, leave, [...] go to the street because you're just doing something wrong' and then they put everyone in special classes, so they already feel apart [...] they are PIEFs, alternative curricula for young people with difficulties [...] And in the association [ANFR] they value them a lot: "just because you're in the PIEF doesn't mean that you're not intelligent. You may not be the best at mathematics, but you certainly write well or speak well. There is always something, they always value something that the person has. Everyone has their level of learning. I may know a lot, 'S.' may know very little, but in the team we are all on the same level. We are all young, we are all participants.
Testimony 7	In the 7th grade, I had a maths teacher, who you could really see she was racist, I always had the best grades in the class, but she always found a way to irritate me and I always went to the street, which I then answered her and always went to the street. Then I had two in the first period, when I always had the best marks, I had good marks in maths, then there was another period when I spoke to my tutor and he said that I had to calm down, that I had to listen and swallow and blah, blah, blah and that nothing could be done and I listened and swallowed and there I went up to a three and in the third period I exploded again and went back to two. Then I got to 8th grade and I only got fives in maths and I said to my mother: 'see, it wasn't my problem'. The 10th grade at school I also won a scholarship for being one of the best students [...] it was the year when my mother left me with my sister and I thought I was going to drop my grades [...] At school you always have teachers looking on from the side and here in capoeira [...] they are united, all equal, inside the roda we are also all equal, nobody is going to tell you: 'no, you can't do that'.
Testimony 8	Testimony of a young community leader living in the neighbourhood: We managed [in the 'Ball Forward'] to make democracies and I think that we do a very good job... we like what we are doing, I think that for love... we are improving... the school doesn't even want to know what goes on at home [...] besides the bad things that they do, they are there [in street football] and they worry about 'Ball': - look, did you close the gate properly? When we go somewhere with them: you don't have to behave like a doctor, you're a youngster! It's all normal, neither I nor anyone else needs to be a doctor, we have to behave, we have to have posture. [In street football being black, white or gypsy is equal, being a man or a woman is equal, we fulfil our duties... the relationship with my colleagues is spectacular [coaching staff of 'Bola P'ra Frente'] [laughs]. And I love it, I love working in 'Bola', with sport and with people to create a strong relationship... you also learn in that social and sportive space, we talk and I give my tips... it's their free time and I put them at ease, it's the oldest group, I know I can count on them... I need to give a street football training and I know I can count on them... I love that connection, I feel I am developing my tasks.... The sport, we experience and we are learning and teaching... I love the activity [...] I love going to give a training... we are there playing ball and magic is made from football.

Source: Own elaboration

In fact, during childhood and a large part of adolescence the school is the dominant context of youth trajectories, partly regulating the time available to youths for their leisure and culture, but also the times of the socio-sports projects, which in the neighborhood allocate their intervention to youths, for example in the coordination of schedules that do not interfere with school attendance.

These projects are not only simple recreational and pedagogical activities and free-time occupation for the time left to young people after school, although they play an important role of recreation and experimentation of new experiences during holidays. They also try to avoid circumscribing their action to sports activities and, in the case of 'Bola P'ra Frente' (Football Ahead), there are several activities aimed at providing school support and ICT training to support the educational path of young people, given that one of the objectives of the project, besides promoting community participation and citizenship, is precisely to prevent and minimise the problems of school dropout, absenteeism and failure, which greatly affect the child and youth population of the local school grouping. They functioned not only at the interface with the local community but also with the school, formally integrated in the consortium of partners, mediating and reorganising the 'juxtaposition of worlds' between family, school, peer group, local socio-educational and leisure institutions, which populated the lives of the young people [15].

Faced with the negative diagnosis of the educational reality in the neighborhood, especially with the young people who leave school early, before finishing compulsory schooling and sometimes not even the 3rd cycle of basic education, in the background they correspond, above all, to the socio-political expectations of the State or the municipality and the financial backers to the expectations of more formal partners, like the school itself and the resident population, regarding the occupation of the young people, sometimes considered as undisciplined. But above all and by mission, they corresponded to the expectations, needs and interests of young people which are established in the socio-sportive field of their action. They take the interests of young people and the management of their difficulties and conflicts in the interface with the education system as a priority, trying to find complementary socio-educational spaces, shaped in the image of youth cultures, taking into account their need to find, between family and school, this third interlocutor, able to collaboratively, with them, to design cooperation strategies (not always successful), in order to make school more intelligible to youth cultures, but also to forge alternative strategies of learning, experimentation and informal education which, as the testimonies and the analysis of youth trajectories revealed, are of their preference.

From the observation and the information gathered in the conversations and interviews with the young people, it was possible to identify that from this point of view, education for citizenship can be assumed as a strategy for the authenticity of the socio-political practice of Social Service, in the mission to promote changes in the systems of power and to guarantee conditions for emancipation and empowerment [11], [16], [17], [18], [19], understanding citizenship in a broad sense, "as belonging to a community willing and able to fight for the rights of its members, as the right to have rights" that can make political citizenship effective in practice [11].

#### **4 CONCLUSIONS**

The educational nature of sport allows the creation and strengthening of social relationships, thus promoting the social inclusion of young people at potential risk. Regular practice of this or another physical activity provides a significant improvement in the quality of life of these young people and encourages self-confidence. Due to its universal nature, sport is an excellent instrument for contributing to the reconstruction of the self of these young people and helps them move from being excluded young people to young people with abilities and potential.

Therefore, it may be considered that through proximity, active listening and the "daily experience of the problems by those who live them", knowledge is acquired about the reality where action is to be taken, in a perspective of building new solidarities from autonomous and competent future adults, who are able to discuss and revalidate the social rules and thus revitalize society itself [19].

With sport, it is in the movement of the 'bodies' that they find a 'mobility', partly imagined in a society that exacerbates its inequalities, around the conquest of spaces of the self in which some autonomy and freedom may reign, thus escaping not from fragility, but from the existential suffering inherent in their role as victims, assuming a proactive attitude in the possible improvement of 'their worlds [11].

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