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# REINVENTING THE *ALLEGORY* *OF THE CAVE* THROUGH DRAMA

## Teachers' challenges and competences in the education of vulnerable young adults in Portugal

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**Abstract:** This paper focuses the challenges teachers face and the pedagogical – including the relational – competences they develop in dealing with diversity and vulnerability in the construction of a play in the second chance school *Escola de Segunda Oportunidade Matosinhos*, in Portugal. This arts-based experience provides opportunity to theorise early school leaving (ESL) and educational failure as well as the promotion of inclusive practices as conditions for educational justice. The main questions are: what competences do teachers need in their work to respond to the educational and social needs of vulnerable young people who left education early?; how can teachers' pedagogical competences be developed in their daily practice?; and how do they feel by doing so?. With these concerns, the paper draws on the video analysis of the construction of the play and on a set of interviews with teachers. Drama is included as part of the syllabus and a strategy to support young adults' emotional states and will to stay in school. Insights from video evidence include critical commentary on common strategies to promote students' engagement and learning and the identification of essential competences to deal with it.

**Keywords:** teachers' challenges, pedagogical and relational competences, arts-based experiences, drama

**RÉINVENTER L'ALLÉGORIE DE LA CAVERNE PAR UNE PIÈCE DE THÉÂTRE: LES DÉFIS ET LES COMPÉTENCES DES ENSEIGNANTS DANS L'ÉDUCATION AVEC LES JEUNES ADULTES VULNÉRABLES AU PORTUGAL**

**Résumé:** Cet article se concentre sur les défis auxquels sont confrontés les enseignant(e)s et les compétences pédagogiques – y compris les relationnelles – qu'ils/elles développent pour faire face à la diversité et à la vulnérabilité dans le contexte de la construction d'une pièce de théâtre dans une école de la deuxième chance de Matosinhos (*Escola de Segunda Oportunidade*) au Portugal. L'accent mis sur les expériences artistiques permet théoriser l'échec et l'abandon scolaire précoce, ainsi que

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la promotion de pratiques inclusives comme conditions pour la justice éducative. Supporté par ce cadre théorique, les questions initiales posées dans cet article sont les suivantes: quelles compétences des enseignants répondent aux besoins éducatifs et sociaux des jeunes décrocheurs? Comment ces compétences peuvent être développées dans la vie quotidienne de leurs pratiques professionnelles? Et, comment se sentent ces acteurs à cet égard?. À la recherche de réponses, l'article est basé sur l'analyse d'une vidéo sur le processus de construction de la pièce – la mobilisation des arts visuels, la musique, le théâtre, dans le cadre du programme pour les jeunes adultes avec des trajectoires de désaffection scolaire, afin d'augmenter leur bien-être émotionnel et le désir d'être à l'école. Cette analyse porte donc un regard critique sur les stratégies de participation active et d'apprentissage et permet l'identification des compétences essentielles pour y faire face.

**Mots-clés:** défis des enseignants, compétences pédagogiques et interculturelles, expériences artistiques, théâtre

#### **REINVENTANDO A ALEGORIA DA CAVERNA ATRAVÉS DO TEATRO: DESAFIOS E COMPETÊNCIAS DE DOCENTES NA EDUCAÇÃO COM VULNERÁVEIS JOVENS ADULTOS EM PORTUGAL**

**Resumo:** Este artigo foca os desafios que os/as docentes enfrentam e as competências pedagógicas – incluindo as relacionais – que desenvolvem para lidar com a diversidade e vulnerabilidade a partir da construção de uma peça de teatro na *Escola de Segunda Oportunidade Matosinhos*, em Portugal. O foco nas experiências artísticas permite teorizar acerca do insucesso e abandono escolar precoce, assim como da promoção de práticas inclusivas como condições necessárias à justiça educacional. Sustentado por este enquadramento teórico, as questões de partida neste artigo são: quais as competências docentes respondem às necessidades educativas e sociais de jovens abandonantes?; como podem estas competências ser desenvolvidas no quotidiano das suas práticas profissionais?; e, como se sentem estes atores em relação a isso?. Na busca de respostas, o artigo assenta na análise de um vídeo sobre o processo de construção da peça – mobilizando artes visuais, música, drama, como parte do currículo para jovens adultos com trajetórias de desafecção escolar, de modo a aumentar o seu bem-estar emocional e vontade de estar na escola. Esta análise evidencia um olhar crítico sobre as estratégias de participação e aprendizagem e permite a identificação de competências essenciais para lidar com elas

**Palavras-chave:** desafios docentes, competências pedagógicas e relacionais, experiências artísticas, teatro

## **Introduction**

This paper focuses key competences developed and expressed by teachers who work with vulnerable young people in a school play in a second chance school *Escola de Segunda Opor-*

*tunidade Matosinhos*<sup>1</sup>, in Portugal<sup>2</sup>. Teachers' voices and professional practice are brought to the fore as they may be relevant to other professionals dealing with similar situations.

By revisiting the *Allegory of the Cave*<sup>3</sup>, this work accentuates the conditions for learning and self-development in this school. Through the making of conditions by the faculty so that young adults move to being creators of light, shadow and their potential relationships, they no longer see life as shadows potentially misinterpreted. This implies teachers' development of competences that helps them recognise both the shadows that standardised teaching methods cast upon students and other bright and creative possibilities. This re-visitation inspired the sociological lens used in the analysis as well as in the emphasis of the possibility of «learning in a new key (LINK)».

Within this view of *possibility*, which implies researchers', teachers' and students' role as *citizenship construction actors* – with the power to act on their lives and in the construction of their common history (Macedo, in press), we address: the competences teachers need in their work with vulnerable young people who left education early or very early; how teachers' pedagogical competences (including the capacity to reinforce the human relational dimension within the learning process, see Figure 1) can be developed in the day-to-day of their professional practice and how they feel by doing so. Teachers' competences are discussed with these concerns through the analysis of the processes/results of the construction of a school play – part of the syllabus that was drawn to support the emotional states and the concurrent will of these young adults to stay, participate and learn in school. In addition, teachers' views on their own competences are taken through the analysis of semi-structured interviews.

The difficulty to engage young people in education is evident in high rates of early leaving from education and training (ELET) by young adults aged 18 to 24 who do not complete compulsory schooling (ISCED 3). In Portugal, this question is still a matter of concern despite the great progress registered in the last years (DGERT, 2014; Macedo, Araújo, Magalhães, & Rocha, 2015; Magalhães, Araújo, Macedo, & Rocha, 2015), and its national and European discussion (CEU, 2013; COM, 2013; OJEU, 2012) has shown that ELET results from a differentiated articu-

<sup>1</sup> School's real name at request of Luís Mesquita (school principal).

<sup>2</sup> The analysis is based on part of the field work in the European project «Learning in a New Key: Engaging vulnerable young people in school education» (LINK). Project Agreement No. 2015-1-UK01-KA201-013752, funded by the European Commission (ERAMUS+), a partnership among universities and learning centers in the UK (Coord.), Portugal, Italy and Poland, in a total of nine European entities.

<sup>3</sup> The Allegory of the Cave was presented by Plato in the Republic (514a–520a) to compare the impact of (the lack of) education. In a dialogue with Glauco, Socrates describes people who have been chained to and facing the wall of a cave for all their lives. They see the shadows of objects in front of a fire behind them, and name these shadows, which are the prisoners' reality. The philosopher is like a prisoner freed from the cave, who comes to understand that the shadows on the wall are not reality, for he can perceive the true form of reality. The inmates do not desire to leave their prison as they know no better life (Duarte, 2012).

lation of factors. Statistical data also show the extent of this problem (Eurostat, 2016), that goes beyond school, such as economic and social inequality, lack of cultural recognition and other systemic constraints that inform life in schools and other educational institutions.

Having the reduction of early school leaving (ESL) as one of its main concerns, the LINK Project within which this paper is produced, explores the fruitful combination of professional knowledge(s) of the therapeutic and educational fields by means of what has been termed «therapeutic teaching practice» – a scholarly endeavour that is open to many interpretations, but that is used in the project to refer to promising teaching practices which take young adults emotional states into account and aim at the re-humanization of the pedagogical relation. The educational-social intervention that is brought to the fore in this article – the school play – and the researching of it through the video analysis and interviews are both part of the LINK Project attempts to contribute to these more humanized teaching practices that engage students, teachers and therapists in the search for educational fulfilment and wellbeing – two conditions of educational justice which may promote greater social justice.

The theoretical concern about education with social justice has been present in national educational systems throughout the European Union. Mass education has been put in place, in line with the European guidelines (COM, 2001) but many European countries have not yet reached the democratisation of education that would be expressed in the capacity to find adequate and feasible educational responses for all. By providing similar educational proposals or socially devalued vocational routes, the school may contribute to the marginalisation of those to whom these routes do not make sense, resulting in school failure, disengagement and ESL. Finding the best possible educational answers to all must include mechanisms to promote success and keep young people in education and training (Araújo, Magalhães, Rocha, & Macedo, 2014).

A *non-synchronic* school (Stoer, 1994) as place of *possibility*, where *reciprocity* stands on *mutual recognition* (Fonseca, 2009) and where spaces for dialogue and understanding arise becomes a challenge in a context of visible inequalities of power (Santos, 2009). A school open to «noise», diverse values and experiences – the different voices (Arnot, 2006) – is a school *for* difference. This is particularly important when it comes to youngsters «who are hard to reach», a «matter of concern for educationalists worldwide» (Clough & Tarr, 2011: 85). Hence, «relational research activity that tries to capture an essence of intervention that successfully reduces barriers to learning is valued by those who work alongside vulnerable children and young people» (Clough & Tarr, 2011: 85).

In this sense, it seems education must go beyond the transmission of knowledge and develop skills and competences that promote young adults' wellbeing and emotional balance and enable them to get into the labour market. Advantage may be taken of the arts as strategies

to promote the mastery of knowledge and skills required by the current social context and teachers must be recognised as key actors in this process who raise issues of social justice, put education into practice (Girvan, Conneely, & Tangney, 2016) and who may reinforce the bridge among individuals and cultures.

Drama has proven to be an important tool for social intervention in education. Beyond the institutional logics and the moral or educational perspectives of art, it is interesting to value the instituting and transformative dimensions that art brings *to* and *within* human experience (Dewey, 2008). With a very specific role in promoting self-expression, creativity and disciplinary knowledge (Macedo, 2004), as referred by Magalhães (2004: 13), by appealing to creativity the arts lead

the individual to greater internal independence and self-confidence, stimulating him/her to develop his/her skills. It is also an experience that invites us to recognize ourselves in the other, and the latter to discover personal unknown aspects, even for ourselves. It can be... a stupendous form of self-knowledge.

Moreover, drama can become instrumental to educational success by upholding a sense of wellbeing, balance and engagement that help build a disposition to be in school, engage with others and learn (Schwartz, 2015). For Eisner (2008: 9), the arts evoke other forms of thinking and generate other «visions of education, other values to direct their enactment, other assumptions on which to construct a more generous conception of school practice». In its relationship with education, the arts can be seen in different perspectives, and bring to the fore a broad debate on educational practice.

Thus, «education through the arts, with the arts and for the arts» (Eça, 2010: 138) creates the context and possibility for the emergence of teachers' competences that in turn transform the relationship with the students.

### **Researching the visual record: critical moments, images and *voice***

This paper builds on a qualitative interpretivist approach that stands on *voice* – the expression of peoples' identities, histories and ways of interpreting the world (Arnot, 2006; Macedo, in press). Participant observation and interviews with teachers, the stage manager (who is also a teacher) and the school staff in this educational process – the best informants about their own reality (Ferreira, 2004) were the main means of data collection. Emphasis is given to the ways teachers enact and perceive their practice and professional development and how these are perceived by researchers.

Data was collected in a second chance school, a non-profit and non-governmental organi-

sation, which started in 2008 and provides ISCED 2 (grades 6 and 9) to young people (aged 15 to 25), who left school without qualifications, are unemployed and at risk of social exclusion. Youngsters are referred to the school by the court for young offenders, social services, mainstream schools and peer-to-peer. The student profile is diverse but the majority has more practical than academic skills. Every year, the school welcomes around 70 young adults. It follows a holistic pedagogical approach by combining vocational, artistic, school, personal and social skills. It was the focus on the arts as the main strategy to work with at-risk young adults that led us to choose this school as context for analysis. Ethical questions such as informed consent were assured by the school and complemented by the team who clarified to participants the activities that were developed and its objectives and possible use.

This paper draws on the visual record of the play construction, which is seen as the best way to capture teachers' competences and self-expression. A mixed team of researchers and filmmaker observed and recorded six sessions of the rehearsals, settings and of the play that resulted in 8h video: at school, the school radio and the theatre where the play was presented to the public, interviews with teachers, other staff and young adults. Whereas all steps of the play involved all students and related to school curricula (Math, English, Philosophy...), participation in the play was voluntary. Some were engaged as actors, others as technicians (lights/sound) and others making the scenery and props.

As referred by Santos (2009), image constitutes an instrument for recording research/capturing reality and a methodological resource for research and intervention. Questioning through image serves as «context, pretext and text of the field work» (Feixa & Porzio, 2008: 109), constituting a cultural product. The recording processes are subject to interpretive reflexivity that serves to discuss the educational context under analysis in this project and the way it is felt by people in it. The power of this research device lies in whoever is behind the camera, in the meaning that is attributed to the image, the shadow, the speech, the object (Martins, 2008), which is constructed from the interested look of the research team. As Rose (2002) argues, any analysis is partial and incomplete, because there are many intervening factors: the gaze of the filmmakers, the angles they use, the choice of certain moments instead of others, the actions developed in those moments – taking into account each interaction with each of the people involved; the time for filming and the interest of the researchers who observed the recordings. In this case, the concomitant presence of the filmmaker and the researcher who decided who, what and when to tape, constituted already a form of dialogue with the images, which was emphasised in the «final» moment when the focus on certain interpretive aspects, transformed the reality by constructing new meanings. The use of video as object and method of research already constituted a possibility of empowerment and citizenship as it provides space to re- and co-create reality (Santos, 2009).

In search for competences teachers need in their work with vulnerable young adults, how they can be developed in the day-to-day practice and how teachers feel by doing so, the video analysis is supported on three grids<sup>4</sup>: (1) Critical moments' analysis – identifies, describes and questions key situations to produce extended reflection; (2) Discursive analysis – focuses on teachers' discursive practice in action, within categories that emerged from the text; (3) Analysis of five interviews – gathers teachers' reflections on their professional performance and development.

In this phase, the project interviewed a total of 18 participants in very different roles in the school and in the school play. For this paper, we selected the interviewees with teaching roles. Their details are inserted in the table below.

TABLE 1  
**The interviewees**

Interviewees	Role in school	Gender	Age	Training
1	school director/teacher	male	58	Educational Sciences
2	stage manager/teacher/ arts therapist/coordinator of teacher training	female	54	Degree in Art Therapy and Drama
3	juvenile mediator/teacher	male	23	Degree in Visual Arts and Artistic Technologies
4	youth coach/teacher	female	24	Degree in Visual Arts and Artistic Technologies, Master in Teaching of Visual Arts to Teachers
5	Portuguese and English teacher	female	39	Degree in Basic Education (Portuguese/ English languages)

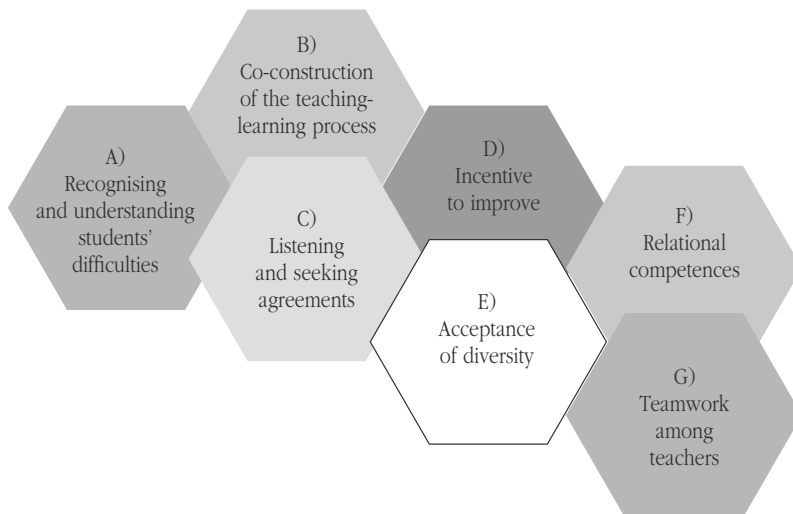
### **Freed from the cave, a new truth under a new light: teachers' competences on «stage»**

This paper discusses teachers' pedagogical competences to respond to the educational and social challenges implied by their work. The tension between unexpected challenges and the competences that result from trying out new strategies constitutes a starting point to rethink teachers' competences in the daily routines of their professional practice. The figure below shows the competences that were identified both in teachers' interviews and researchers' interpretative view of teachers' working processes:

<sup>4</sup> These three grids include the observation of the practices and discourses of teachers, school staff and students. This paper focuses on teachers. Grids 1 and 2 are based on the same empirical material but have different/complementary methodological focusses (grid 1 – practices; grid 2 – discourses). Grid 3 focusses on videoed interviews.

FIGURE 1

**Teachers' pedagogical competences**



These competences are embodied by:

- A) Supporting students get familiar with their difficulties; knowing how to adjust the activities and themselves to the needs;
- B) Engaging students in the collectivization of processes; accepting questions and respecting students' solutions; empowering students;
- C) Negotiating understandings to support learning and the transmission of knowledge (explaining *why*);
- D) Repetitions; Guidelines (directives); conveying the notion of space; feeling the group; exemplifying; respecting error as an opportunity for improvement and learning; promoting curiosity; respecting creativity and fostering experimentation;
- E) Accepting diversity, young adults' circumstances and living conditions;
- F) Providing positive reinforcement; sense of humour; keeping calm and acceptance of contingencies; emotional development as learning strategy; care and familiarity (support among peers, reproof criticism and insults, attention to individual value); knowing how to impose silence;
- G) Teamwork among teachers, sharing information and decision making.



We highlight the competences that became most evident throughout the process, bringing to the fore critical moments<sup>5</sup> – numbered 1 to 6 – that highlight some of the challenges teachers faced in their practice and the competences they developed to increase students' wellbeing and learning. The observation of the critical moments mainly focussed one teacher in her role as stage manager.

### ***1. «I know!»: Overcoming insecurities***

There is an audience, young people, teachers, observers, and filming team... A student rehearses her song for the show on stage with the music teacher. She cannot perform. The teacher gives suggestions of tones, makes her listen to the original music, and registers where she needs to improve. The student listens attentively, as she sings and tries to get right in tone... In the face of her continued difficulty, the teacher suggests that she goes behind the backdrop: «Now sing it strong and in the tone you want», «Sing as if you were doing the dishes». She sings several times, getting better and better. Finally, the teacher says, «It's cool and it can get better». The student takes a deep breath, «I know». (Source for analysis: Research video 1, May 19, 2016)

In this scene the student feels insecure. The challenges the teacher faces are implicit in the various attempts to promote her performance and confidence. The teacher opened up to face the need to deal with these difficulties and to adjust. This implied recognition and understanding of these insecurities, adjustment to the student's needs and to other ways of teaching and learning, as well as creativity to adjust the activities and guidance to reality. This implied several strategies, such as going behind the scenes, which revealed pedagogical and relational competences: care, understanding, respect for rhythm and insecurity, positive reinforcement, repetition of the exercise, identification and understanding of the problem, adaptation and adjustment in search for alternatives.

*Knowing how to deal with difficulties and adjusting to challenges* is evident in this moment and was constant throughout the construction of the play. Similar critical moments may be

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<sup>5</sup> As referred by Christine Halse, Brandi Fox, and Caroline Mahoney (2017, August), «the critical moment is a well-established theoretical framework in intercultural communications, narrative and life history, psychology, and sociology, although it often appears under different guises and labels, such as fateful moments, epiphanies and critical incidents (e.g., Giddens, 1991; 2000; Larson, 1997; Moen, 2006; Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 1993; Thomson et al., 2002; Savin-Baden & Nierker, 2007). (...) a critical moment is an “unplanned, unanticipated and uncontrolled” event (Webster & Mertova, 2007: 77) that takes on particular significance for the individual involved because it stimulates a personal discovery that changes how individuals constitute themselves and their relationships with others and society. (...) it is a change that alters the meaning structures of a life and ways of being in the world (Denzin, 1989: 70). Thus, the substantive and theoretical importance of a critical moment lies not in the character of the event but in the changes it stimulates (Webster & Mertova, 2007)».

reported. For example, a student shows difficulty in memorizing a text. After some attempts, in the face of student anxiety, the stage manager shortens the scene and the dialogue, and would end up using an audio recording. Another time, in a stage rehearsal the stage manager gives directions from the audience. The atmosphere is confused and noisy; she perceives the chaos and joins the group, giving directions in a relationship of proximity with each individual. The group moves from chaos to joint guided work. The strategy proved to be effective.

Strategies as such seek to highlight that increasing self-esteem and confidence are key to surpass situations of vulnerability and get more educational success. The promoting of emotional balance is emphasised by the provision of tools for student empowerment that help them face their insecurities and fears. This goes in line with one of the aims of educational justice: the promotion of a differentiated education that finds a balance between what is asked for and expected from students. In the first critical moment, this is shown in the redefinition of what is expected from a student that is feeling stressed under the spotlight. Moreover, this critical moment allows underlining teachers and students' role as citizenship construction actors, who act on their lives and in the construction of their common history (Macedo, in press).

## ***2. Tell me why and I will learn!***

The students are representing Aboriginal people in a tent. The stage manager exemplifies the movements and they repeat it but as soon as she goes away, they cannot do it. The scene repeats. Faced with this difficulty, the stage manager joins young adults and explains why they have to perform that way. «They play like this with their hands, up and down. They are Aboriginal, so their gestures are of these kind (wiggling arms), you see?». After this information, the students interpret their roles well. The stage manager keeps checking that they understand why they are doing what they are doing. (Source for analysis: Research video 2, May 21, 2016)

The critical moment highlights listening and communication as crucial competences in the transmission and construction of meaningful knowledge. The lack of students'/teachers' understanding is often based on lack of communication. The main challenge teachers are confronted with here is trying to recognise if and how students understand the activities and, consequently, the need to clarify guidelines. The deconstruction of the discourses was an attempt to allow its reinterpretation by the students.

Likewise, throughout the construction of the play, attempts were made to produce meaning through dialogue and interpretation, beyond imitation or memorising. For example, the teacher tries to pass on historical knowledge about a given epoch so that there is greater understanding of the scene: «to pray, which was something that was done a lot at this time. They prayed so that nothing bad would happen». In another scene, she explains who Cleopatra was so that

the character makes more sense. The colleagues listen carefully; they share learning, memorise names of historical figures and associated content.

In all the process observed, *listening and seeking understanding through the transmission of contents* were the competences students required the most from teachers, including the stage manager. This comes in confirmation with a particularly important point when dealing with «more complex young people», that is how far the «relational research activity» works to reduce the barriers to learning (Clough & Tarr, 2011: 85). Moreover, this competence acts as «place of possibility» by promoting self-expression, creativity and disciplinary knowledge (Macedo, 2004). Students became active in the construction of their own educational path.

### **3. «You know you have a very important part here!»**

Unware of the space they have, three students try to move under the tent. The stage manager gives them tips on the use of space. She repeats «Hold on» and reinforces «Very good». However, they still do not know how to dance as Aborigines... The stage manager joins them under the tent and talks about the dance. One of them tries to dance and laughs loudly. In addition to the dance, the stage manager tries to convey the emotion necessary for the scene. She moves her body, face, arms... They look closely and perform. The stage manager goes away, the students keep dancing. She says, «Not so slow, faster, faster... Very well! Fantastic». (Source for analysis: Research video 3, May 21, 2016)

This critical moment highlights the role of emotional bonds and mutual recognition in student learning and success. Young adults faced several challenges. The main one that the stage manager faced was the need to support young people in feeling at ease and get in their roles. To achieve this, she created several strategies that show the impact of relational, affective and communicational skills in the learning process: use of humour to decompress, affective environment, empathy, closeness and positive reinforcement of each effort; keeping calm in the face of unforeseen circumstances; using emotion as learning strategy to make meaning of the contents.

Likewise, other critical moments show the impact of care and proximity on student engagement. At one point the stage manager approaches a student to explain his scene; she sits next to him on the floor, in the same position. The young man talks about his doubts. The stage manager speaks to him at the same level, looks at him – gives him individualised attention. At another time, in a conflict situation, the stage manager touches gently the students' arms, makes and imposes silence to capture their attention and focus on specific and important points. At another rehearsal, a teacher asks the student to address the same feelings in his lines as if he missed someone that is, to pass on personal emotions to the scene and character. The student

repeats and the teacher laughs, «That's it, that's it!». Another time, after several repetitions of a scene, one student shows difficulties in memorising his words. Others get impatient and repeat it slowly. One says, «As if he was very stupid... He's stupid». The stage manager interrupts the scene, and reprimands the one who made the comment. By scolding the insult the stage manager strengthened the young person who was struggling and prompted solidarity and attention to the needs of the whole group that should remain united and not divided by internal criticisms, breaking with stereotypes.

The competences described above were transversal to the whole construction of the play. Congratulatory reinforcement «fantastic; very well; perfect, great» were heard throughout and at the end of each scene. This strategy implies valuing, recognition and promotion of students' success and wellbeing.

The increase in individual and collective motivation and pride after reinforcement was visible. Interestingly, several peer congratulatory reinforcements began to emerge throughout the process, highlighting the impact of this competence on inter-generational and intra-generational practice.

The promotion of emotional bonds within educational contexts remains a key feature for school achievement. Through this study we realized that its potential is enhanced even further when arts-based education is provided. Drama is a tool to engage with others (Schwartz, 2005) and allows a more generous conception of school practice (Eisner, 2008). Moreover, it seems essential as a form of self-knowledge and mutual recognition of teachers and students as human beings in process.

#### **4. «How do we do it?»: teachers and students' involvement in decision making**

«That marking is bad, it's impossible, because it did not go down so much», says one of the youngsters to the others. A discussion begins. The stage manager arrives and asks «What's the problem?» The young woman explains what seems wrong. The stage manager listens, understands the situation and they try to solve it together. (Source for analysis: Research video 4, May 23, 2016)

This critical moment made clear the processes of *co-construction*, *collaboration* and *involvement* of all in the construction of the play. Students question, call into question, give suggestions and seek solutions. The greatest challenge the teacher faces is being confronted in her decisions and goals, a possible loss of authority. Questioning the teacher reconfigures the teacher – student relationship in a new hierarchy of mutual respect.

Another time, the stage manager is in the tent with a student. The others observe, listen intently to their suggestions and come up with proposals. After, the student asks the stage

manager to watch from the outside in an attempt to get an idea and find a solution. The stage manager accepts.

Faced with the challenges, the stage manager makes an effort to accept students' solutions, holds them accountable and tries to give them a sense of belonging. She explicitly involves them in the process, rather than indicating responses. «Doing together» with the students, brings power to the learning processes and encourages creation, reflection and thinking. It reveals competences of leadership and respect for others. It is interesting to note the group effect that this generated, as in the second critical moment, in which the students discuss among themselves the best ways of holding the cloth. Teachers engage students in decision making, moving towards certain equality of positions. These debates emphasise how the arts leads to greater internal independence and transparency (Magalhães, 2004). These processes of co-construction, collaboration and engagement bring great challenges to teachers build a school of reciprocity and a space for the different voices (Arnot, 2006). Teamwork and respect for diversity are embedded in an approach that aims for educational justice.

### **5. «Sorry, it's just to check the milk»: understanding and supporting life circumstances**

Students are rehearsing. One of them interrupts the main actress in the middle of her talk to feel the temperature of the milk of the newborn's bottle. The mother spills some of the milk on the hand, hands the baby bottle to her colleague and continues the scene. The stage manager waits patiently. The baby cries and lies on the colleague's lap. The stage manager gives her a hug and laughs before continuing the scene. (Source for analysis: Research video 5, May 23, 2016)

The student-mother is focused on the scene but simultaneously eyeing the daughter who is still crying. At the end of this dialogue, it is the turn of the colleague who is holding the baby. So one says, «Cleopatra is playing babysitter. Now she cannot». The stage manager accepts «Yes, later, at the end of Cleopatra».

This critical moment emphasises *other* lives that go through the learning space, the different living conditions of young adults involved in the project and the sensitivity of the stage manager to manage such circumstances. The solidarity of colleagues is also present: they help the young mother to feel confident to remain rehearsing while they take care of her baby. This means there is a group understanding of the specificities of each person.

Moreover, this critical moment in which the sensitivity of the stage manager comes to the fore allows emphasising the fruitful match between arts and the role of the sensitive teacher. As referred by Eça (2010), among other things, the presence and intervention of the arts in edu-

cation leads to the likelihood of the emergence of a set of teacher competences, expressed in greater openness and personal development, which completely transforms the teacher-students relations, as shown by all the other critical moments as well. Again, this critical moment allows understanding the transformative dimension that the arts bring *to* and *within* human experience (Dewey, 2008) by showing the possibility of embodying other characters and roles and, simultaneously, respecting each person's realities and singularities.

### Teachers in their own voices

The interviews with teachers and the stage manager, who is also a teacher, came to reinforce the data on the construction of the play as provided by the video analysis presented above. Our data allows emphasising the construction of a *common language* among staff independently from their specific roles, where the joint work seems to have contributed to the reduction of potential tensions arising from staff members' diverse teaching backgrounds and/or practical experience of therapeutic practice. It is worth noticing that most of the staff does not only perform one role but two at least. Growing awareness and attention to others seem to be the key common features in teachers' voices. While referring to their personal learning they emphasise:

- The need not to establish limits as everybody can go further than expected is emphasised by this interviewee:

I learned that not only I can do more things than I thought as I also learned that we cannot establish limits for anybody. We are all able to achieve many things, things that are impossible to predict, even before it happens. (juvenile mediator/teacher)

The comment above reflects the competence *A) Recognising and understanding students' difficulties* which was evidenced by *critical moment 1*, where the student's apparent limits were overcome by means of an educational strategy that provided a network of safety.

- The ability to develop a deeper understanding about learning, to improve the professional performance and stimulate meaningful learning, can be identified in competence *C) Listening and seeking agreements* of *critical moment 2*, where clarification comes as solution:

Learning is always a mutual thing, I have learnt how I can do my professional work in a better way, how to offer things to the group, the young learners, which are important for them, that make sense to them, not only to myself. (stage manager/teacher)

- The ability to implement learning while concurrently learning about the students is emphasised below and fits into *F) Relational competences* as identified and *critical moment 3*, which refers to the empowerment of the student: «Besides moderating this learning process [about different text typologies]... I am the guardian of the poets of this school. As a result I learn a lot about the nature of people, the nature of our students» (Portuguese and English teacher).
- The ability to explore the harmony/balance between process and result and to manage the energy of the group, illustrates the competence *B) Co-construction of the teaching-learning process* that is also highlighted in *critical moment 4*:

I learned how to organize a process in harmony and balance, process and result, because each time we have to take a play on stage..., we always have some moments of stress, intense emotions and it was a very rich experience to me, how to manage the energy of the group, the interests of the group and offer a way of teaching and rehearsing with them which more tranquil, which provides a sense of safety, which gives balance and pleasure. (stage manager/teacher)

- The *E) Acceptance of diversity*, as accentuated by *critical moment 5* – the acceptance of the new born in the scene –, is also highlighted in the following interview where the teacher stressed the significance *of* and the ability *to* construct a sense of belonging: «We managed that everybody feels that the play does not belong to an individual but to all... The process has been extremely interesting and of learning – I have no doubt – not only for them [students] but also for us all» (juvenile mediator/teacher).

All the work of the construction of the play received a special cut from the analysis of the scenes, by means of critical moments. It brought to the fore the competences developed by teachers when faced with particular challenges in their work with students. The analysis helped to highlighting that *another education is possible* (Macedo, 2011), through which teachers also learn and can become better professionals.

## Final remarks

There is a critical moment between the challenges faced by teachers in their practice and the implementation by them of a strategy that addresses the challenge. This moment provides an opportunity to develop and acquire pedagogical competences. We have seen in particular that new pedagogical competences that are relational have the potential to impact positively on young adults lives and work at school.

In the context of a second chance school for young people who seemed not to have had space, nor voice, in mainstream education, owing to the mismatch with school standards and rules and the student interests and needs, the observation of educational practices allowed questioning the degree of vulnerability and failure of these young people. Artistic expression, drama in particular, contributed to recognise, listen to, understand and empower a group of – formerly – very early leavers, contributing to the reduction of their condition of vulnerability. The role of artistic expression in school is to be emphasised as a teaching tool that creates a context and possibility for the emergence of fundamental professional competences that will awaken the potential of each student and their willingness to stay in school. The video analysis revealed that the construction of a school play was an extremely rich process, full of challenges, interactions, and individual and collective learning for both adults and young adults. This was particularly due to the professional competences that emerged and/or were reinforced within teacher-student relationship, showing that the risks faced by vulnerable young adults can be addressed through strengthening teachers' professional profiles and tailoring high quality learning environments. In line with the criteria of success of LINK, one may say that being part of the play construction empowered teachers to use music and arts with added confidence and assurance to support vulnerable young adults as learners. In a positive fashion we may also say that not only did most teachers *preserve their own wellbeing* as they also managed to extend it by means of their active participation. This was evidenced both in the production of the play and in the testimonies provided both by teachers/tutors and students when they were interviewed in this process.

The involvement in the school play has proven to be an excellent strategy to keep teachers and students engaged in school. The observation of the learning processes, which engaged teachers and students in the production of knowledge in a safe and pleasant ambiance, as well as the statements that were videotaped also illustrate the reinforcement of exciting and rewarding music and arts based routines through which teachers support students to feel good and more engaged in school.

Cooperation was another key feature of the work in this second chance school. This provided very rich data for the analysis of what works in education and of the competences needed to do so. As referred by many of the participants that were interviewed the production and presentation of the play constituted some steps further in their engagement in a research that captured the effects of musical and arts based experience on teacher competences and their professional work.

The empirical data that has been gathered in this study from teachers' voices and practices are relevant to the work of other professionals dealing with similar situations. There is room in all professional practice for listening to young people and for engaging with them in the



construction of meaningful learning and of their wellbeing. This implies the need for the development of a set of competences which have been illustrated by critical moments that have been presented and analysed in this paper.

This study of the co-construction of the play has provided illustrations of how teachers can develop such pedagogical competences during their daily practices.

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