

## EVALUATING THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PROGRAM ON EQUALITY AND NON-VIOLENCE

Catarina Mano<sup>1</sup>, Sofia Matias<sup>1</sup>, Sofia Brito<sup>1</sup>, Alexandra Serra<sup>1,2</sup>, & Rui Serôdio<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences – University of Porto (Portugal)

<sup>2</sup> University Institute of Health Sciences (Portugal)

### Abstract

School-based prevention programs play an important role in promoting equality and reducing violence from early developmental stages. Grounded in social psychological research on stereotypes, empathy, and social attitudes, the program *Hora de Ser* (“Time to Be”), developed by the Portuguese Association for Victim Support (APAV), aims to promote personal and social skills associated with inclusive attitudes and non-violent conflict resolution among elementary school children. The present study evaluates the social impact of this intervention using a quasi-experimental design with pre- and post-test measures and a control group. The sample included 321 children attending the 3rd and 4th grades of elementary school. Measures assessed acceptance of diversity, gender stereotypes and gender role beliefs, empathy and identification of emotions in victims of violence, and attitudes toward strategies for dealing with violent situations. Repeated-measures analyses comparing experimental and control groups revealed significant changes associated with participation in the program, including reductions in gender stereotyping, greater attribution of traits to both genders, increased empathy toward victims of violence, and stronger endorsement of constructive conflict-resolution strategies (e.g., Phase  $\times$  Group interaction effects,  $p < .05$ ). No comparable changes were observed in the control group. Overall, the results suggest that *Hora de Ser* produces measurable positive social impact by promoting equality-related attitudes and non-violent behavioral orientations in elementary school children, supporting the relevance of early preventive interventions implemented in educational contexts.

**Keywords:** Social impact measurement, gender stereotypes, equality, violence prevention, school intervention.

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### 1. Introduction

School-based interventions play a crucial role in promoting equality and preventing violence. Early childhood is a critical period for shaping social attitudes, including gender role beliefs and empathy toward victims of aggression (Brown, 2010; Dovidio et al., 2010). Interventions targeting these factors can reduce tolerance for violence and foster prosocial behaviors.

The *Hora de Ser* program by APAV is designed to promote equality and prevent violence through structured activities that develop social competencies, empathy, and knowledge of effective strategies for responding to conflict. This study evaluates its social impact using applied research methods within the framework of social psychology.

### 2. Method

The present study used a quasi-experimental design to evaluate the social impact of the *Hora de Ser* program.

#### 2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 321 children (48.3% girls, 51.7% boys) from 27 classes in 18 schools in Porto, Portugal. Only children completing both pre- and post-test measures were included. Parental consent was obtained, and participation was voluntary.

## 2.2. Design

A  $2 \times 2$  quasi-experimental design was implemented: Group (Experimental vs. Control)  $\times$  Phase (Pre-test vs. Post-test). Experimental group children participated in the *Hora de Ser* program; control group children did not. Pre- and post-tests were administered in both groups under identical conditions.

## 2.3. Measures

The questionnaire included several sets of items assessing the main dimensions targeted by the intervention:

**Acceptance of diversity.** Three items assessed children's attitudes toward exclusion and discrimination based on perceived difference.

**Gender stereotypes and gender roles.** Participants evaluated whether several characteristics (e.g., "strong," "caring," "likes football," "likes dancing") were more typical of boys, girls, or both.

**Degree of gender stereotyping.** The attribution of these characteristics to one gender or both was used to assess the level of gender stereotyping.

**Empathy and identification of emotions in victims.** Using a vignette describing a situation of peer victimization, children evaluated the extent to which the victim might feel emotions such as anger, sadness, fear, or shame.

**Strategies for dealing with violence situations.** Participants evaluated the adequacy of different possible responses to a conflict situation (e.g., asking for help, talking, responding aggressively).

## 2.4. Procedure

Data collection occurred over two school years (2017/2018 and 2018/2019). Questionnaires were read aloud and adapted for children's age and literacy. Pre-tests were administered before program implementation and post-tests occurred after completion. The responses were anonymous.

## 3. Results

To evaluate the impact of the *Hora de Ser* program, several repeated-measures analyses were conducted comparing responses from the experimental and control groups between pre-test and post-test.

Regarding **acceptance of diversity**, the analysis revealed a significant interaction between phase and group [ $F(1.81, 295.03) = 3.50, p = .049, \eta^2 = .02$ ]. While no significant changes were observed in the control group, children in the experimental group reported increased awareness of exclusionary behaviors directed toward peers perceived as different. This pattern suggests that participation in the program may have increased the salience and recognition of discriminatory behaviors among participants.

With respect to **gender stereotypes and gender role beliefs**, principal component analyses conducted separately for pre-test and post-test responses revealed a four-factor structure in both measurement moments. However, important changes were observed in the organization of these characteristics after the intervention. In the post-test, several traits traditionally associated with one gender were more frequently attributed to both boys and girls. This shift indicates a reduction in gender stereotyping among children who participated in the program.

Further analyses examining the degree of gender stereotyping confirmed this tendency. Compared to the control group, children in the experimental group showed significant movement toward the neutral midpoint of the scale for several characteristics, indicating greater attribution of traits to both genders. These changes were observed in characteristics such as being strong, sensitive, courageous, well-behaved, caring, organized, liking to dance, liking football, and liking superheroes. In contrast, the control group showed virtually no change across measurement moments.

Analyses of **empathy and identification of emotions in victims** of violence also revealed significant effects associated with participation in the program. A repeated-measures ANOVA showed a significant Phase  $\times$  Group interaction [ $F(1, 265) = 4.77, p = .030, \eta^2 = .018$ ], indicating that children in the experimental group demonstrated improved ability to identify negative emotions experienced by victims of peer aggression, including sadness, fear, and anger. This pattern suggests an increase in empathic understanding following participation in the intervention.

Finally, results concerning **strategies for dealing with violent situations** indicated that children in the experimental group were more likely, in the post-test, to evaluate constructive responses as appropriate strategies. These included actions such as talking about the situation, seeking help from adults, or asking for support from peers. No comparable change was observed in the control group.

Overall, the pattern of results across the different measures indicates that participation in the *Hora de Ser* program was associated with positive changes in several psychological dimensions related to equality, empathy, and non-violent conflict resolution. A summary of the main outcomes associated with participation in the program is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of the main psychological dimensions affected by participation in the *Hora de Ser* program.

Dimension	Experimental Group	Control Group
Acceptance of diversity	Increased awareness of exclusionary behaviors toward peers perceived as different	No significant change
Gender stereotypes	Reduction in gender stereotyping; greater attribution of traits to both genders	No significant change
Empathy toward victims	Improved identification of negative emotions experienced by victims (sadness, fear, anger)	No significant change
Conflict resolution strategies	Greater endorsement of constructive and non-violent responses (e.g., seeking help)	No significant change

#### 4. Discussion

The present study evaluated the social impact of the *Hora de Ser* program, a school-based intervention aimed at promoting equality and preventing violence among elementary school children. Overall, the results suggest that participation in the program contributed to meaningful changes in several psychological dimensions associated with inclusive attitudes and non-violent conflict resolution.

One of the most notable findings concerns the reduction of gender stereotyping among participating children. After the intervention, several personal characteristics were more frequently attributed to both boys and girls, suggesting a shift toward more flexible and less rigid gender role beliefs. Given the role that gender stereotypes may play in sustaining discriminatory attitudes and social inequalities, these changes may represent an important step toward promoting more inclusive social perceptions in early developmental stages.

The program also appears to have strengthened children's empathic understanding in situations involving peer victimization. The improved identification of negative emotions experienced by victims suggests that the intervention may have enhanced children's sensitivity to the emotional consequences of aggressive behaviors. Such developments are particularly relevant in the context of violence prevention, as empathy has been consistently associated with prosocial behavior and reduced tolerance toward aggression.

Additionally, children who participated in the program showed greater endorsement of constructive strategies for dealing with conflict situations. This pattern suggests that the intervention may contribute not only to attitudinal changes but also to the development of more adaptive orientations toward interpersonal conflict.

Despite these encouraging findings, some limitations should be acknowledged. The quasi-experimental design did not allow for full random assignment of participants, and the study relied primarily on self-report measures. Future research could explore the long-term effects of the program and incorporate behavioral indicators of change.

Overall, the findings highlight the potential value of early preventive interventions implemented in school contexts. Programs such as *Hora de Ser* may play an important role in fostering equality-related attitudes and promoting non-violent forms of social interaction during childhood.

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