



## **Distance Learning In The Training Of Teachers About Violence And Conflict Management In Schools: The Case Of Vgce In The University Of Coimbra**

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### **Abstract**

*The growing conscientiousness of teachers and other education professionals about the dramatic effects of indiscipline and violent conflicts in schools has fostered their will to learn how to deal with these kinds of problems, in order to enhance the quality of life of all actors involved in school context and to help the pupils to become better learners and citizens. Using blended learning strategies, supported by the moodle platform, the Project ED.UC from the University of Coimbra is now training public schools teachers, many of them with direction responsibilities in their schools, in the problematic of violence and conflict management in schools, being this course financially supported by the Portuguese Government. Based on a comprehensive and systemic approach about the phenomena of indiscipline and violence, this course of ninety hours is divided in three main modules that take place continuously across three months, and offer several activities of collaborative work, like discussion forums. To complete the course teachers are asked to conceive an intervention project suitable to their schools. The several learning resources available to teachers and the different activities that are required to them are all organized to foster a deep reflection about the causes of conflicts in schools, about the importance of developing a cohesive and cooperative environment, within and outside classes, and about the benefits of conflicts prevention as an essential component of global school project. Schools will become better places if teachers develop their personal and pedagogic competencies to work effectively in conflicts prevention and management, helping new generations to build a peaceful society.*

### **1 Introduction**

The problems of indiscipline, violence, bullying and cyberbullying have been present in daily agendas of all the actors of school context, because these incidents continue to be a barrier to school success of pupils and to decrease the quality of life in schools. Several kinds of problematic behaviors can in fact occur between children and adolescents, or between pupils and teachers, and they can be characterized according to a continuous of increasing severity, ranging from rude games, antisocial conduct and bullying to severe acts of delinquency or even criminality. The implications of such manifestations are well described in scientific literature [1] [2] [3], and the attention of schools, families, media and politicians tend to be more and more focused on the prevention of these problematic behaviors in the school, in order to help pupils to develop intellectual, emotional and social competencies that allow them to solve conflict situations in a cooperative and peaceful manner. Taking into account the multi-determined nature of conflict situations that can take place in schools, all types of intervention should be based on a comprehensive and systemic approach, involving students as well as teachers and the other stakeholders of the school [4]. Global school project should not only be focused on intervention strategies but also should include prevention initiatives, and results become certainly more effective if the construction of a nonviolent school environment became a priority for all [5].

Considering the political importance of promoting school success to the current Portuguese Government and the availability of human, scientific and technological resources of the University of



Coimbra, a group of researchers<sup>1</sup> on the problematic of indiscipline and violence in the schools conceived and implemented last year (2010-11) an experience of distance learning, which is now being offered to public schools teachers, many of them with direction responsibilities in their institutions. These professionals were selected by the Education Secretary of State based on the urgent needs of their schools, in terms of intervention designed to reduce the occurrence of problems of bullying and violent conflicts. The formation of all professionals from different regions of the country is being financially supported by Portuguese Government.

VGCE is scientifically and technically supported by the Project ED.UC2 from the University of Coimbra, which was designed to promote through e-learning and blended learning strategies, supported by the moodle platform, the qualification and training of professionals from different areas of knowledge, in a perspective of lifelong learning. VGCE is now seen as a pilot experience because it is the first time the University of Coimbra is using this type of teachers training, based on a distance learning strategy. Moreover, it is also a pioneer initiative of using Portuguese public funding to help public school teachers to develop competencies to deal with specifically of old and new problems as indiscipline, bullying and cyberbullying in their daily professional activities.

Until the end of next July (2011), 224 basic and secondary public school teachers will complete their formation, distributed by five editions of a so-called long course (VGCE, 90 hours/three months) and five editions of so-called short course (GCE, 30 hours/one month). Next section we will describe the standard format of the long editions.

## **2 The course of violence and conflict management in schools (VGCE) from the University of Coimbra**

The course of violence and conflict management in schools (VGCE)<sup>3</sup> has ninety hours and is divided in three main modules that take place continuously during three months. The participation of teachers that belong to this active community of trainees is done through b-learning teaching strategies, with two classroom sessions (at the beginning and at the end of the course), and the other sessions are oriented using tutorial teaching in moodle platform. Each activity has defined templates and schedules to be done.

Because the course is organized in a modular structure, each section has specific objectives, contents, activities and evaluation. Throughout the modules, the course requires the execution of several activities of individual and collaborative work, like cases analysis or discussion forums, and the resources available include original texts prepared specifically to this opportunity of training, videos, cartoons, narratives, published papers and selected books.

Across the course, the several learning resources available to teachers and the different activities that are required to them are all organized to foster a deep reflection about the causes of conflicts in schools, about the importance of developing a cohesive and cooperative environment, within and outside classes, and about the value of listening to the pupils' voices to better understand their social interactions and their views about conflict situations.

The goal of the first module is to present a conceptual framework of school violence, clarifying concepts, identifying factors and eliciting possible contexts of violent incidents. The profiles of pupils that are aggressive are also discussed along with the types of provocative and aggressive behaviors that can be displayed against teachers and other adults from the school.

The content of the second module is related to programs of prevention of school violence, beginning with some prevention and intervention programs centered in school context and then focusing the analysis of some strategies more confined to classroom, designed to build discipline within the group of pupils. The role of the teachers is here emphasized, in what concerns the management of academic routines of the class and the importance of creating an emphatic atmosphere between all students.

<sup>1</sup> The four authors of this communication are the responsible for the course of violence and conflict management in schools (VGCE), being the first author the Coordinator.

<sup>2</sup> For more information about this Project see <http://www.ed.uc.pt>. The last author of this communication is the pedagogical Coordinator of the project in the University of Coimbra.

<sup>3</sup> For more information about the objectives, methodology and curricular structure of this course please go to <http://www.ed.uc.pt/index.php/pt/oferta-formativa/items/6>.



The last topic of this module deals with the advantages of monitoring and animating the playgrounds, where many aggressive incidents between students take place without the supervision of adult figures from the school.

The third module is dedicated to the thematic of conflict management and mediation in school context. Beginning with the mediation of conflicts done by adults, the module also explores and emphasizes the mediation by peers, involving children and adolescents. The profile of mediators and the components and phases of a mediation program are further analyzed, having in account the possible lifelong benefits for all parts involved, when they learn to solve conflicts in a peaceful manner. To conclude this last section of the course, teachers are invited to reflect about the supporting structures for pupils and families that school can create or may identify in the community around, in order to take actions according to a systemic view of the problems of indiscipline and violence.

To complete the course teachers are asked to individually conceive an intervention project suitable to their schools, which has an important weight in the final evaluation. It is mandatory the oral presentation and discussion of each project with the other colleagues in the end of the course, during the final session. This project should be based on previously identified needs and it is supposed to be implemented during the next school year of 2011/2012, with the collaboration of school Board.

### 3 Conclusion

The dramatic effects of indiscipline and violent conflicts in schools has fostered teachers' will to learn how to deal with these kinds of problems, in order to enhance the quality of life of all actors involved in school context and to help the pupils to become better learners and citizens.

This opportunity of distance learning has been very stimulating and inspiring for all the parts involved because it has functioned as a real learning community, where teachers create moments for sharing examples of best practices, for asking for help and suggestions, for sharing concerns and for storytelling. Their common desire to learn how to be better professionals is an extremely positive sign that they are really committed to build a better school.

This blended learning methodology, therefore, revealed that distance learning courses are a powerful and very promising strategy to implement in-service teachers' training, since allows them to develop their professional skills in an autonomous, active, and collaborative way, without the space and time constraints of the face-to-face training courses.

VGCE has been also an opportunity for teachers to look in a different manner to their schools. According to some of their answers to the activities required, they were surprised about what was in front of their eyes when they began to analyze with other 'lenses' some apparently trivial maneuverings in the classes, when they began to give more attention to some subtle signs of bullying between students, or when they "gave voice" to their pupils asking them about what kind of problems they face daily in school.

Among the 45 final projects presented until now it is possible to conclude teachers' systemic vision of factors that can cause indiscipline and violent incidents in schools. Their conscientiousness about the importance of sensitizing all educative community, including parents and institutions that have relations with school, to the promotion of competencies and opportunities of non-violent conflicts resolution in students, is probably one of the most positive aspects of VGCE. The creation of teams of conflict mediation by peers, the implementation of mediation offices composed by a multidisciplinary panel, the arrangement in terms of aesthetics and space of the playground and the school surroundings, and the opening of competitions to promote citizenship behaviors in children and adolescents, are some examples of ideas conveyed in teachers' projects. These proposals are based on actual conditions of the schools that are far from the ideal circumstances, in terms of human and monetary resources available, but they are all feasible because of the determination and commitment of teachers.

Social transformations create increasing challenges to school and cause difficulties to teachers' work, who are required a diversity of tasks that go far beyond the traditional roles of the educator. The development of social and emotional skills in children and adolescents are among these responsibilities, being such acquisitions essential to prevent indiscipline and violence in schools. Helping students to be peacemakers is an essential component of the education for active citizenship and a crucial pathway to foster social cohesion, democratic values and a culture of understanding among new generations [6]. This task should not be a lonely one for teachers, since its efficacy



depends on the collaborative work of all the educative agents based on a comprehensive approach of human behavior. Furthermore, it requires the gathering of multidisciplinary knowledge to conceive training and prevention programs and the creation of conditions to give appropriate answers to ongoing problems.

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