

Reflections on empathy and active listening in the school context

ARTICLE

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Abstract

This study aimed to reflect on the need for empathy and active listening in the school context in the light of the assumptions and considerations of Positive Discipline (PD) and Nonviolent Communication (NVC). This reflection was theoretically based on contributions from Rogers (1980) on active listening, Nelsen (2016), with reflections on Positive Discipline, Rosemberg (2006), on Nonviolent Communication, among others, as well as contributions from the BNCC (2018). This work is based on qualitative research, so the focus was on interpreting the object, given its relevance to understanding the work. Methodologically, we opted for a bibliographic review, namely a non-systematic narrative review with an exploratory bias in order to make considerations. In the end, we realized that empathy and active listening can contribute to building a welcoming culture to overcome the suffering to which public school adolescents are subjected.

Keywords: Empathy. Listening. Adolescence. School context.

Reflexões sobre empatia e escuta ativa no contexto escolar

Resumo

Este estudo teve como objetivo refletir sobre a necessidade da empatia e da escuta ativa no contexto escolar à luz de pressupostos e considerações da Disciplina Positiva (DP) e da Comunicação Não-Violenta (CNV). Fundamentando teoricamente essa reflexão, foram consideradas as contribuições de Rogers (1980) sobre a escuta ativa, Nelsen (2016), com reflexões sobre a Disciplina Positiva, Rosemberg (2006), sobre a Comunicação Não-Violenta, entre outros, bem como as contribuições da BNCC. (2018). Este trabalho tem como base a pesquisa qualitativa, de modo que o foco privilegiou a interpretação do objeto, dada a sua relevância para a compreensão do trabalho. Metodologicamente, optou-se por uma revisão bibliográfica, a saber, uma revisão narrativa não sistemática com viés exploratório a fim de tecer considerações. Por fim, percebeu-se que a empatia e a escuta ativa podem contribuir para a construção de uma cultura de acolhimento para a superação dos sofrimentos a que são submetidos os adolescentes de escolas públicas.

Palavras-chave: Empatia. Escuta. A adolescência. Contexto escolar.

1 Introduction

Nowadays, the term "health" involves an increasingly comprehensive perspective, as guided by world bodies such as the World Health Organization (WHO), according to which health encompasses comprehensive care, namely "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not just the absence of illnesses and diseases" (SEGRE; FERRAZ, 1997, p. 539).

This scope, as a basic human right, includes children, adolescents, adults and seniors, in their various particularities. Chronologically, the WHO defines the age group as between 10 and 19 years old (WHO, 2011) and the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (ECA) as between 12 and 18 years old.

When referring to adolescent health, which is not just a chronological category, ignoring this comprehensive perspective can result in physical and psychological illness among this public. Adolescence, as a phase of human development, points to a period of transition marked by significant changes in the physical and psychological constitution that precede adulthood. These changes are, in turn, related to various biopsychosocial factors which can be social, environmental, economic and cultural.

These factors affect the reality of this adolescent subject in the various spaces in which they are inserted, whether at home, in the family, at school, for example, and in the services they have access to, such as education and health. However, it is not new that this access is very limited, especially when it comes to adolescents, who are demographically increasing, in a condition of social vulnerability.

There are around one billion three hundred million adolescents in the world (UN, 2008). Of the Brazilian population, 11% are between the ages of 10 and 19. Twenty-one million adolescents are between the ages of 12 and 17, 31% of whom live in the Northeast of Brazil (UNICEF 2011). In Ceará, there are currently around 1.7 million adolescents between the ages of 10 and 19, corresponding to 16% of the state's population (IBGE, 2010). This number of adolescents is the highest in Brazil's history, and this number is due to the social gains of public policies invested in early childhood (VIEIRA; GUBERT, 2014, p. 18).

The data shows a critical situation in which these adolescents are increasingly in need of health care. Part of this contingent is in situations of social vulnerability and in

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public schools, lacking empathy and active listening so that they can deal with their suffering.

A study carried out in 2021 by Fortaleza City Hall, with the theme "Fortaleza: Pandemic and Youth", heard 969 young people living in the capital of Ceará and of these, 85% said they had noticed a worsening in their emotional state during the period of isolation. The survey showed that 58.82% of adolescents perceived a significant worsening of their emotional state and 26.35% said that this worsening was not so intense, but it did happen. During this period, most schools in Fortaleza were teaching classes remotely, so the teenagers had to deal with the physical absence of their friends and school in order to adapt to the virtual world. The following table shows the results of the research:

Image1 –Search results

// ASPECTOS DA VIDA DURANTE A PANDEMIA						
	Piorou muito	Piorou pouco	Ficou igual	Melhorou um pouco	Melhorou muito	Total
Alimentação	27,59%	37,15%	20,80%	11,46%	3,00%	100%
Condicionamento físico	39,66%	31,21%	15,06%	9,55%	4,53%	100%
Qualidade do sono	44,55%	28,27%	17,99%	7,22%	1,96%	100%
Higiene pessoal	4,90%	11,26%	53,00%	14,81%	16,03%	100%
Relacionamento dentro de casa	15,69%	27,33%	30,27%	18,50%	8,21%	100%
Atividades de lazer e cultura	48,34%	26,50%	12,88%	8,71%	3,56%	100%
Estado emocional	58,82%	26,35%	10,17%	3,68%	0,98%	100%
Disponibilidade de recurso financeiro	49,08%	29,94%	15,34%	4,54%	1,10%	100%

Source: One of the aspects analyzed was the experience of young people in Fortaleza during the Covid-19 pandemic (Photo: Reproduction/YouTube)

From my experience as a school coordinator in a state public school, I was able to come into contact with the difficult reality of high school students, many of whom were socially vulnerable. Working as a coordinator on a daily basis also allowed me to take a more comprehensive look at the problems they manifested, with intense bouts of anxiety,

disorders, fears, among others, since in some cases the presence of some of their families was essential. However, it's not always possible for these families to come to school, as many have jobs that don't allow them to come to school due to the time they need to devote to them.

According to Barros (2020), a period of social isolation can have a significant impact on the population's mental health, in addition to economic and biological interference. Whether it's the fear of contracting the disease or death and mourning losses in the family. In this way, the climate of tension can intensify the symptoms of mental disorders. For adolescents, the need to be in a group, the relationships between friends, everything that corresponds to the search for identity, characteristic of this period, has suffered major impacts. Faced with isolation, the rate of school adolescents suffering from some kind of mental disorder has increased considerably and the study carried out by Fortaleza City Hall, mentioned above, proves this. Many students showed symptoms of anxiety disorder, some were diagnosed with depression, bulimia, among others. Faced with this problem, the need for active listening for adolescents suffering from a disorder makes active listening even more essential in the school environment.

The following question arose: How can empathy and active listening, combined, help to alleviate this critical context in the educational sphere? In search of answers to this more central problem, on a daily basis, I was able to actively listen to adolescents and understand how rare dialogue with parents or other caregivers is and how much the absence of this moment with the family affects the lives of these adolescents. I was also able to see that empathy combined with active listening can promote a welcoming school. Not just in the sense of identifying and diagnosing problems, but in giving them genuine and active attention in the sense of welcoming them.

2 Methodology

As for the nature and type of study, this work is based on qualitative research, which focuses on understanding and interpreting the phenomenon being investigated, or

reflected upon (MINAYO, 2012). Firstly, from this point of view, understanding implies taking into account the singularities of the individual, given that their subjectivity manifests part of their total life, both for the researcher and the researched. This allows for a closer relationship between the two and between the researcher and the object. Secondly, according to Minayo (2012, p. 4), interpretation consists of "a continuous act that follows comprehension and is also present in it: every comprehension holds within itself a possibility of interpretation, that is, of appropriation of what is understood".

The narrative review, also known as a traditional review, deals with the object under investigation from a more open thematic discussion, since it does not generally start from a specific and closed question.

Narrative review articles are wide-ranging publications, suitable for describing and discussing the development or "state of the art" of a particular subject, from a theoretical or contextual point of view. Narrative reviews do not disclose the sources of information used, the methodology used to search for references, or the criteria used to evaluate and select the works.(1) They basically consist of an analysis of the literature published in books, printed and/or electronic journal articles, with the author's personal interpretation and critical analysis (ROTHER, 2007, p. 1)..

In this case, the search for sources does not follow a systematic and predetermined pattern. In this way, the selection of articles and texts can be relatively arbitrary, which in turn makes it possible to understand experiences taking into account subjective aspects in the analysis and investigation based on the author's interpretation and critical analysis (ROTHER, 2007).

In this work, then, references on the subject were selected and, based on a problematizing question, the aim was to define the object and theorize it, that is, the need for empathy and active listening in the school context, based on the assumptions and considerations of Nonviolent Communication and Positive Discipline.

3 Results and Discussion

A empatia é conhecida culturalmente como sendo a ação de “colocar-se no lugar do outro”. Segundo o dicionário Aurélio, seria a tendência para sentir o que sentiria

outrem caso se estivesse na situação e nas circunstâncias experimentadas, então, por outra pessoa ou outras pessoas. No entanto, com uma breve reflexão, pode-se entender que, se cada ser humano é único e carrega experiências singulares, como poderia ser possível se colocar no lugar do outro ou dos outros, se o sujeito enxerga o mundo a partir das experiências que vive ou que vivem? Possivelmente, um pouco da etimologia da palavra pode ajudar a elucidar essa questão.

Derived from the Greek *empathia* (*em*=inside and *pathos*=suffering or feeling), [...] the term gained a meaning dissociated from art and closer to the realm of personal relationships when it was translated into English by Titchener, under the name of empathy, whose meaning was that, through inner imitation or mental effort, it would be possible to know another person's conscience (THOMAZI; MOREIRA; DE MARCO, 2014, p. 88).

Empathy can therefore be defined as the ability to listen, understand and have compassion by putting oneself in the other person's shoes, making the person speaking feel important and understood. For Falcone (1999), empathy can be defined as a communication skill that has three components:

(1) a cognitive component, characterized by the ability to accurately understand the feelings and perspectives of another person; (2) an affective component, identified by feelings of compassion and sympathy for the other person, as well as concern for their well-being; (3) a behavioral component, which consists of conveying an explicit understanding of the other person's feelings and perspective (FALCONE, 1999, p. 24)..

These components allow us to understand empathy as a social skill inherent to human beings, which differentiates them from other animals. However, not everyone is able to be empathetic simply by nature or, at least, cannot access the compassion needed to be empathetic. According to Falcone (1999), the first component, the cognitive, would be a perfect understanding of the other person's feelings, to the point of also understanding their point of view and expectations. The second component, the affective, is compassion. In the course of our lives, many events lead us to "harden" our relationships. As children, a considerable number of people had an authoritarian upbringing that led them to harden their hearts, often as a form of protection, and led them away from the human essence that is compassion. "All human beings, when they feel

pain, need a gift and empathy. We may want advice, but only after receiving the empathic connection" (ROSEMBERG, 2019, p.150). However, this is not always the case. The majority of Brazilian children and adolescents do not rely on their parents' empathy in the learning process and it is becoming increasingly difficult to be empathetic. The third component of empathy, according to Falcone (1999), is behavioral, which is perhaps the most important, since it involves demonstrating that you are being empathetic towards the other person. You need to be clear that you understand the other person's situation so that they also feel welcome. The best way to do this is by talking, expressing what you feel and see from the other person's perspective.

Bringing empathy to the current school, it's important to remember that after the Covid-19 isolation period, the return of students was slow and monitored. Today, about a year later, it can be seen that adolescents are finding it difficult to get along in groups after the isolation period. The Ayrton Senna Institute, together with the São Paulo State Secretariat, carried out a survey that shows the impact that social isolation has had on students. They surveyed 642,000 students in the state of São Paulo and 70% of them showed symptoms of anxiety or depression. The same survey also showed that around 33% of students had difficulty concentrating when they returned to class. Faced with this critical scenario, the students returned with numerous psychosocial and learning difficulties. Empathy and active listening then emerged in the midst of these consequences of isolation as ways of welcoming students and helping them cope with the return process.

Active listening was created by the American psychologists Carl Rogers and Richard Farson in 1950. They coined the term and started using it as a therapeutic approach, and then the PCA (Person-Centered Approach) came into being. Today, active listening is necessary both in schools and in the workplace. In order to listen actively, you need to understand the other person and pay close attention to what they say, so empathy is necessary for active listening. Many students, both in public and private schools, don't have this listening experience at home and are unable to be heard by their parents. Adolescence is already a period of change and many challenges for students, and without

the support and listening of parents, getting through so many changes safely becomes even more complicated. According to Paulo Freire, it is "by listening that we learn to talk to them. Only those who listen patiently and critically to others speak to them, even if, under certain conditions, they need to speak to them" (FREIRE, 2006, p.113). The teacher who learns to listen actively to their students will possibly have 100% of their classroom collaborating with them; active listening is an excellent way of creating a bond with students.

In the school context, empathy brings with it the power to develop an education geared towards peace, which gives new meaning to relationships so that people, in this case students, can understand the reality in which they live so that they can take action against it. According to Jares (2007, p. 44-45), "developing a new type of culture, a culture of peace, which helps people to critically understand reality, which is unequal, violent, complex and conflictual, in order to be able to have an attitude and take action in the face of it", therefore understanding is the basis of a school that seeks peace from the point of view of welcoming and the psychosocial development of children and adolescents.

EEFM São José, the location chosen for this study, is located in Parque São José, in Fortaleza-Ceará, and currently has 3,540 students enrolled. It caters for a group of at-risk teenagers in a community of extreme social vulnerability in the suburban region of Fortaleza, the Favela dos Canos and the Favela Vertical, which today are run by factions. After the social isolation began, many students reported having symptoms of Anxiety Disorder, such as insomnia, tremors, senseless fear and palpitations. As a result, the management began to welcome the students and, through active listening, was able to alleviate these symptoms until the parents were able to get therapeutic assistance. In addition to generalized anxiety, depression is also present among the students in this return and caused four suicide attempts during the first semester of 2022. Faced with this scenario, empathy, through active listening, emerges as a way of maintaining a connection with these teenagers and somehow alleviating their pain.

Caring for these students has been the school's main challenge in the post-pandemic period. From this perspective, active listening, seeking to establish an

empathetic connection and putting this student at the center, considering all the subjective aspects of him as the subject of his story, was the main function of the São José Acolhe Project, an active listening group created in 2020, at the height of the pandemic, which proposed to carry out listening for adolescents 100% online, taking place every Friday at 5pm, via Google Meet. Once the idea was created, we went in search of teachers who wanted to support the project and students to take part in the meetings. Grupo São José Acolhe reflects an attitude of accountability, attention and understanding of the student's reality.

The region in which EEFM São José is located is one of immense social vulnerability. Many students are split between work and school because their parents need financial help. This makes empathy even more essential in the school environment. Adolescence is a very complex period of life that many people find difficult to get through. Physical and psychological changes, moving away from the family in search of a group to identify with, all of this becomes even more challenging when the teenager is faced with adult problems, such as financial issues.

Adolescence is a period of life that can be both bewildering and wonderful. Lasting from approximately twelve to twenty-four years of age (yes, until the mid-twenties!), adolescence is known in many cultures as a time of great challenges (SIEGEL, 2016, p. 7).

According to Siegel (2016), adolescence should not be seen as a period to be overcome, but rather as an important phase of life towards the transition to adulthood. "Adolescence is not just a stage to be overcome, but a stage of life to be cultivated in the right way" (SIEGEL, 2016, p. 74). In other words, adolescence is a vital stage of life that needs to be treated as such so that the essential skills for adulthood that need to be acquired during this period can be cultivated. Again, the importance of empathy in the process of adolescence through active listening.

Active listening is not just a way of hearing, but also interpreting what the other person says carefully. Many parents believe that their teenage children no longer listen to them or even don't want to know about family matters. However, when we listened to the students' narratives in the São José Acolhe group, we realized that they forget that their

children are no longer children and there is a greater need to be heard and have their speech validated by those who are important in the adolescent's life. Listening can take place in a variety of ways, verbal or non-verbal, taking into account the whole that makes up the young individual. According to Rogers (1980), in order to listen attentively and empathetically, it is necessary to listen deeply to the other, including "the words, the thoughts, the tone of the feelings, the personal meaning, even the meaning that underlies the conscious intentions of the interlocutor" (ROGERS, 1980, p. 8).

BAKHTIN (2010) says that the word is the basis of inner life; for him, without the word, the psyche would be almost nothing. Based on this reflection, we understand the importance of an active listening group at school during one of the most difficult periods in human history when adolescents, who should have been forming their own social groups, found themselves isolated.

For Quixadá (2015), the fundamental elements for the process of internalization and organization in psychic life are the other and the dialogue between the self and the other, which means that the active listening group proposed by EEFM São José was also able to help students in this process of internalization and psychic organization through dialogue. One student who took part in the group said that it was like an oasis for her in the midst of the chaos of the pandemic, and this feedback only confirms what the authors have said above.

According to Positive Discipline, every human being needs to feel accepted and important within their social context. The family is the training ground for adolescents' life in society, and feeling accepted and important within it will help adolescents develop emotional skills to deal with conflicts in adulthood (NELSEN, 2016). Active listening is an important tool for building this concept of acceptance and importance that generates belonging.

In a shortened version of the article "Active Listening" by Carl Rogers and Richard Farson, published in the journal *Communication in Business Today* in 1987, the authors point out:

Active listening is an important way of bringing about change in people. [People heard through active listening become more emotionally mature, more open to their experiences, less defensive, more democratic and less authoritarian" (ROGERS; FARSON, 1987, online).

Active listening is fundamental for schools. By listening, we can understand the needs of students and parents in order to build a more welcoming and humane school.

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Rocha, Hueb and Scorsolini-Comin (2020) organized a collective case study, based on Winnicott, with children in care and in the process of adoption. The authors place institutionalized children in a place of speech, where they can express their feelings, narrate their stories and give importance to children's speech. Thus, through listening, it is possible to access the child and welcome them without judging their stories.

In Rocha, Hueb, Scorsolini-Comin (2020), the institutionalized children are listened to through a certain dynamic, always using playfulness. The children talk about their families of origin, the abuse they have suffered and their desire to have a family that is stable and safe. The researchers are always interested in what the children say, which makes them feel important and gives them more confidence in the authors. Bringing this experience to the high school environment, we can see the importance of giving adolescents a place to speak and being attentive to their speech. Through active listening, the school can maintain a greater connection with the student, enabling better learning and fewer school dropouts.

With the aim of preventing suicide in schools and intensifying mental health care for school adolescents, Xavier (2021) developed the Guardians of Life project in partnership with the Child and Adolescent Health Intervention and Research Center (NUSCA) of the Psychology course at the State University of Ceará (UECE) and the Ceará Department of Education (SEDUC). The author recounts that 15 schools were chosen to implement the Pilot Project, each school had to send 3 people to take part in a suicide prevention training group, and a group of 45 people was formed who were called Guardians of Life at School.

The aspects covered during these meetings involved: adolescence and human development; understanding the multidimensional aspects of mental health and suicidal behavior in adolescence; protective factors and risk factors in

adolescence; theories on suicidal behavior; the therapeutic role of art in psychological suffering; the role of the school in suicide prevention; articulation with the protection and psychosocial care network; the role of the family in mental health; construction of permanent projects in the school that enhance mental health care with the entire school community and intersectoral and interdisciplinary actions; what to do in the face of suicidal behavior (XAVIER, 2021, p. 202).

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Based on the study carried out by Xavier (2021), schools in the public education network in the state of Ceará now have an idea of the various situations faced by adolescents that can lead to or aggravate mental illness. The author mentions the following situations: "communication and relationship difficulties with the family; students' resistance to asking for help in the school environment; low self-esteem; difficulty trusting people; difficulty talking about their feelings; lack of family support" (XAVIER, 2021, p. 202), among others.

Some teenagers suffer a lot, and not offering help can be cruel. It is common for them to be suicidal by the age of fourteen, and it is their task to tolerate the interaction of many disparate phenomena - their own immaturity, their own changes relating to puberty, their own ideas of what life is and their own ideals and aspirations; add to this their personal disillusionment with the adult world, which seems to them essentially a world of compromises, false values and endless digressions from the central theme (WINNICOTT, 1999, p. 7)..

The aim of forming teams in each school was to develop ongoing actions to prevent suicide and promote mental health within schools. However, according to Xavier (2021), some changes still need to be made for this to happen. The author mentions that the school needs to be a place of non-violence and the promotion of parents, she also says that it is necessary and urgent to combat prejudice and bullying in schools, it is also of immense importance to bring the school closer to the family and to value the emotional issues of students and teachers. A major difficulty that also needs to be resolved is communication with the health and care network.

In addition to this, Non-Violent Communication (NVC) is a way of accepting others and oneself without judgment. Thus, empathy is the basis of NVC. When they are born, individuals do not establish any judgment of others a priori and are predisposed to love, understanding and growth through relating to others. CNV is capable of breaking down

the crust that is built up over the course of life around one's own heart and helps to rescue the human essence.

For Rosemberg (2006), the language used in Nonviolent Communication, the language of the giraffe, is the best way to welcome others and show empathy. The giraffe, being the largest land animal, with its long and extended neck, can see farther, so it realizes that every challenging behavior hides a real need. Because it has the biggest heart in the animal kingdom, it can also show more love and empathy. Bringing this reflection to the daily life of the classroom and pedagogical management, attending to students with more empathy has given us a better understanding of the reasons for challenging behavior and has enabled us, together with these students, to seek solutions to the situations presented without judgments or punishments. The language of the giraffe allows feelings to be said without hurting the other person, as it doesn't sound like criticism, but rather emphasizes the recognition in the other of unmet needs. At school, CNV plays a fundamental role in resolving conflicts, since as Rosemberg (2006) says: *promotes greater depth in listening, fosters respect and empathy and provokes a mutual desire to give ourselves wholeheartedly.*

4 Final considerations

Faced with the problem of the significant increase in the number of adolescents with some kind of mental illness in the context of post-social isolation, this research has made it possible to reflect on how important and necessary empathy is in this period, so that the school can offer these students a welcoming and learning space.

In the school context, empathy, through listening, brings with it the power to develop an education geared towards peace, which reframes relationships so that people, in this case students, can understand the reality in which they live so that they can take action against it. In other words, as Jares (2007) puts it, acting in favor of a new culture based on peace.

In this sense, the São José Acolhe Group, which was created during the pandemic by the management of EEFM São José, can be seen as a listening space for adolescents and a way of helping them with their suffering through active listening. With this, I reaffirm the importance of listening to our school adolescents as a way of creating a bond and helping them deal with their pain during adolescence.

It is therefore of the utmost importance to study and expand school groups and cultures, such as those presented in this paper, which promote active listening throughout the school environment. Teachers and staff should also be trained to deal with school adolescents during this time of social isolation..

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