

“Friend's Council”: The Importance of Emotions and Democracy in Preschool Education

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Received January 09, 2023; Revised May 26, 2023; Accepted July 25, 2023

Abstract The present article presents the development and implementation of an educational project centered on the triad of Education, Emotions, and Democracy. The project's main goal was to understand how Emotions can be explored with children in Preschool Education, aligning these activities with the Portuguese curricular guiding documents of this level of Education, while fostering the mobilization of democratic principles. This dynamic was implemented in a Portuguese Preschool Education classroom with nineteen children (aged between 3 and 5 years), within the context of teacher initial training. Several weekly sessions were conducted between the months of February and May, where a range of different activities were developed to engage children in the central topics of this project. From the project evaluation, it was concluded that the proposed approach promoted the development of respect for others and different opinions, as well as a democratic spirit in everyday decision-making, improving the ability to vote and argue, understanding the concept of Democracy, identifying different Emotions, and fostering a spirit of understanding and mutual-aid. Considering that Emotions play a fundamental role in the cognitive, social, and emotional development of children, it is crucial to explore them from an early age so that children can later recognize, express, and regulate their Emotions. By applying democratic practices in this process, we simultaneously contribute to shaping children as active, participatory, and aware citizens of their rights and responsibilities.

Keywords: Education, Democracy, Emotions, Early Childhood, Intervention Project

Cite This Article: Beatriz Coquim, Maria João Rocha, Mariana Abreu, Ana Paula Pedro and José Luís Araújo, “ “Friend's Council”: The Importance of Emotions and Democracy in Preschool Education.” *American Journal of Educational Research*, vol. 11, no. 8 (2023): 525-531. doi: 10.12691/education -11-8-7.

1. Introduction

Democracy emerged in Ancient Greece, specifically in the city of Athens, around the mid-5th century BC. Etymologically, the meaning of this word is simple and evident, as “demos refers to the people, and *kratia* to government or authority” (DAHL, 2012, p. 4 as cited in Canavieira & Coelho, 2020, p. 49) [1], which refers to the literal meaning of the word - government by the people.

It should be noted that Democracy has undergone significant evolution since then, in the sense that “the democracy of the ancients, as expressed in the Athenian experience, was a direct democracy that took place in a restricted space - the Greek city-state. It operated through a system of assemblies that were granted the power to make all political decisions” (Neto, 1997, p. 288) [2]. Furthermore, as this author points out, “the democracy of the ancients was limited, both in the sense that it excluded a large part of the population from political life and in the sense that those who theoretically should have had access to it did not equally enjoy political rights or the material goods produced at that time” (Neto, 1997, p. 290) [2].

However, from 1933 to 1974, Portugal underwent a phase of military dictatorship that became known as the Estado Novo (Ribeiro, 2021) [3]. Nevertheless, the Estado Novo still imposed significant repression, as it was considered an authoritarian, conservative, nationalist, and corporatist state regime with fascist inspiration, which did not align with the ideals of Democracy, as it “constituted a true attack on the Human Rights of the Portuguese and the peoples of the former colonies” (Ribeiro, 2021, p. 36) [3].

Since the population was tired of repression, censorship, and the lack of freedom, on April 25, 1974, a revolution occurred in Portugal aimed at putting an end to the existing dictatorial political regime and establishing a democratic political system (Silva and Alves, 2016) [4]. Thus, with the *Revolução dos Cravos*, a democratic change occurred where citizens gained rights and responsibilities, taking into account freedom and equality, particularly in education.

Therefore, in the Portuguese context, Democracy plays a crucial role in schools, as according to Bertineti *et al.* (2013, pp. 1-2) [5], “thinking about a democratic society that includes truly democratic education immediately requires democratic actions. Therefore, we cannot study democracy to later implement it in our schools; we need to

live democracy daily, and believe in the simple democratic practices of our everyday lives". It is evident that within the school environment, there has been an attempt to demonstrate the importance of democratic practices through the creation of various programs. For example, the Education for Citizenship Program currently in place in schools aims to "contribute to the development of responsible, autonomous, and caring individuals who know and exercise their rights and duties through dialogue and respect for others, with a democratic, pluralistic, critical, and creative spirit" (Ministério da Educação, 2013) [6].

As mentioned earlier, Democracy is based on the active participation of citizens and respect for others. Thus, it is considered relevant to establish a contemplative environment where children can express their desires and pleasures, and uncover their frustrations. In this space, they are encouraged to engage in active listening, introspect on their behaviours, express their thoughts, engage in respectful debates, attentively hear others, respect their ideas, and gain insights into their own actions. This approach promotes children's active participation in the learning process and develops the necessary skills for integration into a democratic society (Ribeiro, 2014) [7].

It is perceived that interactions between adults and children are relevant for the child's active and democratic involvement. This interaction serves as a valuable means for the child to acquire essential societal skills and understand how to navigate their life within the broader community (Lopes, 2014, p.21) [8]. In other words, when children interact with adults, they can learn democratic values such as equality, freedom, and justice, among others, through, for example, behaviour modelling, as children tend to imitate adults. They can also understand diversity, as this interaction allows children to respect differences and, finally, develop social and emotional skills, as they create empathy when communicating with others, learn to resolve conflicts and foster critical thinking, which are fundamental in a democratic society.

Thus, it is evident that it is not possible to talk about Democracy without considering Emotions, as they play a crucial role in democratic practices. For example, Emotions drive interest or motivation to participate in political life, such as knowing who to vote for, mobilizing citizens (revolutions), or fostering the necessary empathy/understanding to listen and respect others. Emotions are, therefore, a sudden reaction of our organism, with physiological, cognitive, and behavioural components (André and Lelord, 2002, p. 13 as cited in Catarreira, 2015, p. 27) [9]. They are not meaningless affective impulses but rather intelligent responses that align with events, values, and important goals for each individual (Nussbaum, 2006, p. 52 as cited in Sánchez, 2017, p. 364) [10].

Emotional intelligence plays a strong role in the social sphere as it drives democratic political practices by mobilizing emotional energies to make decisions and live in a community (Nussbaum, 2006, p. 52 as cited in Sánchez, 2017, p. 364) [10]. In this line of thought, it was considered relevant to develop the research project described here based on the thematic axes of Democracy and Emotions in the context of Early Childhood Education, addressing the research question: "How can Emotions be

addressed with children, aligning them with the Curriculum Guidelines for Preschool Education and having a democratic foundation as support?" Thus, seven objectives were formulated to guide this research, from activity planning to implementation and evaluation, with the aim of obtaining a clear and focused structure based on the defined objectives. These objectives are: 1) develop respect for others and different opinions, 2) foster a democratic spirit in everyday decisions, 3) enhance the capacity to vote, 4) as well as the ability to argue, 5) understand the concept of Democracy, 6) identify different Emotions, and 7) enhance the spirit of understanding and mutual-aid.

2. Materials and Methods

Before the implementation of the project, the authors conducted some preliminary observations of the context in which it would be implemented. These observations were crucial in choosing the activities and approaches to be carried out with the children, as they depend entirely on the characteristics of each child individually and each group as a whole. Based on the observations, it was possible to plan the approaches to be adopted, which had to be suitable for the intervention context, where there were children of different ages, developmental stages, and specific educational needs. Therefore, the use of inclusive strategies was crucial to ensure that all children, regardless of their characteristics, could participate equally in the activities. Before the interventions began, the authors created a didactic sequence that underwent adaptations throughout the project to meet all the children's needs, modifying some previously defined activities. These activities were always evaluated by the children and reflected upon by the authors, allowing for an understanding of their preferences and using them as a guide for future interventions.

Pedrosa *et al.* (2011, p. 327) [11] argue that "active methodologies also align with the pedagogy of autonomy, which advocates for contemporary education to produce students capable of self-managing or self-governing their learning process." In this regard, in the proposed project, the children were also responsible for the progress of the activities, as they were actively involved and often had the opportunity to make decisions. For example, when they made choices, voted, or suggested ways to develop a particular activity, they were engaged in an active teaching methodology that promoted their autonomy and decision-making power, which are two fundamental aspects of Democracy.

2.1. Participants

The educational project presented here was developed in the context of initial teacher education, from the Bachelor's Degree in Basic Education at the University of Aveiro, Portugal. Three of the authors (pre-service teachers) were actively involved in implementing the project in the educational context.

The project was implemented with a group of nineteen children aged between 3 and 5 years, along with the Preschool Teacher and the Educational Assistant from this

educational setting. It is worth noting that out of the nineteen children, one had a diagnosed developmental delay, and this child was always included in the activities. For example, knowing that this child loves working with paints, an activity was developed where they stamped their hands on bubble wrap. It should also be highlighted that during the implementation of the project, a new child joined the group. However, this child only participated in one intervention, and it was not possible to create a strategy for his/her inclusion as he/she was very shy and did not want to participate. Therefore, it was decided not to include this child in the evaluation of the project activities.

The involvement of *Lugar dos Afetos* [Place of the Affections], a partner organization, is also noteworthy. They contributed to a planned field trip (described below in more detail) and their space and the involvement of their staff added valuable experiences to enrich our approach.

All children voluntarily participated in this research. Informed consent was obtained from their parents or legal guardians, outlining the main objectives of the project, obtaining permission for participation in the research, and ensuring the confidentiality of all collected personal data. Informed consent was also obtained for the field trip to *Lugar dos Afetos*, including a description of the trip, its cost, the time of the visit, and the accompanying personnel. The collected data were used solely for academic purposes.

2.2. Project Implementation

During the project, eight weekly interventions were conducted, always on Thursdays, from 9:30 am to 11:30 am, between the months of February and May. However, it is worth noting that between 9:30 am and 10:00 am, all the children were gathered in the classroom, and, in this moment, the daily activities were introduced. Between 10:00 am and 11:00 am, the children were divided into two groups, with one group engaging in another school activity for half an hour, and then the groups switched. Finally, between 11:00 am and 11:30 am, all the children were brought back together in the classroom, where the authors took the opportunity to evaluate the intervention.

The sessions developed did not have a single guiding theme, i.e. there was not only one planned activity, with a single objective, that spanned the entire project. Instead, there were several activities planned weekly that focused on Emotions and Democracy. Despite the distinct meanings of these topics, the authors were always able to interconnect them because various democratic practices were employed in exploring the topic of Emotions (and vice versa). For example, when learning the result of a vote, the Emotions felt by each individual are crucial and varied (e.g., anger, frustration, joy, among other emotions), and thus, individuals need to be able to manage those Emotions. As another example, participation in debates is inherently linked to Emotions because, during debates, each individual has to manage their Emotions to defend their own viewpoints or listen to arguments from others. In this regard, the initial interventions focused more on exploring the theme of Emotions, while the later ones focused more on Democracy.

To summarize the sessions conducted, we introduced a table that presents a brief description of the activities carried out in each intervention (Table 1).

To work on the first and fourth defined objectives, "develop respect for others and different opinions" and "enhance the ability to argue" the authors considered that all sessions were relevant since it was always necessary to give opinions on various topics. However, the authors noted that sessions 2 and 5 were the most focused on these objectives, as argumentation and listening to others' opinions were required during the 5th session. The second and third objectives, "foster a democratic spirit in everyday decisions" and "enhance the capacity to vote" were achieved through 3rd, 4th, and 7th sessions, where children were able to experience an election by choosing whom they wanted to vote for on a secret ballot and placing it in a ballot box. In order to achieve the fifth objective, "understand the concept of Democracy," the authors considered session 4 crucial because through reading the book *The President of the Jungle* and the voting activity, children were able to comprehend what Democracy is. The sixth objective, "identify different Emotions," was accomplished through 1st and 8th sessions, as the book *Novelo de Emoções* [*Skein of Affections* (free translation)] and the involvement of *Lugar dos Afetos* [Place of the Affections] provided the necessary foundations for children to understand the concept. The Emotion Guards activity, initiated in the 3rd session, allowed children to understand how their peers felt and provide assistance if needed, aligning with the seventh objective, "enhance the spirit of understanding and mutual-aid."

Among the various activities carried out throughout the project's interventions, notable highlights include the reading and exploration of the book *Novelo de Emoções* [*Skein of Affections*] related to emotions and the book *The President of the Jungle* related to democracy. The facilitation of elections, voting, and a council also played a significant role in this project, leading to its name *Conselho de Amigo* [Friend's Council].

3. Results and Discussion

Regarding the moments and methods of project evaluation, they were planned to assess the children's level of satisfaction with the planned activities and understand the Emotions they felt during them. As expressed in the project objectives, this intention was not designed to assess the children's knowledge of the topics addressed. Additionally, written notes and photos were recorded to facilitate the analysis and interpretation of some collected data. Considering the children's age (they required additional attention during the activities), taking informal notes and capturing certain moments through photos was easier. Opting for formal observation records would have hindered the ability to provide the necessary attention to the children during the intervention and maintain detailed records.

In this way, children's level of satisfaction and the Emotion they felt at the end of each session was recorded, in order to obtain feedback and reflect upon it. To do so, the authors collaborated with the children to create five

wooden markers, each representing a different Emotion, based on the five Emotions (joy, anger, sadness, disgust, and fear) presented in the book *Novelo de Emoções [Skein of Emotions]*. Each Emotion was depicted by an image and accompanied by a description. For example, the Emotion of sadness featured a crying facial expression with the word *tristeza* (sadness) written below it (Figure 1). It is worth noting that these wooden markers were attached to a ring to prevent them from getting lost, allowing the children to participate in the evaluation

activity each week. The authors also created bookmarks, with the session summary and had a section (three facial expressions for colouring) for to children express their degree of satisfaction regarding the activities performed. The first facial expression on the bookmarks represented *did not like*, the second represented *liked somewhat*, and the third represented *liked* (Figure 2). At the end of each session, these bookmarks were given to the parents or guardians to keep them informed about their children's activities and how they felt during them.

Table 1. Date and description of the sessions

Session	Description
Session 1 <i>Skein of Affections</i>	- Reading the book <i>Novelo de Emoções [Skein of Affections]</i> by Elizabete Neves. - Post-reading activity: choosing a colour of a thread from the ball of yarn and sharing a situation that they have experienced which reminded them of the emotion represented by that colour. - Attaching cards with five different facial expressions, each associated with an Emotion, to wooden markers. - Coloring the satisfaction level experienced during the session on the bookmark. - Raising the wooden marker indicating the Emotion felt during the session.
Session 2 <i>A gesture of affection</i>	- Creating a <i>Friend's Council</i> to establish a dialogue where the children's opinions are heard regarding attitudes that should be adopted with friends. - Writing the previously discussed attitudes on cardboard and associating them to the respective Emotion. - Coloring the satisfaction level experienced during the session on the bookmark. - Raising the wooden marker indicating the Emotion felt during the session.
Session 3 <i>Emotion Guards</i>	- Explanation of what an <i>Emotion Guard</i> is. - Voting for the <i>Emotion Guard</i>. - Creating a schedule for the <i>Emotion Guards</i> based on the voting results. - Coloring the satisfaction level experienced during the session on the bookmark. - Raising the wooden marker indicating the Emotion felt during the session.
Session 4 <i>The President of the Jungle</i>	- Distributing badges to the <i>Emotion Guards</i>. - Reading the book <i>The President of the Jungle</i> by André Rodrigues, Pedro Markum, Paula Desgualdo, and Larissa Ribeiro. - Expressing an opinion about the animal that won the election in the book and whether another animal should have won. - Holding an election to choose the animal from the book that they believe should have won. - Placing the results (podium) on cardboard. - Coloring the satisfaction level experienced during the session on the bookmark. - Raising the wooden marker indicating the Emotion felt during the session.
Session 5 <i>Friend's Council</i>	- Distributing badges to the <i>Emotion Guards</i>. - Engaging in a dialogue to recall the book <i>Novelo de Emoções [Skein of Affections]</i> by Elizabete Neves. - Communicating and listening to the felt Emotions. - Tying a wool ribbon of a specific colour representing an Emotion to a place/object/person that evokes that feeling. - Observing and reflecting on this activity. - Coloring the satisfaction level experienced during the session on the bookmark. - Raising the wooden marker indicating the Emotion felt during the session.
Session 6 <i>The Emotions in the bubble wrap</i>	- Distributing badges to the <i>Emotion Guards</i>. - Outdoor activity at the school: hugging five trees and associating an Emotion with each tree. - Stamping their hands with paint on bubble wrap covering the trees. - Coloring the satisfaction level experienced during the session on the bookmark. - Raising the wooden marker indicating the Emotion felt during the session.
Session 7 <i>Field trip rules</i>	- Distributing badges to the <i>Emotion Guards</i>. - Watching an interactive presentation about <i>Lugar dos Afetos [Place of the Affections]</i>. - Voting, using a ballot box, to choose the leaders for the line. - Participating in vote counting. - Coloring the satisfaction level experienced during the session on the bookmark. - Raising the wooden marker indicating the Emotion felt during the session.
Session 8 <i>The Place of the Affections</i>	- Visit to <i>Lugar dos Afetos [Place of the Affections]</i>.

The data gathered from these instruments, i.e., the Emotion felt by the children during the intervention (Table 2) and the level of satisfaction in each session (Table 3), were systematized in Tables 2 and 3, respectively.

As observed, the evaluation activity for the children's level of satisfaction was not conducted in the first session due to the unavailability of data collection instruments. However, the authors were able to determine that the children felt predominantly joyful based on the evaluation of the Emotion felt during the intervention. Both tables also do not include the evaluation of the eighth session, which corresponded to the field trip to *Lugar dos Afetos [Place of the Affections]*, as there was no subsequent

opportunity to conduct formal evaluation activities for that session. Nevertheless, in order to gather some feedback, the authors asked the children if they had enjoyed the activities during the field trip, to which they responded enthusiastically, saying things like "I really liked *Lugar dos Afetos*" or "It was really cool." Additionally, the children's interest and participation were evident throughout the visit, as they were able to answer questions posed by the staff responsible for the visit. For instance, when asked "What are affections?" the children responded with answers such as "giving hugs," "showing affection," or "love." This session also received highly positive feedback from the Preschool Teacher and the Educational

Assistant, both expressing their liking for the place of the field trip and commending the children's interest, attention, and behaviour, as they maintained appropriate conduct and complied with instructions throughout the trip.

Table 2. Emotions felt by the children during each session

Emotions felt by the children						
Session Number of participants	Joy	Sadness	Aversion	Rage	Fear	N.R.
Session 1 18 children	15	1	1	1	-	-
Session 2 16 children	12	-	-	2	2	-
Session 3 17 children	13	1	1	2	-	-
Session 4 17 children	10	4	1	2	-	-
Session 5 17 children	6	5	3	1	2	-
Session 6 17 children	5	3	2	1	2	4
Session 7 16 children	9	4	2	1	-	-

Table 3. Children's satisfaction degree with the activities carried out in each session

Children's satisfaction degree					
Session Number of participants	Did not like	Liked somewhat	Liked	More than one answer	N.R.
Session 1 18 children	-	-	-	-	-
Session 2 16 children	1	2	4	8	1
Session 3 17 children	3	5	9	-	-
Session 4 17 children	2	1	13	-	1
Session 5 17 children	2	4	10	-	1
Session 6 17 children	1	5	7	-	4
Session 7 16 children	1	1	13	1	-

Considering the evaluation of the project, it can be observed that the majority of children enjoyed the implemented activities, with "Joy" being the predominant Emotion felt. However, it was often noticed that when asked, the children associated the facial expressions on the wooden markers with situations that had occurred at home rather than with the activities carried out. For example, one child evaluated an intervention with the "Sadness" however, when questioned, the child mentioned feeling sad because it was their first night sleeping alone. In other words, the mentioned Emotion reflected what they were feeling but was not directly related to the activity. It was also common for children to colour more than one facial expression on the bookmark. However, we understood that they did not fully grasp the purpose of the evaluation, as they mentioned feeling "normal" when they arrived at school but became joyful during our activities. Consequently, they coloured both Emotions experienced since the beginning of the day. It was also observed that when activities had a more theoretical content, the children became bored and restless, which was reflected in the evaluation, as they coloured the facial expression corresponding to "liked somewhat" or "did not like." For instance, the evaluation was not the most favourable in the second intervention where we conducted a *Conselho de Amigo* [Friend's Council]. Therefore, it was concluded that the activities needed to be more hands-on in the following intervention to facilitate the children's enthusiastic participation.

It is worth noting that during the sixth intervention, the activities ended a little later than usual, causing four children to leave before the end of the activity as they had to have lunch. Consequently, they were unable to participate in the evaluation activity.

Regarding the child with a diagnosis of developmental delay, they did not always participate in the evaluation activities as they were sometimes absent from the classroom, receiving individual support, or he/she chose not to engage in the proposed activities, and his/her decision was respected. However, it is worth mentioning that in one session, the child coloured all the facial expressions, assigning the standard colours (red, yellow,

Figure 1. Wooden marker [own authorship image].

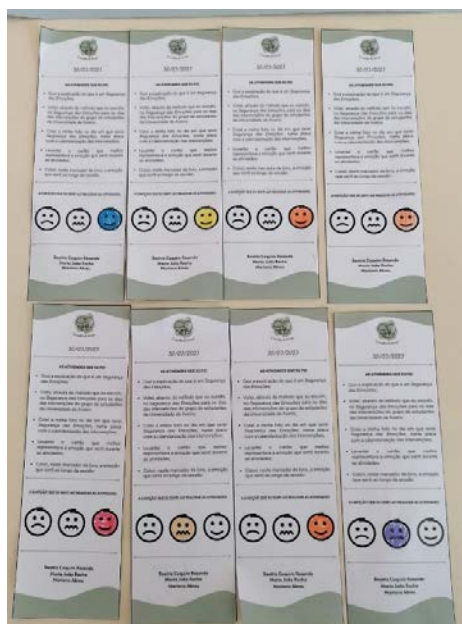


Figure 2. Bookmarkers [own authorship image].

and green) commonly used in everyday satisfaction surveys to each of them.

Through these weekly evaluations, it was possible to understand which activities the children liked the most and least, which served as a reflection to adapt subsequent interventions. In other words, more emphasis was given to the activities that the children enjoyed the most, as engaging in activities they liked would make them more attentive and interested, leading to a better understanding of the content covered.

In order to adapt the activities or even to evaluate our project and each intervention, the feedback provided by the Preschool Teacher at the end of each implementation was also crucial. The Preschool Teacher informed us about what went well or poorly and offered constructive criticism with the aim of improving our interventions. For example, the Preschool Teacher mentioned that the activity related to the election of the animal the children wished to win had gone very well, and the children were able to grasp the concepts of Democracy and an election. This feedback encouraged us to incorporate more activities of this kind.

5. Conclusions

Throughout the development and implementation of the project, indicators emerged supporting the idea that enriching foundations regarding the explored topics were acquired, which propelled the personal and professional growth of the authors, who are trainee teachers. However, for future projects, it is considered essential that the evaluation should be always explicit and suitable for the age range of the target audience. It was evident that some children became confused about what to colour or which Emotion to express. Additionally, many times, they associated Emotions with everyday situations. While this can be advantageous as it allows us to be attentive to aspects that are important in a child's development and well-being, it also had disadvantages. It made it challenging to determine whether the children genuinely enjoyed the implemented activities. Furthermore, an additional difficulty was encountered due to the project being implemented with a group of children of different ages. If the group were more homogeneous in this regard, it would have been easier to prepare assessment instruments that were more suitable for the entire group.

It was also understood that engaging in playful and outdoor activities is highly relevant since the children were more motivated, participative and involved in the activities. Additionally, working in groups was consistently adopted as a strategy, which proved beneficial as it facilitated the exchange of ideas, fostering critical and creative thinking. Thus, it is evident that the initially defined objectives were mostly achieved, enabling the children to strengthen respect for others and different opinions, foster a democratic spirit in daily decision-making, develop skills such as voting and understanding its significance, enhance their argumentation abilities, comprehend the concept of Democracy, identify various Emotions, and learn how to cope with them. All of this contributed to expanding the spirit of understanding and

mutual support necessary for living in a democratic society.

The authors also emphasize the importance of the development of inclusive activities that were able to integrate all children. In our educational context, there was a child diagnosed with developmental delay and other children who were more introverted. Nevertheless, it was possible to adapt all activities to promote true inclusive education.

Although one of the main objectives was to establish contact with the families of the children to obtain feedback, this was not successfully achieved. Despite creating bookmarks with descriptions of the activities and the children's level of satisfaction, which were handed over to home, we rarely obtained information from the families that could contribute to improving the development and implementation of the project. Nevertheless, we infer that families were indirectly involved since the children had prior knowledge of certain democratic concepts and their Emotions.

Concerning the proposed research question, "How can Emotions be addressed with children, aligning them with the Curriculum Guidelines for Preschool Education and having a democratic foundation as support?", it can be concluded that these topics are integrated into the Portuguese Curricular Guidelines for this level of education, particularly in the subject of *Personal and Social Development – Educating for Values* (Ministério da Educação, 2016, 2017) [12,13]. However, to create diverse activities, considering the nature of Preschool Education, interdisciplinarity is even more prominent and highly beneficial. It connects with the subjects of *Expressive and Communicative Development*, specifically the domains of *Artistic Education*, *Oral Language*, and *Introduction to Writing*, as well as the subject of *Knowledge of the World* (Ministério da Educação, 2016, 2017) [12,13].

In summary, it is emphasized the importance of addressing Emotions in Preschool Education, as they play a fundamental role in children's cognitive, social, and emotional development, enabling them to recognize, express, and regulate their Emotions in the future. Furthermore, democratic practices should be applied to promote an inclusive and participatory environment where respect prevails, and children are prepared to become active, engaged citizens who are aware of their rights and responsibilities.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their gratitude to the children who were involved in this project and contributed to its realization. We would also like to thank Colégio D. José I, specifically Preschool Teacher Cristiana, who provided constant assistance and reassurance. We would also like to extend our gratitude to our partner, Lugar dos Afetos, who showed interest in receiving the project, which was crucial in scheduling the field trip. Thanks are also due to all colleagues, family members, and friends who supported the development of the project, whether emotionally, creatively, or with financial/material resources.

This work is financially supported by National Funds through FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P. under the project UIDB/00194/2020 (CIDTFF).

Statement of Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests.

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