

“School, a Path to Equality”: A Multi-Year, Non-Formal Education Approach

Name of organization:

AJP- Action for Justice and Peace (Acção para a Justiça e Paz)

The Intervention

To reach its objectives, this project required a standard strategy for informal education which could be introduced into the schools as an alternative and as a complement to formal education. This methodology allowed the topics of the Project to be brought under discussion in a more participative and creative manner. Cooperative learning and pedagogy also form a part of the informal education strategy as a means of promoting participation of all those involved and leading them to become agents of change. Therefore, multidimensional learning opportunities were introduced which incorporate various “know hows” – “know how to be”, “know how to do”, “know how to know” and “know how to live together.” At the same time, the Equality activities were carefully crafted so as to lead to creativity as well as discovery. Emphasis was given to participative democracy, whereby participants would be called upon to share their experiences during the implementation, and to in-depth analysis of the topics, strongly emphasizing diversity.

The Project planned to raise participants’ awareness of problems, alert them to inequality and discrimination of which they may be a target, and prepare them to build alternatives together. There was consistent effort to adapt activities to the needs and potential of each class and each school, through a constant negotiation between the most pressing needs of each situation and the goals of the project.

The following were the activities of the Equalities project:

Focus Groups

This activity aimed to serve as a first contact with the youth and to begin the process of understanding the reality of each person: their expectations, preoccupations, feelings, ideas and knowledge about topics such as equality, human rights, violence, the role of women and men and youth. The chosen methodology for these Forums was Imagery Theater, one of the forms of Oppressed Theater which creatively, through body

language, facilitated an initial analysis of the interest of these youth. These focus groups were held with all the classes between September and the beginning of November 2005, during Civics classes and other classroom hours ceded by teachers.

Equality Laboratories

These laboratories were informal seminars whose primary tools were pedagogic exercises which simulated the living of experiences and the subsequent debate of eight topics related to equal opportunity between men and women and to human rights. The topics were identified by the youth in the Focus Groups and also singled out by teachers.

1st - Identity, Diversity, Inequality

2nd - Visible Discrimination: Economic Potential, Racism, Xenophobia, Justice, Power

3rd - Invisible Discrimination: Religion, Homosexuality, Sexually Transmitted Diseases, Stereotypes and Prejudice, Violence

4th – Gender Roles

5th - Conciliation between Personal and Work Life

6th - Violence against Women

7th - Violence (in general)

8th - Peace

This activity is titled Equality Laboratories because for many of the youth and teachers this would be their first experience with some of the topics. Also, the processes of “know how to be”, “know how to do”, “know how to know” and “know how to live together” were given priority as a means of experimenting, experiencing, debating and getting to know these problems, thereby making the seminars a space for discovery and emergence of new knowledge.

Laboratories are spaces of experiential learning, debate and reflection. In those laboratories the young people are the main responsible actors and actresses of their personal and collective learning. Each session has a structure, which can be flexible and plastic, as in the following exercises:

- Vitamin Exercise –An ice-breaking activity, usually physical and cooperative in order to create a positive atmosphere for the session

- Experiential Learning - Participants improvise and act out a significant experience that requires that they put themselves in “other people’s shoes”.
- Debriefing – Analysis, Reflection and Debate on the subject and on what can we do to address the problem in the “real world” and get involved in the defense of human rights
- Evaluation of the session – This normally includes both individual and group evaluation. The process assesses several aspects: the interest of the topic, the chosen methodology, individual participation and group dynamics, and the potentiality to increase their capacity to intervene. It might also address the approach of the facilitators and the commitment of each person and the group to engage socially.

Incubator of Youth for Equality

Incubators are methodologies aiming at raising concrete initiatives. In these spaces young people develop the necessary skills and capacities to implement projects, campaigns, activities or other relevant, social initiatives.

This activity was based on a “learn-by-doing” methodology. As a complement to the Equality Laboratories, it sought to broaden the work developed in the Labs by encouraging action after debate. This seemed the best way to raise awareness in the youth not only towards participation and active citizenship in society but also to their power and consequent responsibility in being agents of change and equality. The Incubators sought thereby to become spaces of great autonomy and creativity, which nurtured the training of youth in the basic values inherent to human rights. This activity also created a place where the youth could choose their priorities and causes, act upon them, and contribute to change. The chosen themes and activities were quite varied and were the result of great

Location	Class	Themes	Activity
IPH	8 th A	Discrimination in School	Surveys to better understand their reality Posters in varied materials
		Domestic and Verbal Violence	Artistic awareness and materials for expositions Theater production on Domestic Violence
	8 th B	AIDS	Survey and raffle to collect funds donated to the institution hosting children infected by HIV
	8 th C	AIDS Xenophobia	Couples Education activities directed to students in the first years of elementary school and the 8th year of school
Caranguejeira	8 th C	Violence Racism Peace	Theater Production and Musical Performance
Coimbra	9 th G	Violence and Discrimination Religion Homosexuality	Slide presentation on the topic for presentation to the rest of the School Surveys on Discrimination towards Homosexuals Survey on Discrimination relating to Religion
St ^a M ^a da Feira	7 th F	Domestic Violence	Theater Production
Baguim do Monte	8 th D	School Violence	Surveys to better understand their reality Creation and Promotion of Mural on Alternative to Violence

imagination, talent, creativity on the parts of both youth and teachers. The chart above is a brief presentation of the activities performed in each incubator.

The structure of an incubator depends on the context, participants and issues to be tackled because its purpose is to set up a concrete solution or contribution to a solution for a concrete problem. After a participatory debate, the young people choose the problem they want to work on and then define an adequate working plan that might lead to a solution. Therefore, this activity requires materials, resources, brief lectures on social education, social technologies of intervention, social care, group dynamics, time management, project management, leadership, etc. Personal and collective abilities are pointed out and lauded; young people come to see how they support and complement one another. Organizational skills, autonomy, responsibility and self management are at the core of the Incubators' method.

Equality Van and Rights Desk – Resource Centers

The Equality Van was a tool supporting Equality activities and at the service of participants. It made available documentation and diverse information on the topics addressed during the project. This information was of great use and contributed to the resolution of problems which affect youth, allowing them to overcome some of the violence they experience. In addition, the Resource Center made available to each school community and to each youth innumerable institutions, organizations and associations which address the topics of the project and possible solutions. Moreover, the van itself was a means of promoting awareness about the project, since its exterior design and signage called attention to the project: "Different Pieces, All Fit." The Equality Van was a vital and movable resource center which crossed half the country, taking knowledge, information and awareness to those who most needed it.

As a follow-up to the Resource Center which accompanied the implementation of the activities, the Rights Desk emerged as a space dedicated to Equality of Opportunity and Human Rights. It contained diverse informative and pedagogic materials on such topics as gender equality, social roles, employment and gender, equality and inequalities, sexual and reproductive rights, and education. In the beginning of the 2006-2007 school year, these Desks were implemented in each school, in the library or in another adequate space accessible to young people.

The final product was meant to furnish schools with support materials so that students and teachers could continue to raise awareness on these topics and values and thereby become a constant presence within the schools. In this way, the Rights Desk had as one of its goals to form youth into “multiplier agents” and managers of the Project, hence giving it continuity.

It is hoped that the use of these methodologies will become permanent in the schools.

“Pieces of Equality” Conference

This Conference aimed to put together the “pieces” of the puzzle of the Equality project. It aspired to enable better understanding of what was learned, what Team AJPaz, youth and teachers accomplished for equality and for human rights in our schools and communities, but also what was still left to do. It was hoped that this Conference would lead to discernment of the vision and importance of Equality for these youth. The objectives of this activity were:

- To give a role to youth participating in the program
- To achieve a “balance” of the topics in the “Equality labs” and the “Youth for Equality Incubators”
- To promote a place for interaction and knowledge between all the schools and participating classes.
- To get to know the Projects that young people developed in the Incubators

This project focused on the youth, so they were also the protagonists of discussion in the Conference. Each class chose one student of each gender who presented what they thought, felt and did regarding the topic on which they worked in the Incubators, sharing with their classmates from other schools. In this way, participants were able to listen to and debate topics of discrimination in school, school violence, domestic violence, AIDS, xenophobia, homosexuality, and gender issues. The Conference also featured a theater production and an exposition of much of the work developed in the Incubators. All of this was done by Youth for Youth within the perspective of Couples Education.

During this Conference, other teams of students developed activities, making this a valuable meeting for all. A team that evoked much enthusiasm was the Reporting Team. Conference attendees also viewed the “Our School and Our Incubator” Exposition, a map of Portugal pointing out the geographic location of the schools and a Rights Desk displaying the materials of the Resource Center and a montage of “Equality” photographs.

Teacher’s Meeting “School – A Place for Equality?”

The goal of this Meeting was to provide teachers, whether directly involved in the project or not, and other education professionals with an opportunity to share experiences and debate questions that challenge education in Portugal today. It seemed necessary to provide a participative space, visibility and value to teachers who face conditions of great change in their schools.

In addition, this Meeting also presented discussions which accompanied the project as well as the conclusions drawn and compiled in the “Different Pieces – All Fit” study. Created during the course of the project, it served as an analysis of AJPaz’s intervention in this project and of the potential and limitations of the relations between informal educational associations and formal educational institutions.

The Meeting was also a means to highlight an important date: the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, since the project sought also to contribute in preventing violence against women.

The results of the Project were analyzed, initially in relation to the general objectives of the project and later relative to specific objectives. The analysis was the collaborative effort of students, teachers, and other participants in the project, demonstrating that a large part of the general objectives had been met. The activities with the youth made accessible to the adolescents a dialogue surrounding Equality of Opportunity and Human Rights, in the sense of raising awareness to behaviors that are more tolerant, more open to differences, less prejudiced and discriminatory. Presented next are the “voices” of the project. These testimonials were collected during the entire

Project, but especially during interviews conducted by the Reporting Team during the “Pieces of Equality” Conference.

“It was also beneficial for my personality, because in the midst of so many debates I realized how unfair the world was. What most affected me was the fact that there are so many injustices and so much discrimination in the world, especially in such a small country such as ours. To know that there is so much that people can do to end these concepts which are prejudices.”
Angela and Rita

”These projects are extremely important because they address topics which are of great interest to Youth and that, in a normal class, even if the teachers had the possibility of using other strategies to address these topics, it may not always possible because we know we have a schedule to keep.” Edite Ferreira, Teacher

“We learn more about domestic violence, about AIDS. That AIDS is a sexually transmitted disease, that we have to use contraceptive methods. The gal has to have some sense and the guy has to take some care!”
Anastacia and Adriana

“We learned about Xenophobia. And began to have a more open mind to the problems of society. And perhaps, we’ll have the will to fight against these prejudices.”
Angela and Rita

“I learned that you should not treat people badly and that everyone should feel equal.”
Nelson

“We learned to respect one another [male or female].”
Pedro

“We learned that when there is violence, instead of hiding, we need to disclose it, and take it up with the associations.”
Paulo

“We learned that women are very much discriminated against in the work world; they work the same as men but get less, just for being women.”
Paulo

“I learned a lot about school violence and, like one guy said, that a lot of times violence comes from home, and that’s the truth.”
Samuel

“I learned a lot, for example, about domestic violence. Not that I would do that, but it could stop me, and help me one day when I’m older, not to do any of that.”
Samuel

This behavior transformation was built through dialogue, debate, and the exchange of information, opinions, ideas and experiences among the youth, facilitators and teachers. The methodologies of informal education effectively motivated participation of the youth and made possible a dialogue about these topics. Putting the

youth in each other's places allowed them to identify equality or inequality of opportunities in their daily lives, in the exercising of their rights and responsibilities and, therefore, in the exercise of citizenship.

Assessment of the informal education strategies was very positive and was based on the results pointed out by the schools; success is due to an attitude of great flexibility and adaptation to the context of each educational community. As the knowledge of the classes and their work intensified, conditions that would adapt and improve intervention strategies were continuously created and evaluated.

In line with the Project's general objectives, it should be noted that the training work of/for the youth was a part of their network against violence and discrimination; it was reached through the awareness and information raised by the combined efforts of the Equality Labs, the projects developed in the Youth Incubators, the Pieces of Equality Conference and the Rights Desk .

A major concern of this project was adaptation to the real needs of students and schools. Therefore, team members were invested in working in conjunction with the schools and, as the school calendar allowed, they addressed other requests of the schools participating in the project. On the other hand, they were faced with the constraints of the educational institutions. The bureaucratic burden imposed on the schools and teachers, as well as the demands of the curriculum, didn't always allow this project to be implemented in ideal conditions. In addition, and despite this continuous effort of adaptation of the Project to the reality of the schools, more needs to be learned about building better partnerships with the educational community and developing more advantageous horizontal dialogues. On the other hand, the resources associated with the Project, the timeline and the geographical dispersion did not permit better adaptation of the strategies to each specific class.

Activities implemented in the schools permitted informal teaching of human rights and equality of opportunities between women and men, and also the training of young women and men to reject violence and move towards new behaviors. The main activity of this Project lies in the eight informal education offices which were built and which

constitute the Equality Laboratories. The main activity of this Project, the Labs were adapted to the different audiences of the various schools served by the Project.

In these Labs, youth were given the opportunity to express their opinions, reflect on them and share their life stories in a horizontal manner, with great respect for diversity. This seems to be the best manner for informal learning, since it puts into practice cooperative learning, which allows each person to experience leadership and to promote equality of opportunity. During these activities, youth were heard and valued equally, independently of their gender, of their school performance, of their nationality, of their developmental level, of their social or economic level, of their familial situation, of their looks, and of their physical, mental or psychological potential. This is the first step to train youth, since it permits them to improve their self-esteem and increase their dignity.

This project was very enriching because students discussed topics that were generally excluded from class. Classes were relaxed while at the same time concentrating on the topic; almost everyone shared their opinion, which allowed the class to get to know their classmates and their points of view better. A brief quote follows that typifies student response:

"When we were there, it was like time flew by, because when we finished we didn't even want to believe it. 'Oh, ,already?' and we'd look forward to the next session."
8th C Class – Instituto Pedro Hispano – Granja do Ulmeiro

On the other hand, the Youth Incubators and Pieces of Equality Conference were other important contributions to meeting the specific objectives of the Project and therefore to the training of youth to reject violence and to change their attitudes and actions. The Incubators sought to be a training and education space for youth through a "learn-by-doing" methodology. The Incubators were spaces of great autonomy and creativity, which allowed the training of youth as multiplier agents of values inherent to human rights.

The Equality project reinforced the idea of how necessary and urgent it is to increase the complementarities of the informal and formal educational systems and the capacity for productive dialogue between the different representatives of these institutions in order to innovate and increase the quality of educational practices. For this to happen, the distance between the symbolic power and the authority of one system or another must be diminished.

Important steps were taken in the last several years and today's schools and associations are closer; from this comes mutual interest in the continued development of projects like Equalities. In the meantime, this experience demonstrated that an increase in the quality of our interventions is possible through our ability to implement integrated, multi-faceted and long-term initiatives. The Equality was a project of great geographic and thematic reach, a choice which assumed and required a very active role for the teachers and a joint effort of the team, which was difficult due to the factors explained earlier. The great geographic dispersion of the project brought with it a reduced capacity to get to know and intervene in the local context due to the scarcity of human resources for such a monumental task. This geographic dispersion blocked the implementation of integrated efforts which could have widened the impact of the Project.

In addition to the implementation of the Education for Human Rights project as well as defining the communication resources needed in the schools, it seems fundamental that there be a training and relationship project with teachers. Furthermore, it is necessary to understand as thoroughly as possible the context of which the schools and youth are a part. Partnerships with entities in these territories must be forged so that they can articulate and coordinate efforts. For this to happen, it is necessary to adapt the geographic reach to the human and financial resources available.

The experience of this Project reinforces the conviction that the formal and informal education systems are complementary. The fact that the participating schools insisted on the importance of continuing the partnership, even knowing the difficulty in carrying it out in the desired and required conditions, is also telling. It seems more than apparent that the schools and AJPaz share the desire to empower schools to manage local development and formative spaces for citizens, to become a place for dignity and human rights, a place for emancipation and social transformation. For that to happen, we have to work together and with the deepest and most respectful dialogue.