

PERCEIVED IMPACT OF LIFELONG TRAINING IN TEACHERS

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Abstract

Teachers need lifelong training in the realm of soft skills. Accordingly, several training programs have been proposed for developing teachers' personal and social skills, though they are seldom evaluated. This study proposes to present data on the subjective evaluation of the outcomes of such programs, in relation to gender, age level of teaching, and training program. A sample of 92 participants was voluntarily enrolled in one of seven training programs, and their personal change was assessed in relation to their pre and post intervention perceptions. Results indicate that all participants (irrespective of their gender, age, level of teaching or training program they attended) perceived themselves as more able after the training. This establishes the importance of such type of lifelong training being implemented as a regular option for teachers, as it may contribute to a more positive self-perception, which in turn may contribute to improved professional performance.

Keywords: Teachers; Lifelong training; Evaluation; Self-perceived skill improvement; Soft skills.

Resumo

Os professores precisam de formação ao longo da vida no domínio das *soft skills*. Neste sentido, têm sido propostos vários programas de formação para o desenvolvimento de competências pessoais e sociais nos docentes, contudo raramente são alvo de avaliação. O presente estudo propõe apresentar os resultados da avaliação subjetiva dos professores face aos resultados de tais programas. A amostra incluiu 92 participantes que se inscreveram voluntariamente em um dos sete programas de formação. Pretendia-se avaliar as mudanças pessoais dos professores



relativamente às auto-percepções pré e pós-intervenção. Os resultados indicam que todos os participantes (independentemente de seu género, idade, nível de lecionação ou programa de formação que frequentaram) se perceberam como mais capazes após a conclusão da formação. Estes dados indicam a importância da implementação regular de programas de formação ao longo da vida para professores, pois contribuem para uma auto-percepção mais positiva, o que se reflete numa melhoria do desempenho profissional.

Palavras-chave: Professores; Formação ao longo da vida; Avaliação, Auto-percepção sobre a melhoria de competências; *Soft skills*.

Introduction

As early as 2005, the OECD pointed the importance of teachers developing transversal skills, which should be taken into account among national education policy priorities (OECD, 2005). Additionally, in 2014, the European Commission proposed that besides promoting the development of these skills by teachers, these should also be developed by students, as they lead to improvements in the overall teaching and learning process.

This proposal is justified by the fact that students acquire this kind of skills not only through cognitive strategies but also mainly through socio-emotional dynamics (Jardim, 2010; Ramos, 2002), hence the importance of training teachers in order to enable them to have a significant pedagogical influence in the educational community (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2010). The empirical data also points to the fact that the pedagogical capacities of teachers are related to their transversal skills, and those with these skills are more pedagogically effective than those who only have theoretical knowledge at their disposal (Meroni et al., 2015).

We can identify three types of these soft skills. First, we have skills that enable us to learn how to deal with the psychosocial risk factors that are a source of occupational stress. These factors may be based on poor work organization, lack of control in work processes, unsatisfactory conditions, poor management, and lack of support from peers and superiors. Thus, this occupational stress arises as a response that an individual may have when confronted with demands relating to his work that are not



compatible with his knowledge and skills, which also challenges his coping abilities (WHO, 2015).

Second, teachers are required to maintain adequate levels of physical and mental health, since this is considered to be one of the most stressful professions. With disruptive attitudes and behaviours, the challenges to the teacher's authority and competence, and even indiscipline in the classroom, contribute to the negative stress that teachers tend to experience and this has consequences on their professional performance (Hastings & Bham, 2003; Otero López et al., 2008).

Third, teachers need this kind of skills in their curricula because they often promote learning based on project development, since it is considered one of the most effective methods in a teaching-learning process (Hanover Research, 2014). In this sense, the implementation of the specific dynamics of project pedagogy presupposes that the teacher has sufficient levels of transversal skills.

Thus, we can conclude that teachers who possess soft skills, in addition to their technical skills, can overcome the challenges that the teaching career now entails with greater ease. Therefore, it is important that teachers can manage and organize their daily tasks in a challenging context like in today's world (Uzunboylu, Ngang, Yie, & Shahid, 2015).

Models that measure the impact on teacher training, that is, the added value of complementary training, should allow us to compare the before and after of a training event. Given that in the scientific literature we did not find an adequate instrument to evaluate these conditions, we have created such an evaluation instrument, as shown below.

The current work intends to present data on the self-reported personal change of teachers following the enrollment on several training programs. Moreover, this perception of personal change was tested in relation to the participants' gender, age, and level of teaching; an expected improvement in self-perception was expected regardless of these individual characteristics. Also, the length and specificity of each training program was considered as impacting on this improved self-perception; it was expected that all participants would show improved self-perceptions, despite these training particularities.



Method

Participants

Participants in this work were 92 teaching professionals, namely at the kindergarten ($n = 40$; 43.48%) or the formal school level ($n = 52$; 56.52%). Their age range varied between 26 and 67 years old ($M = 43.41$, $SD = 8.38$). The vast majority of these participants were female ($n = 82$, 89.1%) and only 10 were male (10.9%); men were significantly older than women ($M = 50.4$, $SD = 6.72$ and $M = 42.54$, $SD = 8.19$, respectively; $t(89) = 2.91$, $p = .005$). Men and women were not similarly distributed by level of teaching ($\chi^2(1) = 5.12$, $p = .02$), with more women than expected teaching at the kindergarten level and more men than expected employed at the formal teaching level.

Instruments

Before and After Training – 5 items (BAT-5).

Because there is an evident lack of evaluation instruments for this kind of training, a specific before and after training screening tool was developed within the current work. This included five items intending to address each participant's self-perception on personal well-being, self-esteem, relationship with others, professional competence, and motivation for change. Participants were instructed to answer in relation to the way they perceived themselves before and after attending the training program, using a five point likert scale, ranging from 1 (very bad) to 5 (excellent).

The items pertaining to the before and to the after self-perception were submitted to separate exploratory factor analyses (EFA). For the before self-perception, the data was found to be appropriate for such an analysis ($KMO = .75$) and only one factor was retained (eigenvalue = 2.78), explaining 55.75% of the variance of the data. For the after self-perception, again the data was found to be appropriate for an EFA ($KMO = .76$) and again only one factor was retained (eigenvalue = 2.78), explaining 55.59% of the variance of the data. Loading values for these solutions are presented in Table 1, along with the internal consistency and descriptive values obtained for each of them. None of these measures followed the normal distribution ($z = .18$, $p < .001$ and $z = .14$, $p < .001$, respectively).

Table 1: Loading values for the before and after self-perception measures

	Before	After
1: My general well-being was/ is	.89	.78
2: My motivation for change was/ is	.76	.76
3: My ability to relate with others was/is	.75	.75
4: My self-esteem was/is	.68	.74
5: My perception of my own professional competence was/is	.62	.70
Internal consistency	.79	.80
Mean	16.45	19.80
Standard deviation	2.23	2.26

Procedures

Participants were voluntarily and on their own initiative enrolled in one of seven training programs (cf. supplementary material on the specific goals of each of these programs). Though specific, all these training programs shared one common goal, which was reflected in the before and after self-perception instrument (see above): to promote the development of soft skills (to be further applied to each participants' professional context). The length of the training programs varied between 4 and 15 hours ($M = 9.95$, $SD = 8.65$; cf. supplementary material on the length of each program). At the end of the training, participants were asked to rate the above mentioned instrument. The confidentiality and anonymity of their data was guaranteed and no participant refused to participate.

Given the goals of this work, a compare means approach was used. Specifically, the before and after mean value was compared for the complete sample, and the impact of socio-demographic characteristics (*i.e.*, gender, age, and professional level) and training variables (*i.e.*, training program and length) was also ascertained.

Results

A significant difference was found between the before and after mean value of the sample ($z = 8.19$, $p < .001$), with participants reporting more positive self-perceptions after attending the training programs (cf. Table 1).

A mixed design ANOVA was further used to ascertain for the effect of several between-subject factors (*i.e.*, gender, level of teaching, and training program); the same within-subject factor was always used (*i.e.*, self-perception). No specific effect of



gender, level of teaching, or training program was found, nor of the interaction between these variables and self-perception. Alternatively, a specific effect of self-perception was found in all cases ($F(1,90) = 121.39$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .57$ when gender was the between-group factor, $F(1,90) = 264.57$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .75$ when level of teaching was the between-group factor, and $F(1,85) = 128.35$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .60$ when the training program was the between-group factor). Such findings indicate that the significant difference ($p < .001$) between the before and after self-perceptions was similar for male and female participants, for those teaching and the kindergarten level and the formal teaching level, and for those all the considered training programs. Participants always perceived themselves more positively after attending the training programs (cf. Table 2).

Table 2: Descriptive values for self-perceptions by gender, teaching level, and training program

	Before		After	
	M	SD	M	SD
Gender				
Male	16.80	2.04	20.70	2.54
Female	16.40	2.25	19.69	2.21
Teaching level				
Kindergarten	16.70	2.39	19.85	2.01
Formal teaching	16.25	2.09	19.77	2.45
Training program				
<i>Playing with dreams - Entrepreneurship pedagogy</i>	17.00	2.55	20.78	2.17
<i>Coaching and conflict management in schools</i>	16.61	1.49	19.96	2.44
<i>Self-knowledge training based on the enneagram</i>	15.33	3.51	18.33	1.53
<i>Pedagogical instruments</i>	15.17	1.33	18.83	1.94
<i>Entrepreneurship pedagogy</i>	16.17	3.54	18.83	3.13
<i>Self-knowledge</i>	15.00	2.82	21.00	.00
<i>Conflict management in professional contexts</i>	16.60	2.30	19.84	2.15



In turn, neither age nor length of the training was a significant covariate when comparing the before and after self-perception mean values.

Discussion

The current work intended to ascertain if teachers thought themselves to have generally improved skills following soft skills training. Results show that all teachers enrolled in this kind of training perceived their general skills to have improved from the before to the after training. This was true for male and female participants, for kindergarten teachers and for those teaching at a more formal level; also, age was not a distinguishing factor for improved self-perception. In addition, the different themes addressed in each specific training program and their specific lengths were also not determinant of diverse improvement levels on the participants' self-perception.

Jardim (2014, 2013) had already proposed that such training would be beneficial to all teachers, as it may be further applied to personal, social and professional well-being. It has been established that teachers who think better of their own skills (i.e., self-efficacy) are more motivated, innovative and proactive within their professional roles (Meroni et al. 2015). So, by working on teachers' self-perceptions, we may actually be impacting on the quality of teaching processes students are subjected to (Onabamiro et al. 2014).

This being the case, it seems paramount to provide teachers with regular opportunities of engaging in such soft skills training throughout their professional lives. According to Jardim (2015), politics pertaining to teachers' training that clearly opt by the development of training programs where the individual self of each teacher is considered will be beneficial to all the educational community. It is important that teachers are able to enroll in trainings that promote their "teacher self" and increase their "psychological maturity" (Barros, 2007), so that they can more adequately face the personal, social and professional challenges they are faced with. Otherwise, being a teacher may become a significant burden, with strong psychosocial and professional implications (OCDE, 2005).

This work is not without limitations, the most salient being the fact that the instrument in which the data is based was designed within the current work. Still, if differences were found using a preliminary instrument, they may become even more expressive if using established instruments addressing more general constructs (e.g. burnout). The use of both kinds of instruments (i.e., more objective and more



subjective) may be an optimal choice for future works. Also, participants reported on their before perceptions after the training was over, and so their before perceptions may have been biased, namely by recall procedures. Nevertheless, if anything, these perceptions would have been positively biased by the more positive way participants felt after the training, and so the current data may be an underestimation (and not an overestimation) of before and after differences. A continued evaluation of this changes over follow-up periods may also better enlighten on the continued impact of this self-perceived overall skill improvement.

There is no doubt that soft skills are a prerequisite for professional success in the current working environment, namely when one is faced with increased technology dependence. Teachers may be even more relevant for teachers who face with increased challenges (Jardim, 2014), often posed by the very working environment in which they have to fulfill their professional duties. At the same time, the quality with which these duties are fulfilled is of extreme relevance for the preparation of future socially and professionally able citizens (EU Skills Panorama, 2014). So, it is up for the educational community to make the conditions available for teachers to perform at their very best. The current work sustains that lifelong training should be considered as one of these conditions.

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