

# Chapter 3

## São Miguel de Machede Community School: Building Citizenship

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The São Miguel de Machede Community School was founded in 1998 in a small rural village in the municipality of Évora, Portugal. Since that founding moment, the project's aim has been to create a community educational context that would promote the opportunity to build better access locally between the citizens living there and their rights and duties as citizens. Under these circumstances, the São Miguel de Machede Community School was structured around people's daily lives, taking access to Health, Education, Economy, Culture, Information, Solidarity, Work and Leisure as the cornerstones of a socio-educational approach that determined a model of Community Education that has been developed and implemented.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The São Miguel de Machede Community School is a socio-educational project promoted by a small community faced with the challenges arising from Portugal's sparsely populated, ageing and socially and economically fragile rural contexts. This social context is very common throughout the so-called “interior of Portugal”.

Aware of this difficult situation and the great and complex challenges it poses for the present and, above all, for the future, in 1998 the members of the São Miguel de Machede community took on the need to think about their future and plan for it in accordance with their personal, family and professional projects, articulating this reflection with the social and economic framework of the territory and with the cultural and political environment of their community ecosystem. From this complex social equation came the aim of ensuring that they could exercise citizenship on their own land to the same standard as in other, more favoured social, cultural and economic contexts, taking on the collective responsibility of building local responses to the main problems and challenges facing the community. The exercise of citizenship rights and duties was and is, in this context, the centre of gravity of the educational and social project of the Escola Comunitária de São Miguel de Machede.

In those circumstances, the São Miguel de Machede Community School was built and has been active since 1998, with a view to promoting the rights and duties of citizenship set out in the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic, which are the true pillars of the activities designed and implemented during this period. In this context, the following constitutional rights and duties are valued: health, education, social protection and solidarity, work, housing, culture, information, participation, justice and security.

The distinguishing mark of the project presented stems from the fact that the community of São Miguel de Machede has taken on the collective responsibility of seeing its needs and problems as development challenges, and has mobilised itself to build the best possible responses, valuing its endogenous resources and transforming these moments of social participation into authentic educational processes, in which the people and

institutions involved have the opportunity to build knowledge and skills in environments of cooperation and solidarity.

The following text presents the community project called “Escola Comunitária de São Miguel de Machede” (São Miguel de Machede Community School) and describes some of the activities carried out there, in which some of the rights and duties of citizenship mentioned above were realised.

## **1. THE EXERCISE OF CITIZENSHIP AND OUR TERRITORY**

We become citizens because exercising our rights and duties as citizens is the result of a conscious and deliberate learning process, during which we build knowledge and competences that allow us to autonomously decide the shape of our lives. This existential exercise takes place in certain circumstances, the characteristics of which greatly determine the quality of citizenship.

The centrality of building citizenship lies in the learning processes, and consequent human development, that result from building links between the individual and their rights and duties as a citizen. In reality, exercising citizenship is a personal process and presupposes deliberate action on the part of the individual with the aim of building a personal, autonomous and responsible capacity for self-determination, in accordance with their fundamental principles and values. On the other hand, exercising citizenship is always a real, demanding and permanent learning process that takes place in all vital circumstances and throughout each person's life cycle.

The exercise of citizenship rights and duties in each territory establishes the circumstances of fairness and equal opportunities that exist in it, in terms of access to and participation in social, economic and cultural dynamics, determining to a large extent the quality of life of people and the social and civic presence and action of institutions and communities in local development.

Different levels of quantity and quality in the exercise of citizenship rights and duties establish situations of inequality and unequal opportunities, promote processes of social and economic exclusion and jeopardise

territorial cohesion. This is a reality that exists in the Portuguese territorial context, particularly when comparing coastal territories (more urban, more populated and with better social and economic development indicators) with inland territories (more rural, less populated and with worse social and economic development indicators).

In these conditions of inequality and unequal opportunities between territories, there are phenomena of demographic mobility and the relocation of economic activity. On the other hand, and as a consequence of the same causes, there is a shrinking state presence, evidenced by the reduction in the presence of public services in the area of sovereignty (justice and security) and the social area (health, education and social protection).

Low demographic density, lower economic and social dynamics, intermittent presence of public services and reduced political weight almost always determine a weakened, unattractive territory, which promotes inequality and unequal opportunities and has a strong potential for demographic and economic exodus. A territory with no future! This was the reality of São Miguel de Machede (a parish in the municipality of Évora/Alentejo/Portugal) in 1998, when SUÃO-Associação de Desenvolvimento Comunitário (Community Development Association), the institution that promoted the São Miguel de Machede Community School, was founded.

The São Miguel de Machede Community School was born out of the realisation that the variables that determined the opportunities available to people, families and institutions were more complex and difficult in that specific territorial context, where, at the time (and today), there was a sharply declining and deeply aged demographic and a fragile economy that was very dependent on social support. In reality, in 1998, the territory of São Miguel de Machede projected an unattractive future for the community living there: for the youngest, because of the lack of expectations regarding future possibilities for personal and professional fulfilment; for the adults, because of the difficulty in accessing the basic services that determined their quality of life; for the elderly, because of the way they resigned themselves to a reality that didn't give rise to any challenge or ambition that could determine new life projects in its final cycle.

In the circumstances described above, where the personal and community narrative was negative and where expectations about the future were

low, the community had three possible responses: (i) accept the reality that fate seemed to be defining and resign themselves to living according to this 'fatality'; (ii) demand external intervention, through which they could identify one or more people responsible for defining their fate; (iii) take responsibility for intervening in their own reality, identifying existing needs and constraints and calling on the endogenous resources available to build possible responses. The first two options were the easiest and least responsible for the community, because they took away the challenge of undertaking any responsible action; the third option was the riskiest, because it involved taking on the responsibility of defining the contours of our future and the courage to decide to build it, in the place where we want to continue living and working. Only the third option involved one of the most difficult life exercises, which was the ability to conjugate the verbs of our lives in the third person plural: *our problems; our resources; our solutions!*

In this context, the São Miguel de Machede Community School was born out of the decision by citizens living in the parish to assume their individual and collective social responsibility, contributing to solving the problems and challenges of their community, favouring the endogenous resources that emerge from it and which are anchored in the infrastructures, institutions and material, immaterial and human heritage. Likewise, the role of the network of local institutions has been fundamental over these 27 years of activity, within which formal and informal partnerships have been established, which are fundamental to the pursuit of local development dynamics.

## **2. THE COMMUNITY EDUCATION MODEL**

In small communities, everyone is needed and all resources must be considered, valued and mobilised in the processes of identifying and solving the problems that affect their development. The design and realisation of the best solutions to the most difficult and complex challenges and problems

benefits from the maximum diversity of participants and the universe of personal and institutional resources available in each community context

Therefore, the concept of Community Education mobilised at the São Miguel de Machede Community School is assumed to be the educational and cultural process, territorially, socially and politically situated, with a holistic, vital and intergenerational dimension and implemented in all educational contexts, which - by valuing and managing the community's endogenous resources in a cooperative, participatory and supportive manner and considering all its knowledge and teaching - contributes to the exercise of citizenship rights and duties and promotes development.

Community education is an educational process that is born and develops according to the human, territorial, social, cultural and economic circumstances that gave rise to it. It is therefore a process that is constantly evolving, given that as it takes place and transforms its protagonists and its own context, it generates new coordinates of existence, thought and relationships. These are coordinates that have never existed before and will never exist again, and which are therefore unique, unrepeatable and irreversible once they have been experienced. Community Education is, in this context, a process that feeds heavily on the circumstances, decisions and creativity that take place within it and on the way it is appropriated by those who lead it.

It is in this volatile, diffuse, but rich and challenging field, where it is “impossible to exist without dreams” (Freire, 2001, p.35) - because dreams that can be imagined and dared to be realised are part of the present - that the epicentre of the idea and practice of Community Education is located. It is also here that Community Education must be taken up in each local and community context as a real public policy that, through its implementation, provides local educational services that, by knowing and understanding the needs and potential of the community, can generate local responses that consider and value endogenous resources, solve problems and satisfy the needs of the community, regardless of the area in question. As Betto (2004) says, “the challenge is to make public administration within the dynamics of popular education” (p.221).

As such, all areas of people's lives and their communities are areas of Community Education, which gives it its holistic, synergistic (Ghanem

& Trilla, 2008, p.45), global and integral character. With this in mind, in each community context, the way in which community education is implemented should be centred on building access between individuals and exercising their rights and duties as citizens in the various areas in which it materialises. In reality, the global and vital dimensions of Community Education are a consequence of the fact that it is a community responsibility (Carneiro, 1985, p.57), in the context of the concrete reality in which it is inscribed.

Community Education, due to its nature of proximity and presence in the different circumstances of individual and collective life, is, in this conceptual formulation, one of the instruments available to build and maintain active access between citizens in each territorial and community context and to make their full citizenship a reality in the various dimensions in which it is realised. Community Education is therefore the educational process through which citizens exercise their rights and duties of citizenship rationally, autonomously and democratically (Nico & Nico, 2013, p.919).

In this approach to community education, the axiological dimension plays a structuring role, as it provides a framework of principles and values that guide educational action, giving meaning to the learning processes in which people and institutions are involved. In fact, in community education contexts, the formulation of objectives should always involve a permanent exercise about the axiological meaning, personal significance and social usefulness of the knowledge and skills resulting from the learning that takes place.

In reality, it is through educational processes that we build and develop the endogenous capacity to be what we want and aspire to be, realising our personal project in accordance with our axiological criteria and moral goals. It is through educational processes that we develop and become capable of designing our life projects and, consequently, realising them. Vital projects that, frequently, imply profound changes in our present reality and which, for this very reason, pose significant development challenges.

With this in mind, the educational model of the Escola Comunitária de São Miguel de Machede is fundamentally based on two principles: the Encounter Principle and the Positive Principle.

## 2.1. The Meeting Principle

Following on from the above, it is assumed that community education is *dissolved* in the community itself, in its daily life, in its problems and challenges and in the concrete circumstances of each of its members. It is the management of everyday life, the problems it poses and the challenges it raises, that is the centre of learning in community education contexts (Berne & Aran, 2008, p.26). It is in this everyday life of people and communities that educational processes must be based and developed, so that life becomes a “centre of culture and development” (Del Pozo, 2013, p.31).

In the daily life of communities, educational contexts that value encounters between people from different generations are intrinsically more interesting and guarantee more favourable conditions for promoting human development, since the complexity arising from the difference between individuals from different generations is a catalysing and enriching element in the learning experiences in which everyone participates (Vygotsky, 2007).

In the circumstances described above, a structuring dimension of the educational model developed by the São Miguel de Machede Community School is the valorisation of the encounter, understood as an opportunity to:

- a) **Promote intergenerationality**, a critical dimension in the process of passing on knowledge and life experiences in community contexts. The presence and participation of people from different generations in educational processes is a unique opportunity to guarantee a space and time for dialogue and interaction between individuals of different ages, different levels of personal experience and academic qualifications and different expectations about the relevance of problems and challenges and the usefulness and significance of the respective solutions. The interaction that takes place in educational contexts with an intergenerational profile is an element that aggregates and consolidates ties between members of the community and promotes social and territorial cohesion. At the same time, it has made it possible to promote dialogue between different generations, often distanced by the societal challenges they face. This logic of dialogue between generations strengthens the sense of community, making it more autonomous, promoting contexts



for the active participation of older people throughout their lives and contributing to an active and healthy ageing process.

- b) **Encouraging co-operative work**, based on the assumption that educational processes - which are the basis for building the most effective responses to the problems and challenges faced by communities in their daily lives - are generated in participatory, inclusive and commitment-promoting contexts. Within this framework of social interaction in educational contexts, a greater breadth of individual and institutional diversity leads to greater complexity in the processes and greater creativity in building commitments. Diversity and consequent complexity, when properly managed in community contexts, are elements that aggregate and consolidate ties between people and institutions, thus guaranteeing greater social and territorial cohesion;
- c) **Promoting active learning**, since it creates a suitable context for people to actively participate in the learning process, constructing their own knowledge through interaction with others and with the content. This reality differs profoundly from that found in formal and school education contexts, in which people are generally faced with passive learning, limited to receiving information unilaterally;
- d) **Developing socio-emotional competences**, as it encourages individuals to develop fundamental skills such as communication, teamwork, conflict resolution, empathy and respect for difference. Through interaction with peers, people learn to collaborate, negotiate, deal with different points of view and build healthy relationships;
- e) **To promote conscious and critical citizens** by contributing to the training of people capable of critically understanding and analysing social reality, assuming their rights and responsibilities and actively participating in community life. Through dialogue and critical reflection, individuals are encouraged to question the existing reality, proposing solutions to the social problems identified and building alternatives for a fairer and more democratic society;
- f) **Favouring inclusion and equity**, when diversity is valued and a welcoming and inclusive environment is created, ensuring that everyone has the same opportunities to learn and develop.
- g) **Developing identity**, because encounters allow people to explore their characteristics, values and beliefs in contact with other people.

Through social interaction, individuals are confronted with different realities and perspectives, which leads them to reflect on themselves, define their principles and build their own identity;

- h) **Develop creativity**, since through the exchange of ideas, collaboration on projects and exposure to different forms of expression, people are encouraged to think outside the box, seeking new solutions and exploring new possibilities;
- i) **Promoting social cohesion**, as meetings help to build and strengthen bonds between people, generating a sense of community. Through social interaction, people develop a sense of belonging, mutual respect and co-operation, which contributes to building a more just, peaceful and supportive society;
- j) **Promoting active citizenship**, as the meeting encourages people and institutions to take social responsibility. Through social interaction, people and institutions in the community are sensitised to social problems and encouraged to participate in building solutions to the problems in their areas, valuing their participation and endogenous resources. In fact, participation is a structuring didactic assumption in Community Education, since it is in the communities to which people belong that they participate, broadening and directing their capacity for participation towards more complex and global contexts. From this, we can see that community is a privileged context for participation in a universal order (Delanty, 2006, p.32), since the individual dimension is necessarily social (Bertrand, 2001, p.163). Active participation is, in this understanding, a fundamental element in educational processes in Community Education contexts, as it stimulates and enables the exercise of a basic right of citizens, being an unavoidable variable in the learning process and providing a more complete and healthy exercise of citizenship (Rivero, 2003, p.135). According to the above, participation plays a fundamental, non-transferable and non-delegable role in the personal and collective construction of the exercise of citizenship and in the personal capacity for self-determination. In reality, participation is a structuring element of citizenship, since citizenship only really exists when it results from a personal, proactive and deliberate process of building access to basic rights and duties. In fact, as Pérez (2022, p. 27) points out:

*Without participatory citizens, democracy cannot be fully effective and is reduced to a merely formal exercise of democracy which, at best, boils down to uncritical voting every few years, giving the rulers a blank cheque for the duration of their mandate. In this sense, participation is not only a right, but also a civic duty. As it is a social skill and not an innate gift, it requires learning.*

- 1) **Encouraging cultural development**, because the encounter allows knowledge, values and traditions to be preserved and passed on between generations. Through social interaction, people share their cultures, learn from different customs and build a society richer in diversity and plurality.

To summarise, it could be argued that promoting the meeting of people and institutions in the design and implementation of educational processes in a community context is both a right and a duty of citizenship and a fundamental exercise in individual and institutional social responsibility. Promoting contexts of cooperative work that favour the presence and participation of all generations of the community and that encourage their participation in the construction of responses to the challenges and problems facing communities is, in itself, an educational process that profoundly transforms reality and induces the construction of the future.

## **2.2. The Positive Principle**

The problems and challenges that communities, institutions and people face in their daily lives should be seen as excellent opportunities to design and implement learning processes that lead to the construction of the best possible responses. In this process, within the scope of the São Miguel de Machede Community School, the positive dimensions generated by the opportunities we are confronted with on a daily basis are favoured:

- a) **the opportunity to set objectives**, since for each problem or challenge a response must be constructed. The exercise of getting to know and understand the present reality, identifying the constraints and obstacles that limit our development and the exercise of our citizenship, is

a fundamental moment for defining the challenge or problem that we must overcome. However, just as important as determining the starting point (present) is the assumption of a coordinate of arrival (future). The existence of these two points determines the existence of the need to unite them, and the path we will have to take to this end corresponds to the educational process we must design and realise. Having a problem in the present is synonymous with needing to define a project for the future that calls us onto a path in which our development process will take place through participation in a learning context;

- b) **the valorisation of the community's endogenous resources**, an inclusive and cooperative exercise that considers the whole universe of institutions and people and values all vital knowledge and experiences. In reality, when building solutions to problems and answers to challenges, all available resources are needed, knowing that it is in their co-operative management that the effectiveness of community action on its reality will lie;
- c) **the need to establish commitments**, understood as meeting points that take on a different coordinate from the various individual and institutional starting points. Making a commitment presupposes the need for a process of participatory and consistent dialogue. The meeting translated into the commitment generated has a strong mobilising and empowering potential, since it already reflects a path travelled and agreement on the objectives set out in the unifying project;
- d) **the promotion of management in solidarity** within the community, which guarantees that everyone can and should participate in the educational processes that are the basis for building solutions to problems and answers to challenges. The solidary nature of the co-operative relationship that develops in educational processes should value the differences that exist in the community;
- e) **guaranteeing the public nature of the solutions and responses developed**, given the collective and co-operative dimension that is transversal to the approach developed. In reality, the educational model developed by the São Miguel de Machede Community School assumes the open and accessible nature of the entire educational process and the guarantee that the knowledge and skills built within it are not private

property, but a public asset available to any person or institution that wants to benefit from them.

The positive dimension is a structural pillar of the educational model of the São Miguel de Machede Community School and it is on this that the entire design and development of the educational process generated from the community's interaction with its present and its representation of the future is based.

### **3. THE GENESIS OF THE SÃO MIGUEL DE MACHEDE COMMUNITY SCHOOL**

Based on the axiological and pedagogical framework presented above, the São Miguel de Machede Community School was founded in 1998 as part of a community institution called SUÃO-Associação de Desenvolvimento Comunitário.

From the outset, the São Miguel de Machede Community School has adopted a model of non-formal education, with a popular, community-based matrix and an intergenerational profile, through which it has been promoting active, supportive intergenerational co-operation. In this context, the scientific coordinates of the project that has been developed are rooted in the PADéCA model/Programme to Help Develop the Capacity to Learn (Berbaum, 1992), the principles and practices of social learning promoted by Vygotsky (2001) and the values and practices of Paulo Freire (Freire, 1996, 2001).

Given the different educational contexts that exist in a territory, the non-formal education developed by the São Miguel de Machede Community School takes on the characteristics pointed out by Gohn (2006, p. 28), according to which

*Non-formal education refers to a process with various dimensions, such as: the political learning of individuals' rights as citizens; the training of individuals for work, through the learning of skills and/or the development of potential; the learning and exercise of practices that enable individuals to organise themselves with community objectives,*

*aimed at solving everyday collective problems; the learning of content that enables individuals to read the world from the point of view of understanding what is going on around them.*

As such, the entire educational process at the São Miguel de Machede Community School aims to build access between people and their citizenship rights and duties established in the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic (Nico, 2020), in order to guarantee equal opportunities and fairness for all members of the community and between the community and other communities in the region and the country

At the São Miguel de Machede Community School, educational activities are always born out of the real circumstances of the community and its members, in particular the challenges and problems they face in their daily lives and in the territory where they develop their personal, professional and civic lives. In reality, educational processes - which De Natale (2003, p.177) sees as processes in situation - always take place in a given territory (Soler, 2009, p.25; De Natale, 2003, p.180), which is a complex, systemic and dynamic physical, social and technological space. In the specific case of the São Miguel de Machede Community School, the territory is a structuring element of its activity and is determined by the administrative boundary of the parish of São Miguel de Machede, which is part of the municipality of Évora/Portugal.

As mentioned above, it is in the construction of solutions to problems and answers to challenges that educational processes are generated in which the community builds, in a participatory and supportive way, knowledge and skills that are immediately useful and will become part of the collective heritage. The collective and co-operative dimension of the educational approach is a structuring element of the concept of community education and the consequent practice in the territorial and social context considered. At the São Miguel de Machede Community School, principles and values are always at the starting and end points of the learning processes and they establish the need for the technical and didactic dimensions to serve a higher purpose. With this in mind, we present some of the vertices of this unavoidable axiological geometry of community education realised there (Nico, 2020, pp. 39-40):

- i) Direct and active **participation** by the protagonists of the learning process (Finger & Asún, 2003; Freire, 1996);
- ii) **Autonomy** in the processes of drawing up and implementing educational projects and consequent **accountability** for their implementation and respective results (Council of Europe, 1997; Finger & Asún, 2003);
- iii) **Global learning**, in the sense that it is not compartmentalised and is usually related to real life, and is therefore heterogeneous and integral (Carneiro, 1985; Finger & Asún, 2003);
- iv) **Solidarity**, at all stages of the learning processes, emphasising the social and mutual aid dimensions of these processes and recognising that solidarity is one of the richest human assets (Carneiro, 1985; Betto, 2004);
- v) **Development**, particularly in relation to local communities (Carneiro, 1985; Alves *et al*, 1996; Finger & Asún, 2003);
- vi) **Co-operation**, on the assumption that it will result in increased and shared competence (Alves *et al* 1996);
- vii) **Conviviality**, which results from the relational and social context in which educational processes take place, as opposed to the manipulation of other forms of education (Finger & Asún, 2003; Carneiro 185);
- viii) **Hope/animosity**, which stems from the ability to generate possible and realisable projects for the future (Souza, 2007);
- ix) **Democracy**, exercised and guaranteed by the possibility of free participation in all moments of the educational process (Carneiro, 1985);
- x) **Freedom** to participate, according to individual and collective criteria, and to learn what one values.
- xi) **Subsidiarity**, on the assumption that some of the vital learning can and should be designed and implemented in closer contexts and that sustainable development processes are bottom-up (Finger & Asún, 2003);
- xii) **Equal opportunities** in access to and participation in educational projects (Finger & Asún, 2003);
- xiii) **Justice**, in the conviction that solidarity requires the transformation of unjust situations, which presupposes a social, political and cultural commitment, in which education is the critical variable;
- xiv) **Sharing** knowledge, skills, perspectives, solutions, results and resources (Graça, 2009);

- xv) **Singularity**, in the certainty that we educate ourselves from our originality in the singular interaction with people, their lives, our community, in our territory and in our time (Carneiro, 1985);
- xvi) **Happiness/Pleasure**, which are an indispensable context for adequate motivation and enjoyment in learning and which result from the ability to imagine and feel passion for life (Carneiro, 1985).

In this axiological framework, the São Miguel de Machede Community School is currently a structuring project for community life, guaranteeing everyone an equivalent level in the exercise of citizenship rights and duties, through collective, cooperative and participatory work.

## **4. THE ACTIVITIES OF THE SÃO MIGUEL DE MACHEDE COMMUNITY SCHOOL**

Within the axiological context defined, the São Miguel de Machede Community School has been developing its activity in a systemic and holistic way, in a broad implementation of the concept of community education: education for health; education for work; education for solidarity; education for the economy; education for qualifications and education for identity.

In this context, we present some of the main activities that the São Miguel de Machede Community School has carried out since 1998:

### **4.1. Community Library**

In 1998, it was difficult for people and institutions in the community to access information and this clearly limited access to other basic citizenship rights. In this context, the Community Library began operating by distributing a regional newspaper (Diário do SUL) daily, free of charge and at home. For around four years, 160 newspapers were distributed daily to every household in the parish, on a rotating basis, with each copy being read by at least four families. Later, with the support of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, around 100 books were purchased, which were also made available to households every fortnight. With this project, access to



information became widespread and many families established the routine of accessing a daily newspaper and reading it.

A regular acquisition process and frequent donations have meant that the Community Library currently has a collection of over 7,000 titles. On the other hand, there are regular activities that involve encouraging children to read, lectures for the whole community (called Sermon in the SUÃO) and some cultural activities that may involve study visits or themed workshops. Today, the Community Library is a central space of the institution, where multiple activities take place, involving the entire community of São Miguel de Machede.

## **4.2. Community Education Course**

The community education course began in 1998 and, at the time, was centred on promoting basic reading and writing skills, since the existing illiteracy rate was high and this was a limitation that prevented access to a lot of information and made it difficult to exercise many citizenship rights and duties. The didactics developed used a method of generating words, inspired by the literacy approaches developed by Paulo Freire (Freire, 1996, 2001).

However, it soon became apparent that the approach developed, based on a more negative dimension of people's lives (illiteracy), was not sufficiently motivating to promote the participation of many of those who could neither read nor write, and especially those who, while possessing these basic skills, would like to build other knowledge and competences. This was the first practical evidence that the São Miguel de Machede Community School should consider and value, in its educational model and in the concrete practice of its projects and activities, other more positive dimensions of people's lives: the knowledge they had and the skills they possessed. This should be the core of the motivational process and the decision to take part in the projects.

Therefore, from a very early stage, the Community Education Course began to incorporate and develop educational activities in the following areas: physical activity (gymnastics and aqua aerobics), painting, ceramics, music, information and communication technologies (IT and social

networks), group dynamics, study visits, among other more occasional activities.

In this context, the Community Education Course naturally takes people's lives as the basic context for the design and implementation of learning activities, preferentially valuing the participants' prior knowledge (pre-acquisitions rather than prerequisites).

### **4.3. “O Menino da Bica” Community Newspaper**

At the same time as the Community Library and Community Education Course projects, a local newspaper called “O Menino da Bica” was created in 1998.

Seen as an opportunity for participation and the local construction of information, the community newspaper has become a structuring element in the dynamics of the community, particularly in the processes of constructing content, editing and distributing its annual editions free of charge at home.

Within the community newspaper, several generations of people cooperate: the older ones share their knowledge and memories, while the younger ones collect more up-to-date information and make it available to the community. On the other hand, the community newspaper acts as a link between all the members of the community: those who live there and those who are already living abroad for personal or professional reasons.

Between May 2020 and June 2021, the period during which the pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus occurred, the community newspaper “O Menino da Bica” was published fortnightly, giving the population regular access to current and useful information.

### **4.4. Brigade Signature**

With the distribution of the community newspaper “O Menino da Bica”, it became clear that there were a significant number of people living in São Miguel de Machede who could not read and write. On the other hand, after the first editions of the Community Education Course, in which a literacy approach was favoured, it emerged that not all the people

who couldn't read and write were willing or motivated to take part in this learning process. This paradox resulted in the need for the São Miguel de Machede Community School to reflect on the strategy to be followed in order to encourage more people to take part in the Community Education Course and thus promote literacy among those who lacked basic reading and writing skills.

In this context, the Brigade Signature project emerged, which was structured around small intergenerational groups (2 young people and 2 seniors) who had a close relationship with each other (family ties, proximity of residence, friendship). Each of the brigades had the autonomy to organise itself and to establish the appropriate strategy to achieve a simple goal: for the senior members to learn how to sign their own name and thus replace their identity card.

The process involved an intergenerational and solidarity-based learning process, in which the younger members volunteered to help their friends and older colleagues build up the skills of writing their own names. The process was monitored within the brigade itself, through dialogue and commitment.

All the brigades had the same timetable, so that the results of all the learning processes could be seen at the same moment: the trip to the Civil Registry Office in the city of Évora for all the senior members to replace their identification documents with new, duly signed ones.

The new identity cards were handed over at a public ceremony held in the community, where each Brigade Signature presented the results of their collective work and where all the participants could be recognised and valued.

During the period in which this activity took place, 22 adults took an active part in it, having learnt their signature skills. Almost all of them continued their educational journey, having moved on to the adult education course.

## **4.5. Eco-Legs**

With the daily home distribution of the newspaper *Diário do SUL* and the return of copies that had already been read, the São Miguel de

Machede Community School began to accumulate a considerable amount of paper that needed to be properly disposed of from a waste management point of view. At the time (1998-2000), there was still no selective paper collection circuit and this reality led to the need to valorise the used paper that was accumulating on the institution's premises and which should not be sent to general waste.

In this context, the Eco-Legs project was born. Its aim was to collect and dispose of the waste paper that existed in São Miguel de Machede, in particular newspapers that had gone out of circulation, as part of the reading promotion projects promoted by the Community Library. Eco-Pernas followed the same operating model as the Community Library and favoured making the collection service available to families at their homes on a fortnightly basis.

The paper collected was stored on the premises of the Community School and then sold to an industrial recycling unit. The proceeds from this sale were always used to buy new sheets of paper that were used in the institution's own operations and given to students in the parish. With this circuit established, it became clear how valuable used and recycled paper could be and the community integrated this local process of collecting and valorising paper as a routine.

Subsequently, this project was discontinued as the municipality installed its own system for collecting differentiated waste (paper, metal, plastic and batteries), a project that benefited from the routine already established in the community in the area of collecting and disposing of used paper.

## **4.6. Paperwork Office**

The Paperwork Office was created in 1998 and predates the Portuguese government's creation of the Lojas do Cidadão. From the outset, this project was seen as a platform for active mediation between the citizens of São Miguel de Machede and public services, in order to provide the former with access to information and the possibility of exercising their citizenship

rights in areas that are critical to quality of life: health, education, social protection, housing, justice and local municipal services.

Various activities are carried out in the management of the Paperwork Office:

- i) carrying out information actions, through talks, distribution of information at home or publicising in the community newspaper and on social networks;
- ii) direct support, through concrete mediation with public services (state or municipal) or companies. In this case, the issue to be resolved is deposited by the citizen at the institution and is referred to the younger members of the Community School. Due to their academic background and ease of travel, they take on the construction of the solution as an opportunity to realise a learning process that aims to deliver an answer to the citizen. In this process, knowledge and skills are built, which are fundamental resources for the community and available to everyone.

The Paperwork Office concretely and clearly realises the two principles on which the Community School educational model is based: encounter and positivity. In reality, in order to solve a problem or overcome an obstacle, the community comes together and makes the most of endogenous resources, creating a new capacity through an educational process of solidarity and co-operation.

To date, the Paperwork Office has attended to around 1,500 people and has always responded with solutions to the problems presented.

#### **4.7. Student Disengagement Office**

In 1998, there was a high rate of school failure and dropout in the community. In fact, there was a school and social transition that penalised the young people of São Miguel de Machede during the transition from 4th to 5th grade. At this point in their school career, the young people were moving from one year of school to the next and, at the same time, from one place to another, since the 5th year of school was already being attended in the city of Évora. This school and social change was profound

and introduced a disturbance into the lives of the students and their families that often led to situations of school failure which, sooner or later, led to school dropouts.

Faced with a problem of this magnitude - which severely limited the young students of São Miguel de Machede from exercising their right to education - São Miguel de Machede Community School, in conjunction with the students and their families, designed a mentoring and tutoring project based on solidarity, co-operation and individual social responsibility, which it called the Student Disengagement Office.

The project is based on the assumption that young people can and should help each other, valuing the knowledge and skills of those who are more experienced and who have already succeeded in their school career (mentors), putting their resources at the disposal of younger and more inexperienced young people or those who show greater difficulties in their learning, integration and adaptation processes. In this way, young people organise themselves into working groups, which are coordinated by more experienced people (mentors), designing and implementing a work plan that aims to provide as much support as possible for everyone.

The Office of Student Disengagement does not involve the awarding of scholarships or the purchase of “tutoring” services. It is based solely on the knowledge and skills of the young people themselves and their sense of solidarity and community. Since the start of this activity, around 150 young students from São Miguel de Machede have been involved in the Student Disengagement Office and all of them have successfully completed their school careers.

#### **4.8. Village Circuit**

The Village Circuit was born out of the need to valorise the endogenous resources of São Miguel de Machede, considering social cohesion and intergenerationality as the structuring bases of the social approach to be implemented. The Circuito da Aldeia (Village Circuit) is an itinerary for learning in rural areas, through which visitors have the opportunity to get to know the daily life of a small community located in rural areas. This everyday life is organised into a pedagogical itinerary with different

stations (vegetable garden, grocery store, school, church, parish council, winery, public washhouse, traditional games, etc.), where senior citizens who have experiential knowledge of the activities carried out there are available to teach the visitor. In cooperation with the seniors, there are qualified young people who, together with the experts in experiential knowledge (seniors), design and implement the itinerary best suited to each audience (schoolchildren, institutionalised seniors, families, people with special educational needs, companies).

The organisation and implementation of the Village Circuit has enabled intergenerational and interinstitutional cooperative work, the enhancement of local resources, the promotion of our land and the generation of wealth, which is necessary for the functioning of the institution. The origin of the project is due to the urgent need to valorise the knowledge and experience of the elderly, which is a valuable heritage of local culture and memories, making it available to younger generations and transforming it, if possible, into a product that generates wealth.

The Village Circuit has already welcomed more than 2,000 visitors to São Miguel de Machede, involving more than 100 people from the community (adults and young people) in its preparation and realisation.

#### **4.9. Curricular and professional internships**

Students living in São Miguel de Machede are encouraged to take on long qualification programmes through the support they receive from the Office of Student Disengagement and the valorisation of their knowledge and skills in the various projects promoted by the Community School.

In this context, the São Miguel de Machede Community School regularly hosts traineeships as part of vocational courses (at secondary school level) or higher education courses (bachelor's and master's degrees). This opportunity to realise a part of their school career in their locality is an important stimulus for establishing links between academic qualifications and the local community and an initial moment of integration into a professional context.

On the other hand, when young people finish school (at secondary and higher education level), the Community School regularly promotes

the offer of professional internships, in conjunction with the Institute for Employment and Professional Training and the Portuguese Institute for Sport and Youth. Professional internships are an excellent opportunity to gain access to the labour market, which, in the territorial context in question, is a critical situation for young people with higher qualifications. By making it possible for young people to work in a qualified profession in their place of origin, an effective mechanism is established to encourage them to successfully complete long school careers, start professional careers in an area that is consistent with the training they have completed, and to value existing qualifications and access reasonable pay.

The possibility of completing long qualification courses and initial segments of professional practice in São Miguel de Machede gives young people the opportunity to complete a full cycle of training and begin a professional infusion.

In the Community School's 27 years of activity, 15 professional internships have already taken place.

#### **4.10. Community theatre**

The São Miguel de Machede Community School has an amateur theatre group that regularly prepares and performs a play every year, the result of an endogenous, participatory and inclusive creative process. Through theatre, messages are prepared and transmitted that are based on the daily life of the community. The youngest members of the Student Disengagement Office, who are on their summer school holidays, usually take part in the dramatic activity.

The drama activity takes place on the premises of the Community School, usually in the summer, favouring the evenings, which are the times of day when temperatures are milder and therefore more conducive to people meeting and socialising outside their homes

#### **4.11. Study visits**

Study visits are learning contexts that are structured around people's participation in other projects at the São Miguel de Machede Community



School, in particular the Community Education Course and the Student Disengagement Office.

Study visits are prepared by young people who identify places of interest that have potential for intergenerational learning. Once these possible destinations have been identified, a popular consultation is held and, as a result, a place to visit is chosen.

The visit is then prepared in detail by travelling to the destination beforehand and drawing up an itinerary that allows participants to enjoy all the opportunities the route has to offer. The aim is always to get to know other territories and other cultures. Destinations that combine heritage (natural, environmental and built), economic activity and social dimensions are favoured.

The study visit is organised with the coordination of the youngest children and is often attended by families, which allows people from different generations with family and friendship ties to take part in the learning moments.

The study visits are held annually (when they involve the whole community) and monthly (when they involve the students on the adult education course).

## **4.12. Solidarity Door**

The Solidarity Door project aims to respond to the critical situation resulting from the existence of unmet basic needs, at an individual and family level, by promoting responses that result from the local social support network. This project supports the people of São Miguel with access to food for families in need or with the immediate resolution of other basic needs identified in terms of family support or housing. The Porta Solidária project involves a formal and active partnership with the Évora District Social Security Institute and the Food Bank Against Hunger.

The activities of the Solidarity Door project involve young people who take part in the Office of Student Disengagement project, so that these young people can give back some of the school support they receive through solidarity work of a community nature.

### **4.13. SUÃO-TV**

One of the most recent projects of the São Miguel de Machede Community School is SUÃO-TV, which aims to help promote communication between the institution and the community, particularly for members who don't live in the parish.

SUÃO-TV is a video platform available on Youtube, through which the institution provides content related to the activities of the Community School and also about the daily life of the community. This content is produced and edited locally by young members of the institution, using the technological resources available in the community.

This project is, on the other hand, an extension of the communication space built within the framework of the community newspaper “Menino da Bica”, now using digital technology and aimed at people living in the area and those who come from the area but currently live in other national or foreign territories. The digital dimension introduced by SUÃO-TV has made it possible to extend the perimeter of the community, going beyond its physical boundaries and ensuring that locally produced information reaches all the places where people with ties to the area live.

### **4.14. 2M-Digital Museum (Nico et al., 2020)**

2M is a project to recover the memory of the community of São Miguel de Machede, through a participatory process of creating a digital collection based on photographic and video records made available by the population itself. The aim of 2M is to create a digital museum space through which it will be possible to reconstruct some aspects of community life in its most everyday activities (professions, religious and pagan rituals, family activity, sport, culture and civic activity).

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everyday activities (professions, religious and pagan rituals, family activity, sport, culture and civic activity).

In a nutshell, 2M has the following objectives:

- I. To publicise, disseminate and enhance aspects of community life in São Miguel de Machede;
- II. To create an instrument that is accessible and participatory for all Micaelenses to access and share the common memory;
- III. To promote the sharing of traditions, cultures and daily activities between all generations of the island;
- IV. To publicise, value and disseminate the material and immaterial heritage of the Micaelense community.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout its 27 years of existence, the São Miguel de Machede Community School has been building an educational and social project based on the concrete reality of the people and institutions of the community, considering their problems and constraints as opportunities for transformation and development in the area, through the design and implementation of open, participatory, inclusive and supportive learning processes that bring together all the people and institutions of the parish and value all the endogenous resources.

In this axiological and educational framework, the future is built collectively, through projects that are born from the present, evolve with the contribution of those who participate in them and allow for the personal fulfilment of all members of the community (Nico & Nico, 2022):

- i. opportunities for young people to exercise their right to education, guaranteeing their access to all levels of training and ensuring that, at all times, the necessary conditions exist for them to remain in school and succeed;
- ii. opportunities for the youngest and most qualified to exercise their right to work, creating pathways for volunteering, transition and employment in the area;

- iii. opportunities for everyone to exercise the duties and rights of citizenship in all areas of life, particularly those that contribute most to human development (health, education and social support);
- iv. opportunities to recognise, value and disseminate the knowledge and skills of older people, which are fundamental elements of local identity and culture;
- v. opportunities to create wealth by enhancing the daily life of the community and its members, thus ensuring that local culture and heritage are recognised as a fundamental endogenous resource to be preserved and enhanced;
- vi. opportunities, through participation in voluntary, solidarity-based and cooperative learning paths, to generate inclusive human, social and economic development processes that mobilise a renewed attitude towards the future (Nico & Nico, 2022, pp. 80-81).

This text presents the main activities carried out by the São Miguel de Machede Community School. Since 1998, many other projects and activities have been carried out, always anchored in the problems and challenges facing the community and with the aim of using them as opportunities to promote educational processes that lead to the construction of solutions and answers and the installation of new knowledge and new skills that strengthen the resilience of people and community institutions.

At present, the community remains fragile due to depopulation and the consequent decline in social, economic and cultural dynamics. However, these problems serve as motivation to build an alternative future in which the best conditions for personal, professional and social fulfilment can be guaranteed for each of the people who have decided to live in the area and build their life project there. In reality, as Nico and Nico (2022, pp. 73-74) point out:

*The design and implementation of educational processes in a community education context favours dimensions such as intergenerational dialogue, cooperative work and the creation of emotional bonds between everyone. In this educational context, which has a profoundly humanist profile, there are three pillars that define the solidarity dimension of education:*

- i. **Problems are everyone's problems:** as real starting points for learning processes, the problems identified in the community's daily life are not exclusive to those who live and feel them. Not being a factor of exclusion or negative discrimination, the existence of a problem is taken as a possibility for each person, who, by sharing it, contributes to creating an opportunity for everyone to participate in its resolution;
- ii. **Participation is for everyone:** the construction of a solution to a given problem or challenge must involve all endogenous knowledge and skills. This assumption makes the construction of the educational process more complex and requires valuing all contributions, finding the right way for each one to be considered and included;
- iii. **The solutions belong to everyone:** once a problem has been solved through a learning process in which many collaborated, the result obtained does not remain the private property of the person who had the problem that triggered the learning process or of the person who participated most in building the solution. It becomes available to the community and becomes part of its collective heritage.

The São Miguel de Machede Community School is a holistic, community-based project with an intergenerational profile and within the framework of non-formal education, in which the people and institutions of a small community in the south of Portugal try to respond to the needs and challenges they face by designing and implementing participatory and cooperative educational processes.

A school of Democracy and Freedom.

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