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**DOCTORAL SCHOOL "EDUCATION, REFLECTION,
DEVELOPMENT"**

SUMMARY - DOCTORAL THESIS

THE FORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF CULTURAL CONSUMPTION IN PRIMARY EDUCATION IN RURAL AREAS

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Keywords: cultural consumption, cultural education, rural environment, young school age, psychological well-being, socio-emotional development, social connection, active involvement, prosocial behavior

INTRODUCTION

Children's education is one of the fundamental concerns of contemporary society, as it forms not only cognitive structures and school skills, but also ways of relating to oneself, to others, to the community and to the universe of cultural values. In a context characterized by rapid social changes, technological transformations, diversification of life experiences and accentuation of differences between residence environments, education can no longer be understood exclusively as a process of transmitting knowledge. This presupposes a multidimensional formation, in which cognitive, affective, social, moral and cultural development is in a permanent relationship of interdependence.

This doctoral thesis starts from the premise that the development of the young school-age child is significantly influenced by the quality, diversity and relevance of the educational and cultural experiences to which he has access. The child's training is not only achieved through the curricular contents, but also through reading, storytelling, play, music, artistic activities, cultural encounters, social interactions, community practices and participation contexts that allow him to explore the world, to attribute meanings to lived experiences and to gradually build his identity.

In this perspective, cultural consumption is approached as an educational resource with multiple formative valences. Cultural experiences can contribute to the development of language, imagination, aesthetic sensitivity, empathy, cooperative capacity, motivation and prosocial behavior. Culture is not only a set of products or contents that are received by the child, but also a symbolic and relational universe in which he can participate, express himself, communicate and build meaning together with others. For this reason, the pedagogical valorization of cultural consumption can support the integral development of the child and can create authentic contexts for learning and training.

The issue of children's cultural participation acquires a special relevance when it is analyzed in relation to the rural environment. In many rural communities, students' access to diversified libraries, museums, theaters, performances, exhibitions, art workshops, and specialized extracurricular activities is lower than in urban areas. The distance from cultural institutions, the deficient infrastructure, the transport possibilities, the economic resources of

the Families and the local cultural offer directly influence the frequency and diversity of children's cultural experiences. Under these conditions, differences in access to culture can turn into differences in educational opportunity, with implications for personal, social and axiological development.

However, the rural environment should not be analysed exclusively from the perspective of structural difficulties and limitations. Rural communities have their own cultural resources, expressed through traditions, customs, family stories, community memory, intergenerational relationships, local practices, relationship to nature and specific forms of solidarity and cooperation. These resources can provide the child with important identity, moral and social landmarks. The central problem is therefore not the absence of culture in rural areas, but the degree to which existing resources are recognized, pedagogically organized and transformed into educational experiences relevant to child development.

In this context, the school can perform an essential cultural function. It can facilitate the encounter between local culture and universal culture, between the child's experiences and broader systems of knowledge and meaning. For students who benefit from limited access to cultural institutions and activities, the school can become the main space for organized cultural participation. This function goes beyond the transmission of information about culture and involves the creation of contexts in which culture is lived, explored, interpreted and recreated through activities adapted to the age of the students and the particularities of the community.

The theme of the research, entitled "Formative capitalization of cultural consumption in rural education, at young school age", is located at the intersection between education, culture, psychological development and social equity. The choice of the theme was determined by the need to deepen the role that cultural experiences can have in the child's formation and by the need to identify concrete ways in which the rural school can partially compensate for the reduced access to institutionalized cultural resources.

An important argument in choosing this theme is the fact that cultural activities are sometimes considered complementary or recreational components of education, without being sufficiently analyzed as pedagogical environments with effects on psychological and socio-emotional development. When systematically designed, adapted to the level of development of students and integrated into a coherent educational framework, cultural activities can facilitate active involvement, social connection, emotional expression, cooperation, behavioral self-regulation and the manifestation of prosocial behaviors.

The choice of the low school age as the level of analysis is justified by the intensity of the formative processes characteristic of this period. In the first years of school, the child it

strengthens language, self-image, the ability to relate, conduct regulated by norms, willingness to cooperate and relate to values. It is a stage in which educational experiences have a special shaping force, the child being receptive to stories, models, games, symbolic activities, artistic expression and meaningful social interactions. Capitalizing on cultural consumption during this period can contribute to the formation of personal and relational resources relevant for school adaptation and integration into the community.

The research problem starts from the relationship between the access of students from rural areas to organized cultural experiences and the possibility of capitalizing on them as training resources. Specifically, the research aims to analyze the extent to which the participation of young school-age students in a structured cultural educational program can produce changes in psychological well-being and socio-emotional functioning. The approach goes beyond an exclusively descriptive approach and aims both to evaluate the effects of the intervention and to understand the psychological and relational processes through which these effects can occur.

The purpose of the research is to evaluate the impact of a program of cultural educational activities, based on a socio-constructivist structure, on the psychological well-being and socio-emotional functioning of young school-age students in rural areas. Psychological well-being is analyzed through the dimensions of involvement, perseverance, optimism, social connection and happiness, and socio-emotional functioning is investigated through indicators related to emotional symptoms, behavior problems, hyperactivity, relationship problems and prosocial behavior.

The cultural educational program "School as a space of living culture" was designed to capitalize on cultural experiences as resources for child development. It creates educational contexts in which students participate in narrative, artistic, musical, expressive, collaborative and reflective activities. The proposed activities aim to stimulate active involvement, develop social connection, facilitate emotional and creative expression, strengthen cooperation and support positive reporting to local and universal cultural values.

Within the program, culture is not only transmitted as information, but is explored through concrete learning experiences. Reading and storytelling, artistic creation, music and movement, role-playing, dialogue, collaboration and exploration of local cultural identity are organized so that students are cognitively, emotionally and relationally involved. The program capitalizes on both skills specific to the curricular areas of language and communication, arts, music and movement and civic education, as well as transversal skills on communication,

cooperation, creativity, emotional expression and regulation, responsibility and prosocial behavior.

The research approach was oriented in the following main directions: analysis of the theoretical foundations of education as a multidimensional and value-oriented process; delimitation of cultural consumption and highlighting its formative valences; examining the particularities of the rural environment and the role of the school, family and community in the development of the child's cultural capital; assessing the impact of the cultural educational program on psychological well-being and socio-emotional functioning; investigating the relationship between hyperactivity and prosocial behavior; as well as the analysis of the mediating role of social connection and active involvement in explaining the processes associated with behavioral change.

From a methodological point of view, the research integrates an evaluative and an explanatory dimension. The evaluative dimension aims to compare the level of psychological well-being and socio-emotional functioning before and after the cultural educational intervention, in relation to the experimental group and the control group. The explanatory dimension aims to analyze the relationships between the research variables and to identify mechanisms through which pedagogically organized cultural experiences can contribute to the development of prosocial behavior.

The theoretical foundation of the thesis is progressively organized. The first chapter analyzes education as a multidimensional system, in relation to the fundamentals of the formative process, to the dimensions of the development of the young school-age child and to the axiological and cultural coordinates of education. The relationships between cognitive, affective and socio-relational development are highlighted, as well as the role of values and culture in the formation of the child's personality and identity.

The second chapter is devoted to cultural consumption as an educational practice. The conceptual delimitations of cultural consumption, its formative valences and the psychosocial and axiological implications in primary education are analyzed. At the same time, the theoretical models of learning relevant for capitalizing on cultural experiences and the contemporary frameworks of psychological well-being and socio-emotional development are presented.

The third chapter analyzes the rural environment as a socio-educational and community space for child development. Access to cultural resources, structural constraints and formative opportunities of the rural environment, the cultural function of the school, the role of the family

and the community, as well as the influence of socio-economic determinations on children's cultural participation are addressed.

The applicative part begins with the presentation of the methodological framework of experimental research. The theme and problem of the research, the purpose, objectives, questions and hypotheses, the sample of participants and the sample of educational content, the research methods and tools and the stages of conducting the investigation are delimited. In this part, the analysis of the educational and cultural needs in the rural context and the architecture of the "School as a space of living culture" program are presented.

The fifth chapter describes the development of the educational intervention, the ways of implementing the program in rural areas, the cultural activities carried out and the forms of student involvement. Narrative, artistic, visual, musical and exploration of local cultural identity activities are presented, as well as ways to monitor participation and evaluate students' progress.

The sixth chapter is dedicated to the analysis and interpretation of the results. The results on psychological well-being, assessed by the EPOCH tool, and those on socio-emotional functioning, assessed by the SDQ tool, are examined. The descriptive and inferential analyses are completed by testing mediation models based on social connection and active involvement, in order to deepen the explanatory mechanisms of the relationship between hyperactivity and prosocial behavior.

The last chapter summarizes the general conclusions of the study, the theoretical and practical implications, the limits of the research and the directions of future investigation. The possibilities of capitalizing on the program in the activity of the school and the rural community are highlighted, as well as the relevance of cultural experiences for the development of more involved, more socially connected, more expressive and more open to cooperation and participation students.

Through the approached theme, the thesis proposes an integrative perspective on cultural education in rural areas. Culture is not treated as an external or additional element of the educational process, but as a constitutive dimension of the child's formation. Cultural consumption is understood as a meeting space between knowledge, emotion, relationship, value and identity, and the school is valued as an environment in which cultural experiences can be transformed into opportunities for personal and social development.

The importance of research derives from the need to identify accessible and relevant educational interventions for children in rural areas. Through the pedagogical organization of cultural activities, the school can create bridges between local culture and universal culture,

between the child's experiences and the aims of contemporary education, and between individual needs and community life. In this way, cultural education can become a tool for the participation, inclusion and integral development of the young school-age child.

Chapter I. Education as a multidimensional system: theoretical foundations, dimensions of child development, axiological and cultural coordinates

The first chapter of the thesis addresses the theoretical foundations necessary to understand education as a complex process of child formation, following the relationship between the cognitive, affective, social, axiological and cultural dimensions. Education cannot be reduced to the transmission of knowledge, but represents an intentional, systematic and value-oriented action, through which the child is supported to develop his capacities, to participate in social life and to gradually build his identity. It takes place in relation to a system of purposes, contents, methods and values that express both the needs of the person and the requirements of society (Cucoş, 2014; Nicola, 2003; Cristea, 2000). Any educational action expresses, at the same time, a certain conception of man, society, values and personal becoming (Albulescu & Albulescu, 2018).

The multidimensional character of education results from the fact that it influences the person as a whole. The formative process contributes to cognitive development through the organization of knowledge, to affective development through the formation of attitudes and sensitivity, to social development through the internalization of the norms of coexistence and to axiological development through the relationship to values. Education is thus situated at the intersection between instruction, socialization, moral formation and cultural transmission.

From a sociological perspective, education contributes to the integration of the person into the community and to the transmission of values, norms and forms of collective life (Durkheim, 1956). However, social integration must not only be understood as adapting to existing requirements, but also as developing autonomy and the capacity for responsible participation. Authentic education is achieved through meaningful experiences, through involvement, cooperation and reflection, the school being an environment of life and participation, not just a space for the transmission of information (Dewey, 1916, 1938).

The relationship between education and culture is highlighted by understanding learning as a process of building meaning. The child's mind is formed within the culture, through language, stories, symbols, patterns and social interactions. The school mediates the relationship between individual experience, family culture, and the broader universe of

knowledge, supporting the child to interpret the world and participate in the community's systems of meanings (Bruner, 1960, 1996). In this perspective, the student is not a passive receiver, but an active participant in his own formation, and education must capitalize on dialogue, reflection and his life experiences (Freire, 1970).

The educational process is also influenced by the quality of pedagogical relations. The child's training does not depend only on the curriculum and the methods used, but also on the affective and relational climate in which learning takes place. Care, recognition of the child as a person and sensitivity to his or her needs support trust, participation and responsibility (Noddings, 2005). The teacher therefore fulfills the role of mediator, model and facilitator, organizing contexts in which the child can learn, express himself and cooperate with others.

The young school age represents an important transition stage, marked by the transition from the predominance of playful activities and family experiences to integration into an organized institutional framework oriented towards systematic learning. The dominant activity becomes learning, without play, imagination and artistic expression losing their importance. The child continues to need concrete activities, visual support, storytelling, movement and interaction, gradually becoming able to follow more complex tasks, follow rules, cooperate and evaluate their results (Șchiopu & Verza, 1997; Verza & Verza, 2000).

Cognitive development is manifested by the strengthening of language, voluntary attention, logical memory and the ability to compare, classify and solve problems. The child's development is supported through interaction and mediation, and the tasks carried out with the support of the teacher or peers can lead to the formation of capacities that will later be used independently. Language contributes to the organization of thought, the planning of actions, and the regulation of behavior (Vygotsky, 1978). At the same time, the development of executive functions supports maintaining attention, impulse control, cognitive flexibility, and adapting to new situations (Diamond, 2013).

The affective dimension is significantly influenced by school experiences and by the way the child is appreciated and integrated into the collective. Encouragement, recognition of effort, and successful experiences can strengthen self-image and a sense of competence, while repeated failure, labeling, or exclusion can affect motivation and participation. Emotional regulation develops through language, modeling and safety relationships, with the child learning to recognize and express emotions, tolerate frustration and adapt his reactions to social situations.

Socio-relational development involves extending the child's relationships beyond the family environment. The class group becomes a space of belonging, cooperation and

internalization of norms. Through joint activities, the child learns to follow rules, to assume roles, to understand the perspective of the other and to resolve conflicts. The cognitive, affective and social dimensions are interdependent: emotional safety favors involvement in learning, language facilitates the expression of emotions, and cooperation creates conditions for the development of empathy and prosocial behavior.

Education also has an axiological character, as the school transmits not only knowledge, but also ways of relating to goodness, truth, beauty, responsibility, respect and solidarity. Values are not formed by simply memorizing norms, but by experiences in which they are understood, lived and transformed into behaviors. Moral development involves the transition from submission to the rule imposed by the adult to the understanding of cooperation, reciprocity and the consequences of one's own actions on others (Piaget, 1932).

Character formation involves the integration of moral knowledge, moral sensitivity, and moral action. The child must understand value, consider it important and manifest it through concrete behaviors (Lickona, 1991). The development of prosocial behaviors requires situations in which the child can show empathy, help, responsibility and care for others, and the teacher can capitalize on these situations through discussions, stories, group activities and reflection on behaviors (Damon, 1988). Axiological education must thus be integrated into the entire life of the class, through the established rules, the distribution of responsibilities, the way of resolving conflicts and the models offered by adults.

Culture is a fundamental dimension of education, because through it the child comes into contact with the language, values, symbols, traditions and forms of expression of the community. Identity formation is achieved through the interaction between personal experiences and the meanings transmitted by family, school and community. Culture is not an element external to the educational process, but the symbolic environment in which the child learns to think, feel, relate and attribute meaning to his experiences.

For the young school-age child, culture becomes formative through accessible and concrete experiences: reading a story, participating in an artistic activity, learning a song, discussing a local tradition or getting involved in a cultural project. These experiences can contribute to the development of language, imagination, aesthetic sensitivity, empathy, belonging and the ability to express oneself. In rural communities, the school can become a centre of local cultural life, capitalising on traditions, community memory and intergenerational relations through projects, exhibitions, workshops, reading circles and heritage activities.

In conclusion, the first chapter supports the need for an integrative education, oriented towards the development of the child's entire personality. The articulation of the cognitive,

affective, social, axiological and cultural dimensions underpins the understanding of cultural experiences as formative resources and prepares the analysis of cultural consumption carried out in the next chapter.

Chapter II. Cultural consumption as an educational practice: formative valences and psychosocial and axiological implications in primary education

The second chapter of the thesis analyzes cultural consumption as an educational practice and as a resource for the cognitive, emotional, social and axiological development of the young school-age child. In a broad sense, cultural consumption includes contact with literature, theatre, music, visual arts, museums, heritage, traditions, community events and digital cultural content. It is not reduced to the passive purchase or reception of cultural products, but involves selection, interpretation, participation, valorization and the integration of meanings into personal experience.

In the case of the child, access to cultural forms is mediated by the family, school, peer group, community and digital environment. Reading a story, listening to a song, participating in a celebration, making a drawing, visiting a library or getting involved in a local tradition acquire formative value through the way they are lived, discussed and integrated into the child's experience. The public is not a passive receiver, since cultural contents are interpreted and used according to the experiences, interests and resources of each person (de Certeau, 1984).

Cultural consumption can be organized institutionally, through school, library, museum, theater or community center, but it can also have family, community and digital forms. In contemporary society, these forms intersect, and their effects depend on the quality of the contents, age appropriateness, adult mediation and the possibility of active participation. For this reason, cultural consumption must be differentiated from cultural education. Cultural consumption designates the practices through which the child comes into contact with cultural forms, while cultural education involves the organization and intentional orientation of these practices for formative purposes.

Another important delimitation is that between cultural consumption and cultural capital. Cultural consumption refers to activities and experiences, and cultural capital refers to the resources, dispositions, skills and forms of recognition accumulated through participation in culture. Cultural capital can exist in an incorporated state, in the form of language, tastes and habits, in an objectified state, through books, instruments and other cultural goods, and in an institutionalized state, through formal qualifications and recognition (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural

tastes and practices are influenced by social position and habitus formed in the family and community (Bourdieu, 1984).

Access to culture is therefore not only a matter of individual preference, but also one of opportunity. Children who grow up in families where books, conversations and artistic activities are constantly present acquire a greater familiarity with the cultural forms valued by the school. Cultural participation can contribute to school outcomes and the development of resources that are institutionally recognized (DiMaggio, 1982). However, children who do not benefit from such contexts are not deprived of cultural potential, but need additional opportunities for access, mediation and valorization.

Contemporary perspectives draw attention to the diversification of tastes and the shift from exclusive consumption to more varied cultural repertoires (Peterson & Kern, 1996). For education, this change implies the recognition of the plurality of cultural forms and the avoidance of a rigid hierarchy between consecrated culture, local culture, popular culture and digital culture. The role of the school is to critically select and put these forms in dialogue, so that the child develops his ability to interpret and choose.

The formative valences of cultural consumption manifest themselves first on the cognitive level. Reading, storytelling, and dramatization support vocabulary development, understanding causal relationships, anticipation, memory, and narrative organization of experience. The visual arts support observation, symbolization, imagination and flexibility of thought, and music contributes to the development of attention, auditory memory and the ability to recognize structures. Cultural activity becomes educational when the child is helped to observe, compare, formulate questions, explain and relate the experience to his own life, not when he mechanically reproduces information (Albulescu, 2020).

Cultural experiences can also support self-directed learning, as the child is encouraged to choose, explore, ask questions, and reflect on their own ways of expressing themselves (Herlo, 2017). Formative value is not automatically produced by the mere exposure to a book, an image or a song, but by active involvement and pedagogical mediation. The child must be able to interpret, create and communicate, transforming reception into a personal experience.

On an emotional level, literature and the arts offer symbolic forms through which the child can recognize, express and understand emotions. Fiction can function as a simulation of social worlds, allowing for the exploration of intentions, emotions, and relationships between characters (Oatley, 2016). Exposure to fiction has been associated with certain dimensions of social ability, without these relationships being interpreted as automatic effects of reading (Mar

et al., 2006). Dialogue about characters and situations can support the child to understand different perspectives and develop empathy.

Music, drawing, painting, modeling, and dramatization provide alternative channels of expression for experiences that cannot always be formulated verbally. Collective musical activities create contexts of synchronization, belonging and common expression, and visual arts allow the symbolic externalization of states and experiences. Art contributes to the development of forms of thought and knowledge that cannot be reduced to verbal language or logical reasoning (Eisner, 2002).

Cultural consumption has an important social dimension. Reading, theatre, music, dance and collective creation activities involve cooperation, listening, following the rules, negotiating roles and making a personal contribution. The child learns to participate in the life of the group, to give and receive feedback and to value the contributions of others. Cultural projects can become contexts for practicing emotional expression, self-control, cooperation and self-confidence (Opre, 2010).

The axiological dimension of cultural consumption is expressed through the child's encounter with values, behavior patterns and forms of belonging. Stories, songs, images, traditions and community practices offer concrete situations through which the child can understand solidarity, responsibility, courage, respect and care for others. At young school age, values are not internalized through abstract definitions, but through narratives, examples, relationships and affective experiences.

Traditions and popular creations can contribute to the formation of value landmarks and to the understanding of continuity between generations (Stan & Bocoş, 2008). For children from rural areas, the memory of the community, local stories, crafts, customs and intergenerational relationships are important resources for identity formation. Culturally relevant pedagogy emphasizes the need to connect school activities to students' experiences and culture of origin (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This valorization should not lead to the isolation of the child in the local culture, but should be the starting point for opening up to national, universal heritage and cultural diversity (Banks, 2016).

Constructivist and sociocultural models of learning provide the theoretical basis for the pedagogical valorization of cultural consumption. Development is mediated by cultural tools such as language, writing, symbols, images, stories, and rules (Vygotsky, 1978). The child builds his knowledge through participation and interaction, and culture offers him the forms through which the experience can be organized and interpreted (Bruner, 1996). Development

must be analyzed in the context of concrete cultural activities in which the child reads, narrates, draws, sings, dramatizes, observes and creates (Cole, 1996).

However, the cultural experience does not become formative through mere participation, but must be organized pedagogically, so as to produce reflection, continuity and new learning possibilities (Dewey, 1938). Cultural activities should be age-appropriate, connected to the child's experience and followed by conversations, interpretations and forms of personal expression. The teacher has the role of transforming contact with culture into a process of building meaning.

The chapter also looks at psychological well-being as a component of the child's integral development. Well-being does not only mean the absence of emotional or behavioral difficulties, but also the existence of positive relationships, involvement, autonomy, a sense of competence and the possibility of personal development. Ryff's model includes self-acceptance, positive relationships, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose, and personal development (Ryff, 1989). Perspectives on subjective well-being, positive emotions, engagement, and optimal experience complement this framework (Diener, 1984; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Seligman, 2011).

In primary education, well-being can be observed through curiosity, involvement, perseverance, optimism, social connection, joy of participation, initiative and trust. Cultural activities can support these dimensions when they are accessible, continuous, inclusive and meaningful. A child can be present at a cultural activity without feeling valued or involved, which is why the quality of the experience is more important than the mere frequency of participation.

Self-determination theory explains the role of fundamental psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness in sustaining motivation and positive functioning (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Cultural activities respond to the need for autonomy when the child can make choices and express himself personally, to the need for competence when tasks allow him to progress and to observe his successes and to the need for relationships when he participates in a climate of cooperation and belonging. The teacher contributes to meeting these needs by providing real options, constructive feedback, accessible tasks and fair opportunities for participation.

The ecosystem perspective situates the child's development in the network of relationships between family, school, community, institutions and the broader social context. The bioecological model highlights the importance of proximal processes, represented by the child's regular and meaningful interactions with the people, objects, and symbols in his

environment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). It is not the mere existence of a library, a tradition or a heritage object that produces development, but repeated and mediated participation in reading, dialogue, creation and cooperation activities.

In rural areas, cultural education depends on the collaboration between school, family and community. Isolated activities can produce positive impressions, but the formative effects are sustained by continuity, rhythmicity and their integration into the daily life of the class. Cultural and artistic education can contribute to creativity, identity, inclusion and participation when it is treated as a dimension of child formation, not as a festive annex to the curriculum (UNESCO, 2006, 2010, 2024).

In conclusion, cultural consumption is a complex educational practice, at the intersection of knowledge, emotion, relationship, value and identity. Its formative potential depends on access, mediation, adequacy, active participation and continuity. The socio-cultural models of learning, the theories of psychological well-being, the theory of self-determination and the bioecological perspective underpin the design of cultural activities capable of supporting the integral development of young school-age students and prepare the analysis of the socio-educational particularities of the rural environment.

Chapter III. The rural environment as a socio-educational space: structural determinations and formative processes in the constitution of the child's cultural capital

The third chapter analyzes the rural environment as a social, educational and community space in which the experiences of the young school-age child are formed. The rural cannot be reduced either to the idealized image of a stable, supportive community and preserver of traditions, nor to the unilateral representation of a space characterized by shortages and vulnerabilities. It is a complex living environment, at the intersection of cultural continuities, economic changes, migration, demographic transformations, social inequalities and specific forms of belonging.

For the child, the rural community represents the first extended framework for socialization beyond the family. Through daily relationships, participation in household life, contact with relatives, neighbors and local institutions, the child forms his first representations about work, belonging, authority, solidarity, education and social difference. Its development cannot be separated from the systems in which it lives, since the family, school and community interact permanently and influence opportunities for learning and participation (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986).

The transformations of Romanian society after 1990 have changed the structure of rural communities through migration, demographic aging, the restructuring of occupations and the diminishment of some traditional forms of community participation. These changes do not manifest themselves uniformly, with important differences between localities close to urban centers and isolated communities with reduced infrastructure and services. Educational inequalities are influenced by social origin, family resources, and local context, which can create additional obstacles in the path of rural children (Hatos, 2012).

Access to cultural resources is one of the essential dimensions of child education. Contact with reading, art, music, heritage, theatre, film, technology and community activities contribute to the development of language, imagination, sensitivity, curiosity and interpretive skills. In rural areas, this access is influenced by the distance from cultural institutions, the quality of transport, the costs of participation, family and school resources, digital connectivity and the existence of constant cultural programmes.

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However, capitalizing on the local culture should not limit the child to the universe of his community. Cultural development involves a balance between getting closer to the local heritage and opening up to literature, science, contemporary art, national and universal heritage and experiences from other cultural spaces. The local culture must represent a starting point for broadening the child's horizon, not a limit of his becoming.

Under these conditions, the rural school can become the main cultural agent of the community. Its function goes beyond the transmission of curricular content and includes organizing, mediating and expanding students' cultural experiences. The school can facilitate access to reading, arts, heritage and technology and create contexts in which students participate, explore, create and reflect. Education through culture and the arts contributes to creativity, critical thinking, sensitivity, identity and social participation, being a component of integral education, not just a festive or complementary activity (UNESCO, 2024).

The cultural role of the school is manifested in two complementary directions: the child's openness to diverse cultural forms and the capitalization of the community's resources. Through reading projects, creative workshops, artistic activities, intergenerational meetings, heritage research and guided use of technology, the school can create links between the child's experiences and the wider culture. Reading has a special role, but the existence of books is not enough. The formation of a cultural habit involves access to appropriate texts, reading patterns, conversations about books and repeated activities that turn reading into a meaningful experience (Ionică, 2025).

The teacher has a central role in organizing these contexts, but he cannot act in isolation. Its work must be supported through resources, training, partnerships and coherent educational and cultural policies. The family, the library, the local administration, cultural institutions and other community actors can contribute to transforming the school into a center of cultural participation and development. In this perspective, the rural school not only compensates for certain shortcomings, but activates local resources and creates bridges to broader forms of knowledge.

The family is the first medium for transmitting cultural capital. The child acquires through the family the language, customs, attitudes towards education, ways of expression, values and the first practices of reading and participation. Cultural capital includes not only visible goods, such as books or digital devices, but also arrangements, skills, forms of communication and ways of interpreting the social world (Bourdieu, 1986).

Parents' reading behaviors, access to books, and family interactions influence the literacy development of primary school children (Petrescu & Iliescu, 2024). However, family support does not depend exclusively on the educational level or material resources, but also on the relational climate, communication and the willingness of adults to participate in the child's experiences. The rural family can transmit practical knowledge, responsibility, community memory and a sense of belonging, even if these resources do not always correspond to the cultural forms that are institutionally valued.

The migration of parents has altered family and community relationships, with many children remaining in the care of grandparents or other relatives. Separation can influence the child's emotional support, education and well-being, even if the connection with the parents is maintained through digital means (Matei & Ghența, 2024). At the community level, migration can reduce local participation and transform solidarity networks, but it can also produce new forms of belonging and circulation of resources (Goldschmidt & Rad, 2025).

Children's cultural consumption is also influenced by socio-economic determinations. Low incomes, poverty, distance, lack of transportation, fragile cultural infrastructure, and adult educational attainment can limit access to books, trips, artistic activities, and digital resources. In 2024, 33.8% of children in Romania were at risk of poverty or social exclusion, above the European Union average of 24.2% (Prodan & Franț, 2025; Eurostat, 2025). These vulnerabilities affect not only the material conditions, but also the variety of symbolic and formative experiences available to the child.

Cultural inequality should not be interpreted by blaming families. Parents may value education, but they may not have the money, time, transportation, or information to constantly support cultural participation. For this reason, cultural activities must be integrated into a broader educational equity strategy. Isolated initiatives can be memorable, but the formation of cultural capital requires continuity, familiarity, positive relationships and repeated participation.

In conclusion, the cultural development of the child in rural areas results from the interaction between the community context, access to resources, the role of the school, the influence of the family and socio-economic conditions. Culture can function simultaneously as

an identity resource, a means of compensating for inequalities, a space for expression and a way of opening up to the world. In order for its formative potential to be capitalized, cultural consumption must be projected as an accessible, mediated, participatory and continuous process, supported by collaboration between school, family and community (Croitoru & Becuț Marinescu, 2024; OECD, 2025).

Chapter IV. Methodological framework of the experimental research on the role of cultural education on the psychological well-being and socio-emotional development of students

The research starts from the finding that children's access to cultural experiences is not evenly distributed, and the rural environment remains a space where the opportunities to participate in non-formal cultural, artistic and educational activities are lower. Cultural education cannot be considered only a complementary activity to the curriculum, but a relevant pedagogical resource for child development, especially in communities where the school represents the main organized framework for socialization, participation and access to formative experiences.

The data contained in the "Cultural Consumption Barometer 2024" indicate a low participation of the population in cultural education activities and the existence of differences between urban and rural areas. Of the respondents who benefited from such activities, half indicated school, kindergarten or high school as a space to take place, which confirms the role of educational institutions in facilitating access to culture (Croitoru & Becuț Marinescu, 2024). The need to develop cultural education programs in rural schools is also supported by the guidelines contained in the Sectoral Strategy in the Field of Culture 2023–2030 (Ministry of Culture, 2023).

The issue is also relevant in relation to the educational and social vulnerabilities specific to the Romanian countryside. Almost 42% of primary and lower secondary school pupils attended schools in rural areas in 2023, and the rate of early school leaving was considerably higher in rural areas than in cities (European Commission, 2025). Under these conditions, the rural school must function not only as a training space, but also as an environment for support, participation, socialization and personal development.

International empirical research shows that access to artistic and cultural activities can influence school engagement, empathy, self-regulation, and student behavior. School-based arts education has been associated with reducing disciplinary deviations, improving written

expression, and developing empathy (Bowen & Kisida, 2023). Other educational interventions based on artistic activities have highlighted improvements in executive functions and behavioral self-regulation (Andersen et al., 2019). Engagement in arts and cultural activities has also been associated with reduced outsourcing difficulties assessed by SDQ (Hugh-Jones & Munford, 2025).

Based on these benchmarks, the research issue concerns the extent to which the participation of young school-age students from rural areas in a structured cultural educational program can produce changes in psychological well-being and socio-emotional functioning. The approach aims both to evaluate the effects of the intervention and to explain the psychological and relational mechanisms through which cultural activities can support prosocial behavior.

The aim of the research is to evaluate the impact of a program of cultural educational activities based on a constructivist structure on the psychological well-being — involvement, perseverance, optimism, social connection and happiness — and on the socio-emotional functioning — emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity, relationship problems and prosocial behavior — of young school-age students in rural areas.

The specific objectives of the research were:

O1. Highlighting the initial profile of the psychological well-being of the students in the experimental group and in the control group, by analyzing the dimensions assessed with the EPOCH tool in the pre-test stage;

O2. Establishing the initial level of socio-emotional and behavioral functioning of the students, assessed by the SDQ tool, to verify the initial equivalence of the participants;

O3. Evaluation of changes in psychological well-being, by comparing EPOCH scores obtained in the pre-test and post-test stages;

O4. Determining the changes in socio-emotional and behavioral functioning, by comparing the SDQ indicators in the two evaluation stages;

O5. Analyzing the relationship between hyperactivity and prosocial behavior in the post-test stage;

O6. Examining the associations between hyperactivity and the dimensions of psychological well-being assessed by EPOCH;

O7. Testing the role of social connection as a mediating variable in the relationship between hyperactivity and prosocial behavior;

O8. Testing the role of active involvement as a mediating variable in the relationship between hyperactivity and prosocial behavior;

O9. Comparison of the explanatory contribution of the two models of mediation based on social connection and active involvement.

The research hypotheses were formulated in accordance with these objectives:

I1. The experimental group and the control group present comparable baseline levels of psychological well-being assessed by the EPOCH dimensions;

I2. The experimental group and the control group present equivalent baseline levels of socio-emotional and behavioral functioning assessed by SDQ indicators;

I3. Participation in the cultural educational program determines statistically significant changes in the dimensions of psychological well-being assessed by EPOCH;

I4. Participation in the program determines statistically significant changes in the indicators of socio-emotional and behavioral functioning assessed by SDQ;

I5. There is a statistically significant relationship between hyperactivity and prosocial behavior in the post-test stage;

I6. Hyperactivity is statistically significantly associated with the dimensions of psychological well-being measured by EPOCH;

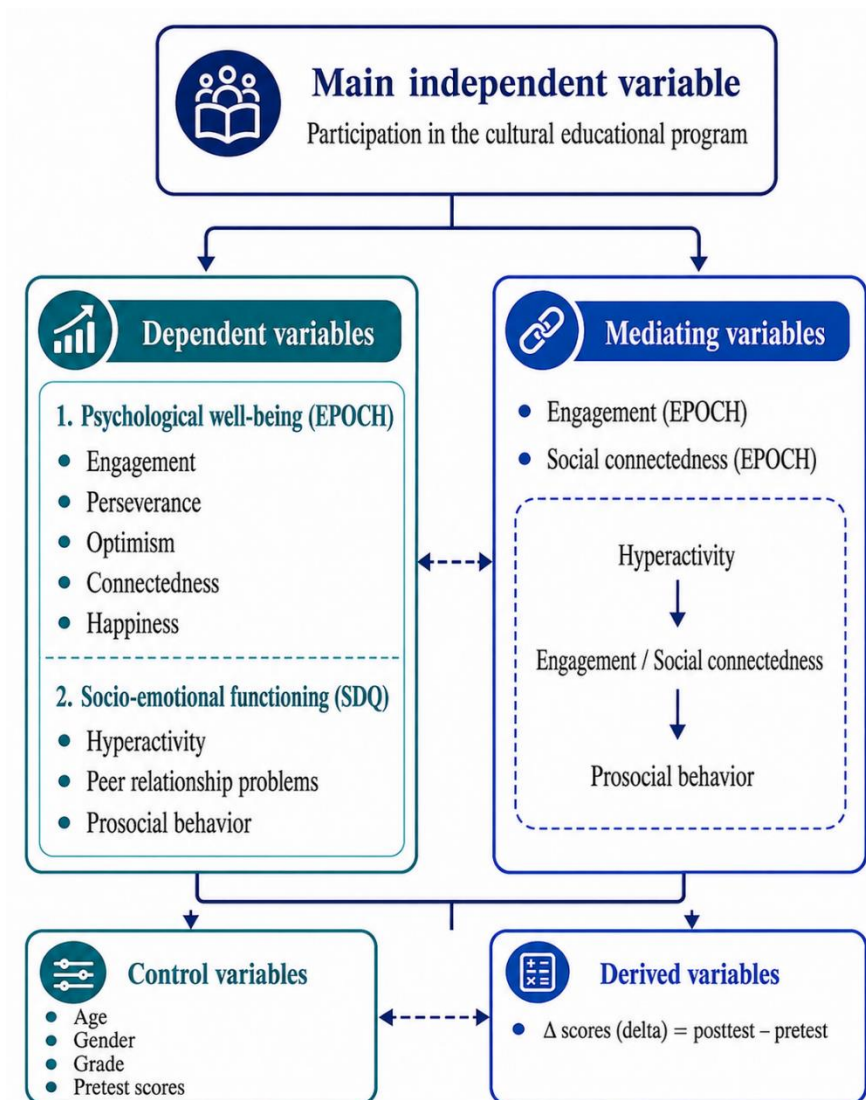
I7. Social connection significantly mediates the relationship between hyperactivity and prosocial behavior;

I8. Active involvement significantly mediates the relationship between hyperactivity and prosocial behavior;

I9. Models based on social connection and active involvement explain complementary mechanisms of socio-emotional change.

The independent variable of the research is represented by the participation in the cultural educational program, operationalized by the students' belonging to the experimental group or to the control group. The dependent variables are psychological well-being, assessed by the dimensions of involvement, perseverance, optimism, social connection and happiness, as well as socio-emotional functioning, assessed by hyperactivity, difficulties relating to colleagues and prosocial behavior. Social connection and active involvement were included as mediating variables, and age, gender, class, and pretest scores were control variables. The participants' evolution was also analyzed through difference scores, calculated according to the formula $\Delta = \text{posttest} - \text{pretest}$.

Figure 1. Operational structure of research variables

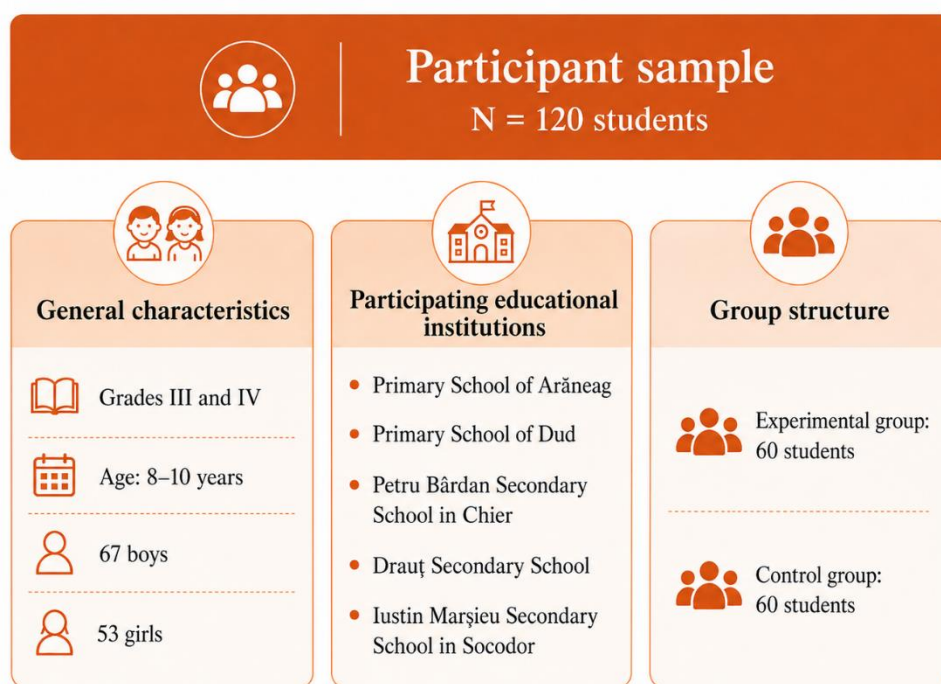


The research had a quasi-experimental pre-test-posttest design, with an experimental group and a control group. The sample consisted of 120 students aged between 8 and 10 years, enrolled in the third and fourth grades. Of these, 67 were boys and 53 girls. The participants were equally distributed under the two conditions of the research: 60 students in the experimental group and 60 students in the control group.

The research was carried out in five educational units in the rural area of Arad County: the Primary School in Arăneag, the Primary School in Dud, the "Petru Bărdan" Secondary School in Chier, the Secondary School in Drauț and the "Iustin Marșieu" Secondary School in Socodor. The distribution of the participants was made according to the existing organization of the classes and the concrete conditions in the participating schools. The students of the

experimental group participated in the cultural educational program, and those in the control group continued the usual educational activities.

Figure 3. Participant sample structure



The design of the intervention was preceded by an analysis of educational and cultural needs. Ten focus groups were organized, two each in each school: one with parents or legal representatives and one with teachers. 97 parents or legal representatives and 22 teachers participated. The discussions focused on children's access to cultural experiences, existing resources in the community, the role of the school, the socio-emotional difficulties observed and the activities considered appropriate for students in the third and fourth grades.

The analysis highlighted the reduced access to performances, museums, exhibitions, concerts and artistic workshops, determined by the distance from urban centers, transport possibilities, family resources and the limited local cultural offer. Difficulties were also reported regarding cooperation, expressing emotions, managing frustration, getting involved in tasks, following the rules and assuming roles in collective activities. Parents and teachers appreciated as appropriate the activities based on storytelling, reading, drawing, song, play, movement, creation and group work.

The content sample consisted of narrative, artistic, musical, expressive and exploration of local cultural identity activities. They offered situations of reading, storytelling,

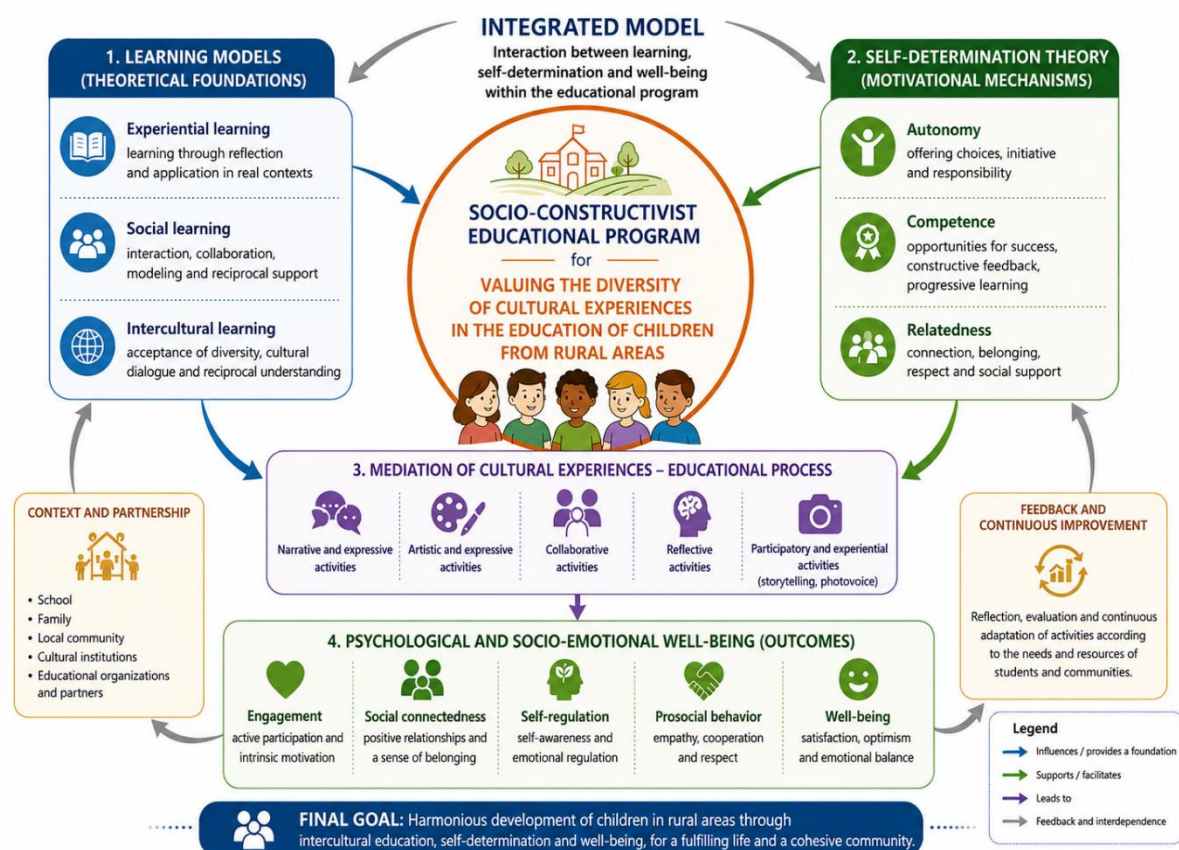
interpretation, creation, emotional expression, cooperation and reflection on cultural values. The contents have been designed so that students participate individually, in pairs and in groups and to practice respect, belonging, solidarity, responsibility and cooperation.

The program "School as a space of living culture" is based on the socio-constructivist perspective of learning. The role of social interaction and mediation in cognitive development supports the organization of activities through cooperation, dialogue, and pedagogical support (Vygotsky, 1978). Education is approached as a process of cultural mediation and the construction of meaning through language, symbols and narratives (Bruner, 1996), but also as an experience that becomes formative through participation, action and reflection (Dewey, 1916). The program also pursues the function of subjectivation of education, by creating contexts in which students express their opinions, make decisions and assume responsibilities (Biesta, 2015).

The program progressively evolved between 2020 and 2025. Between 2020 and 2022, the activities were exploratory in nature and aimed to familiarize students with various forms of cultural manifestation. In the period 2023–2024, the approach was structured as a systematic intervention, in accordance with the objectives and hypotheses of the research. In the 2024–2025 stage, the program was expanded through participatory and reflective methods, such as storytelling and Photovoice, which allowed for community exploration and the construction of personal narratives.

The aim of the program is to capitalize on cultural experiences as training resources for the development of psychological well-being, socio-emotional skills and prosocial behavior. The reception and expression of oral, written and artistic messages, creative expression through symbolic languages, relating and cooperation, relating to values and cultural belonging, as well as transversal skills of communication, emotional regulation, responsibility and reflection were targeted.

Figure 4. Integrated conceptual model of the socio-constructivist educational program centered on capitalizing on cultural experiences in student development



For the research, the focus-group method and two standardized tools were used. The EPOCH scale assesses five dimensions of psychological well-being: engagement, perseverance, optimism, social connection, and happiness. The tool allows capturing affective, motivational and relational resources that can be stimulated through expressive and collaborative educational experiences.

The SDQ questionnaire – Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire – assesses emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity, difficulties relating to peers and prosocial behavior. The tool comprises 25 items, with answers organized on a three-step scale. In the research, the analyses were mainly focused on hyperactivity, relationship difficulties and prosocial behavior. The values of the Cronbach alpha coefficients, between 0.70 and 0.80, indicated adequate fidelity.

The instruments were administered in printed format, under standardized conditions, before the intervention and after its completion. The application was carried out in the school environment, in a familiar climate of the students, under the supervision of the teachers and the researcher. The data were analyzed through descriptive and inferential procedures, complemented by correlational analyses and mediation models.

The research comprised three stages. In the pre-test stage, the groups were set up, the initial tools were applied and the needs analysis was carried out. The intervention phase consisted of applying the program to the experimental group, while the control group continued its usual activities. In the 2023–2024 school year, eight training and methodological work sessions were organized for teachers, each lasting four hours, totaling 32 hours. The post-test phase involved the reapplication of the instruments under similar conditions and the comparison of the results between the moments of the evaluation and between the two groups.

Through the adopted design, the research aims not only to establish the effects of the cultural educational program, but also to explain the processes through which active involvement and social connection can contribute to behavioral self-regulation and the development of prosocial behavior of students in rural areas.

Chapter V. Carrying out the educational intervention

The implementation of the cultural educational program represented the central applicative stage of the research, in which the theoretical foundations and methodological options of the study were transposed into real educational contexts in rural areas. The intervention aimed to capitalize on cultural activities as resources for the development of psychological well-being and socio-emotional functioning of young school-age students.

The "School as a space of living culture" program was conceived as a structured but flexible approach, adapted to the particularities of the students, the existing resources in the participating schools and the needs identified through discussions with parents and teachers. The activities were not organized as isolated cultural experiences, but as parts of a coherent program, oriented towards active involvement, personal expression, cooperation, social connection and the development of prosocial behavior.

The intervention capitalized on the school as a space for cultural mediation, especially given that the access of students from the participating communities to museums, theaters, exhibitions, concerts and artistic workshops was limited. Culture was not presented only as a set of information, but was lived, interpreted and recreated through reading, storytelling, drawing, painting, modeling, music, movement, dialogue, cooperation and community exploration.

The socio-constructivist foundation of the program supported the organization of learning through interaction, mediation, and the use of cultural tools such as language, story, image, symbol, and song (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1996). The activities involved the direct

participation of students, reflecting the idea that experience becomes formative when it is pedagogically organized and leads to reflection and new learning possibilities (Dewey, 1938).

The program was progressively developed between 2020 and 2025. In the first stage, carried out between 2020 and 2022, the activities were exploratory in nature and aimed to familiarize students with various forms of cultural manifestation. In the period 2023–2024, the approach was structured as a systematic educational intervention, being correlated with the objectives, variables and hypotheses of the research. In the 2024–2025 phase, the program was expanded and strengthened by introducing participatory and reflective methods, including storytelling and Photovoice.

From an organizational point of view, the activities were carried out outside the mandatory school hours, after the completion of the current teaching activities. This organization allowed the delimitation of the intervention from the usual program of the students and provided a more flexible framework for narrative, artistic, musical and collaborative experiences. The activities carried out in the school were complemented, where possible, with experiences carried out in non-formal and community contexts.

Figure 5. Integrated structure of the cultural educational program implemented in the period 2020–2025

Stages of development and implementation of the cultural educational program 2020–2025

- Cultural and expressive exploration
- Integration of cultural activities in the online environment
- Orienting activities toward the development of psychological well-being
- Implementation of the experimental educational intervention
- Expansion of the program through participatory, non-formal and narrative activities

Integrated educational and cultural activities

- Organization of thematic exhibitions
- Conducting theatre and film activities
- Conducting music activities and creative workshops
- Participation in virtual museum visits and online cultural activities
- Application of the Photovoice method
- Conducting activities within the educational camp
- Organization of cultural storytelling workshops

Dimensions pursued within the program

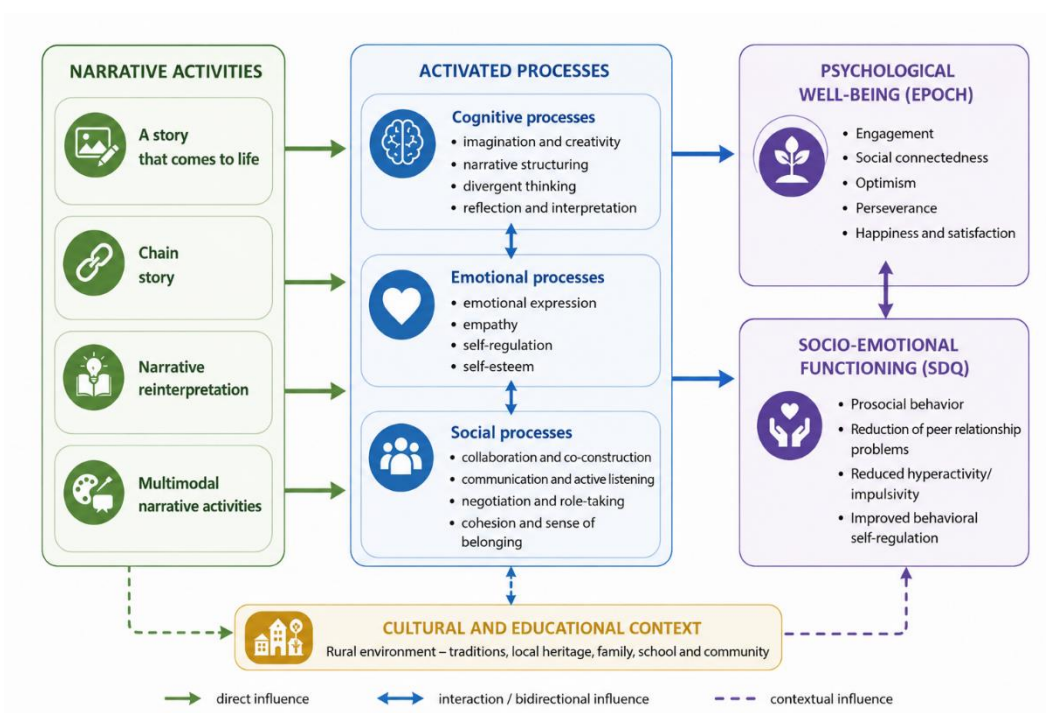
- Encouraging active engagement
- Developing social connectedness
- Supporting behavioral self-regulation
- Strengthening prosocial behavior
- Developing psychological well-being

Narrative activities were one of the main components of the program. Storytelling was used as a way of cultural mediation, of organizing the experience and of exploring emotional and relational situations. Through stories, literary texts, open questions, retelling, continuation of narratives, dramatization and assuming roles, the students were encouraged to interpret, formulate opinions and relate the contents to their own experiences.

Narration provided an accessible framework for the development of oral language, imagination and expressive capacity. At the same time, the situations and characters encountered in the stories allowed the recognition of emotions, the understanding of the other's perspective and the discussion of values such as respect, courage, solidarity and responsibility. Fiction can constitute a symbolic space in which the child explores emotions, intentions and social relationships without being directly exposed to the risks of a real situation (Oatley, 2016).

In the context of the rural environment, the narrative activities created links between the school universe, family experiences and the memory of the community. The students were able to capitalize on local stories, memories, traditions and situations close to their lives. By participating in activities in pairs and groups, emotional expression, listening, cooperation, assuming roles and developing prosocial behavior were pursued.

Figure 6. Conceptual model of narrative activities and their role in the socio-emotional development of students

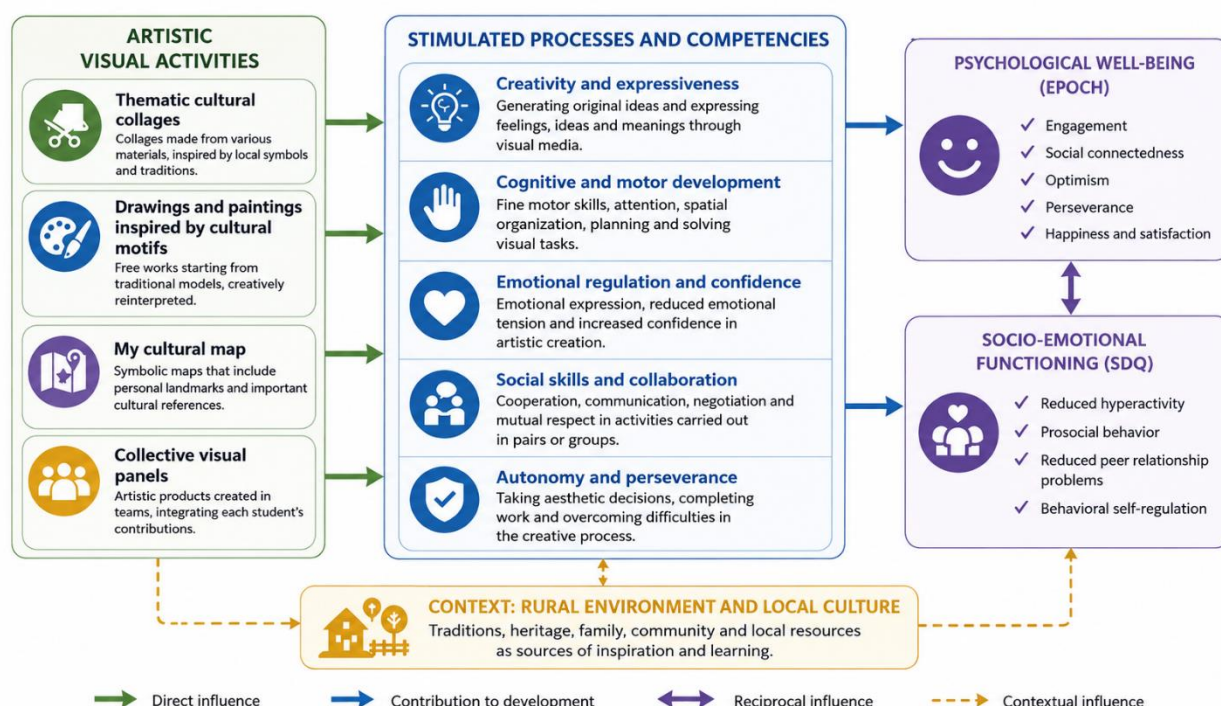


Visual art activities were introduced to stimulate students' creativity, aesthetic sensitivity, and ability to visually represent ideas, emotions, and personal experiences. With little access to museums, exhibitions and specialized workshops, the school offered direct contexts for artistic exploration through drawing, painting, modeling, collage, illustration and mixed media.

These activities aimed to develop attention, fine motor skills, spatial organization and perseverance. Making an artistic product involved choosing the materials, planning the work stages, maintaining attention and completing the task. Artistic activity has been valued both as a form of learning and symbolization, as well as as a way of personal expression, art facilitating the development of forms of knowledge that cannot be reduced to verbal language (Eisner, 2002).

The products made by the students were starting points for conversations about emotions, values and personal experiences. Collective activities, such as panels, collages and thematic exhibitions, involved negotiating ideas, distributing responsibilities and valuing the contribution of each child. In this way, visual creation supported both individual expression and social connection and group membership.

Figure 7. Conceptual model of visual artistic activities and their role in the socio-emotional development of students

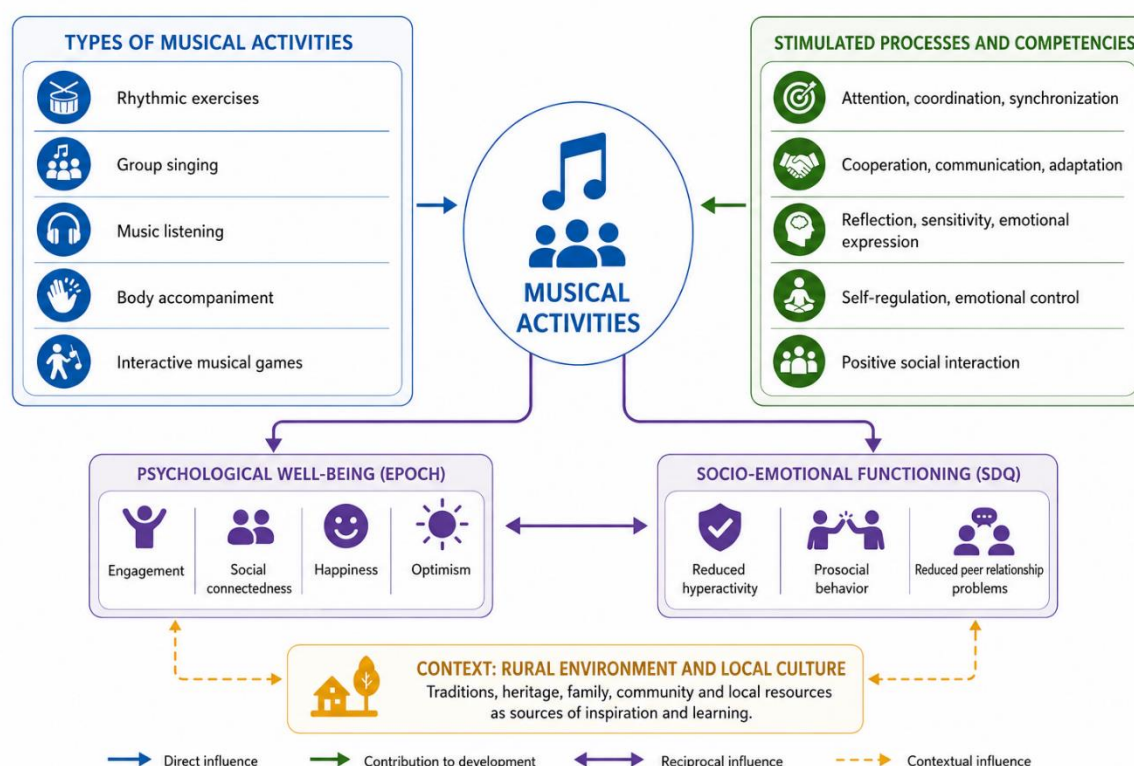


The musical activities aimed to develop expressiveness, attention, emotional regulation and collective participation. The students were involved in rhythmic exercises, songs, auditions, movement to music, accompaniment and the use of improvised instruments or sound objects. The accessible and repetitive nature of the exercises allowed the participation of all students, regardless of the previous musical experience.

By reproducing rhythms and coordinating movements, the students practiced maintaining attention, controlling impulses and adapting their behavior to the demands of the group. The collective singing and accompaniment required listening to others, respecting the common rhythm, waiting for the turn and synchronizing the actions. Music thus provided a structured and predictable framework for channeling energy and developing self-regulation.

The musical activities also contributed to creating a positive emotional climate. The students had the opportunity to express themselves, to cooperate and to experience the satisfaction of a common achievement. Mutual support, encouragement of colleagues, patience and coordination were prosocial behaviors practiced directly within the activities.

Figure 8. Conceptual model of musical activities and their role in the socio-emotional development of students



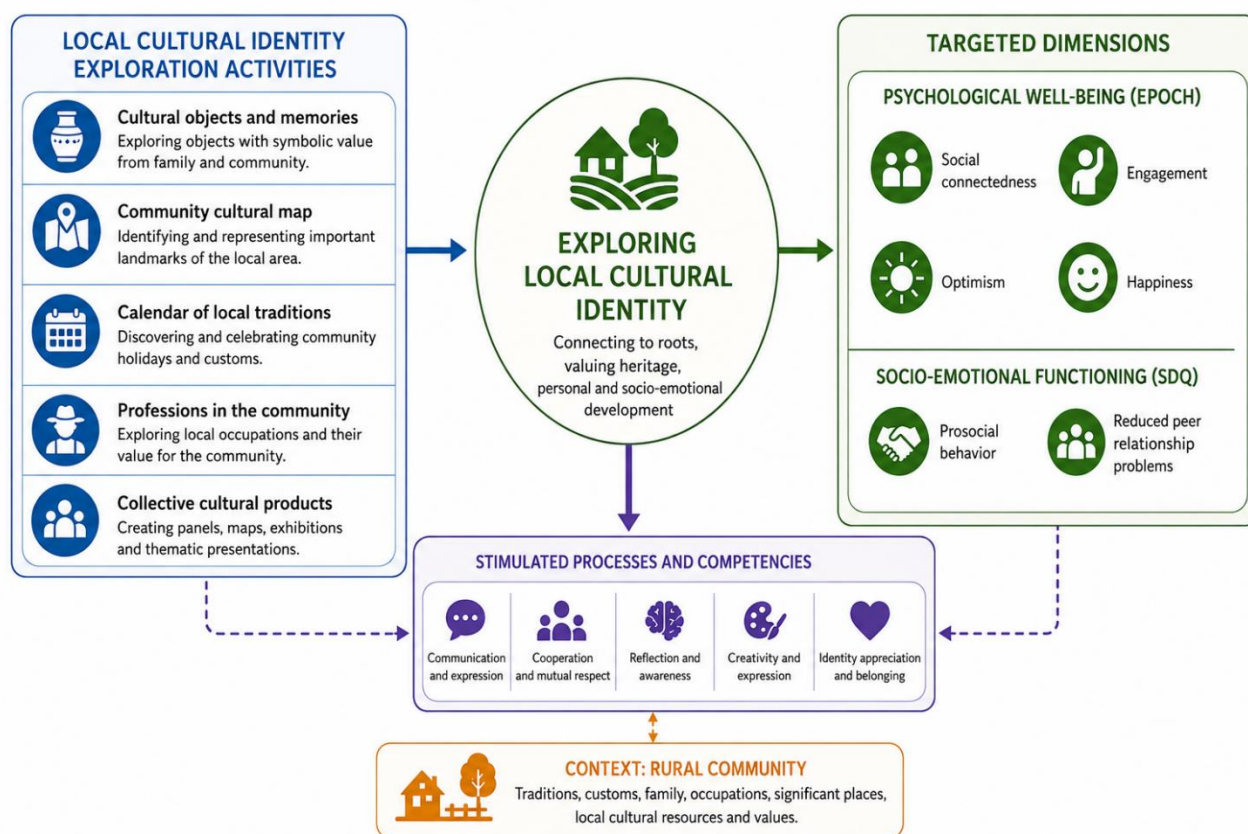
Activities exploring local cultural identity capitalized on children's experiences, community resources, and intergenerational relationships. The students were involved in identifying and representing traditions, places, occupations, objects, stories and symbols relevant to the space in which they live. These activities aimed to strengthen the sense of belonging and develop a conscious and valuing relationship to the community.

Among the activities carried out were the creation of the cultural map of the community, the construction of a calendar of local traditions, the exploration of trades and occupations in the community, dialogues and mini-interviews with family or community members and the creation of panels, exhibitions and thematic presentations. Through the Photovoice method, students were able to photograph elements considered significant and formulate explanations

and narratives about them, transforming the observation of the local environment into a process of reflection and participation (Chasciar & Roman, 2024).

The activities stimulated observation, communication, visual expression, symbolic thinking and information selection. Collective outputs involved cooperation, taking responsibility and integrating individual contributions into a common outcome. The local culture was used as a starting point for opening up to broader cultural values and experiences, without limiting the child to the immediate universe of the community.

Figure 9. Activities to explore the local cultural identity as a formative approach and the targeted dimensions



Monitoring participation and assessing progress accompanied the entire implementation process. The teachers and the researcher watched how the students got involved in the activities, cooperated, expressed their opinions and emotions, followed the rules, assumed roles and completed the tasks. The observations and monitoring notes allowed the adjustment of the activities according to the rhythm, interests and difficulties of the students.

The formative evaluation did not aim to assess the aesthetic quality of the products or to compare the artistic performances. The emphasis was placed on participation, effort,

individual progress, the ability to express oneself, cooperation and relationships. The feedback was constructive, being oriented towards valuing the contributions and supporting the students' confidence in their own possibilities.

Observations indicated a progressively greater willingness to participate and collaborate. Students became more willing to express their opinions, accept different perspectives, respect roles and contribute to joint activities. These changes provided relevant qualitative information on group dynamics and complemented the data obtained through the standardised EPOCH and SDQ tools.

By combining systematic observation, monitoring of implementation fidelity and pretest-posttest evaluation, a complex perspective on the students' evolution was obtained. The intervention created repeated contexts of cultural participation in which personal expression, behavioral regulation, social connection, and prosocial behavior could be stimulated and practiced.

Chapter VI. Analysis and interpretation of results

The data analysis aimed to evaluate the effects of the cultural educational program on the psychological well-being and socio-emotional functioning of students, as well as to identify the mechanisms by which social connection and active involvement contribute to the development of prosocial behavior. Descriptive analyses, t-tests for even and independent samples and mediation models were used, the significance level being set at $p < 0.05$.

The results obtained in the pretest indicated comparable levels of the experimental group and the control group, both for the dimensions of psychological well-being assessed by EPOCH and for the indicators of socio-emotional functioning measured by SDQ. The initial equivalence of the groups allowed the attribution of the differences observed later to the cultural educational intervention.

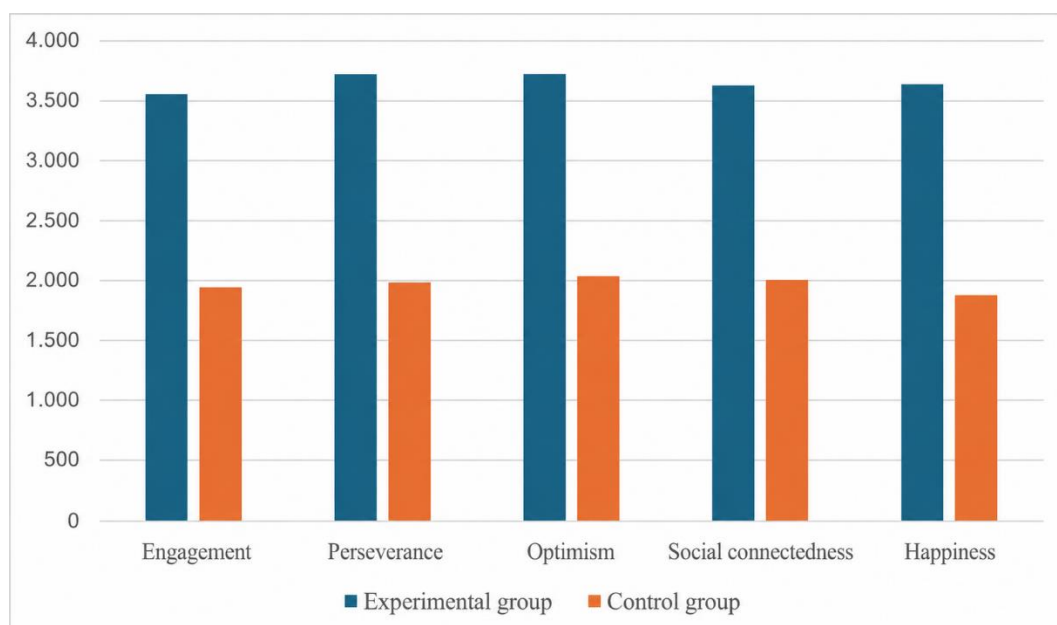
In the case of the EPOCH scale, students in the experimental group recorded statistically significant increases for all five dimensions analyzed: engagement, perseverance, optimism, social connection, and happiness. The average engagement score increased from 2,108 to 3,558, perseverance from 1,996 to 3,717, and optimism from 1,917 to 3,725. Social connection increased from 1,967 to 3,625, and happiness from 1,967 to 3,638. All differences were significant at the $p < 0.001$ level.

These results show that cultural activities supported active participation, maintenance of effort, confidence in the possibility of success, a sense of belonging and positive affective

states. The expressive, collaborative and non-competitive nature of the program provided students with contexts in which to feel valued, to show their initiative and to build positive relationships with others.

In the control group, scores remained relatively constant between pretest and posttest, with no statistically significant differences. In the post-test, the comparison between the groups showed significantly higher scores in the experimental group for all EPOCH dimensions, all values being significant at $p < 0.001$. The difference between the evolution of the two groups supports the specific impact of the intervention on psychological well-being.

Figure 13. Comparison of Psychological Well-Being Dimensions (EPOCH) between the experimental group and the post-test control group

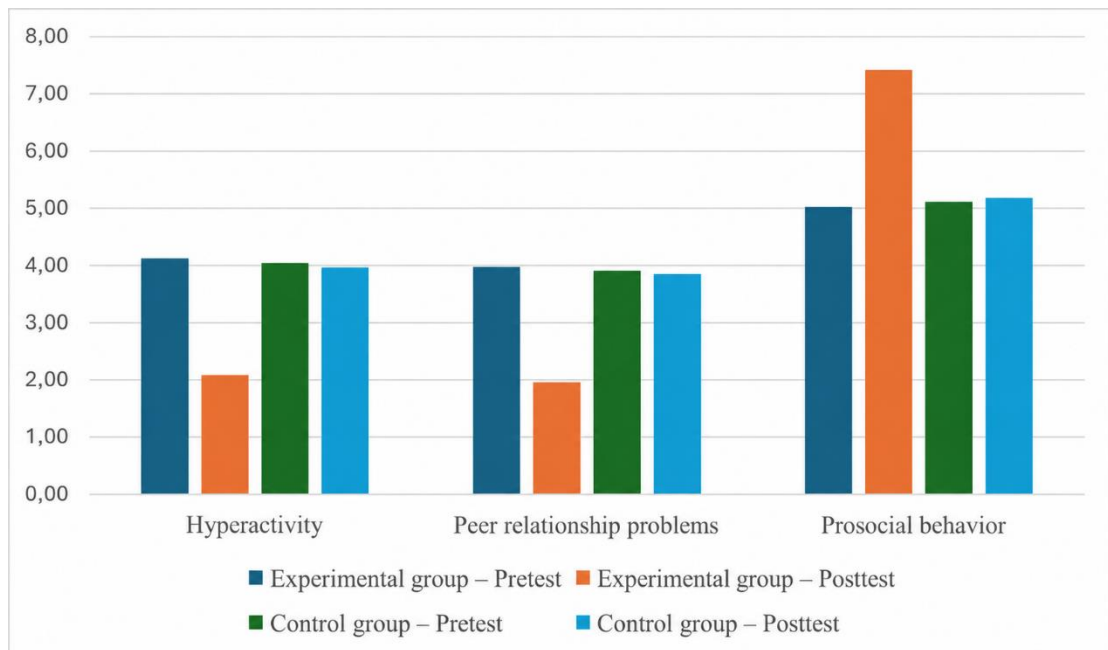


The results obtained through SDQ showed a favorable evolution of socio-emotional functioning in the experimental group. After the intervention, the students showed a lower level of hyperactivity and problems relating to peers, at the same time as an increase in prosocial behavior. No significant changes were identified in the control group between the two points in the assessment.

In the post-test, students in the experimental group obtained significantly lower scores in hyperactivity than students in the control group, the difference being significant at $p < 0.001$. Fewer difficulties in relating to peers were also identified, $p = 0.018$, as well as a significantly higher level of prosocial behavior, $p < 0.001$.

Reducing hyperactivity suggests improving the ability to concentrate, control impulses and adapt to the demands of activities. The decrease in relationship difficulties reflects a better integration into the group, and the increase in prosocial behavior indicates a greater availability for cooperation, help, empathy and compliance with common rules.

Figure 14. Evolution of socio-emotional functioning indicators (SDQ) according to the group and the time of evaluation



The mediation analyses aimed to deepen the processes by which behavioral self-regulation is associated with prosocial behavior. The first model examined the role of social connection, and the second the role of active engagement. In both models, the total effect of the hyperactivity indicator on prosocial behavior was statistically significant (Estimates = 1.093; $p < 0.001$).

In the first model, social connection significantly mediated the relationship between hyperactivity and prosocial behavior. The indirect effect was significant (Estimates = 0.462; $p < 0.001$) and the direct effect remained significant after the introduction of the mediator (Estimates = 0.631; $p = 0.002$). The result indicates a partial mediation and highlights the fact that the feeling of belonging, acceptance and quality of relationships with others are important mechanisms for the development of prosocial behavior.

In the second model, active involvement also played a significant mediating role. The indirect effect was 0.375, with $p = 0.008$, and the direct effect remained significant (Estimates = 0.719; $p < 0.001$). The model explains 29% of the variation in prosocial behavior and 38.1%

of the variation in active involvement, supporting the role of participation and engagement in pregnancy as mechanisms of socio-emotional adaptation.

The two models highlight complementary mechanisms. Social connection describes the relational path through which belonging and the quality of interactions support cooperative and helping behaviors. Active involvement describes the motivational and self-regulating path through which participation, concentration and perseverance facilitate prosocial conduct. The interpretation is consistent with the Self-Determination Theory, which emphasizes the role of the need for relationships and autonomous motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017), and with the perspective of positive child development, which highlights the importance of personal and contextual resources for adaptation (Lerner et al., 2015).

All the results support the efficiency of the "School as a space of living culture" program. The narrative, artistic, musical and exploration activities of the local cultural identity produced coherent changes at the affective, motivational, relational and behavioral levels. While the experimental group made significant progress, the control group maintained its relatively stable profile.

The results show that systematically organized cultural experiences can function as environments for psychological and socio-emotional development. The impact of the program is not only explained by the cultural content used, but also by the participatory and relational way in which the activities were organized. Cooperation, dialogue, creative expression and the realization of common products simultaneously supported psychological well-being, self-regulation and prosocial behavior.

Chapter VII. Conclusions and proposals

The research aimed to evaluate the impact of a program of cultural educational activities on the psychological well-being and socio-emotional functioning of young school-age students in rural areas. The approach integrated an evaluative dimension, oriented towards identifying the effects of the intervention, and an explanatory dimension, focused on the psychological and relational mechanisms through which cultural activities can contribute to the child's development.

The results confirm the effectiveness of the "School as a Space of Living Culture" program. The students in the experimental group made significant progress in terms of involvement, perseverance, optimism, social connection and happiness. At the same time, the reduction of hyperactivity and difficulties in relating to colleagues were highlighted, as well as

the increase in prosocial behavior. The stability of the control group's results supports the conclusion that the observed changes are associated with cultural educational intervention.

The narrative, artistic, musical and exploration activities of the local cultural identity created contexts in which the students were able to express themselves, cooperate, assume roles and contribute to the realization of common products. The effects of the program are not only explained by the cultural contents addressed, but also by the participatory, relational and reflective nature of the activities. Culture thus became lived experience, not just information transmitted.

Mediation analyses highlighted the role of social connection and active involvement in explaining prosocial behavior. Social connection expresses the importance of belonging, acceptance, and positive relationships, and active engagement reflects the contribution of participation, focus, and perseverance. The two mechanisms are complementary and confirm that socio-emotional development is supported both by the quality of relationships and by the child's authentic participation in educational activities.

From a theoretical point of view, the research supports the conceptualization of cultural education as an integrative pedagogical framework, capable of simultaneously mobilizing cognitive, affective, motivational and relational resources. The results confirm the relevance of socio-constructivist perspectives, according to which development occurs through interaction, mediation and participation in significant cultural practices (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1996). They are also consistent with the Self-Determination Theory, which highlights the role of autonomy, competence, and relatability in supporting motivation and psychological well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

An important theoretical contribution consists in the articulation of cultural education with the psychological well-being and socio-emotional functioning of the child in rural areas. The study goes beyond the perspective that cultural activities have a predominantly recreational role and demonstrates that they can constitute systematic contexts for the development of involvement, self-regulation, belonging and prosocial behavior.

Another contribution is the testing of the mediating role of social connection and active involvement. The research was not limited to ascertaining the effects of the program, but aimed to explain the processes by which change occurs. In this way, the results propose an integrative model in which cultural participation, psychological resources and social relationships together contribute to the child's adaptation.

From a practical point of view, the program can be a benchmark for the design of cultural interventions in rural schools. The proposed activities are accessible and can be adapted

to local resources, without permanently requiring specialized cultural infrastructure. Reading, storytelling, artistic creation, music, movement and exploration of local heritage can be integrated into curricular, extracurricular and community activities.

However, the application of the programme requires continuity and coherence. Cultural activities should not be limited to celebrations or occasional events, but integrated into the life of the school. It is necessary to organize repeated experiences, in which students can actively participate, express their opinions, cooperate and reflect on what they have lived. The mediation of the teacher is essential for transforming the contact with cultural products and practices into a formative experience.

The rural school can become a cultural center of the community by developing partnerships with the family, the library, the local administration, cultural institutions and resource persons. Parents, grandparents, artists, craftsmen and other members of the community can contribute to activities about traditions, local stories, occupations and heritage. At the same time, students must be facilitated access to national, universal and contemporary culture, so that the enhancement of local identity is accompanied by cultural openness.

The results also support the need for teacher training for the design and mediation of cultural activities. Teachers need methodological benchmarks on the integration of story, art, music and heritage in activities oriented towards socio-emotional development. The program can be used as a flexible model, which can be adapted to the particularities of the student body and the community context.

The research also has a number of limitations. The sample consisted of students from five rural schools in Arad County, which limits the generalization of the results to other regions and socio-cultural contexts. The quasi-experimental design and the constitution of the groups in relation to the existing organization of the classes did not allow the random distribution of the participants.

The evaluation was carried out by pre-test-post-test measurements, without a subsequent monitoring step, so that the persistence of the effects in the medium and long term cannot be established. The research also focused on selected dimensions of well-being and socio-emotional functioning. Mediation models have included social connection and active involvement, although optimism, happiness or perseverance could also perform explanatory functions.

Another limit concerns the weight of quantitative data. The broader inclusion of the perspectives of students, teachers and parents would have allowed us to capture the way in which the intervention was experienced, the meanings attributed to the activities and the

elements considered most valuable. These limits do not invalidate the results, but impose caution in interpretation and provide benchmarks for further research.

Future directions aim to extend the study to wider and more diverse samples from different regions and socio-cultural contexts. Comparing the rural environment with the urban environment could highlight the role of context in producing the effects of cultural education. Longitudinal research is also needed to maintain the results after the end of the intervention.

Future investigations may separately analyze the contribution of narrative, artistic, musical, and community activities, and may include other mediating or moderating variables. The integration of interviews, reflective diaries, systematic observation and products made by students would allow for a deeper understanding of participants' experiences and the mechanisms of change.

In conclusion, cultural education, conceived as a participatory, relational and meaningful experience, can be a valuable tool for supporting the harmonious development of the child, especially in environments characterized by reduced access to cultural resources. The main contribution of the thesis is to demonstrate that the pedagogical valorization of culture can produce effects on psychological well-being and socio-emotional functioning and can activate processes such as involvement, connection, self-regulation and belonging. Culture is not an ornament of education, but an essential resource for the formation of the child.

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