


## From legislative simulation to early civic engagement: Nurturing young minds for social change - The Brazilian case

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates how legislative simulation programs since 2003 have played a crucial role in imparting democratic values and socio-emotional education to children and adolescents. Since its inception in 2003, the program has undergone several enhancements to better foster citizenship and provide practical legislative experiences. The program's engaging and educational activities aim to develop key psychological skills such as autonomy, self-reflection, distancing, and self-determination, laying the foundation for democratic engagement and coexistence. Moreover, the study emphasizes how digital activities significantly enhance the internalization of democratic values and socio-emotional skills among participants. While individual factors play a role, the predominant influence stems from societal practices and values. This innovative approach not only educates young citizens about legislative processes, but also instills in them the principles of democracy and active participation. In conclusion, the study underscores the program's vital contribution to nurturing informed, reflective, and participatory individuals—key to building a just and democratic society.

**Keywords:** Legislative simulation programs, Education for democracy, Democratic beliefs and values, Child and adolescent citizenship protagonism, Autonomy and civic self-reflection.

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## INTRODUCTION

The primary objective of this study is to highlight the key theoretical components in the creation and delivery of socio-emotional and democratic education programs within legislative simulation programs initiative. It seeks to enhance the role of children and adolescents in citizenship, aiming to cultivate autonomy and the capacity for self-reflection from a young age. Research shows that the social participation of young people is often undervalued by societies, a challenge that necessitates intervention (SARMENTO, 2005; COUTO JUNIOR *et al.*, 2018; QVORTRUP, 2017). According to Pires and Branco (2007; 2023a, 2023b), innovative educational strategies are essential for fostering cultural change and combating societal biases. As such, spreading socio-emotional and democratic education among the younger generations is crucial for their personal growth, helping to dismantle entrenched prejudices and encourage the adoption of positive societal norms and values. This approach is informed by Cultural Psychology (VALSINER, 2014, 2021), which serves as the theoretical framework for our analysis.

From this perspective, we can explain that child and adolescent development occurs amid social and personal practices that manifest in different environments, such as families, schools, parliaments, and other collectives. These environments compose the cultural ecosystems (XU; WU; LI, 2021) in which everyone of us develops. The practices, tasks, and interactions in these contexts are organized around a set of symbolic and emotional elements called beliefs and values. These are essential psychological constructs, with affective-semiotic characteristics, guiding human action (BRANCO, 2021). Influencing individuals' perceptions, feelings, thoughts, and actions, they become central elements in the conscious decision-making process (BRANCO, 2021; PIRES; BRANCO, 2023a; VALSINER, 2014, 2021). The main difference between beliefs and values is that the latter are more deeply intertwined in the affective dimension, making them more resistant to change, though they can also be subject to transformation or re-signification (BRANCO, 2021; VALSINER, 2021). This understanding is very important, as it allows us intelligibility on the formation of prejudices throughout ontogenesis.

Prejudice consists of a rational-affective unit of the same nature as beliefs and values. The rational part comprises premises that do not need any evidence support. Typically, these are premises overgeneralized to all its subjects or objects. For example, someone might believe that people wearing white shirts are all naive. Then, over time, this premise intertwines with contempt and reaches all people who wear any white shirt. This emotion (contempt) begins to regulate the behaviors, the thoughts and the decisions of this person towards all those wearing white shirts. Considering the elements that constitute and maintain this cognitive-affective unit, it is possible to infer that arguing against a generalized premise that does not stand on evidence is futile, which is



why the affective dimension is the central element regulating the expressions of contempt presented by our hypothetical prejudiced subject in the example.

This is why socio-emotional learning is a good alternative for facing any type of prejudice, which can be carried out digitally, as we will show. Keeping these theoretical elements in mind, let's look a bit at the history of the first Brazilian legislative simulation program.

### **BRIEF HISTORY OF LEGISLATIVE SIMULATION FOR YOUNGSTERS IN BRAZIL**

As Costa and Melo (2010) tell us, the first program was conceived in 2002 by an initiative from a group of public servants of the Chamber of Deputies who presented the original idea in a contest. The authors note that Plenarinho was named with the intent of encouraging children and adolescents to cultivate citizenship, articulated through three foundational aims: (1) providing fun and easily accessible educational activities, alongside democratizing access to legislative information; (2) supplying resources for simulating the legislative process; and (3) fostering favorable perceptions among young people towards the Chamber of Deputies. This was, in itself, an innovative pedagogical proposal for the time.

From its creation to the present day, visual and textual languages have been adapted to the target audience, and special didactic resources have been used to engage the user in the construction of the proposed knowledge, a process that has undergone various improvements over time. An example of this strategy was the creation of characters, which stimulated identification between children and the content offered on the portal.

Costa and Melo (2010) also tell us that, in August 2004, Plenarinho was launched nationally and soon in the first few months reached an average of four thousand visits per day. At that time, activities were developed that provided a more personal interaction of Deputies with the target audience. Equally important was the introduction of activities to simulate the legislative process and the democratization of access to legislative information.

The expanded understanding of the program's significance for socio-emotional learning and democracy has transformed it into an initiative in constant refinement and innovative transformation. In 2010, strategic planning was developed, leading to improved organization and structuring of the pedagogical proposal. Within this context, the broadening scope of the main objective directed the creation of activities aimed at empowering its audience, marking another moment of qualitative and innovative leap in proposals. According to Meneguim (2017), although the Chamber of Deputies remains the institutional content core, the focus shifted towards fostering a new political consciousness in children and adolescents, opening spaces for their participation and protagonism.

From an educational standpoint, actions have been supported by Ribeiro's (2022) concept of political literacy, which involves learning about acting in public life and social contexts through



knowledge, skills, and citizen values. This includes building knowledge and experiences about public institutions; laws; processes and issues; skills for analyzing and proposing solutions; and dispositions to engage and believe in the power to influence society.

Without altering its main objectives, in 2013, the portal underwent a significant overhaul in content presentation, activities, and digital architecture, which continues to be improved. Despite technological innovations, the main purpose remained to bridge the Parliament and the child and adolescent public, by promoting positive attitudes towards the Chamber of Deputies and facilitating the internalization of beliefs and values that encourage socio-emotional education, pro-social behaviors, and democratic and citizen coexistence, which will be analyzed further.

### **CULTURAL ECOSYSTEM, HUMAN DEVELOPMENT, AND LEGISLATIVE SIMULATION FOR YOUNGSTERS**

The concept of a cultural ecosystem (XU; WU; LI, 2021) highlights the dynamic interaction between individuals and the socio-cultural environment they inhabit. It focuses on the interactions all humans establish on various levels, emphasizing possible reflections for both, society and individuals. In this context, the Chamber of Deputies' civic seeds can be considered a component of this cultural ecosystem, providing an educational and interactive environment where children and adolescents learn about the legislative process, the functioning of the Legislative Power, and democratic principles in a practical and engaging manner.

By simulating legislative sessions, debates, and votes, students are encouraged to make decisions and understand the impact of their actions within the political context. Psychologically, this experience constitutes a set of social practices that channel the internalization of pro-social personal beliefs and values (PIRES; BRANCO, 2023a). Like prejudices, beliefs and values are also rational-affective units of meaning that guide our decisions and behaviors.

The internalization process involves a strong intertwining between personal values and human affectivity, reinforcing the understanding that the theoretical treatment of this topic should not be solely rational but also consider the special emergence of values from the affective-semiotic fields that become hyper-generalized as they are internalized and experienced by individuals across various environments and their social interactions (BRANCO, 2021).

Pires (2023a) provides a detailed view on how individual values are built within emotional experiences and how they bring to the forefront the influence of affective processes on the outcome of the internalization of social values. Many challenges in creating more democratic environments can be overcome by developing new educational strategies capable of mobilizing the affective-semiotic fields of children and adolescents in a new direction. Our conception of deconstructing



prejudices involves focusing the deconstructive effort on the affective-semiotic component and, after this dimension shows changes, then addressing the flawed premises (PIRES, 2024a, 2024b, 2023a).

As a result of internalization, this playful-didactic environment contributes to forming conscious, critical, and engaged citizens, motivating and equipping them to actively participate in political and democratic life. From a psychological perspective and the centrality of emotions and the role that beliefs and values play in human decision-making processes (PIRES; BRANCO, 2023a, 2023b), we conclude that the simulated legislative activities, the involvement of the child and adolescent public, and their implications in psychological processes far exceed the analytical possibilities of the concept of political literacy.

Since the inception of the first legislative simulation program for children and adolescents in Brazil, the initiative has proliferated across local legislatures. This pioneering effort has not only introduced young Brazilians to the intricacies of their governmental system but also ignited a widespread interest in civic education throughout the country. As a result, numerous local parliaments have adopted similar programs, expanding the reach of this educational approach. This expansion reflects a growing recognition of the importance of early engagement in democratic processes, fostering a generation of informed and active citizens equipped to contribute to the democratic fabric of their communities.

By offering online educational resources such as games and teaching materials, programs like that can expand their reach, allowing more people to access these knowledges and engage with political and social issues as ambiances for the development of important social and individual skills essential for maturing psychological capacities like distancing. Distancing, the foundation of autonomy development, is the ability through which a human being can analyze their actions as if they were a third person, enabling the development of individual skill to act autonomously, responsibly, and self-reflectively (GLĂVEANU, 2020).

Furthermore, they promote interaction among students, providing opportunities for dialogue, debate, and collective idea construction. Analyzed from a psychological perspective, this aspect gains importance since learning and development processes occur in a historical, social, and cultural context, where interaction and the exchange of perspectives are essential for constructing personal meanings, individual identity formation, and the transformation of collective practices (VALSINER, 2016, 2021).

Emphasizing the relevance of interactions in the construction of subjectivity, we consider as subjects of this ecosystem both the team formulating and maintaining the playful-pedagogical activities and the children and adolescents. All these subjects are bio-cultural hybrid beings with advanced psychological capacities for semiotic operation, distancing, and self-determination (MARTIN; GILLESPIE, 2010). Thus, these educational programs fit into the concept of a cultural



ecosystem in Cultural Psychology by creating an educational and interactive environment that promotes civic awareness, participatory citizenship development, and social interaction, contributing to the formation of engaged individuals active in democratic society and the necessary autonomy that will support these individual practices.

## **SOCIO-EMOTIONAL LEARNING**

Socio-emotional learning is an encompassing and crucial concept aimed at nurturing emotional, social, and interpersonal skills in individuals (BARBOSA; SANTOS; PARANAHYBA, 2021). This education focuses on enhancing abilities to comprehend and manage emotions, forge healthy relationships, make sound decisions, and address challenges and conflicts constructively. The goal of socio-emotional learning is to foster emotionally intelligent individuals who can effectively interact with themselves and others.

It's important not to confuse the advancement of socio-emotional growth with simplistic training that fails to account for the cultural ecology aspects previously discussed. Nevertheless, the impact of socio-emotional learning in combating biases and violence is significant, urging the continuous development of socio-emotional concepts and strategies beyond superficial or pseudoscientific methods. By promoting emotional insight and empathy, individuals are more inclined to grasp different viewpoints, diminishing the perpetuation of stereotypes and biases. Additionally, socio-emotional learning cultivates more inclusive and tolerant settings, encouraging the peaceful resolution of disputes.

By bolstering communication and negotiation skills, socio-emotional learning equips individuals to tackle interpersonal challenges effectively, reducing the likelihood of conflict and escalation of violence. Hence, implementing socio-emotional learning broadly across educational institutions and society plays a vital role in endorsing values of respect, empathy, and mutual understanding, thereby fostering a more equitable world (CANETTIERI; PARANAHYBA, 2021).

Interactions are instrumental in shaping individuality and identity, as highlighted by Valsiner (2016, 2021). From this perspective, the programs for democracy education significantly contributes to socio-emotional learning by offering a digital platform where children and adolescents can adopt democratic values, cultivate essential psychological skills, and proactively participate in societal activities, thereby nurturing autonomous and aware citizens.

## **CONCLUSION**

The programs for democracy education, established to enhance citizenship education and the hands-on experience of Brazil's legislative process since 2003, have seen various stages of development over time. Their engaging and educational activities have been instrumental in



developing the skills of distancing and self-determination, which are crucial for fostering democratic and civic coexistence.

Although the activities of such programs are designed to mirror the proceedings of the legislative process, their impact extends much further. Through providing experiences that encourage the adoption and internalization of democratic principles, beliefs, and values. The success of this internalization process is influenced by numerous personal factors but is primarily shaped by societal practices and values. In this milieu, the programs for democracy education plays a pivotal role in molding aware and critical individuals, reinforcing democratic ideals and highlighting the significance of individual engagement in evolving society towards more equitable and democratic interactive environments.



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