




Article

“Learn to Fly”: Nurturing Child Development, Intergenerational Connection, and Social Engagement

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Abstract: Learn to Fly was developed between February 2022 and March 2023 with the goal of fostering greater social participation and intergenerational dialogue around the recognition and solution of pertinent social issues through the development of psychological flexibility and socioemotional competences in children at the start of their academic careers. Based on a participatory methodology and the concepts of the third generation of Cognitive Behavioral Therapies (CBTs) and ACT (Acceptance Commitment Therapy), the target audience included children of ages 5 and 6 (pre-school and first grade), their teachers, and their families. The Learn to Fly pilot initiative was implemented in eight partner institutions on the Portuguese mainland with the participation of 289 children, their families, and 22 educators. Learn to Fly was evaluated after 12 weeks of implementation using a combination of methodologies, including interviews, focus groups, and pre- and post-tests. Teachers emphasized that the initiative brought families closer to the school, thereby strengthening connections between the school and the community, when analyzing the impact of the project on the school community. Positive changes were observed in the children’s behaviors, particularly with respect to hyperactivity, relationship problems with colleagues, prosocial behavior, socioemotional skills, their perceptions of their participation in various scenarios (their city and country), and intergenerational dialogue with their parents. In addition to the teachers’ preconceived notions about child participation, they became more aware of the possibility of children having a say in decision-making and discovered that the program promoted this aspect. Presently equipped with resources, it is envisaged that teachers trained to implement Learn to Fly will play a significant role in promoting positive child development and social engagement.

Keywords: children; social participation and engagement in childhood; active citizens; intergenerational dialogue; psychological flexibility



Academic Editor: Todd Michael Franke

Received: 17 December 2024
Revised: 19 February 2025
Accepted: 25 February 2025
Published: 19 March 2025

Citation: Gaspar de Matos, M., Branquinho, C., Noronha, C., Moraes, B., & Gaspar, T. (2025). “Learn to Fly”: Nurturing Child Development, Intergenerational Connection, and Social Engagement. *Youth*, 5(1), 32. <https://doi.org/10.3390/youth5010032>

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1. Introduction

Childhood is a crucial period characterized by a variety of developmental changes and obstacles. Individuals can develop skills at any point in their lives, but children have greater potential for acquiring cognitive, emotional, social, and adaptive skills that assist them in navigating life’s challenges (Cook & Coley, 2017). Thus, it is essential to

prioritize cultivating personal and social skills during the early years of life (Matos, 2020). Psychological flexibility also constitutes an important factor regarding psychological health throughout life (Ruiz, 2010). Specifically, regarding children, the literature states that promoting psychological flexibility results in more adaptive behaviors and less aggressive behavior in this age (Ruiz & Perete, 2015). According to Black (2022), children tend to respond satisfactorily to this approach, given the interactive and experiential nature of the techniques used. The intervention starts with a simple approach which uses uncomplicated language and accessible exercises (Black, 2022).

These interventions contribute to well-being, academic performance, and a proactive approach to preventing the development of hazardous behaviors (Taylor et al., 2017). Prioritizing the development of socioemotional competencies alongside academic achievement results in a more positive developmental trajectory and overall adjustment across multiple domains throughout an individual's lifetime (Chernyshenko et al., 2018; Elias et al., 2015; Pace et al., 2019).

According to the positive development theory, adolescents possess an innate capacity for growth and development that can be fostered (J. V. Lerner et al., 2009; Tomé et al., 2019). Positive development programs seek to reduce risks and empower participants by leveraging their strengths and skills. Children and adolescents are encouraged to take an active role in their development, which assists them in adapting to their respective environments and thriving (Matos, 2020; Matos et al., 2015). The literature states that programs that aim to promote health and well-being with a positive development approach are essentially oriented towards the flourishing of young people and children as active subjects in producing changes in their contexts, but also towards the development of skills to produce these changes (Matos, 2020). Therefore, the focus is on maximizing health and well-being through the promotion of health behaviors and socioemotional and life skills (Matos, 2020). Based on this premise, it makes sense that the most efficient way to do this is to support young people and children to develop their maximum potential (Matos et al., 2015; Michie et al., 2011) by helping them to identify and use resources, by empowering their talents and identifying their strengths, and especially by including them in decision-making, using open and fair communication as well as promoting intergenerational dialogue (C. Branquinho & de Matos, 2019; C. Branquinho et al., 2020a; R. M. Lerner et al., 2006). It is therefore essential to acknowledge that the social environment surrounding children, such as their family, school, and community, has a significant impact on their ability to reach their maximum potential (J. V. Lerner et al., 2009). Even with sufficient growth resources, a dearth of supportive opportunities in their environments can impede positive change (Michie et al., 2011). It is essential to create inclusive and supportive environments that value children's participation and their capacity to shape their own lives, allowing them to implement their skills and realize their full potential (C. Branquinho & de Matos, 2019; R. M. Lerner et al., 2006; C. Branquinho et al., 2020a).

Despite the worldwide recognition of children's participation rights since the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, implementing these rights continues to encounter practical challenges and barriers (Burger, 2017; Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2020).

Promoting social participation requires allowing children to communicate their views, express themselves, and make decisions in an environment that promotes openness and intergenerational dialogue (Baraldi, 2008; Le Borgne & Tisdall, 2017; Kennan et al., 2019). Children with strong social communication skills are more likely to engage in diverse activities and participate more actively, according to research (Khalifa et al., 2020). Therefore, it is essential to implement measures that encourage children's meaningful and collaborative participation, fostering a two-way flow of ideas (Clark & Richards, 2017).

According to studies, children have a significant impact on shaping social choices, which leads to their development and benefits society (Gibbs et al., 2018; Checkoway, 2011). Participating in social activities can have long-term benefits that extend beyond immediate experiences and may include participation in a variety of social contexts. Children wield enormous power to influence social decisions, contribute to their development, and enrich the community, according to research (van Bijleveld et al., 2021; Skauge et al., 2021; Ozer et al., 2020). Engaging in social activities can result in long-term benefits that transcend individual experiences and entail participation in a vast array of social spheres (C. Branquinho & de Matos, 2019; C. Branquinho et al., 2017; Matos et al., 2024).

Programs that aimed to promote social participation in children and adolescents have been documented in the literature and proven successful. A national study called Dream Teens, whose main objective was to promote the social participation and active citizenship of young Portuguese people, was developed in 2014 (Matos et al., 2015; C. Branquinho & de Matos, 2019). The project was successful in promoting decision-making and empowering young people and is now an ongoing project that promotes positive development and social participation in various contexts of young people's life (C. Branquinho et al., 2016; Frasquilho et al., 2018). Based on this project, and bearing in mind the importance of promoting social participation during childhood, Dream Teens originated the Dream Kids Project in 2016—giving a voice to children, which, along similar lines to the previous project, included children between the ages of eight and nine (C. Branquinho et al., 2017). The goal was to emphasize the social participation of children as a promoter of well-being and positive development and to promote their social participation in topics such as school, family, and socioemotional skills. This project also included an important component of promoting intergenerational dialogue (student–school community relationship) (C. Branquinho et al., 2017).

The present study aims to evaluate the pilot implementation of an intervention targeted at children aged 5–6 years old, the “Learn to Fly” program, aiming at fostering positive child development, intergenerational dialogue, and social engagement, involving children, their teachers, and their families. This program builds upon the methodological framework and objectives of previous initiatives, such as Dream Teens and Dream Kids, which aimed to promote social participation and active citizenship among children and youth.

The Learn to Fly Program

This innovative project in Portugal has the following as its motto: involving the generations of tomorrow, and supporting and facilitating the construction of a healthier, fairer, more dignified, and more socially active society. Based on this premise, and based on a participatory methodology and concepts from the third generation of Cognitive Behavioral Therapies/ACT (ACT—Acceptance Commitment Therapy), in the context of universal prevention, the pilot study was aimed at children aged 5 and 6 years old (pre-school and first cycle of basic education), also including educators, teachers, and families.

Focused on promoting social participation and dialogue between generations through identification of and action on relevant social issues, this project also aimed to promote the development of greater psychological flexibility, openness, curiosity, autonomy, and self-regulation in children at the beginning of their school career.

During the twelve-week course, participating children were invited to follow stories included in the program manual about five children who wanted to change the world and were faced with different problems. Each week was dedicated to a specific theme: program introduction; flexibility; school; friendship; family; street and neighborhood; city; country; planet; world; and, finally, the closing of the program.

2. Materials and Methods

The Learn to Fly experiment began in 2022 and lasted fifteen months (March 2022 through May 2023). It began with the development of the program’s manual, based on a participatory methodology and on the concepts of the third generation of Cognitive Behavioral Therapies/ACT (Acceptance Commitment Therapy) and intended for children ages 5 and 6 (pre-school and first grade), their teachers, and their families. It was implemented with the assistance of eight national partners. This project’s objective was inspired by a story about five children with varying psychological, physical, family, life, and cultural characteristics—Lucas, Eva, Artur, Renata, and Nastya—who are challenged by a parrot to become more socially participative, to engage in dialogue with previous generations, and to become more psychologically flexible. The manual set the tone for the work with the 5- to 6-year-old Learn to Fly participants (Matos et al., 2024). The figure below shows the structure of the program (Figure 1).

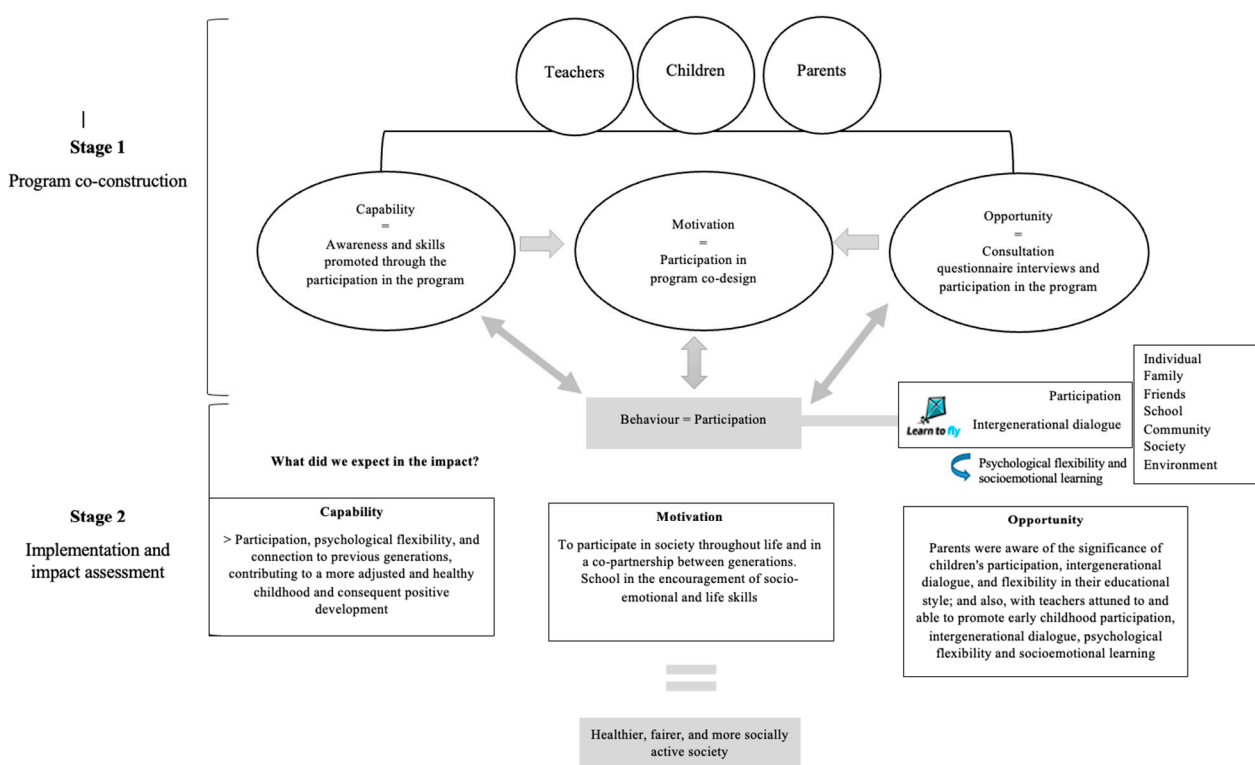


Figure 1. Learn to Fly implementation.

2.1. Stage 1—Program Co-Construction

Recognizing that children, teachers, and parents should play an active role in this work, all actors participated in the co-construction of the manual by filling out a questionnaire to gain insight into the program’s development.

In October 2022, a 12-session implementation manual (Table 1) was finalized and made available to teachers. This manual compiled scientific literature, methodology, and evaluation techniques. Using the scientific literature, methodology, and evaluation procedures, a manual comprising a 12-session program to be implemented by trained instructors over the course of 12 weeks during the 2022–2023 school year was constructed (Table 1).

Table 1. Structure of Learn to Fly program.

Week	Session	Theme	Dynamics/Activities
Introduction to the program	1	Pre-test and program presentation	Group cohesion/the parrot in the room; debate/ children can also take part; artistic expression/a drawing, an action
Flexibility	2 and 3	I am flexible. . .	Self-knowledge/the mirror of the I; guess/who will it be; reading/the good egg and the bad seed; puzzle/emotions have faces; game/bingo; debate/my thoughts; debate/try not to think about chocolate cake; movie/amusingly enough
School	4	I have an idea for my school. . .	Debate/and the school. . . what is it for; photo/through our eyes; school visit/welcome to our school; school exploration/the explorer; interview/Mr. Principal, tell me more, please; song/a song for my school
Friendship	5	I have an idea for my friends. . .	Debate/what is the true meaning of friendship; game/blindfolded; game/a good friend is; drawing/who is who; drawing/being strong; interview/tell me more about yourself
Family	6	I have an idea for my home. . .	Debate/me and my house; presentation/show and tell; music/music festival at school; artistic expression/the sociogram; drawing/my family is special; music/my family's song
Street and neighborhood	7	I have an idea for my street/neighborhood. . .	Exploration and debate/the street of shapes; reading/a story about neighbors; exploration and debate/street inspectors; finding solutions/a good deed for the school street; artistic expression/my neighbors; drawing/map of my street
City	8	I have an idea for my city. . .	Fantasy/the city's professions; debate/the city's resource checklist; exploration/the history of my city; riddles/the riddle game; debate/the ideal city; exploration/a tour of my city
Country	9	I have an idea for my country. . .	Sharing experiences/the diversity festival; debate/decisions and dilemmas; assembly/our class assembly; debate/and Portugal was born; debate/my rights and duties; drawing/what if I were president
Planet	10	I have an idea for planet Earth. . .	Painting/a more colorful school, a more sustainable school; collages/planet-friendly food; debate/the world without. . . ; artistic expression/from garbage to art; exploration/garbage in nature; debate/I can make a difference
World	11	I have an idea for the world. . .	Debate and artistic expression/I choose and do what is important; socializing/the day of the future; artistic expression/citizen of the world; reading/diversity
Program closing	12	Post-test and program closing	Artistic expression/Learn to Fly mural; artistic expression/collection of moments

2.2. Stage 2—Program Implementation and Impact Assessment

Teachers involved in its implementation participated in training sessions. The duration of the one-time training sessions was approximately three hours. A webinar was also conducted for parents to explain the aims of the program and help promote their own psychological flexibility in parenting.

To accompany and stimulate the participation of teachers and parents during the program's implementation, weekly interaction sessions for teachers and parents and a WhatsApp group for teachers were implemented. E-mail was the preferred method of communication between instructors and the research team.

The program also included a pre- and post-test evaluation using online questionnaires directed at the children, their parents, and teachers.

At the end, as a complement to the impact assessment, focus groups were held in each of the eight partner institutions.

2.3. Participants

The Learn to Fly program was attended by 289 children and their families and 22 teachers.

2.4. Instruments

2.4.1. Qualitative

To initiate the co-development of Learn to Fly, three initial online questionnaires with open-ended interview questions were developed:

1. Administered to groups of 5–6-year-olds by their teachers, this survey asked how the program could be made more engaging and effective.
2. Addressed to teachers who would be implementing the project, this survey aimed to investigate the needs the teachers identified in children and the strategies that should be included in the project manual, the work to be developed with parents and teachers in the context of promoting more-positive child development, and what could make Learn to Fly more effective.
3. Applied to parents, this survey focused on the needs they identified in their children and the corresponding strategies that should be included in the project manual, the work to be developed with teachers in the context of encouraging more positive child development, and what could make Learn to Fly more effective.

For the project's final evaluation, a semi-structured interview script was developed and used in focus groups with each of the eight educational institutions that participated in the pilot study in order to investigate the difficulties encountered, the impact of the program, and future recommendations.

2.4.2. Quantitative

To evaluate the project and examine its impact, a quantitative study was also conducted using a pre- and post-test administered to the participating children, their parents, and the instructors who implemented the program. The design of the instrument was based on the following formats:

1. Children
 - It's Easy for Me Scale (an adapted and abbreviated version of the "For me it's easy" scale developed by Gaspar and Matos (Gaspar & De Matos, 2015)): A 5-point Likert scale from 1 = Never to 5 = Always. The reduced and adapted scale had two dimensions, whose items were selected based on the aims of the program: the "Me with Me subscale" (e.g., for me it's easy to follow rules, for me it's easy to control my emotions and behaviors), which had 8 items and a Cronbach's Alpha value of $\alpha = 0.891$, and the "Me and the Others subscale" (e.g., for me it's easy to make friends, for me it's easy to help other people), which had 9 items and a Cronbach's Alpha value of $\alpha = 0.865$).
 - SDQ Questionnaire (Goodman, 1997), adapted for Portugal by Fleitlich et al. (2004) which contained the following: emotional symptoms (e.g., has a lot of worries, always seems worried; is often sad, discouraged, or tearful), with 5 items and a Cronbach's Alpha value of $\alpha = 0.75$; behavior problems (e.g., gets nervous very easily and throws a lot of tantrums; often lies or cheats), with 5 items and a Cronbach's Alpha value of $\alpha = 0.63$; hyperactivity (e.g., he is restless, very agitated, he never stops still; feathers on things before doing them), with 5 items and a Cronbach's Alpha value of $\alpha = 0.766$; relationship problems with colleagues

(e.g., has at least one good friend; in general the other children like him), with 5 items and a Cronbach's Alpha value of $\alpha = 0.42$; prosocial behavior (e.g., is sensitive to the others' feelings; is friendly and kind with younger children), with 5 items and a Cronbach's Alpha value of $\alpha = 0.687$; a 3-point Likert scale (from 0 = extremely false to 2 = extremely true); and total difficulties (all questions except prosocial behavior; $\alpha = 0.813$, 20 items).

- Children's Psychological Flexibility Questionnaire, teacher version (adapted and abbreviated version from the Children's Psychological Flexibility Questionnaire (Dixon & Paliliunas, 2018) which measured total psychological flexibility (e.g., the child is attentive and aware of what happens around them; a child apparently has the best face to behave well every day) using 6 items, with a value for Cronbach's Alpha for the survey of $\alpha = 0.731$, and a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 = Never to 5 = Always).

2. Teachers

- Questionnaire to Assess Kindergarten Teachers' Understanding of the Right to Participate—beliefs related to children (Lopes et al., 2016)—adapted and abbreviated version. This measured beliefs related to child participation (e.g., children of 5/6 years should not be overloaded with decisions; children of 5/6 years old have the competency to organize themselves accordingly and develop useful projects in the classroom) using 7 items, with a Cronbach's Alpha value of $\alpha = 0.562$, on a 5-point Likert scale (from 0 = Totally disagree to 4 = Totally agree).
- Additionally, the extent to which teachers considered that Learn to Fly would promote/promoted social participation in childhood, intergenerational dialogue, psychological flexibility, openness, curiosity, autonomy, self-regulation, socio-emotional skills, connection with school, family, community, and society was studied (11-point Likert scale from 0 = Nothing to 4 = A lot).

3. Parents

- KIDSCREEN-10 (Gaspar & Matos, 2008): 10 items (e.g., your child felt full of energy; your child felt sad) and a 6-point Likert scale (from 0 = Nothing to 5 = A lot).

2.5. Data Analysis

2.5.1. Qualitative

Qualitative data were examined based on content analysis and analyzed using the MAXQDA 2020 software for qualitative data analysis.

2.5.2. Quantitative

Quantitative data were collected using online pre- and post-test instruments and analyzed using SPSS version 28 quantitative analysis software. Using descriptive statistics, the data were analyzed. Previously, the scales were analyzed, and their Cronbach's Alphas were determined. The children's data were analyzed using the t-test for paired samples, while the teacher and parent questionnaires were analyzed using the Wilcoxon test due to their small sample sizes. The normality and homogeneity of the data were tested, and the assumptions were not met, further supporting the choice of the Wilcoxon test. A 0.05 significance level was set.

3. Results

3.1. Stage 1—Initial Qualitative Study—Program Co-Design

Eight children, seventeen teachers, and twenty-four parents were surveyed via interview questionnaires.

In this exercise, based on the interview questionnaires, in which the various actors had the opportunity to collaborate on the construction of the program manual, it was mentioned that it would be necessary to make the program even more effective and appealing:

- From the children's point of view, it could consist of activities, stories, conversations, experiences, films, theater, cinema, and the development of a book. Regarding intergenerational dialogue, they believed it could be enhanced through joint activities in which they could learn stories and nursery rhymes, cook and crochet with previous generations, teach them new songs and nursery rhymes, play computer and PlayStation games, recycle, and meditate.
- From the perspective of the teachers, the program needed to include material on the self-regulation of children as well as dynamics like movement accompanied by music, drawings, paintings, dramatizations, dance, stories, exchanges with other schools, family dynamics, and activities. According to them, group discussions, cooperative work, school–community–family work, the development of social initiatives, and social gatherings could encourage social participation among children. On the other hand, engaging in conversation about work-related issues, celebrating holidays, hosting social events, implementing activities in daycare centers, and using social media could all help promote intergenerational dialogue. Regarding how to make the project more effective, appealing, and fruitful, they believed that active participation by all participants and active and participatory activities played crucial roles.
- The parents' requirements regarding their children, which should be incorporated into the program, were found to be self-regulation, sharing, responsibility, and self-confidence. As program dynamics and facilitating strategies, they identified games, play, dialogues, and stories, and believed that this work should primarily unite parents and educators. They believed that the use of technology, practical activities, and volunteering could facilitate the promotion of children's social participation. In terms of nurturing intergenerational communication, which they believed would increase social participation, they mentioned family gatherings, community activities, and games. When asked how to make the program even more effective, attractive, and productive, they emphasized the significance of opportunities and moments for parents to share, the integration of as many experiences as possible, social rooms, and observation classes for parents to observe their children's behavior in the school setting.

This information was taken into account when designing the program manual.

3.2. Stage 2—Program Assessment—Quantitative Study

3.2.1. Children's Assessment

From the 289 children who participated, it was possible to pair, in total, 105 responses to the pre-test (initial assessment) and post-test (final assessment) instruments administered to the children by their teachers. These instruments were based on the SDQ and an adaptation of the For Me It's Easy questionnaire. A total of 58.1 percent of the students were enrolled in kindergarten, while 41.9 percent were in the first grade. The mean age was 5.85 ± 0.81 years (Min = 5 and Max = 7).

In the study of SDQ | strengths and difficulties using a pre- and post-test instrument, the subscales SDQ | emotional symptoms, behavior problems, and SDQ | total difficulties did not reveal significant differences.

The dimensions SDQ | hyperactivity, $t(99) = 3.349$ $p < 0.001$, pre-test ($M = 0.54 \pm 0.27$) and post-test ($M = 0.42 \pm 0.445$); SDQ | relationship problems with peers, $t(99) = 2.140$, $p < 0.05$, pre-test ($M = 0.24 \pm 0.259$) and post-test ($M = 0.17 \pm 0.247$), showed a significant decrease; and prosocial behavior showed a significant increase, $t(100) = -3.039$, $p < 0.01$, pre-test ($M = 1.64 \pm 0.337$) and post-test ($M = 1.75 \pm 0.312$) (Table 2).

Table 2. T-test for paired samples: SDQ (N = 105).

			M	SD	t	df	p
SDQ	Emotional symptoms	Pre	0.45	0.382	−0.457	100	n.s.
		Post	0.47	0.433			
	Behavior problems	Pre	0.23	0.293	1.436	103	n.s.
		Post	0.19	0.27			
	Hyperactivity	Pre	0.54	0.445	3.349	102	≤0.001
		Post	0.42	0.445			
	Relationship problems with peers	Pre	0.24	0.259	2.140	99	<0.05
		Post	0.17	0.247			
	Prosocial behavior	Pre	1.64	0.337	−3.039	100	<0.01
		Post	1.75	0.312			
	Total difficulties	Pre	0.35	0.235	1.873	92	n.s.
		Post	0.30	0.267			

Note: n.s. = not significant.

In the study of socioemotional competence, which was conducted by adapting the For Me It’s Easy instrument, statistically significant improvements were found in the *Me With Me* subscale, $t(79) = -3.102$, $p < 0.01$, pre-test ($M = 3.93 \pm 0.731$) and post-test ($M = 4.35 \pm 0.499$), pertaining to the child’s emotional regulation skills, and in the *Me with Others* subscale, $t(78) = -10.708$, $p < 0.001$, pre-test ($M = 3.71 \pm 0.531$) and post-test ($M = 4.35 \pm 0.499$) (Table 3).

Table 3. T-test for paired samples: It’s Easy For Me (N = 105).

			M	SD	t	Df	p
It’s Easy For Me	Me with Me	Pre	3.94	0.729	−3.106	101	<0.01
		Post	4.13	0.657			
	Me with Others	Pre	4.2	0.591	−2.442	102	<0.05
		Post	4.35	0.498			

In addition, there was no significant increase in psychological flexibility (Table 4).

Table 4. T-test for paired samples: psychological flexibility scale.

			M	SD	t	df	p
Psychological Flexibility—Total	Pre		3.96	0.576	−0.89	104	n.s.
	Post		4.01	0.621			

In the study of the perception of decision-making in the classroom, school, home, city, country, and world, statistically significant differences were observed in the perception of decision-making in their city, $t(68) = -2.783$, $p < 0.01$, pre-test = 1.86 ± 0.989 and post-test = 2.19 ± 0.733 , and in their country, $t(68) = -3.792$, $p < 0.001$, pre-test = 1.67 ± 1.024 and post-test = 2.16 ± 0.699 .

In turn, in conversations with other generations, statistically significant differences were found in conversations with their parents’ generation, $t(68) = -2.173, p < 0.05$, pre-test ($M = 2.62, SD = 0.571$) and post-test ($M = 2.78, SD = 0.449$).

3.2.2. Teachers’ Assessment

In the teachers’ study, based on the application of questions relating to children’s participation beliefs, a total of 19 responses were obtained after the pre- and post-test pairings. A total of 89.5% taught kindergarten, and 10.5% taught the first year of elementary school. The teachers’ average age regarding the respondents was 49.37 ± 9.57 years.

In the study of the teachers’ responses to ideas about children, statistically significant differences were observed in the items “Children aged 5/6 should not be burdened with decisions”. $Z = -2.956, p < 0.01$ (pre-test = 2 ± 1.291 and post-test = 0.68 ± 0.885); and “It is important to consult children, but decisions should be made by adults”. $Z = -2.288, p < 0.05$ (pre-test = 1.89 ± 1.286 and post-test = 2.68 ± 1.204) (Table 5).

Table 5. Wilcoxon results for teachers’ beliefs about children’s participation: Questionnaire to Assess Kindergarten Teachers’ Understanding of the Right to Participate (N = 19).

	Test	M	SD	Z	+	–	=	p																																																																		
Children aged 5/6 should be well informed about adults’ plans in order to promote their involvement.	Pre	3.58	0.507	–0.816	4	2	13	n.s.																																																																		
	Post	3.68	0.582						Children aged 5/6 do not yet have the skills to make decisions about their daily lives.	Pre	0.74	0.933	–0.53	2	4	13	n.s.	Post	0.63	1.012	Children aged 5/6 should not be overwhelmed with decisions.	Pre	2	1.291	–2.956	1	12	6	<0.01	Post	0.68	0.885	It is important to consult with children, but decisions should be made by adults.	Pre	1.89	1.286	–2.288	9	2	8	<0.05	Post	2.68	1.204	Children aged 5/6 should be guided by adults to make the choices that adults know are in the best interests of the children.	Pre	1.63	1.012	–0.482	7	5	7	n.s.	Post	1.74	1.046	Children aged 5/6 have the skills to organize themselves in order to propose and develop useful projects in the classroom.	Pre	3.58	0.507	–0.962	2	3	14	n.s.	Post	3.37	0.955	Children aged 5/6 are at a stage in their development where their ability to express themselves is limited.	Pre	0.79	1.134	–1.414	1
Children aged 5/6 do not yet have the skills to make decisions about their daily lives.	Pre	0.74	0.933	–0.53	2	4	13	n.s.																																																																		
	Post	0.63	1.012						Children aged 5/6 should not be overwhelmed with decisions.	Pre	2	1.291	–2.956	1	12	6	<0.01	Post	0.68	0.885	It is important to consult with children, but decisions should be made by adults.	Pre	1.89	1.286	–2.288	9	2	8	<0.05	Post	2.68	1.204	Children aged 5/6 should be guided by adults to make the choices that adults know are in the best interests of the children.	Pre	1.63	1.012	–0.482	7	5	7	n.s.	Post	1.74	1.046	Children aged 5/6 have the skills to organize themselves in order to propose and develop useful projects in the classroom.	Pre	3.58	0.507	–0.962	2	3	14	n.s.	Post	3.37	0.955	Children aged 5/6 are at a stage in their development where their ability to express themselves is limited.	Pre	0.79	1.134	–1.414	1	4	14	n.s.	Post	0.58	0.961						
Children aged 5/6 should not be overwhelmed with decisions.	Pre	2	1.291	–2.956	1	12	6	<0.01																																																																		
	Post	0.68	0.885						It is important to consult with children, but decisions should be made by adults.	Pre	1.89	1.286	–2.288	9	2	8	<0.05	Post	2.68	1.204	Children aged 5/6 should be guided by adults to make the choices that adults know are in the best interests of the children.	Pre	1.63	1.012	–0.482	7	5	7	n.s.	Post	1.74	1.046	Children aged 5/6 have the skills to organize themselves in order to propose and develop useful projects in the classroom.	Pre	3.58	0.507	–0.962	2	3	14	n.s.	Post	3.37	0.955	Children aged 5/6 are at a stage in their development where their ability to express themselves is limited.	Pre	0.79	1.134	–1.414	1	4	14	n.s.	Post	0.58	0.961																		
It is important to consult with children, but decisions should be made by adults.	Pre	1.89	1.286	–2.288	9	2	8	<0.05																																																																		
	Post	2.68	1.204						Children aged 5/6 should be guided by adults to make the choices that adults know are in the best interests of the children.	Pre	1.63	1.012	–0.482	7	5	7	n.s.	Post	1.74	1.046	Children aged 5/6 have the skills to organize themselves in order to propose and develop useful projects in the classroom.	Pre	3.58	0.507	–0.962	2	3	14	n.s.	Post	3.37	0.955	Children aged 5/6 are at a stage in their development where their ability to express themselves is limited.	Pre	0.79	1.134	–1.414	1	4	14	n.s.	Post	0.58	0.961																														
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	Post	0.58	0.961																																																																							

Note: n.s. = not significant.

In the study of the program’s impact on program objectives, statistically significant differences were observed in childhood social participation, “To what extent does Learn to Fly promote childhood social participation?”, $Z = -2.029, p < 0.05$ (pre-test = 6.68 ± 2.187 and post-test = 8.05 ± 1.68) (Table 6).

Table 6. Expectations and achievements of Learn to Fly (N = 19).

	Test	M	SD	Z	+	–	=	p																																																																		
Does the program promote social participation in childhood?	Pré	6.68	2.187	–2.029	11	4	4	<0.05																																																																		
	Pós	8.05	1.682						Intergenerational dialogue?	Pré	6.68	2.187	0.601	10	6	3	n.s.	Pós	7.11	2.644	Psychological flexibility?	Pré	6.63	2.166	–1.786	10	6	3	n.s.	Pós	7.63	1.95	Openness?	Pré	6.68	2.11	–1.944	10	5	4	n.s.	Pós	8.11	2.331	Curiosity?	Pré	6.79	2.175	–1.816	10	6	3	n.s.	Pós	8.21	2.44	Autonomy?	Pré	6.63	2.409	–1.35	10	6	3	n.s.	Pós	7.63	2.191	Self-regulation?	Pré	6.47	2.48	–1.832	11
Intergenerational dialogue?	Pré	6.68	2.187	0.601	10	6	3	n.s.																																																																		
	Pós	7.11	2.644						Psychological flexibility?	Pré	6.63	2.166	–1.786	10	6	3	n.s.	Pós	7.63	1.95	Openness?	Pré	6.68	2.11	–1.944	10	5	4	n.s.	Pós	8.11	2.331	Curiosity?	Pré	6.79	2.175	–1.816	10	6	3	n.s.	Pós	8.21	2.44	Autonomy?	Pré	6.63	2.409	–1.35	10	6	3	n.s.	Pós	7.63	2.191	Self-regulation?	Pré	6.47	2.48	–1.832	11	6	2	n.s.	Pós	7.79	1.813						
Psychological flexibility?	Pré	6.63	2.166	–1.786	10	6	3	n.s.																																																																		
	Pós	7.63	1.95						Openness?	Pré	6.68	2.11	–1.944	10	5	4	n.s.	Pós	8.11	2.331	Curiosity?	Pré	6.79	2.175	–1.816	10	6	3	n.s.	Pós	8.21	2.44	Autonomy?	Pré	6.63	2.409	–1.35	10	6	3	n.s.	Pós	7.63	2.191	Self-regulation?	Pré	6.47	2.48	–1.832	11	6	2	n.s.	Pós	7.79	1.813																		
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Self-regulation?	Pré	6.47	2.48	–1.832	11	6	2	n.s.																																																																		
	Pós	7.79	1.813																																																																							

Table 6. *Cont.*

	Test	M	SD	Z	+	−	=	p
Socioemotional and life skills?	Pré	6.84	2.218	−1.896	11	5	3	n.s.
	Pós	8.32	2.001					
Connection with school?	Pré	7	2.055	−1.341	10	5	4	n.s.
	Pós	8.11	2.622					
The link with the family?	Pré	7.16	2.115	−0.969	9	6	4	n.s.
	Pós	8	2.708					
The link with the community?	Pré	6.79	2.417	−1.297	10	6	3	n.s.
	Pós	7.95	2.549					
The link with society?	Pré	6.74	2.491	−1.401	10	6	3	n.s.
	Pós	7.95	2.415					

Note: n.s. = not significant.

3.2.3. Parents’ Assessment

After matching the pre- and post-test instruments, a total of 28 responses from parents were evaluated. The majority were mothers (92.9%), 60.7% had a child in kindergarten, and 39.3% had a child in the first grade. The average age of their offspring was 5.36 ± 0.488 years, and those children were mostly girls (60.7%).

Finally, in the analysis of responses from parents and the study of the subjective health and psychological, mental, and social well-being of children in the last week, a statistically significant difference was found in “Did your child feel energized.” $Z = -2.392, p < 0.05$ (pre-test = 4.29 ± 0.937 and post-test = 4.68 ± 0.548) (Table 7).

Table 7. Impacts on children’s quality of life: KIDSCREEN-10 (N = 28).

	Test	M	SD	Z	+	−	=	p
Was your child healthy and fit?	Pre	4.29	1.049	−1.713	11	5	12	n.s.
	Post	4.64	0.488					
Did your child feel energized?	Pre	4.29	0.937	−2.392	10	2	16	<0.05
	Post	4.68	0.548					
Did your child feel sad?	Pre	1.71	0.713	−0.711	7	4	17	n.s.
	Post	1.82	0.548					
Does your child feel lonely?	Pre	1.46	0.637	−0.284	6	5	17	n.s.
	Post	1.43	0.573					
Does your child have enough time for himself?	Pre	4.14	0.591	−0.728	9	5	14	n.s.
	Post	4.25	0.701					
Has your child been able to do the activities they want to do in their free time?	Pre	4	0.943	−0.037	6	7	15	n.s.
	Post	4	0.72					
Did your child feel that the parents treated him fairly?	Pre	4.14	0.848	−0.69	4	6	18	n.s.
	Post	4.04	0.838					
Did your child have fun with other boys and girls?	Pre	4.36	0.678	−0.5	7	6	15	n.s.
	Post	4.43	0.573					
Did your child do well in school or kindergarten?	Pre	4.46	0.637	−0.775	8	4	16	n.s.
	Post	4.57	0.573					
Did your child feel able to pay attention?	Pre	4	0.981	−0.369	8	5	15	n.s.
	Post	4.07	0.813					

Note: n.s. = not significant.

3.3. Stage 2—Program Assessment—Qualitative Study

The focus groups convened in each of the participating educational institutions averaged fifteen children, four educators, and three family members. Additionally, three institutions had their psychologist present.

In the final phase, the qualitative study was also based on the material collected in the focus groups held (one group per participating institution). After content analysis based on the semi-structured interview script, 101 text segments were coded in the MAXQDA 2020

qualitative analysis software, which made it easier to study the data. The text segments were distributed as follows: What it was like to take part in Learn to Fly: ($n = 37$); What they liked best about Learn to Fly($n = 23$); What they did not like so much about Learn to Fly | ($n = 8$); Learn to Fly made something change in your living room, home, or school ($n = 3$); You would change something to make Learn to Fly even more fun ($n = 22$); You would participate in Learn to Fly again next year ($n = 8$).

In the study of the most frequent words in the speeches, limited to a minimum frequency of five, and after excluding general words associated with the focus group (teacher/educator, child, father, mother, psychologist), definite and indefinite articles, and prepositions, the 15 most frequent terms are presented in a word cloud. These include the following: liked ($n = 16$); world ($n = 14$); do ($n = 12$); story ($n = 11$); and program ($n = 11$).

3.4. Overall Personal Appreciation

In general, the children referred that they enjoyed and benefited from the Learn to Fly program, and this was reinforced by the teachers, families, principals, and psychologists. The teachers also said that the program was an asset in their classrooms, bringing new ways of approaching themes or other topics that are not worked on in the pre-school curriculum or the first year of the first cycle of basic education. The structure of the Learn to Fly program was praised by the teachers. The involvement of families and the community was highlighted by teachers and parents.

When asked what they liked best, the “Bingo” and “Inspector of my street” activities were the ones the children remembered best. The teachers and families added that the school-themed story made them question their parents and grandparents a lot about schools in their time.

On the other hand, the children could not really identify a thing that they did not like so much. The shortage of time to implement the program was the factor most mentioned by the teachers. The families added that they had some difficulty understanding whether the activities were related to Learn to Fly or not. Examples of speeches given in the focus groups are presented in Table 8.

Table 8. Examples of speech about global personal appreciation.

<p>What was it like to take part in Learn to Fly?</p> <p>“Fun”—child</p> <p>“We learned that we can change the world”—child</p> <p>“It involved the whole school working, from planning the project to the final event”—teacher</p> <p>“It brought new and different things to the school, good dynamics for working on different topics. The children loved it. The phrase they said the most was ‘There’s a project today’, and they were very happy when there was. They began to look at the world in a different way, to be more attentive. . . We listened to the children a lot. For many, it was the first time they had come across certain problems and issues. . .”—teacher</p> <p>“Nice and very well structured.”—teacher</p> <p>“Parental involvement.”—teacher</p> <p>“Dialogue with the different generations.”—family</p>
<p>What did you like most about Learn to Fly?</p> <p>“I really enjoyed the bingo and all the sports activities.”—child</p> <p>“The parrot came to my house and helped me make the Christmas tree.”—child</p> <p>“Be a friend activity and street detectives.”—child</p> <p>“It fits in with all the areas of pre-school education.”—teacher</p> <p>“I liked the importance of doing this project in the transition from pre-school to 1st grade.”—family</p> <p>“Moments of sharing.”—family</p>

Table 8. *Cont.*

What didn't you like so much about Learn to Fly?
"We enjoyed everything, but we had the pressure of time, and with heterogeneous groups, it was more difficult. It's a cross-curricular project that we'd like to continue with more time."—teacher
"Little time for implementation"—teacher
"Very extensive assessment instruments"—psychologist

3.5. Transformative Capacity/Participation

In the investigation into changes in the classroom, school, or home, there were mainly changes in schools, such as changing the snacks available and having an empty room, proposed by the children to the respective heads of their educational establishments. At home, the main change was to try to make families aware of the importance of recycling (Table 9).

Table 9. Examples of speech about transformative capacity/participation.

Has Learn to Fly made something change in your classroom, home, or school?
"A letter to the principal asking to change the snacks and they were listened to."—teacher
"They made proposals to change a room in the school, they were heard by the principal, and the room is going to be renovated."—teacher
"The President of the Parish Council received us and listened to the children's ideas for creating a park, but we don't know if anything will happen."—psychologist

3.6. Limitations and Proposed Improvements

In order to improve the program, it was suggested that it be applied over the course of a school year (as was the initial aim of Learn to Fly, but this pilot did not allow for this because it included the development of the program itself); to provide more developed stories with more diverse themes such as divorce and more family types explored; a manual that could be integrated into parents' activities; the possibility of applying the sessions to the respective holidays; and content proposed by the teachers.

The children suggested integrating more characters with characteristics and life stories more similar to their own. For their part, families mentioned the need for the teachers to include a framework for the program at the beginning of the school year. Finally, regarding the continuity of the Learn to Fly program, they were unanimous in their response to its continuity (Table 10).

Table 10. Examples of speech about proposed improvements.

Would they make any adjustments to make Learn to Fly even more fun?
"Add other characters to the story."—child
"Blank pages in the manual to add parents' records."—teacher
"Some activities should be applied in the months of the associated festivities."—teacher
"More sessions focused on the EU."—teacher
"Having puppets."—teacher
"A framework at the beginning of the school year for parents."—family
Would you take part in the project again next year?
"I'd like to apply it to all the groups. I have a heterogeneous classroom."—teacher
"I hope to continue applying Learn to Fly."—teacher
"We'll apply it next school year."—teacher

4. Discussion

Based on the premise, encompassed throughout the project and in the present study, that children can have important contributions regarding decisions and measures that affect them (C. Branquinho et al., 2020a; Burger, 2017), the program was built taking their ideas into account, including their point of view about the effectiveness and appeal of the program. Amongst other ideas, the children mentioned activities, stories, and art (films, theater, books), as well as conversations, experiences, and joint activities with adults. This program includes teachers' and families' perspectives.

4.1. Strengths

In the program evaluation, the results show a significant improvement in the children's socioemotional competence, as well as in their ability to control their impulses and remain calm—hyperactivity—and in the feelings of acceptance and support from their peer group—relationships with colleagues—along with greater empathy, sensitivity, and mutual help between the children—prosocial behavior. These results are consistent with the previous literature regarding the promotion of socioemotional skills as a way to increase children's well-being and emotional regulation as well as decrease their psychological suffering (Bierman & Motamedi, 2015; Taylor et al., 2017; Gaspar et al., 2018). Socioemotional skills, which play a central role in healthy and successful assimilation throughout life, are essential at all stages of life, including early childhood (Castro et al., 2023).

No statistically significant differences were found in the research on developing psychological flexibility; however, it is believed that with a longer implementation period, this result could be improved, as well as having a greater impact on socioemotional skills, boosting strengths, and reducing difficulties. As psychological flexibility has proven to contribute to better health and increase well-being (Ruiz, 2010; Fang & Ding, 2020; Taylor et al., 2017) as well as promote adaptive behaviors (Ruiz & Perete, 2015), the program aimed to overall promote positive development and, consequently, a more positive life trajectory (Ruiz, 2010; Taylor et al., 2017; Elias et al., 2015; Pace et al., 2019). An ACT-based approach has also proven to be effective with the program's population because of the levels of interaction and experience the used techniques provide (Black, 2022).

In addition, concerning intergenerational dialogue, statistically significant differences were found in conversations with children's parents' generation, resulting in more opportunities to communicate with this generation. The literature states that intergenerational dialogue is not only a factor that promotes well-being (Smith et al., 2013; Sarat, 2014) but also an opportunity for children to be more socially involved and to have a voice (Matos & Sampaio, 2009).

The program resulted in changes in participants' perceptions of their role in decision-making in the city and country. Opportunities for participation encourage the development of resources that will promote the identification and resolution of problems regarding children's lives and future (C. Branquinho et al., 2017; Matos & Sampaio, 2009; Jones et al., 2015). Moreover, when it comes to social participation, the interactions between different factors regarding children—personal resources and strengths, opportunities (e.g., school and family), and the sociopolitical scenario—must be considered and are able to create beneficial results at the individual and structural level (Gal, 2017).

Based on the results, we can see the program's impact on promoting social participation in childhood. Teachers become more receptive to taking "children's voices" into consideration, even if they are convinced that adults must provide final decisions, and they consider that the Learn to Fly program can empower children to be more socially participative. These results are particularly important considering that, in order for children to be able to participate, it is essential to build a safe and propitious environment (Jones et al.,

2015). Teachers and educators play a fundamental role in ensuring these environments and facilitate children's socioemotional development and social participation (Gal, 2017).

According to parents, children's energy levels increase. This improvement can be explained because socioemotional skills are associated with psychological health and health-related behaviors, which have an effect on physical health (OECD, 2018).

Overall, and according to the focus groups, the children, teachers, and parents enjoyed and benefited from the program, which increased the involvement of the community and families; it also strengthened the participation of the various actors, with a particular emphasis on the children, who valued the transformative nature of the program in their classrooms, schools, and homes. On the basis of the proposed enhancements, the program was adjusted.

4.2. Limitations

The program would have benefited from being applied over the course of a school year, as this was the initial aim of Learn to Fly, but limitations in the pilot study did not allow this because the time window had to encompass the development of the program itself and the manual. A recommendation for the future is to develop the program throughout the course of the whole school year.

In order to provide a more individualized experience, it would have been important to create more diverse stories as well as add more characters to the manual. Once again, the time limitation played a crucial role in the impossibility of achieving this.

Additionally, some methodological limitations should be considered, namely the reduced reliability of some measures, which require the cautious interpretation of the results. Some variables, such as perception of decision-making and intergenerational dialogue, were based on single items, not fully allowing for an assessment of their reliability. The number of responses does not allow for a generalization of the results.

4.3. Future Steps

As steps towards the future, the process of accrediting training for the implementation of the program by teachers and psychologists is presently underway, based on the results of the pilot program. The manual for the program was published by the Portuguese Psychologists' Association (Matos et al., 2024), attesting to its quality in achieving its goals and facilitating its dissemination among the professional community.

Currently, and recognizing the need to begin promoting social participation in childhood and intergenerational dialogue as a means of nurturing more active and just societies, the program has been adapted for replication in Brazil in 2024, and an extension will be available in 2023/2024 for children from 3 to 10 years old.

After the implementation and evaluation of this pilot project, we hope to contribute to fostering social participation in childhood and intergenerational dialogue by providing a resource—the Learn to Fly program—that is effective not only in fostering social participation in childhood and intergenerational dialogue, but also in fostering psychological flexibility and developing socioemotional skills, a need identified by teachers and parents and fundamental to the exercise of social participation. Moreover, we hope that the replication of this program will contribute to more-positive childhood development as it enhances children's empowerment by developing and utilizing their strengths and skills (Matos, 2020), making them active participants in their development (Matos, 2020; Matos et al., 2015), including them in decision-making, and using open and fair communication, as well as promoting intergenerational dialogue (C. Branquinho & de Matos, 2019; C. Branquinho et al., 2020b; R. M. Lerner et al., 2006) and assisting them in adapting to their contexts and thriving (Matos, 2020; Matos et al., 2015; Michie et al., 2011; C. Branquinho & de Matos,

2019); we also hope that it will contribute to a healthier, more equitable, and more socially engaged society.

5. Conclusions

The program's conclusions are as follows:

- In a general reflection, we understand that the real gains are at the behavioral level, and that the more internal characteristics (e.g., emotions, psychological flexibility), would require a longer intervention over time, so we propose programs with two sessions for each theme in the future.
- When involved in the co-construction of the program, the students were motivated and able to participate.
- The pre- and post-testing of the children revealed an improvement in socioemotional skills, including hyperactivity issues, peer relationship difficulties, and prosocial behavior strengths. Moreover, a positive effect was found on the perception of decision-making in the city and the country, as well as on intergenerational dialogue with their parents' generation.
- Regarding the initial and final evaluations of teachers, there was a positive perception of the program's effect on promoting social participation, although they were not yet completely engaged in promoting genuine social participation in children; from the perspective of parents, the children's vigor increased.
- In general, participants stated that they enjoyed and benefited from the program; the scenarios and children's participation were transformative. The proposed enhancements were considered and incorporated into the new manual for children aged 3 to 10 years old.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, M.G.d.M., C.B., C.N. and B.M.; Methodology, M.G.d.M. and C.B.; Software, M.G.d.M. and C.B.; Formal Analysis, M.G.d.M.; Investigation, C.B., C.N. and B.M.; Resources, M.G.d.M. and C.B.; Data Curation, C.B. and C.N.; Writing—Original Draft, C.B., C.N. and B.M.; Writing—Review and Editing, M.G.d.M. and C.B.; Visualization, M.G.d.M.; Supervision, M.G.d.M.; Project Administration, M.G.d.M. and T.G.; Funding Acquisition, M.G.d.M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (Iniciativa Reconstruir Melhor).

Institutional Review Board Statement: This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (approval code 1896/2021 (project number) on 21 December 2021).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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