PROFESSIONAL PRACTICES OF SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS IN PROMOTING EQUITY IN TIMES OF COVID 19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

Children and young people from different social and cultural backgrounds, nationalities, ethnicities access school, but they have not had the same opportunities for school success and to see their right to education and other human rights guaranteed. Intervening with this diversity in a positive way means making difference, not synonymous with stigmatization and school and social exclusion, but rather with school and social inclusion, through the promotion of equity and social justice. The covid 19 pandemic, by electing distance learning, expanded and intensified the risks of dropout and failure of students with a more fragile relationship with the school, accentuating social inequalities and other inequalities and not allowing the multiplicity of their needs to be satisfied, in the sense of its integral development. The increased risk of school dropout and failure is more accentuated in some segments of the population, namely, those with greater social vulnerabilities. The government wanted to respond to the problems of absenteeism and school dropout, child poverty, intra-family violence and mental illness, which were aggravated by the covid-19 pandemic, giving guidance to managers, teachers and technicians to reinvent the role of the school in times of physical distance, quarantine and isolation. In this reinvention, the intervention strategies of the multidisciplinary teams of the schools were highlighted in the identification, signaling and monitoring of risk/danger situations for children and young people and in the articulation with the competent authorities and the community institutions, in promoting the right to education and social protection of children and young people. In these teams, social workers, with a diversified and multi-referenced academic scientific and technical background, have the necessary conditions to intervene in the realization of the right to education because they are able to bring together and promote the collaboration and communication that is essential between knowledge and educational actors for the elaboration of a diagnosis and respective intervention plan, which should focus on the three main domains of the ecological model of assessment in risk/danger situations: the child's developmental needs, the parental skills of the families and the family and ecological factors.
Focusing on a qualitative approach, through interviews with social workers who are part of multidisciplinary teams in school clusters, we sought to know how these professionals, in times of pandemic, perceive their functions and tasks, their professional practices and its potential in making the right to education effective and in combating school and social inequalities.

Keywords: Professional practices, school social workers, covid 19 pandemic, social inequalities, equity.

1. Introduction

Ensuring access to inclusive, quality and equitable education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all is an objective outlined by the UN for the sustainable development agenda 2016-2030 and which has been committed to the emergence and expansion of the pandemic. de covid 19. To mitigate the negative effects of the pandemic on the realization of the right to education, educational policy measures were implemented that have required educational systems to pay special attention to the increase in social inequalities resulting from different learning conditions in the various social categories of students. Such teaching-learning conditions accentuated the differences in student performance resulting from factors related to social, economic and cultural contexts. In this pandemic period, the risk of school dropout and failure to which certain categories of students are subject is associated with their low family capital for learning, which leads these students to situations of greater school and social exclusion. Socio-economic, cultural and personal conditions cannot prevent access to education and qualifications. Guaranteeing all children and young people the right to a quality education that fights social inequalities, that promotes inclusion and social justice, is the challenge of the educational system, namely to consolidate the school as a place that provides for all, without exception, opportunities to learn, full integration into the school environment and the creation of conditions for personal fulfillment. Such educational measures sought to make the school promote the process of equity and school and social inclusion. Social justice as a guarantee

that personal and social circumstances, such as socio-economic status and ethnic origin, are not an obstacle to the development of educational and social inclusion potential as a guarantee of achieving a minimum level of skills for all, sufficient to the continuation of training in the sense of a satisfactory integration into society and the labor market, were seriously compromised in times of the covid19 pandemic. All the more so since equity in education is a fundamental instrument of social equity and inequality in school results has social and economic costs: school failure and dropout increase the risks of unemployment, juvenile delinquency and criminality. Equity is a central issue of education policies and is considered as the condition through which individuals can take advantage of education and training, in terms of opportunities, access, attendance and results. An education and training system is equitable when "its results are independent of socio-economic background and other factors leading to educational disadvantages" and when "attendance takes into account specific individual learning needs" (Valter Lemos, 2013: 3). International studies that measure equity in education systems and that allow the collection of relevant information on student performance and on teaching and learning contexts have concluded that, despite a significant improvement in education indicators, social inequalities persisted. and, in the period of pandemic crisis, they increased. Pre-pandemic data showed some positive indicators regarding the mitigation of inequalities in access to education, expressed, for example, in the reduction of the percentage of students who leave education and training early and in the reduction of school retention rates. However, the 2020 Goals, regarding the increase in the percentage of students with minimum skills in Reading, Mathematics and Science, were not achieved, which also made visible the influence that the socioeconomic resources of families had in explaining school results, which compromises the social justice indicator. (CNE; 2021: 139) There is still no accurate and comprehensive assessment of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on education. But, as the report on the state of education (CNE, 2020) advances, there is already a consensus, worldwide, that social inequalities have worsened, that the learning done by students was harmed and that there was an increase in dropout and failure. schoolchildren. The closure of schools led to an unequal situation of access to technological equipment, the Internet network and digital training that allowed students from socially disadvantaged groups, even at a distance, to continue learning and maintain contact with their teachers and with the your pairs. No less important is the reference to the low level of schooling achieved by their families, who did not have the knowledge or skills that would allow them to monitor their children's schooling, as well as the non-existence of conditions for access to food and other essential goods, namely health. Confined in often overcrowded housing, without living conditions and without a quiet space to study, children and young people had a significant increase in levels of anxiety and mood swings, as well as a greater number of conflicts and disagreements at home, signs of depression and irritability and feelings of loneliness. These factors had a major impact on the worsening of learning inequalities. Thus, in the pandemic period, it is necessary to pay special attention to factors related to different learning contexts: in particular the family context and resources for families' learning (family capital for learning) and the social composition of schools (Diogo, 2010). The family capital for learning indicator brings together a set of variables related to the cultural (in particular academic), social and economic resources of families, which can have an impact on school performance and on the integral development of children and young people, namely the level of education and professional qualifications of guardians/parents and other family members, as well as existing resources at home: the number of books, in particular children's books, having access to the internet, having a room to study, etc. In the CNE study (2021), "about half of the teachers and directors, surveyed at the end of the first confinement, considered that the closure of schools increased the risk of dropping out of school. The severity attributed to the risk of dropping out is more evident in schools with more vulnerable populations. For example, in schools located in Educational Territories of Priority Intervention, with higher rates of poverty and social exclusion, the risk of dropping out of school was considered serious or very serious by the principals. In these schools, among students, 50% or more have School Social Action, more than 10% have Portuguese Non-Mother Language, more than 10% have Specific Needs and more than 2% did not participate in school activities during the first closing period of schools (CNE, 2021: 23) The well-being of children and families has become increasingly urgent, given the public health crisis and the resulting greater social inequalities that significantly affect vulnerable groups of the population in terms of access to education and social protection.

2. Research methodology: Objectives, design, methods

The research work developed aimed to know the representations of social workers working in a school context about their professional practices and the reinvention of intervention in the context of a pandemic crisis. It fits into the qualitative research strategy, having given special focus to the words and speeches of social workers, in order to capture the subjective reality of social actors. The study had an exploratory character, constituting the first stage of a more comprehensive, methodological and territorial research, which is in progress. For data collection, a semi-structured interview was used using a script composed of 6 main themes (academic path; professional path; work developed as a social worker at school;

social work and school mediation; intervention in a school context during the Covid Pandemic 19; role of the Social Worker in Schools: representations and perceptions). Given the impossibility of conducting the interviews in person due to the pandemic situation, and taking into account the availability of the interviewees, it was decided to send the interview guide by email. The interviews were conducted during the 2020/21 school year. Ten social workers who are part of multidisciplinary teams in School Groups in the Porto Metropolitan Area participated in the research. The sample was non-probabilistic, built intentionally and for convenience. To read the interviews, thematic content analysis was used. In order to contextualize the work of social workers, a content analysis of legal documents was also carried out, which enunciated emergency measures in the context of education and the action of these specialized technicians in the school context.

3. Discussion: The professional practices of social workers and the Covid 19

As previously mentioned, 10 social workers participated in the research who have professional experience as social workers, mostly for more than 10 years. However, as professionals integrated into the school context performing functions in the area of Social Work, experience of less than 10 years predominated. With the exception of two interviewees, the others joined the school through public measures to promote educational success: the Educational Territories of Priority Intervention (TEIP), the Integrated and Innovative Plan to Combat School Failure (PICIIE) and the National Program for Promoting School Success (PNPSE). In addition to their basic training in Social Work, most of the interviewees had specific training, either at post-graduate or Master's level, in the area of childhood (e.g. Sociology of Childhood), intervention with children and young people (e.g. Social Intervention in Children and Youth at Risk of Exclusion) or mediation (e.g. Family Mediation). From the analysis of the interviews, for this article, we highlight the theme of professional practices and the reinvention of intervention in the context of pandemic crisis. In this line, it was important to know not only what challenges the interviewees faced in the performance of their professional activity, but also what strategies they developed to overcome them. First of all, their confinement forced them to use technology to carry out the follow-ups, i.e. the intervention started to be done at a distance through digital platforms and telephone contact. Nevertheless, in situations of greater social risk, all maintained the field work with students and families through, mostly, home visits. But the most substantive change was related, above all, to a reorientation of action: the closure of schools has forced a greater focus on situations of risk of absenteeism and school dropout. The school as a first-line entity plays an important role in preventive and protective intervention in situations of risk and danger. Of the 41337 dangerous situations reported in 2020 to CPCJ, 6232 are related to the non-fulfillment of the right to education: the highest values relate to reports of school absenteeism, with 60% of the situations reported, followed by school dropout (30%). According to the national commission, the growth trend in this category continues in the age brackets from 11 to 14 years and 15 to 17 years, always higher among males. (CNPDPCJ, 2021) The intervention to combat absenteeism and school dropout was carried out by social workers in order to support children in need and without resources to keep up with distance learning, and also to support situations of deprivation and poverty through some work to meet basic needs, particularly at the food level. Thus, in a context of crisis intervention, the efforts made by schools to ensure the continuity of learning and minimize the effects of social inequalities were perceptible. The reinforcement of intervention by social service technicians and other specialized technicians allowed, in addition to social monitoring of children and young people and their families, the reception of children and young people at school, the provision of meals, the availability of resources to support distance learning methodologies, the dissemination of diversified support documents and alternative and more personalized forms of articulation between school and family. In addition to the realization of the right to education, the pandemic has made it clear that the school is an important space for the promotion of the personal, social and emotional well-being of children and young people, and that special attention must be paid to the most vulnerable students, in order to provide everyone with the necessary conditions for their safety, training, education, well-being and full development. The pandemic brought a worsening of social inequalities that, in turn, became more visible and affected more students and families. The most vulnerable were the most affected, becoming even more vulnerable, and this implied the implementation of monitoring and evaluation responses in an educational ecosystem that involved the various actors, and among them the specialized technicians of the multidisciplinary teams, so that inclusion and social justice could continue to be developed and guaranteed. It was also very clear that the effectiveness of educational measures implies intervention in other social, economic and cultural areas, with the purpose of promoting skills and qualifications and improving the living conditions of children and young people and their families. This orientation for intervention stems from the ecological approach, used by social workers in making the diagnostic assessment and defining and implementing social intervention plans, which always considers the child and young person and their families in transformation, in relation to their changing context, in which all influence each other reciprocally. We must analyze and reflect on the various phases of the

intervention process in the context of social accompaniment, as mentioned by the interviewees. In practice these phases are confused and often appear simultaneously, although here they are presented sequentially:

- The request, as most of the referrals are made by teachers, especially by class principals and head teachers, management bodies, local partners, the team of specialized technicians, educational assistants, families, peers, students themselves and the Social Worker herself who ends up identifying situations through informal contacts established with students in various activities at school. Thus, the implementation of activities in which he has direct contact with students can make him a signaling agent;

- After the request, the social worker in conjunction with other technicians and teachers diagnoses the situation, identifying the full development needs of children and young people, the problems and their causalities, but also the potentialities to be developed in the social intervention plan;

- The diagnosis is the basis for defining an intervention plan, appropriate to the problems and needs identified and the existing resources, which should be built together with students and families who should commit to the actions to be developed, making a commitment to change;

- Following the principles of the helping relationship, the social worker does the monitoring, that is, the follow-up in order to support the student and the family in the actions and checking if what has been defined is effectively being carried out. Such monitoring should involve several players in the educational community who should be attentive and available to collaborate. Based on the diagnosis, the process of social intervention presupposes a negotiation where the social worker assumes the role of mediator between the various social factors that influence the process and an intervention in the school system and with the students and their families, developing a close monitoring through regular contact with the students and strategies to approach the families, calling them for appointments, making phone calls and home visits;

- The evaluation of the intervention process should be systematic and continuous, in order to review, whenever necessary, the diagnoses and expected results in the implementation of the action plan. This allows not only to know the results and effects of the intervention, but also to correct trajectories if they are undesirable;

- To end the process, the ideal will be a closure because the child, youth and family have reached the established goals and have become autonomous. However, it can occur on the initiative of the targets themselves, by referral to another body or for various causes.

It was possible to understand that the risk or danger to which children and young people were subjected, results from the interaction that occurs between the different elements that make up the different systems and the accumulation of factors such as lack of parental support, lack of social support, low educational level and unemployment of parents, lack or insufficient participation and involvement of parents in the personal and school development of their children, schools in poor neighborhoods, etc. These factors are directly related to the family context and in particular the socio-economic and cultural status of families that exerts its action on the child's well-being and school achievement. The Covid 19 pandemic caused increased exposure to certain conditions or risk factors in the family microsystem that increased the likelihood of the child or youth experiencing social, emotional, or physical problems.

However, the interviewees did not forget that the risk factors for school failure are also in the school context. Regarding school, it should be noted the experiences lived by children and young people in the interaction with the different elements that make up this school context, namely teachers and peers, the relationship, support and expectations of teachers and the relationship/support of peers, their level of motivation towards learning and the type of recreational/pedagogical activities developed, etc. In addition to knowledge of the school and family contexts, social workers identify other factors that play a decisive role in school success and in the comprehensive development of a child/youth: the influence of the local community in which the family is inserted and broader aspects of the socio-economic and political environment, without losing sight of the temporal and historical changes of each of these contexts. It also emerged from the speeches of the 10 interviewees that they work with children and youth at risk/in danger, providing psychosocial support in the host schools in close coordination with institutions in the area of promoting the rights and protection of children/youth at risk (Commission for the Protection of Children and Young People and Multidisciplinary Teams to Support Courts, in particular) and social support (municipalities, Social Security Institute and Private Social Solidarity Institutions). The articulation of the family with the school and the school with the entities of the promotion and protection system for children at risk/anger, such as the CPCJ, is essential in the individualized response to be built for each case of risk/anger. Mobilizing the data from the National Commission for Protection and Promotion, there has been less visibility and increasing complexity in the access to children, youth and their families in the community since the beginning of the pandemic. In the National Commission's report for 2020 data, of the total 188 CPCJ respondents in a survey, half (50%) report that the greatest difficulties were experienced at the assessment stage for making a diagnosis of the referenced danger situation during the period of the state of emergency. This trend maintained a significantly high value (44.9%) in the defined post-state of emergency period (from May 3 to August 31, 2020). Examples of difficulties experienced are: "the decrease in field

work, fewer looks at children and youth." (34 CPCJ); "the difficulty in talking to children and young people." (90 CPCJ); "the greatest difficulty was felt in conducting home visits" (165 CPCJ); "maintaining face-to-face meetings at this stage, in view of the temporary barring/closure of care services in the building where the CPCJ is located (City Hall)." (171 CPCJ. (CNPDPCJ, 2021). In several cases, the action of the schools' multidisciplinary teams is highlighted in the support and social monitoring of children and youth at risk/in danger, which allowed the local CPCJ to overcome any difficulties. When CPCJ did not even make home visits, the schools' social workers made home visits that served to understand what was going on, why they were not attending classes 'online', why parents did not answer the phones or did not respond to emails sent.

4. Conclusions

Improving relationships and communication between the various actors on the educational scene, implementing the role of mediator, is possible because the social worker in school context is specialized in making social diagnosis and intervention plans focused on the child / young person who is the student. At the methodological level, it is the social diagnosis that will underpin the entire intervention plan at the level of psychosocial support focused on the child/youth who is the student, the group, the family, the local community and the school. It is the professional with the knowledge and skills to understand and work with what is in the school organization and "on the other side of the school", not only with regard to the personal and social skills of children and young people, parenting skills (basic care; safety; affection; stimulation; setting rules and limits; stability) and other family and ecological factors: family history and functioning; extended family; housing conditions; and employment status of household members and their impact on the child and the parents' relationship with him/her. It is the child and the young person who are at the center of their intervention, understood in their uniqueness, getting to know them at school and also what is on the other side of the school. The social worker has the knowledge and skills to understand the social reality, identifying the needs and problems that affect children and young people, as well as their causalities, in order to define pertinent paths of intervention. With an integral look, the social worker perceives the multiplicity of development needs of the child/youth in terms of education, but also in terms of health; behavioral and emotional development; identity; family and social relationships; social presentation, and empowerment for autonomy. The social worker is a professional who allows the school to understand the environment where each student is inserted, share it with other specialized technicians and with teachers. To this end, it is crucial to carry out a social diagnosis capable of grasping the complexity and multidimensionality of the problems affecting children and young people, their families, and local communities, highlighting the diversity of factors that lie at their genesis. Furthermore, the social worker knows and is able to mobilize the local community's endogenous resources to better respond to the multiple needs of children/youth, families, territories and the school organization and, because she/he uses the potential of networking, she/he designs and implements intervention projects in partnership with various entities of the municipal social network and the local social action commissions of the parishes. The local development projects in which they operate, the articulation with different services in the fields of promotion and protection of minors, social action, employment and health and the participation in working groups are just examples of the various responsibilities assumed by social workers in their daily professional life in a work of opening the school to families and the local community.

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