Constructing and (re)constructing professional identities: an analysis on Portuguese social educators

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Abstract

Institutions need to be aware of the complex way in which professional trajectories are built upon in order to offer under graduate and graduate students' different possibilities for developing needed competences to display in practice. This paper focuses on the study[2] conducted by ESEPF on its former students of Social Education, through a written questionnaire analysing different parameters of their professional transitions, from entrance at training, first job and entrance on the labour market, present work situations, developed competences and perceptions of the Social Educator role on Portuguese Society, among others. Results will be presented and discussed. Particular focus will be given on the specific role of Social Education and its distinctive features towards other "social work" professions.

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2   The questionnaire was applied to 165 graduates in Social Education and contained a set of different questions in order to be able to understand student's social backgrounds, motivations in becoming a Social Educator, training and employment situations, etc.. In this paper we will focus on the more relevant ones for this purpose.

The project – Studying ex students social and professional trajectories

The Higher School of Education of Paula Frassinetti (ESEPF), Portugal, started its training programmes of Social Educators in 1996. By then, the need of professionals capable of recognising and understanding social realities in a complex way; capable of relating and creating close relationships with the groups they work with and for; capable of developing technical, personal and social skills, was clear.

After more than a decade of training the school decided to develop a project that could know what trajectories were built by social educators as well as understanding their main difficulties and struggles in the new professions. As a part of an individual's identity, professional recognition is still an important part to take into account.

On one hand, Social Educators are still a relatively new profession in Portugal. For students it may sometimes be difficult to find their own space in Social Work, alongside with other professionals such as psychologists and social workers *tout court.* On the other hand, in recent years there has been an increase of demand for these professionals particularly, working in multidisciplinary teams. Many social contexts have rapidly changed and institutions realised the need of different educational perspectives and approaches.

The social and professional recognition of social educators is also dependent on general social dynamics and on the perception of the value of its pedagogical and action work, in promoting people's well being. Also, as Romans, Petrus and Trilla (2003) suggest, part of the "undefinition" of social educators can be associated to the uncertainty of definitions on "pedagogical intervention"; the superposition of task of other professionals of "social work", making it difficult for other professionals to understand the pedagogical and educational specific features of Social Education; on the labour market uncertainties in career building and of social work market itself.

The interest in the analysis of former students of Social Education is related to the importance of observing the training profiles of the Higher School of Education of Paula Frassinetti. From questionnaires it is possible to observe that students choose this profession in order to respond to a personal calling and to the possibility of contributing actively in social change processes. In fact, students state a high social consciousness towards contemporary problems such as poverty, social exclusion, disabilities, etc...

Becoming Social Educators: student's motivations

Most students asked about the motivations to be a social educator said they wanted to follow a personal and professional calling; to be a part of social change processes with the possibility of working in different social contexts. Also the practical components of the curriculum offered to students by our school was one of the main reasons. The curriculum is built on a set of knowledge from social pedagogy, sociology, public policies and social services, history, psychology, artistic expressions, anthropology and ethics. Besides these general components of training other subjects – more specific – complete and reinforce the definition of the Social Educator profile of the School.

Some of these specific subjects are risk populations and educational intervention; families and socioeducational intervention, deviant behaviour, educational intervention methodologies and training posts. With a multidisciplinary training programme we aim to attend the complexity and diversity of social reality and its specific contexts where students will develop their work. Students should be prepared to be able to perform a responsible, assertive and meaningful socio-educational intervention throughout the training years.

One main feature of the curriculum is the training experiences in different kinds of institutions particularly valued by students[3]. The possibility of putting theory and practice together attracts students and is a motive of choice. This idea had already been presented by Teixeira (2008) on the study conducted on social educators from another training institution in Santarém, South of Portugal. Students, when entering the school are no longer shaped by a pure logic of social help training but more by the idea of transforming people they work with by promoting their autonomy.

The idea of a social educator that allies personal motivation with the possibility of social change in communities and groups is, therefore, one of the most important factors into account.

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3   This school keeps practicum field work protocols, ever since its beginning, with different institutions recognised as excellent socio pedagogical work contexts, such as: After School Activities Centres, Day Care Centres, Children's Temporary Care Centres, Children and Young People Protection Commissions, Children and Youth at Risk Shelters, Social Security Intervention Teams, institutions for handicapped people, Priority Intervention Educational Territories, Social Development Local Projects, amongst others.

On the social and community dimension the aim is to train students for:

- Respecting the ideas of others;
- Solidarity with the present world, particularly with surrounding communities;
- Commitment to built a human and fair society;
- Participation and service;
- Justice;

Some of the main/general skills proposed on the curriculum are:

- Recognise the need of networking with different professionals and services
- Articulate different subject areas knowledge
- Accept and appreciate social, ethnical and cultural diversity
- Work in multidisciplinary teams
- Be autonomous and creative
- To have social awareness and sensitivity
- Have reflexive and prospective thought

Ex students reveal strong social concerns at the beginning of the training years that are later on reinforced with the work made during the training process, namely, on valuing volunteer work with deprived populations, elderly, disabled people, hospitals, etc. It is also important to clarify on a reflection and questioning exercise the axiological and philosophical premises that underlie professional practices. Isabel Baptista (2001, 58), uses several metaphors to define social educators as an empty handed specialist, a field expert, a social mediator, an agent of change, a specialist of the relation that goes out "… (…) to the field without miraculous solutions but, supported in a unique professional knowledge, who commits himself in projects that make it possible to change the faces of exclusion.

For social educators concepts like solidarity, personal availability, and brotherhood, social and ethical responsibility amongst others are the face that constitutes the ideals of proximity and alterity nowadays. Through the ambition of integrating the individual in society by helping them understand its life contexts, by motivating them on building projects to achieve personal fulfilment, we agree with Serrano (2003, p. 129) on stating that the goals of social education are the development of social maturity, human relations and the preparation of individuals for life in community.

"The pedagogical knowledge offers (social educators) wide conceptual tools, according to the demands of educational activity, simultaneously valued as art, science, technique and philosophy" (Carvalho & Baptista 2004, p.83).

It is not surprising then that they also choose ESEPF for the practical features of the curriculum; for the perception of quality in training programmes and for the quality of teaching and learning methodologies. Students are not only interested in receiving a solid theoretical training but in the possibility of combining it with practical experiences with different groups and institutions along the training years.

Student's perceptions of labour market and professional recognition

Most students see some difficulties in obtaining the first job as a social educator. The first one, according to students, is some unawareness of employers regarding social education; as a second reason students point out the lack of job placement offers for social educators; finally, the lack of serious public investment on social areas and on social policies.

These ideas are sustained also by authors such as Teixeira (2008, p. 70) and Carvalho and Baptista (2004) have analysed reasons that can enable or constrain the placement of social educators. Visibility and recognition must be related to the fact of social education being a recent profession and one that crosses different arenas of action – educational and social make it harder to have precise conceptual definitions of the profession.

If we look back on social education in Portugal, there is a growing acceptance of the profession as well as it's recognition in institutional dynamics. Some clear signs can be found towards its visibility slowly growing up: graduation courses in different schools and universities, post graduation programmes and masters programmes, specialised journals and publications, seminars and congresses, etc. This recognition is also obtained from our personal point of view. The reasons are: the plurality of tasks that the social educator is able to perform; the complementary role with other social workers, both the scientific training and "know how" to do with solving problems and the recognition of life long learning as a key to improve professional performances.

However, it should be mentioned that in Portugal, over the past two years we have seen the opening of placements for social educators where there usually was only

for other social workers – examples could be given on the teams working with the Social Income Programme, City Councils, Children and Youth institutions and Child and Family Services as well as schools. As Teixeira argues: *"Emergent jobs imply by its contents and skills a new professional category with specific abilities to perform a set of tasks that, up until then, were developed by other professionals or inexistent"* (Valente, 2005, 124 quoted by Teixeira, 2008, 80).

Furthermore we are living in a moment of serious environmental problems made visible throughout nature's degradation and the world's population quality of life. These contexts force us in creating new imaginaries, values and lines of thought that allow the overcome of this crisis. As Morin argues (1998) the complexity of reality demands us to overcome the paradigm of disjunction, reduction and unidimensionality by training groups that are capable of practicing interdisciplinary and knowledge dialogue.

In fact one of the needed conditions to reinforce social educators as a profession is a bigger diffusion on the profile of professions. For its social, educational and socio-ethical training social educators develop a set of skills and conscience of his own virtues, abilities, rights and duties, helping self promotion. Thus the underlying idea of his intervention is to make human improvement possible by implicating people in the construction of their own histories. Because social educators believe in improvement potentials as well as in solidarity and education for the full of citizenship they never give up fighting for better well-being, physically, psychologically and structurally. Their profile is resilient and prepared with multidisciplinary knowledge making them capable of an ambitious intervention. It is time, then, to recognise that these professionals are able to conciliate methodological and pedagogical knowledge, guided by humanitarian values that define their professional practices.

The importance of volunteer work for specific competences acquisition

It is crucial to integrate theory and practice during training programmes. These practices assume its higher potential when students have their practice training in different kinds of institutions and social realities. It is common for students to have a job offer after the practical training period. Institutions recognise social educators as a value in multidisciplinary teams of "social work" where they perform enriching interventions and projects.

Work with students during the training periods is concentrated in valuing people not as objects but as active subjects with ability to construct their life projects. At the same time the intervention philosophy of ESEPF – strongly marked by humanist values and social justice – aims to understand the human being as having competences of resistance, emancipation and intervention. Thus, students themselves must develop these competences during the years of training, alongside with mediation and ethical competences that allow them to assume the antropo-ethical principles of human rights.

One of the most interesting aspects of the questionnaire was to learn that a great deal of students (53%) worked in volunteer work with different groups and institutions prior to the beginning of the degree. Interestingly enough, a part of them does this work in their own communities, paying attention to the needs and contexts surrounding them and they would also take part in some volunteer projects developed by the school. When thinking about the competences that have been referred in this paper, volunteer work is a major contribution to developing them alongside the work made in the training years.

The human and interventionist features of social education as well as student's motivations in transforming society may help explaining such a high number of volunteers. In our perspective, practicing volunteer work helps to build a professional and personal profile, particularly in personal and relational competences that are fundamental in our field area. As Lovato (1996) and Dricker (1997) argue volunteer work is a social practice that can be related to religious values, charity or the desire of making oneself useful by helping others by accomplishing a particular social mission. In fact, contemporary social and economical contexts, crossed by the rise of risk and vulnerability as Beck suggests (2001) help to reshape the nature of volunteer work and citizens participation, particularly since the 1990's (Dias & Palassi, 2007, p.1). The growth of this sector and the number of people willing to participate also show an increase in social participation and community participation from volunteers, especially young people. Therefore, society itself is reorganised in order to respond to different challenges felt by particular social groups, more fragile or vulnerable. Finally, volunteer work can be seen as a part of social work, social action and, thus, in our case, of social education practices, assuming itself as a form of social awareness that can be more or less organised. Therefore, volunteers could be seen as "individuals that offer their free services to an official institution (National Institute for Social Work, 1995, 23). In our case, social volunteer work would refer to a task *"(…) with the purpose of fighting all forms of oppression, discrimination and marginalization based on race, sex, believes, culture,*

socioeconomic background, age, political ideals (…) throughout participation in solidarity projects in a humanitarian organisation" (Fajardo, 2004,p.17). Most of the students did their volunteer work in homeless people institutions, elderly, children and young peoples in vacation, food collection projects, religious missions, support groups to people with cancer, Red Cross projects.

Final remarks

When graduates, ex students refer themselves to the ways in which the training years have raised their expectations and reinforce the idea of the social educator as a mediator and change generator. Their professional profiles structured by competences of being, doing and existing allow them to have a set of competences that make them capable of acting both technically and pedagogically, with social and ethical sensibility. Underlying their intervention models is the pedagogical culture of these educators that through art, creativity, opportunity, enthusiasm, responsibility and dynamism are capable of interpreting social reality by committing themselves to paths of personal achievement and personal development.

By knowing these paths we are able to state that most ex students (now graduates) are placed as social educators in different social and educational institutions working alongside with different professionals such as social workers and psychologists, sociologists and recognised as a fundamental piece by these institutions. On recent examples in Portuguese reality social educators have been integrated by Social Security Systems in specialised teams working in children and youth at risk institutions; in schools in deprived urban areas; in working with multiproblematic families and community development projects. Thus, social educators must always be mediators between individuals, family and institutions, and society. Their biggest contribution lies, therefore, on the pedagogical, technical and human knowledge than turns them into irreplaceable workers on orienting and "solving" social contemporary problems.

On a second stage of this work, a qualitative and subjective perspective will be taken by conducting in depth interviews with graduates and with institutions that collaborate in social educators practicum placements, in order to assess their place in multidisciplinary teams and the particular and specific contribution of these professionals.

On adopting an approach of training, guidance and help social educators emerge as professionals inspired by humanitarian values, versatile, multitasked and prepared to address social needs in the individual relation with himself/herself and others, with places, with families. Trained for new spaces of reflexion and work they can help build the grounds of Education in the 21st century – *"learning to live together"* in a well being society. Thus, without *"miraculous solutions"* (Baptista, 2001, 58) but with great sensitivity and pedagogical knowledge in non formal education contexts social educators have skills to help *"people capable of evolving, of adapting to a world in rapid transformation and dominate change"* (Delors, 1996, p. 78) (Sarapicos, 2006, p.13).

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