

# MEDIATION AND SOCIAL WORK AT SCHOOLS: TWO CASE STUDIES ABOUT NEW SOCIAL ACTORS IN EDUCATION

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## **Abstract**

Nowadays there are multifarious functions that are demanded from the teachers. It is expected that teachers have the role of educators, good transmitters of knowledge and values, instructors, animators, mediators, social workers, etc.

It's a fact that nowadays more social than pedagogic solutions are required from the schools. And is the teacher able to handle all of them?

Even if there is a will to embrace it all, it seems doubtful to be humanly possible to perform all those functions with quality and efficiency. Even if the teacher voluntarily dedicates more than is obliged by law, the truth is that they have somewhat specific functions that also demand specific training and consequently may not be viable to be performed by only one teacher, for however global, glocal, multifunctional and multifaceted it may be.

The question is: who are the teachers that have taken on these multifarious roles? How do they do it? Why do they do it? Probably, it's an impossible mission to teachers without social workers to help in this tasks. What can be, in this context, the role of the Socio-pedagogical mediators in school? What lessons can we obtain from the experiences and educational projects that contemplate already social mediation and social work in the schools we study in?

we want to present a comparative study, between educational projects of 2 schools where the social work and the social mediation, together with the traditional education, is notorious, to evaluate the potentialities, successes and failures of these projects, so as to study the possibilities for the creation of posts in the schools to the social Workers, teachers and others, as social mediators between school and families, school and communities.

**Keywords:** mediation, social work technician (SWT), social work at schools

## **1. How to deal with the social problems of contemporary school?**

### **The problem**

It is often expected that primary and secondary education teachers have, among other missions, those of educators, good transmitters of knowledge and values, instructors, group leaders and mediators between school, family and community. This is, probably, a very social role for only one teacher (Vieira, 2013).

Other teachers, probably because they are more settled in the system and, perhaps because of this, more professionally secure, and therefore capable of conveying a perhaps more authentic self, commonly say that *I'm a teacher, I'm not a psychologist, nor a social worker...*

Part of an ongoing study on social work conducted in schools is presented in this text, whether on the part of social educators and social workers, or on the part of teachers who are sensitised and prepared to perform school mediation and make the link between the hegemonic school culture and the one of the pupils that arrive there.

For this purpose, we have enlisted the help of teachers' descriptions of school contexts where pedagogical and social practices have been constructed to deal with the differences, inequality and problems of contemporary society, mirrored in the "school for all".

The starting point, in this case, is the study of real situations in Portuguese schools, specifically in the region of Leiria, to listen to the need for training and inclusion of professionals who have to deal with situations of conflict and/or of exclusion that present themselves in the school context. Whether there is room at school for other professionals who

are not just teachers is the guiding tool for the entire study (Vieira, 1999). Clearly, this is just a part of the project and, as such, we have left here only some of the guiding questions of the study.

Even if teachers and group directors are, perhaps, sensitised and prepared for social education, social work, intercultural and intermulticultural education, the School-Family-Society relationship, social inclusion (Silva 2003; Vieira 1992, 1998; Zanten 1990, 1992; Souta 1997; Stoer, Magalhães and Rodrigues 2004; Stoer and Silva 2005; Cardoso 2006), where does the work of the teacher and of the group director objectively end?

Do teachers have to be "a jack of all trades"? Do they have to be capable of performing and solving everything, provided that it arises within the school context? Probably, schools can no longer be only for teachers. Within them, there has been room in Portugal for a school psychologist for some time. In Spain, for a while now, social education, social pedagogy and social work have been given room in primary schools, secondary schools and universities (Caride 2005, 261).

What experiences of social work, socio-cultural and school social mediation do we have today in Portuguese primary schools?

## **2. Social and school mediation**

Mediation has shown itself to be a process that values the human condition and that is capable of promoting change. It is simultaneously comprised of an alternative form of intervention whose direction is formed through day to day experience in the light of different actors, and in specific contexts, a dynamic process that rejects the "deficit" model in favor of a political and practical study committed to transforming experiences. As a process, mediation constitutes a challenge for all those who act in the social field. (Almeida 2004; Vieira, 2013).

Although it has connotations of conciliatory practices, mediation has confirmed itself as an alternative to conflict resolution, as a means of social regulation or a method of social and cultural development (De Briant and Palau 1999), which takes on the different characteristics according to the situation, the profile of the mediator and the representation that this person has in the process as a whole.

Mediation includes, necessarily, a third person, i.e. mediation involves, as a minimum, a triangular interaction where the mediator works as a translator of cultures.

The field of action of the Social Work Technician (SWT) in institutions oriented towards formal education was, for a long time, confined to certain types of situation considered problematic and of a more or less residual nature. With the aim of increasing their capacity to intervene positively in the prevention of social problems, it has been translated into a constantly updated and problematic investment in training seeking the broadening of their skills. In the expansion of education that increasingly reveals the difficulties in communication between the school culture and the cultures of origin of a significant number of children and young people, the educative function is too complex a job, requiring knowledge and skills that, despite being diversified, only acquire efficiency when they communicate between themselves. The SWT, in possessing a theoretical training in social sciences and in social education and mediation, brings together positive conditions for establish itself a catalyzing agent for collective processes, promoting communication between the different socializing agents, and being this socio-cultural mediator.

The construction of an educative community by the creation of integrating teams of all socializing agents is a route with significant potential as regards knowledge and appreciation of socio-cultural specifics of the socializing contexts, namely the school (Canário e Rolo, 2001). Their problems were seen as school problems, when, in reality, they were social problems that revealed themselves and were potentiated at school (Amado, 2001). The schooling of social problems, or their transformation in schooling problems as a consequence of social differences, which psychology, and other sciences, deals with, has widely promoted an image of the school as an institution whose operation is reducible to psychologically manageable behaviors, and therefore interpretable and regulatable in the light of individual factors.

The simultaneously interdisciplinary and practical nature of the SWT, of Social Educators and School Mediators makes them agents with specific skills with regard to the insertion of the school into development dynamics that imply cooperative linkage between agents of formal

and informal education, and other social and economic agents, taking into account intercultural bridge-building between school and active life (Vieira, 2013).

### **3. The “OSFS”<sup>1</sup> at the Pinhal school and the “Behaviour Workshop” at Calçada school as school mediation experiences**

With a view to familiarising ourselves more with the Pinhal school and the Calçada school projects, the Individual Ethnographic Interviews (IEI) (Vieira 1999, 2009) and the Focus Group (FG) conducted in accordance with the methodology (IEI and FG) had as their basis the following subjects: the role of the school; inclusive education; social exclusion and social mediation practices; what social mediation is; the “OSFS” and the “Behaviour Workshop” – school mediation spaces; social problems identified in the studied school contexts; the importance of linkage between primary and secondary solidarities in the process of social inclusion; solidarity networks in the mediation process; social mediation and change; the systemic perspective; role of the SWT; social work in networks; professionals' view on the role of the mediator(s).

Taking into account the problems of school exclusion, of the inequalities present in schools and the emergence of new paradigms that identify the need to create equality of opportunity, respecting differences, the intervention carried out by mediators has to be based on the specificity of the socio-cultural contexts of the students. These two offices arose to answer these questions.

They therefore constitute school mediation spaces, given that they seek to respond to the students' social problems, which cause their maladjustment to the social and school context.

The OSFS arose as a form of school mediation, in the secondary Calçada school, in an effort that derives from the concept that the student is the principal actor in the school and that only through their active participation and collaboration is it possible to improve the environment experienced in the school and the community of which they are part. Thus, the student is the central and most important element in the OSFS's intervention.

However, the students cannot be worked with in isolation, as they are social subjects and are part of a community, which also has its problems and difficulties. The approach to the student is systematic, considering all the systems of which the students are part and also how these systems communicate between themselves. The OSFS seeks to intervene with the student, the school community of which the student is part and those with whom they directly relate (the class director, the class, ...), seeking always the co-responsibility of the family, and not forgetting the entire community network, which may serve as support in the whole intervention (health centre, sports club, social security, authorities...).

“[...] Today, as we already have the office, therefore, the Social Services technicians attempt a direct approach to these students, and they try to disassemble the situation [...]”. (Teacher E, Vice-President of the Executive Board of Sec. Calçada school).

For its part, “[...] What is the purpose of the Behaviour Workshop? It serves to in some way offer the child resources to fight adversity [...]”. (Teacher C, from the 2, 3 Primary Pinhal School)

“[...] the Behaviour Workshop was something created so that the student reflected a little on the reason why he is doing what he is doing, why it is that I took certain decisions and, maybe, why am I attacking? Why is it that I turned myself into an aggressor? And after finding the motives for the student turning himself into an aggressor, then let's go and see, it's like, let's endow the student, create resources in such a way as to combat the adversity in which they live. And then? Then we are going to look for the Social Worker or the Social Services Technician in that area. This work is very much associated with the class director and we are going to create protocols with the Higher School of Education, with Social Services in terms of interns, and we are going to produce these reports constantly saying that Social Services are necessary in the school[...].” (Teacher C, from the 2,3 Primary Pinhal school).

Even before the integration of the Social Services intern into the school, and probably before gauging their skills, teachers from that school have been seeking to be the school mediators themselves, bridging, in such a way as they were capable, the social problems of the students that they perceive not to be merely pedagogical problems. Today, 2 years of experience in the placement of Social Services interns in school, there appears to be no doubt as to how

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<sup>1</sup> OSFS: Office of Student and Family Support.

vital the SWT's role as mediator is recognised to be, and how it is necessary to solve these problems. Considering that these experiences are also relatively recent in Portugal, (although, at the same time, we know that the number of OSFSs has risen to a hundred across the country, whereby they will be, naturally, the subject of study for the next phase) and that, given that the School Social Service does not yet represent a formal and delimited professional area in the school context, "[...]" The implementation of these offices, is perhaps a way for people linked to Social Services to enter schools. [...]" (Teacher E, Vice-president of the Executive Board of Sec. Calçada school). In this sense, we may say that we are probably witnessing the emergence and recognition of new professionals to act within the school context, starting from an inductive logic, not imposed from the top down by the ministries, legal statutes, etc., but rather, from the recognition of the effectiveness of the SWTs on the ground.

#### **4. The Role of the SWT in School**

Currently, an enormous field of action is opening up to the social worker, the Social Educator, the school mediators and other social scientists such as anthropologists, sociologists, namely the dynamisation of interdisciplinary teams, working not only on the investigation of the structural factors that generate school abandonment / success or, even, of "functional illiteracy", but also in the formulation and implementation of methodologies and concerted strategies of intervention and cooperation between educative school and extra-school agents. The response of the school is built, in a sustained manner, on multidisciplinary teams that coherently and concertedly develop work in all the contexts of the student's life.

Taking into account the concept of social mediation already widely referred to, we may assert that the SWTs may constitute mediators in the school community, seeing as how they are promoters of changes and interventions based on the social contexts of the students. The actions that they conduct as mediators come to deal with situations of conflict at a work, family, community and institutional level, as well as situations of risk, seeking efficient answers to these situations.

The Social worker, this social technician, is also multifaceted and complex, working, then, in the sense of getting to know the social sector of the students and their families, seeking to increase the interaction of the same with the school.

Throughout this study, we realised that the teachers themselves and other educative agents identify the need for the existence of partnerships with the local community and other institutions, the linking of resources and sharing of information in such a way as to manage to conduct more efficient intervention, better adjusted to reality, in an effort to answer specifically and most appropriately the given problem situation. "[...]" First of all, there needs to be good linkage between the services. Exchange of information, work in networks, even within the school itself, as well as outside the school. [...]" (Y, SWT Calçada school). "[...]" The school has to know how to diagnose problems, it has to know how to acknowledge the school community, its students in particular, it has to acknowledge them. It has to diagnose the problems and it has to have procedural regulations among teachers, Social Workers, doctors, if one part is lacking, the others are lacking too. [...]" (Teacher F, of Sec. Calçada school).

We have observed that the main gap that the teachers identify is "[...]" a lack of establishing partnerships, a lack of us all working together, having meetings together, it happens very little, a very big flaw." [...]" "There is a need for greater collaboration with the different social support groups." (Teacher E, Vice-president of the Executive Board of Sec. Calçada school). "The gaps are really the collaboration with the institutions." (Teacher D, from the 2, 3 Primary Pinhal school).

#### **5. View of Education Professionals on the role of the mediator**

Within the school communities analysed, we found two views on the role and importance of social work. During the IEI and the FG, above all those of the teachers, we found that there are controversial opinions. Thus, there is one group of teachers that consider the presence of the SWT, who assumes the role of mediator between the school, the family and the community (namely the institutions that are at the disposal of the same), fundamental. This technician is appreciated by them as someone who may gather the resources and may find a

solution appropriate for solving the social problems that affect the students, and which stop them from achieving a performance at school similar to their peers.

"[...] I consider it indispensable [social work in school] " [...] very often the teachers ask for more Social Workers [...]. I have to do my part of communicating, connecting to the social worker, and then the technician will do theirs. Therefore, my objective is not to have a background in Social Work, it is to know what I need to observe and how to be useful to the Social Worker." [...] teacher B, from the 2,3 Primary Pinhal school

"[...]Here, nobody takes the place of somebody else. That is not the question. The question is that we could actually be a team. The core of a school, the heart of the school, the school exists because students exist and, therefore, students form the core from which the school lives. And therefore, it is for them that we all go there... Therefore, it is in their interest, and to solve their problems, that we should act. And, as such, nobody takes the place of someone else. The Social Workers have their place in the school, and the teachers should not feel threatened by this, not at all. Despite there being, sometimes, some sensitive points. But these are things that I think will only change with time, and with the changing of generations of teachers. I'm very practical. [...]" (Teacher F, from the Secondary Calçada school).

On the other hand, it was detected the existence of another group of teachers who are not sensitive to the social problems that affect the students, who underestimate them, and who do not thus consider relevant the presence of a mediator (role taken on by the SWT) within the school community. Thus, they only value the pedagogical component, i.e. the cognitive dimension of the student is the only one that matters. They see the school as a space only for teachers. "[...] It depends on the schools. And it has nothing to do with age groups. There are new teachers who have the attitude very much "I'm here to teach classes and not... The rest passes me by. It has nothing to do with me. I don't need to truly know the students at this level. I only need to assess them at the level of English, or French or Philosophy". Therefore, it isn't a question of age group. We could consider that the older teachers are less sensitive due to their education, it isn't that. It's even the opposite. I mean, it's according to the actual sensibilities of each person, I think. We have all kind of teachers. [...]" (Teacher F, from Secondary Calçada school).

"[...] There are instructors who believe that, as they say, the only function of the teacher is to teach their subject, because they are there to ensure that the students learn something and get good results. [...]" (R, SS Intern at Pinhal school).

"[...] Albeit, sometimes teachers resist to everything that comes from outside and which is intended to be deployed here. Namely, when they don't know the responsibilities of these people, they resist. They think these people are bypassing them, you know? But, for example, this year with the office, teachers already know very well what their role is, where it is that their role ends, that the role is one of diagnosis and where the role of the Social Services starts accordingly, which is to get to the root of solving the problems. [...]" (Teacher E, Vice-president of the Executive Board of Sec. Calçada school). In fact, we found that, many times, the role that the SWT may perform in the school community is underestimated by teachers because many see their presence in a school context as an "invasion" of their professional space.

It is also known that the school has opened up to psychologists a long time ago. And, probably, any street survey would show that the majority of respondents agree with the presence of a psychologist in schools. The same would not happen, perhaps, if this question was directed to social professionals, social workers or social educators.

Perhaps the explanation is that the common sense continues to see school as an epistemologically homogenising, regulatory place, which confines differences to the realm of deficiencies to be sent for psychological treatment. This consideration serves to highlight a conflict, at least in its infancy, that this study shows: on one hand, psychologists with legitimation in the school system; on the other, the social workers who need to assert themselves and see their skills recognised to show how many pedagogical problems have a socio-cultural root, and that their resolution is through social and school mediation. There is, thus, in both cases studied in this research, a certain lack of clarification between the roles of one or the other about teaching. This was detected whether in direct observation of the work contexts, in the IEI and in the FG.

"[...] Firstly, there are no lines of intervention in the school environment, and then there is no delimited professional space. There are no Social Workers in schools. This fact shows itself in the preference demonstrated by teachers for the psychologist in the school community in detriment to the social worker, as the responsibilities of the psychologist and their

professional space are better defined in the school context. But, in fact, the role of mediator falls to the social worker, as it is they that have the training to intervene in the various social spheres [...]”. (R, SS Intern at Pinhal school. Many times, at the root of the students' maladjustment to the environment and form of the school are associated problems of social order, not necessarily psychological, and when present, the latter derive from the former (not all, clearly).

As R. (SS Intern at 2, 3 Primary Pinhal school asserts, “[...] But the technician most requested was the psychologist. When, even psychologists, psychologists manage to answer many things, don't they? But the majority of young peoples' and children's problems are not of a psychological nature. Many times, and I'm saying here what I think, because many times the problem actually is at home, is actually in the family. Or because the family is unstructured, or because the family has economic problems, or because at the heart of the family there is some problem that is not allowing the child or the young person to develop in a healthy and harmonious manner. If it happens, the fact that he goes to a psychologist is even going to allow him to release all that pain and anguish and all that, but it is not going to solve the problems at home, the problem will persist. [...]”. It is thus observed that, in the absence of a technician with specific training who takes on the role of mediator in the school community, it is the teachers that take it on “[...] This is our work as class directors, to act as Social Workers, constantly. [...]” (Teacher D, at 2, 3 Primary Pinhal school. This is one more area to be explored later: to what point can the teachers, who in some way already perform social and school mediation, be reconfigured to be, effectively, not professional teaching staff, but social workers inside schools, especially since, currently, Portugal has a surplus of teachers and schools have emerging social problems, even deriving from the increase in the multicultural nature of society and schools (Vieira 2004).

They feel that they do not possess the skills to take on this role (because they do not have the training for it). Thus, we found that, many times, in trying to resolve situations, they do not act in the most appropriate manner, and, therefore, do not find definitive solutions to the social problems that affect their students “[...] And we go on trying to find solutions, and it has to be case by case. It's one way one day and another the next. [...]” (Teacher D, at 2, 3 Primary Pinhal school. In the intervention that they carry out, “[...] they use common sense and tact more than anything else. [...]” (Teacher F, at 2, 3 Primary Pinhal school.

Taking into account that said above, without a shadow of a doubt we consider that the ideal solution would be that these professionals work as a team, so that there is concerted, systematic and effective intervention. Only with the contributions of all the professionals (social workers, psychologists, social educators, teachers, among others) will such a thing be possible. “[...] if we work all together, and each one has information and each one has specific knowledge, it is a small step to arrive at the root of things much more quickly [...]” (R, SS Intern at 2, 3 Primary Pinhal school.

The Behaviour Workshop, of Pinhal school, was conceived by teachers sensitised to social work, but who recognise today the need for inclusion and interaction with other professionals who are not teachers: “[...] the Behaviour Workshop is only until I can have a multidisciplinary team, of course. [...]” (Teacher B, at 2, 3 Primary Pinhal school, “[...] And it was without doubt an added value, a multidisciplinary team [...]. But, exactly, in a multidisciplinary team. Not only a Social Worker, nor just a Psychologist. Both. We need them. We really need a team. [...]” (Teacher A, President of the Executive Board at 2, 3 Primary Pinhal school. “[...] There really needs to be combined intervention to manage to solve something. [...]” (Teacher E, Vice-president of the Executive Board of Sec. Calçada school). “[...] it is important for schools to have at their disposal Social Workers who intervene together with teachers and other technicians to solve the child's problems, early on. [...]” (Teacher B, at 2, 3 Primary Pinhal school.

It is important to reiterate that this study intends only to make an analysis of the similarities and differences between the strategies adopted by the two schools, without the intention of making any value judgement.

The location of the two schools, situated close to problematic social areas which they serve, indicates the importance of the strategies that they have adopted, and the need for consolidation of intervention at a social level that those responsible for this work at both schools defend. Thus, both defend the idea that social work should be carried out through an interaction between the executive board, class directors, staff, that is, between all the elements of the school context that seek to monitor and support the social problems, always in very close relationship to the parents, the students and the community. It should also be

pointed out that, according to those responsible for it, the school situated in Leiria urgently needs to have an SWT at its service, even if it may perhaps have to be part time. But its presence becomes fundamental given the weak response from institutions whose function is child protection. This school, contrary to Secondary Calçada school, is not supported by the CSI (Child Support Institute)<sup>2</sup>, seeking the work tools and the finance to cope with the costs that a social worker generates on its own.

At this school a project has already been organised, the Student Social Support Centre (SSSC), created by Social Services interns, which, suffering from the consequences of the lack of social workers in schools, is in the planning stage. With a view to changing this situation, and the financing of technicians that the CSI would make available having been denied by the Municipal Council of Leiria and of the Leiria Social Security District Centre, the school is now trying to have the project recognised in conjunction with the Regional Directorate of Education. In the meantime, at the school the Behaviour Workshop has been functioning for two years, a space for socio-pedagogical intervention operating outside the classroom, and has as its activities, in general terms, providing services to students who arrive of their own free will or who are sent by teachers, monitoring adjusted to the needs detected, and when it is considered necessary, proceeding with the guiding of the situation in conjunction with other extra-school entities. With this project, the complementarity with the work of the class director is appealed to in an effort to link to the family of the student or with the community. Contributing to the student's education is aspired to, not simply to instilling social and school rules.

For its part, at Calçada school there is the Office of Student and Family Support (OSFS) which, similarly, intends to develop work both with the student and with the family, contributing to the harmonious overall growth of the child/young person, promoting a more humane and smooth environment for school and social integration. In the case of assistance, it seeks to find answers to disciplinary, family and social problems. More specifically, the objectives are to reduce situations that call into question the physical and emotional integrity of the child/young person, and situations of consumption of psychoactive substances, creating and dynamising the Social Support Network (SSN). This network intervention proposal demands a systematic monitoring of the students.

Commonly, the assessments carried out by those responsible for both projects allow the evaluation of success and failure in resolving some situations, such as the lack of means and the inability of the school to act on its own.

In giving a voice to ex-Social Services interns who have worked on these projects, it was found that both considered that this experience in the area of education was very positive, considering social intervention in the schools essential for early detection and/or intervention for students with socio-cognitive problems. They point to the urgent need to implement these social support projects for students and their families in more schools. However, they are unanimous in pointing to the lack of openness of some teachers to this work (Vieira, 2013).

## **6. Concluding notes**

Currently, schools say they want to promote equality of opportunity, in the sense of fairness, wanting to understand individual differences or, at least, recognise them.

However, this model is a good theory which is not shaped in all school contexts. What happens is that the idea of equality persists, and not of equity, whereby in not meeting the specific needs of each child/young person (as intervention strategies are the same for the same problem situations), the problems persist, which affects the healthy and harmonious development of the child/young person and their integration at school.

Teachers and other educative agents recognise the need for the existence of a mediator with specific training in the social area, electing the SWT as the professional who may perform this function, among other social scientists. However, there is no delimited professional place or proper lines of intervention for social work in a school context, whereby we consider that the implementation of offices, such as the OSFS, as a good way to include the social worker and social educators in the school community.

Because professional isolation leads to weakness, a school mediator may never work alone. Then, there is a need for the existence of social support networks and multidisciplinary teams (which include professionals from different areas, such as social workers, psychologists,

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<sup>2</sup> Known in Portugal as IAC (Instituto de apoio à Criança) – [www.iacrianca.pt](http://www.iacrianca.pt)

teachers, doctors, among others) for concerted and efficient intervention that resolves the problem situations affecting the students.

The existence of more social workers/mediators in schools would be extremely important, in an effort to meet the needs of students, teachers and other professionals, not only in terms of Social Action but also in the detection of problem situations in the school and family fields (Vieira, 2013).

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