CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF THE ROLE OF THE SOCIAL EDUCATOR IN THE CONTEXT OF SÃO TOMÉ AND PRÍNCIPE

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ABSTRACT

Theoretical benchmark: Starting from a theoretical framework that addresses the multiplicity of roles inherent to the Social Educator, we wanted to understand the work developed by five undergraduate interns from the Social Education course at a higher education institution in Portugal, who stayed for four months, February to May, in the 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 academic years in various institutions, in São Tomé and Príncipe.

Method: Qualitative study, informed by descriptive and interpretative characteristics, seeks to understand and describe behaviors, feelings and ways of thinking and acting of the subjects participating in the study.

Results and conclusion: The paths followed by the interns, in their multiple roles, were an added value, making visible the importance of the role of the Social Educator in developing countries and, in particular, in the exercise of full citizenship in demanding and complex contexts that are aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, it is called for an increase in internships in the context of international cooperation, in developing countries.

Research implications: Need for the Social Education technician in developing countries, and especially in São Tomé and Príncipe.

Originality/value: Research carried out in São Tomé and Príncipe to highlight the valorization of the role of women, since this group was only female, in order to contribute to the reduction of socio-educational problems, associated with female and child poverty, which they still have a lot of expression on the Island of São Tomé and Príncipe.

Keywords: Social Educator, Developing Countries, Citizenship, Sao Tome, Principe.

DESAFIOS E OPORTUNIDADES DO PAPEL DO EDUCADOR SOCIAL EM CONTEXTO DE SÃO TOMÉ E PRÍNCIPE

RESUMO

Referencial teórico: Partindo de um enquadramento teórico que aborda a multiplicidade de papeis inerentes ao Educador Social, quisemos perceber o trabalho desenvolvido por cinco estagiárias da Licenciatura do curso de Educação Social de uma instituição do ensino superior de Portugal, que permaneceram durante quatro meses, de fevereiro a maio, nos anos letivos de 2019/2020 e 2020/2021 em várias instituições, em São Tomé e Príncipe.

Método: Estudo de natureza qualitativa, conformado por características descritivas e interpretativas, procura compreender e descrever comportamentos, sentimentos e formas de pensar e agir dos sujeitos participantes no estudo.

Resultados e conclusão: Os percursos trilhados pelas estagiárias, nos seus múltiplos papeis, foram uma mais valia, deixando visível a importância do papel do Educador Social em países em desenvolvimento e, em particular, no exercício de uma cidadania plena em contextos exigentes e complexos agravados pela pandemia COVID-19. Assim, apela-se que se redobrem os estágios em contexto de cooperação internacional, em países em desenvolvimento.

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1 INTRODUCTION

São Tomé and Príncipe (STP) is an island state located in the Gulf of Guinea (1001km2), composed of two main islands - São Tomé Island and Príncipe Island, approximately 300 km from the African continent, is part of sub-Saharan Africa, considered considered by many to be a poor region. The 2012 General Population and Housing Census (RGPH) states that the resident population of São Tomé and Príncipe was 178,741 inhabitants, of which 49% were women. Compared to the 2001 RGPH, the São Tomé population grew by 41,000 inhabitants, representing an increase of 2.4% per year. According to the National Statistics Institute (INE) of São Tomé and Príncipe, population projections estimate an average annual growth rate of 2.1% until 2030. As a result, in 2017, it is estimated that the country had around 200,000 inhabitants, expected to reach 260,000 in 2030 (CPE, 2019).

The work presented here describes and problematizes the contribution made by seven undergraduate interns from the Social Education course at a higher education institution in Portugal, who stayed for four months, from February to May, in the 2019/2020 academic years, and 2020/2021 in various institutions in São Tomé and Príncipe. These institutions had different values, being mostly aimed at welcoming children, young people and elderly people in vulnerable situations, both due to the absence of families and the lack of financial and/or material resources. Even though the main objective of the internship was for the students, through unique experiences, to complete the Internship Curricular Unit in order to complete their degrees, its purpose, and given that we are talking about a developing country, was provide institutions with qualified human resources in the area of Social Education, contributing to increasing the skills and professional qualifications of all people involved in the process, in a logic of learning communities. In this more distant and complex context, we wanted to understand, “What practices characterized the development of the internship of the 5 students on the Social Education course in São Tomé and Príncipe”. It was also hoped to be able to contribute to awakening the need for the role of a social educator in reception institutions.

In the theoretical foundation, it was considered important to address issues related to the diversity of roles that the social educator may have to deal with, as well as the structure of the Curricular Unit (CU) and the points it addresses, in order to understand the contribution of same in supporting more complex situations encountered by social education interns.
2 THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

The multiplicity of roles of the social educator is a necessity and a characteristic reality of the profession. When we talk about developing countries, as is the case of STP, the situation is worsened by the particularities of the island context and its level of development, resulting in significant social problems. From the perspective of Samagaio (2019, p. 26), “a social problem is a phenomenon, a situation or a condition that, from the perspective of certain groups within a society, does not work as it should”. Much is said about social innovation that “emerges as a new way of addressing social problems through the articulation of different actors in favor of local development ( Justen , et al., 2020, p. 1). In a society where problems are multiple and complex, marked by asymmetries and diversity, the social educator plays an essential role in the daily and continuous effort aimed at improving the quality of social life of individuals. Senent (2011) brings us this idea when he argues that a social educator rarely works with homogeneous groups, with diversity being their biggest challenge, whatever the socio-educational context in which they intervene. From the perspective of the same author, this fact is due to the characteristics of today's society, marked by a growing diversity, where the contexts of intervention of Social Educators mirror this diversity inherent to their action. In his multiplicity of roles, the social educator is, therefore, “an intercultural mediator, a socio-educational mediator, a builder of bridges between cultures, people, groups and communities, (…) but who, (…) has formative moments that he considers significant in your life story to become the professional you are” (Vieira, Vieira & Marques, 2021).

From the perspective of Caride (2003), it is extremely important to build a Social Education that is capable of building different fields of action with regard to educational intervention, that is concerned with and invests in the integral training of individuals, so that the path towards a more inclusive, plural and critical citizenship is a reality.

Social Education, materialized through the skills of its professionals, confers a right of citizenship that takes shape in the recognition of a profession of a pedagogical nature, generating educational contexts and mediating and training actions (ASEDES, 2007). This situation ends up being beneficial in the sense of creating a window of opportunities in the job market, derived from the panoply of contexts existing in society. To this end, and in order to be able to provide an adequate response to all the challenges posed by today's societies, higher education institutions are responsible for preparing these professionals who are so versatile and necessary to mitigate discrimination in its broad ramifications. From the perspective of De Vicente et al (2006 in Urrutxi , et al., 2011), the practical component, materialized in the curricular unit “Internship”, assumes an undeniable importance in the training of social educators, providing them with a series of skills acquired in the context internship, given that they are called upon to intervene in complex and varied situations, putting their potential as human beings and professionals to the test. It is true that this practical component is built by the interaction of several actors who make it possible and give it meaning, namely, students, host entities and higher education institutions (Urrutxi, et al., 2011 ), and The contribution of each participant plays a decisive role in the quality of the work carried out during the internship and in the holistic training of the future professional. This idea is corroborated by Caride (2003), when arguing that the development of socio-educational intervention skills of the Social Educator is combined with a set of knowledge and theoretical-practical knowledge based on social pedagogy, contributing to the development of a professional profile that combines academic training with practical training, where the experiential nature leverages and mobilizes both components.

Professions related to social circumstances, in a context of globalization, urbanization and individualization of ways of life and rapid and profound social, economic and cultural transformations, have been undergoing constant and profound transformations. In the case of
social educators, they have to mobilize subjects’ resources with the aim of promoting their social participation, respecting their specificities and taking into account fundamental values and rights and social justice. Thus, social educators collaborate both in the construction and reconstruction of the identities of subjects and communities, and in the implicated action of each person as a citizen. In a society where inequalities are increasingly accentuated, old family and neighborhood solidarity is fading, social protection systems are in crisis and disappearing. Development occurs at multiple speeds and economic difficulties affect, structurally or in cyclical waves, a very significant number of households. The work of professionals who participate in the construction and development of programs and projects that facilitate construction is particularly relevant. of a fairer social organization. Actors driven by the same interests can bring about significant social changes in low-income communities (Hodge, et al., 2019). These are the challenges for social education professionals. Challenges that do not simply conform to actions triggered by the urgent needs of individuals, groups or communities, but which involve reflection and intervention designed with long-term objectives. The Social Education course's primary objective is to train graduates capable of performing a wide range of functions in organizations and institutions linked to multiple social, cultural and educational contexts. Students must develop different types of skills (general and specific), essential to the performance of services required by the sector. The internship will allow students, not only to develop and mobilize some of the knowledge acquired in theoretical terms, but also to understand institutional dynamics and make a first approach to specific structures and environments related to social intervention (programmatic contents of the internship UC). Thus, the central objective of the internship Curricular Unit is to provide students with the possibility of insertion into a professional context of social education, enabling them to develop transversal and specific skills.

The general objectives of the Internship UC are i) to allow the student to enter a work context and functions related to Social Education; ii) promote the application of theoretical-practical knowledge acquired throughout the course to training situations in a professional context; iii) contribute to the development of a reflective professional stance around the profile of the Social Educator.

The specific objectives fall within i) to know the social and educational policies suitable for intervention within the intervention contexts; ii) mastery of socio-educational intervention methodologies; iii) participate in the promotion of projects that the host institution proposes to carry out; iv) understand and integrate into the functioning and structure of the organization/institution.

The transversal objectives include ai) Ability to work and communicate in groups; ii) Develop the ability to act effectively and socially responsible in relational and professional contexts.

The internship takes place in the 2nd semester of the 3rd year of the Course, for a total of 490 hours.

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The program contents are oriented towards knowledge of the structures, functions and organizational environments in which students will carry out their internship and towards the construction and/or mobilization of socio-educational intervention devices in a work context.

3 METHODOLOGY

The present study aims to make known the multiple roles of the Social Educator through the work developed by seven interns from the Social Education course at a higher education
institution in Portugal, who stayed for four months, from February to May, during the academic years. 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 in various institutions in São Tomé and Príncipe.

From a methodological point of view, this is a qualitative study, shaped by descriptive, exploratory and interpretative characteristics, seeking to understand and describe behaviors, feelings and ways of thinking and acting of the subjects participating in the study. To understand the dimension of the diversity of their roles, the following objectives were outlined: i) reflect on the relationship established between the programmatic contents of the Internship curricular unit and its articulation with the activities implemented by the interns in context; ii ) reflect on the multiplicity of roles of the Social Educator in developing countries; iii ) understand the contribution of extreme situations to the autonomy of students, particularly with regard to reconciling professional work with humanitarian work. The data were collected in context, that is, through episodes resulting from face-to-face meetings held by the researcher with each of the interns and the supervisor of each of the institutions, through joint reflections between the researcher and the interns, and also through analysis document resulting from the internship reports of the aforementioned students. Due to the characteristics of the study, and given that it is part of the qualitative paradigm, content analysis was considered the most suitable procedure for processing the data, as it allows obtaining rich data about the personal experiences lived by the subjects in real contexts (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017; Morgado, 2012). To interpret these data, it is necessary to make “interpretive inferences” supported by an explanatory logic essential for the analysis and discussion of the results (Amado, 2017). This procedure involved a floating reading of the corpus, which made it possible to select the main emerging ideas to respond to each of the objectives. According to Amado (2017), “The first major objective of content analysis is to organize the contents of a set of messages into a system of categories that translate the key ideas conveyed by the documentation under analysis” (p.315 -). Subsequently, after a careful reading of the corpus, it allowed us a global view of the information collected, and given the defined objectives and the theoretical framework that supports the study, a deeper reading was carried out that allowed the creation of the analysis categories.

The study subjects will be designated as intern 1 (E1) to intern 5 (E5) for reasons of ethics and professional secrecy.

We then move on to analyzing and interpreting the data, as evidenced in the following section of this text.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

At this point we intend to present and discuss the results relating to the practices that characterize the development of the internship of the five students of the Social Education course in São Tomé and Príncipe and which are summarized in table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research question</th>
<th>Practices that characterize the development of the internship of the 5 students of the Social Education course in STP</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advance research, by the interns, on the contexts where the internships would take place.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Getting closer to the reality of socio-educational contexts upon arrival at each of the institutions, in STP, through contact with professionals there.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Observation of the target audience, the context and the facilities where the internship would take place.</td>
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<td>contact and immersion in the socio-educational and cultural contexts of STP.</td>
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What practices characterize the development of the internship of the 5 students on the Social Education course in São Tomé and Príncipe

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practices</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation in the promotion of routine activities established in each of the internship institutions, among other experiences.</td>
<td>Educational experiences in very simple spaces devoid of resources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction of new cultural and artistic knowledge that emerges during the internship.</td>
<td>Training in real work contexts, in very needy socio-educational contexts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of methodologies that allow the (re)construction of practical and experiential knowledge, based on theoretical learning, taking into account the scarcity of resources.</td>
<td>Preparation of projects with the intention of minimizing existing problems in institutions.</td>
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<td>Humanitarian work resulting from COVID19</td>
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</table>

Source: prepared by the author (2023)

In a society where problems are multiple and complex, marked by asymmetries and diversity, the five interns played multiple roles aimed at improving the quality of life of individuals, in all areas. After data triangulation, we can verify that the practices that characterize the development of the internship of the five students on the Social Education course in São Tomé and Príncipe cover very varied contours. Some are part of the work of the social educator as a technician, others are part of any human being who is available to collaborate with the reality that surrounds him, from a holistic perspective. It should be added that the fact that the interns reside in the institutions where they carry out their internships, for the sake of minimizing costs, ends up bringing other challenges, especially for the interns who stay in homes for children at risk, who are removed to parents. E1 reports that “since they are children from nursery to primary school (8 months to 9 years) who in turn find themselves without structuring rules which often lead to negative behaviors among them”. Although the reception is exemplary, there is great difficulty in participating in the activities on the part of the institution's employees, and “undoubtedly the “no” support on the part of the employees in carrying out the activities, that is, they do not know how to act and how they can help and when an activity is being carried out” E3, brings more effort to the interns who have this context. At the end of the first two weeks of the internship, the interns had already realized that their role would be multiple, within all the problems identified. E2 states that “Over these two weeks, my work has gone beyond being a Social Educator, as there are several needs, not only in working with the employees, but also in helping the management” and E5 reinforces the same idea when he says that “there are great needs on the part of the institution, not only in working with children, helping employees, giving medication to children, monitoring families, preparing purchases for the institution”. Senent (2011) reinforces this idea when he addresses the heterogeneity of the groups with which a social educator works, with diversity being his greatest challenge, whatever the socio-educational context in which he intervenes. In STP, this context occurs, given the characteristics of an island, developing country.

Issues related to children’s health also began to be a concern for the interns. STP has only one Hospital where needs also abound. In any case, it is there that people have to travel, as this institution is far from any of the interns’ host institutions, making it necessary to have a van to transport the children because ambulances are scarce and always occupied. In this context, E1 reinforces this idea when he reports, “we realized that there is a great need (…), the existence of transport that most of the time deprives children of the right to education, health and a fair and affordable quality of life. egalitarian.” With the hope of resolving all the problems, the same intern, together with her colleague, E2, started the process to be able to help the institution in acquiring the van and to this end “we created a new project in order to raise
funds to achieve the much-desired transportation.” It is clear that the interns tried to minimize the problems encountered, even though they were difficult to resolve in the short term.

The Covid-19 outbreak also reached São Tomé and Príncipe, where it was necessary to carry out a prevention plan, as students were left without classes and everyone started to be at the institution 24 hours a day. As employees were not allowed to go home and return to the institution the next day, there were not enough people who decided to stay to carry out the activities. In this context, the interns had to ensure the survival of babies, clean the facilities, help cook meals, wash dishes, wash clothes manually, guarantee hours set aside for children to study, do extracurricular activities, bathe children, and everything else that needs to be done when you live in a house with a large family, without being able to leave the institution. This humanitarian work was exhausting and intense, with few hours of rest. E4 states that “the tiredness has been a lot, few hours of sleep and always a lot of work to keep the children fed, clean and in some way occupied during the day”. All these moments were difficult for the interns, but their testimonies reveal that “this internship taught me more than 2 or 3 years of working in our context” E5. E3 states that “being able to develop activities with ‘a handful of nothing’ is challenging and rewarding. I thought I wouldn’t make it.” The need to survive created in these five interns the ability to improvise solutions that, perhaps in a richer context, would deprive them of taking risks so that daily problems could be resolved or minimized.

The contexts of the five interns allowed for very diverse professional and personal learning, as E1 tells us “As a future Social Educator and intern (…) it has been a complex and very rewarding experience, not only on a professional level, but certainly individually”. The openness of the professionals from the institutions in welcoming us ends up being “quite satisfying to see that everyone welcomed us in the best way possible” E2. The lack of resources and scarcity of materials brings new learning, challenging interns to immerse themselves in new contexts. E1 states that “I feel that every day I learn and experience different episodes, which make me see life in a broader way and at the same time an unequal world” and E5 “It is a very rewarding and challenging job, which makes me every day I learn things I never even imagined existed.” In this sequence, E3 reports that “it is a very rewarding and challenging job, which makes me achieve new challenges every day and obtain new learning”. Some of the difficulties encountered in the context of the internship were addressed in the theoretical part of some UCs of the course in question. In fact, for those who have never experienced them, it is difficult to imagine them and F4 says, “As everything in life has its difficulties, it has been in this context that I have come across the reality so studied in theory”.

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Table 2 – response to research objectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objectives of the investigation</th>
<th>Response to research objectives</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The general objectives of the Internship UC are:</td>
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<tr>
<td>i) reflect on the relationship established between the objectives contained in the syllabus of the Internship curricular unit and their articulation with the activities implemented by the interns in context;</td>
<td>ii) promote the application of theoretical-practical knowledge acquired throughout the course to training situations in a professional context;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>iii) contribute to the development of a reflective professional stance around the profile of the Social Educator.</td>
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</table>
It seems to us that the interns used the general objectives of the UC, articulating them with the daily needs of the various contexts, even in the most complex situations.

The multiplicity of roles was a reality, in an island country, considered developing, where problems are multiple and needs occur at all levels. The most vulnerable population, such as children, are a greater concern, where the backpack of suffering accumulates over the days.

After the emergence of COVID-19, the interns adopted a resilient role, combining professional work and humanitarian work in the institutions where they remained;

Source: prepared by the author (2023)

5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

During the period in question, the students played various roles within each of the host institutions, trying to respond to the emerging needs they faced and which often transcended the role and competencies of the Social Educator. The institutions involved have different capabilities as some welcome children at risk, from 0 to 12 years of age, others are aimed at welcoming and monitoring school-age children from Roças and others function as Homes for the Elderly. The scarcity of resources inherent to the island context becomes more acute when it comes to institutions that do not finance themselves, their survival depending on support and donations. At this juncture, the social educator has an added challenge since the needs of the context require professional and humanitarian responses. The same institution needs the social educator to perform educational, re-educational, informative, guidance, animation, management, local development, project design, intervention, mediation functions, and in complex situations, such as that caused by COVID-19, the Humanitarian functions were crucial to maintaining the functioning of the institutions hosting the students. The interns' contribution was crucial, becoming an added value in terms of human resources, providing structured activities in working with each target audience, making visible the importance of the role of the Social Educator. Creativity and innovation have leveraged daily work practices, where resources are practically non-existent and where the social educator “(...) an empty-handed specialist” (Batista, 2000), reinvents himself daily. It is this search for improving reality, which promotes its transformation based on its trajectories, due to the unrepeatable nature of its work, the flexibility of its action, the need to combine knowledge and knowledge constitutes (will), in itself, a challenge recurring (Samagaio, 2019). It was precisely from this perspective that the social educators who interned at STP responded to the requests imposed by the contexts where they developed their professional activity in the form of curricular internship.

The aim was to contribute to the dissemination of a project that articulates the attempt to respond to some social problems, with the contribution of five interns from the Social Education degree. They simultaneously tried to respond to other issues related to the emergence of COVID-19 and the more equitable socio-educational distribution of the scarce resources of institutions located in the respective communities.

Another contribution was to highlight the valorization of the role of women, since this group was only female, in order to contribute to the reduction of socio-educational problems, associated with female and child poverty, which are still very prevalent on the Island of STP, especially with regard to the situation in many developing countries.

COVID-19 brought some limitations to the research as the researcher was no longer able to go to the contexts. Meetings were held online when electrical conditions permitted, as the lack of electricity was constant and for a long period of hours.
It would be interesting to analyze this type of internship over time, in a longitudinal investigative follow-up. Analyze internships in other curricular areas to understand the difficulties and challenges, since the target audience could be different and the interaction could be more fruitful.

REFERENCES


