

Chapter # 24

SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK INTERVENTION WITH STUDENTS AT SOCIO-EDUCATIONAL RISK: PRACTICES TO PROMOTE EQUITY IN TIMES OF COVID 19

Sidalina Almeida

Instituto Superior de Serviço Social do Porto (Portugal)

ABSTRACT

The Covid 19 pandemic, by electing distance learning, 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 Portuguese 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 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 social workers were highlighted in the identification, and monitoring of risk/danger situations to which children and young people were subject and, in the articulation with the competent authorities and the community institutions, in promoting the right to education and social protection. Focusing on a qualitative approach, through interviews with social workers who are part of multidisciplinary teams in school clusters, in the metropolitan area of Porto in northern Portugal, we sought to know how they perceive their functions and professional practices, and their potential in making the right to education effective for combating inequalities.

Keywords: students at socio-educational risk, 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 Covid 19 pandemic. 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 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 is a guarantee that personal and social circumstances, such as socioeconomic 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 risk of unemployment, juvenile delinquency, and criminality. Equity is a central issue of education policies and is considered 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” (Lemos, 2013, p. 162). International studies that measure equity in education systems and that allow the collection of relevant information on student performance and 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 (CNE, 2020). 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, 2021) and the report on the National Commission for the Promotion of the Rights and Protection of Children and Young People) (CNPDPJC, 2021) 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 school dropout and failure. The closure of schools led to an unequal situation of access to technological equipment, the internet network, and digital training that allowed students from groups placed at a social disadvantage, even at a distance, to continue learning and maintain contact with their teachers and pairs. No less important is the reference to the low level of schooling achieved that the system allowed families to obtain, 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, following the guidelines of the ecological approach, 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 earning (family capital for learning) and the social composition of schools (Diogo, 2010). 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. In a comprehensive approach centered on the professional practices of school social workers, recreated in the period of the Covid 19 pandemic, it is our purpose to identify how the reinvented practices of these professionals allow them to mitigate social inequalities in the realization of the right to education and other human rights, guaranteeing conditions of equity and social justice, and to intervene in the socio-educational risk and danger to which children and young people were exposed.

2. ECOLOGICAL MODEL AND SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK INTERVENTION WITH STUDENTS AT SOCIO-EDUCATIONAL RISK

In a situation where children and young people are exposed to risk/danger of having their right to education and other human rights guaranteed, the school social worker should intervene with the child, the family, and, all the local entities present in their social care, in elaborate a social diagnosis and the respective intervention plan. This diagnostic assessment and the design and implementation of the intervention plan of school social work should be based on theoretical and methodological references such as *The Assessment Framework for Children in Need and their Families - Ecological Model for Assessment and Intervention in Situations of Risk and Danger for Children*, which adopts an ecological perspective, placing the child/young person and the family in their multiple social life contexts. The ecological views students as part of a larger system of interactions and relationships beyond selves (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Siporin, 1980). This ecological approach allows school social workers to intervene at various levels of the "system" to address how the interactions of different contexts may be impacting student well-being (Clancy, 1995).

This model integrates four fundamental components: the process, the person (developing), the context (immediate or not), and time (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Canhão, 2007):

- The first dimension is the process which involves the different forms of interaction that occur between the person and his/her environment (proximal process);

- The second component is the person and this dimension includes not only the person's biopsychological characteristics but also the characteristics developed/acquired based on interaction with the immediate environment(s). The characteristics of the person that influence proximal processes are dispositions, resources, and demands;

- The third dimension refers to context and encompasses the interaction between four different environmental levels or contexts: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. The microsystem, "is a pattern of activities, roles and interpersonal relationships experienced by the developing child/youth in a given environment with specific physical and material characteristics." (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 18) Therefore, environments such as the home, daycare center, or school in which the child/youth is involved in face-to-face interactions are part of the microsystem. The mesosystem concerns the interrelations between two or more environments in which a child/youth actively participates, and can be formed or expanded whenever he becomes part of new environments. For example, this system includes the relationships a child maintains at home, at school, at the club, and with neighborhood friends. In an exosystem, unlike the mesosystem, the child/youth in development is not an active participant, but there may be events that affect them or vice versa, they may be affected by events in the immediate environment where the child is. These types of environments that consist of exosystems can be for example the parents' place, the sibling's school, or the parents' friends network. Finally, the macrosystem includes the cultural values, beliefs, situations, and historical events that define the community in which one lives and which may affect the remaining ecological systems. (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)

- The fourth dimension is time. Importance is attributed to the concept of chronosystem which encompasses changes or consistencies over time, not only in the characteristics of the person but also in the environment in which the person lives. For example, changes over a lifetime in family structure, socioeconomic status, employment, or where one lives.

In the intervention process, the social worker should analyze the needs of the child/youth - in education, health, emotional and behavior development, identity, family and

social relationships, social presentation, and autonomy capacity. The analysis should also focus on the respective capacity of parents/caregivers to respond to these needs, referring to basic care provision, safety, effectiveness, stimulation, the establishment of rules and limits and stability, and in family and ecological factors, namely family history and functioning, extended family, housing conditions, employment situation, family income, social integration of the family and existing community resources.

School social workers should therefore focus on the child/youth, on his/her developmental, protective and well-being needs, measured against his/her stage of development, but also against his/her school, training, and life project. As children are not only individuals with their bio-psychological specificity but also social beings who develop in the structural spaces they inhabit and are conditioned by, it is crucial to take into account their social class, ethnicity, gender, the local community they live in, etc. The development of children/young people has to be understood as a continuous and interdependent process of multiple factors (biological, psychological, social, and cultural), which influence each other, either positively or negatively, constituting protective or risk factors.

From a bio-ecological perspective, emotional, social, and cognitive development occurs through the complex process of interaction between the child/young person and the different microsystems in which he/she moves. This process occurs in a reciprocal and bidirectional way, in which the child exchanges with the elements (e.g. parents, teachers, and peers) that compose the microsystems.

These multiple contexts include characteristics related to the child, the family, and the school (peer group and teachers), that may constitute risk or protection factors. Risk factors are interpreted in terms of vulnerability and are often associated with a lack of adaptation. The protective factors or mechanisms are analyzed as risk mediators, as they allow modifying the individual's response to danger, thus reducing the possibility of negative development. Risk and/or protective factors interact with each other, by integrating the ecosystem of the developing person and may originate from different microsystems (e.g. family, school, peer group) that are not independent of each other, which necessarily implies in the intervention process, analyzing the links established between these different microsystems in which the child is involved and participates.

3. RESEARCH: METHODOLOGY, 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 and has given special focus to the words and speeches of social workers, in the construction of the subjective reality of social actors. The study had an exploratory character, constituting the first stage of more comprehensive, methodological, and territorial research, which is in progress. For data collection, a semi-structured interview was used with a script composed of six 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 19 Pandemic; the role of the Social Worker in Schools). 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. We intentionally selected the sample because we already had contacts with social workers

who supervised the internship of students of the degree in social work, which made the process of collecting information faster and more operational, in times of a pandemic. We concluded conducting interviews when the information provided by school social workers added little or nothing to the material already obtained, not contributing significantly to the improvement of the reflection. To read the interviews, thematic content analysis was used. The answers to open questions allowed us to obtain the perceptions of social workers on the effects of the Covid 19 pandemic on their professional practices. These raw data were subject to the categorization process by us. To this end, we cut the text of the responses into comparable categorization recording units for thematic analysis. Coding is the process by which raw data are systematically transformed and aggregated into units, which allow for an accurate description of relevant content characteristics. We chose, as categories, the themes that we consider to be our registration units, that is, the unit of meaning to be coded and which corresponds to the content segment to be considered as a base unit, aiming at categorization. To define the categories, we used the context units that serve as comprehend units to encode record units and correspond to the message segment, whose dimensions are optimal so that the exact meaning of the recording unit can be understood. It should also be noted that the definition of the categories was carried out in a mixed way, in which part of the categories is derived from theory and another part is induced during the course of the analysis. To understand 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.

4. DISCUSSION: THE PROFESSIONAL PRACTICES OF SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS IN SOCIO-EDUCATIONAL RISK IN TIMES OF COVID 19

As previously mentioned, ten social workers participated in the research, who are integrated into clusters of schools in the Porto metropolitan area and have professional experience mostly for more than 10 years. However, as professionals integrated into the school context performing functions in the area of Social Work, the experience of fewer than 10 years predominated. With two exceptions, the others joined the school through public measures to promote educational success: Educational Territories of Priority Intervention (TEIP); Integrated and Innovative Plan to Combat School Failure (PICIE); 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 crises.

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 (see figures 1 and figure 2). To learn about the changes in their professional practices during the pandemic, we asked the following questions:

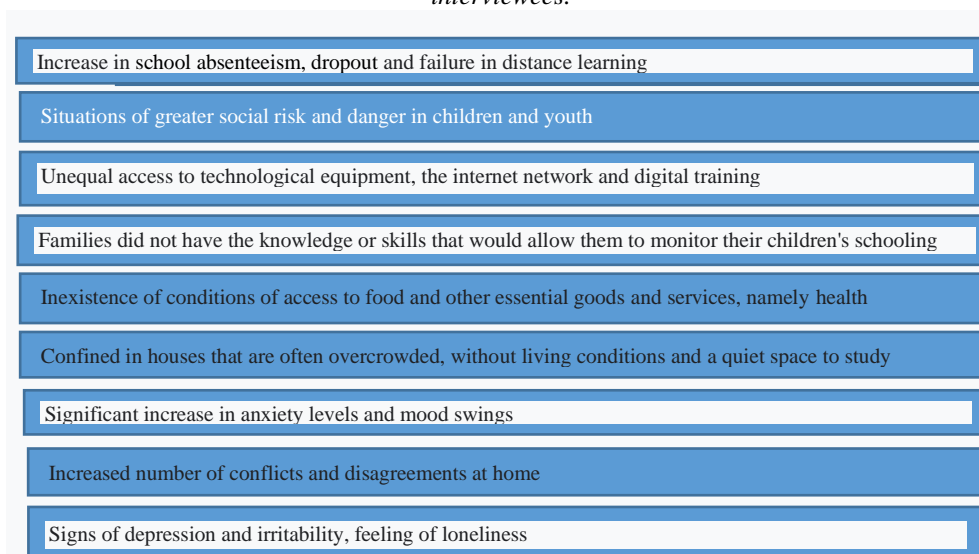
- How do you define the intervention of Social Work in schools in times of a pandemic?
- What has changed in intervention in times of a pandemic?

In times of a pandemic, psychosocial support for students and families has become even more central in the work of social workers. This individualized intervention with students and families followed an intervention procedure consisting of the following phases: signage;

diagnostic evaluation; intervention planning; social follow-the-up, which involves establishing an intervention agreement and negotiating and monitoring it; and evaluation.

The diagnostic evaluation identified the following problems (see figure 1):

Figure 1.
Effects of COVID-19 on education and other rights: problems identified by the interviewees.



First of all, their confinement forced students 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. But home visits were necessary, and the reception of children and young people at risk/danger at the school was important (see figure 2).

“As we know, on March 13, 2020, schools close until September 2020 and the work on the ground was at serious risk of being compromised. However, this did not happen”. (Int. 1, a social worker for 13 years)

“The social worker continued to provide psychosocial support to students and families through the TEAMS Platform or over the phone. The technologies made it possible to continue with the contact and proximity with the families, but some constraints were evident as not all students were able to talk about their problems from a distance”. (Int. 2, a social worker for 8 years).

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.

“The secondary school, the headquarters of the group, now welcomes students from all schools in the same area who are unable to follow virtual teaching at home, because their parents are essential workers, or because they do not have the material conditions, or because are at risk or in danger, among other reasons. Some of them are students who

have no interest in classes, which has become worse with distance learning. These are students who do not carry out the tasks given by the teachers and who are undisciplined”. (Int. 7, a social worker for 22 years).

Social workers have played an important role in their psychosocial follow-up. It was the principals, teachers, and families themselves who asked for the intervention of the social worker.

“It only confirmed once again the essential role of the social worker with students and families, as they were the ones who sought help from the technician”. (Int. 9, a social worker for 18 years)

“The signals came mostly not from the class directors but from the families themselves who contacted the GAAF social worker directly”. (Int. 2, a social worker for 8 years)

“Requests for support from families increased, so responses had to improve and increase. In times of a pandemic, in a school context, intervention requires a non-conformist and creative attitude”. (Int.10, a social worker for 3 years).

Figure 2.
Knowledge, skills, and acts of professional activity of social workers who intervene at school.

<p>Interactive relationships: active listening, empathy, neutrality, and impartiality.</p>	<p>Act of relationship building Alternative and more personalized forms of articulation between school, students, a family</p>	<p>“There was a strengthening of communication with families”. (Int. 4, a social worker for 13 years) “The intervention of Social Work always excelled at proximity to those with whom it works. Social work in schools has two factors that I consider highly positive, proximity and direct contact with the context. We project our eyes onto others. Therefore, it has been possible to carry out the intervention, transmitting confidence to those with whom one works, feeling that they are not alone”. (Int. 1, a social worker for 13 years)</p>
<p>Professional mediations and articulations”: permanent institutional interaction; mediation between services and citizens</p>	<p>Act of informing Mediations and articulations with directors, teachers, and specialized technicians - collaborating with the entire social network - partnerships with local community entities: CPCJ, EMAT, Municipalities, ISS, IPSS</p>	<p>“Social work in times of a pandemic is possible because relationships have already been established, intervention networks have been built, partnerships have been established, relationships have been created in the community”. (Int. 1, a social worker for 13 years) “A reinvention was necessary with working and the research of different social responses capable of responding to the demands and difficulties that occur with the pandemic that we are experiencing.” (Int.3, social worker for 14 years) “Despite the physical distance, I believe that the pandemic brought the technicians closer to each other, which led to an effective articulation of the different needs of each family. That is, the pandemic allows organizations to work effectively in a network to leverage different resources and thus better serve the needs of each family accompanied. (Int.1, social worker for 13 years) “Advice to class directors.” (Int. 4, social worker for 13 years)</p>

<p>Know the social phenomena: understand the situations of people, families, and groups; the environmental factors that condition and influence them</p>	<p>Problem definition act Knowledge of the rules and social and family contexts that condition the performance of students in school spaces</p>	<p><i>“The social worker has to be able to know the different life contexts of students and families. He must know very well the rules that regulate his school grouping, know the intermediate and superior leadership, but he must also know and characterize the social and family contexts that condition the performance of students in school spaces.” (Int. 4, social worker for 13 years)</i></p>
<p>Methods and techniques for planning and organizing resources and providing psychosocial care and development of citizens' living conditions</p>	<p>Professional act of help Psychosocial support and social monitoring of students' families - plan and organize resources so they are available to support distance learning methodologies, the dissemination of diversified support documents, to support situations of privation and poverty through some work to meet basic needs, particularly at the food level, and to make the follow-up of children and young people at risk/danger</p>	<p><i>“The social worker proved to be essential to keep students in contact with the school. Using all the surrounding means and collaborating with the entire social network, barriers and constraints that prevented access to education were broken”. (Int. 4, a social worker for 13 years)</i></p> <p><i>“Social work at school is very important during the pandemic, especially during the suspension of teaching activities, as it allowed students and families to be monitored to different needs (school, social, and family). The social worker maintained an essential function with regard about served by the group's canteens. Daily, he contacted class directors, guardians, and students, via email and by telephone, also communicating daily to the Director of the School Grouping, the update of the number of cases for school lunches.” (Int. 2, social worker for 8 years)</i></p> <p><i>“As there was an increase in the needs felt by many families in terms of food, the GAAF proposed a more comprehensive measure to the direction of the Grouping, which was not limited to responding only to students with grade A. The response was positive, which is why, with the collaboration of the management, the GAAF social worker also flagged and monitored cases for school reinforcement, similar to what was already established before the period of distance learning”. (Int. 2, social worker for 8 years)</i></p> <p><i>“To intervene with students who have problems at school, social, family and relational level; intervene with the respective families and promote parental training”. (Ent. 5, social work for 21 years)</i></p>

Source: Adapted from Granja, 2011

In Portugal, 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%). The intervention to combat absenteeism and school dropout was carried out by social workers to support children in need and with resources to keep up with distance learning, and also to support situations of privation and poverty through some work to meet basic needs, particularly at the food level.

Thus, in the context of the crisis intervention, the efforts made by schools to ensure the continuity of learning and minimize the effects of social inequalities were perceptible. There was the reinforcement of intervention by social work technicians and other specialized technicians in 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, to provide 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, to promote skills and qualifications and improve conditions of children and young people and their families. These measures implemented in a pandemic period increased during the growing emphasis on ecological systems theory and related practice models.

Social workers identify risk and protective factors affecting students that are understood to be part of a system of interactions and relationships beyond individual beings, and systems theory requires school social workers to intervene at various levels of the "system" (e.g., microsystem, mesosystem, and macrosystem) to address how the interactions of these different systems can affect a student's relationship with the school and school knowledge. Placing the child/young in their multiple social life contexts, the school social worker should intervene in the elaboration of a social diagnosis and the respective intervention plan which should consider three main domains: the child's developmental needs, the parental competencies, and the family and ecological factors, and should analyze the reciprocal interaction between the three domains and how they influence each other. Ecological theory suggests that practice be carried out from a more ecological system's structure (Frey & Dupper, 2005; Frey, Lingo, & Nelson, 2008; Kelly, 2008). Contemporary school social work practice reflects the growing emphasis on ecological systems theory and related models of practice. The focus of practical activities of social workers should be environmental and not merely individual and the level of their intervention should be primary prevention and not just secondary and tertiary prevention (Kelly, Berzin & Frey, 2010). In school social work the emphasis on interventions that focus on change at the child level is inconsistent with an intervention with the ecological framework or with the person in the environment (Alderson, 1972; Allen-Meares, 2006; Costin, 1973; Dupper, 2002; Frey & Dupper, 2005). The focus should broaden to address conditions within the classroom, school, family, and community contexts, as well as interactions between school stakeholders and community service providers. The Alderson (1972) and Costin (1973) models pioneered research on intervention effectiveness by validating this approach, while the Frey and Dupper (2005) model drew largely on this knowledge. New, emerging, and more comprehensive programs and strategies targeting other systems such as the peer group and the school are evolving. The ecosystem perspective argues that the problem or need, rather than individual risk factors, should be centered on those related to peer, school, family, or community systems (Butcher, Kelly, & Frey, 2010)

The intervention that the social worker developed in times of a pandemic, was focused on students and families, always taking into account their biopsychosocial and cultural whole. The ecological perspective postulates that students and families and their environment must be understood in the context of their mutual relationship. This relationship is characterized by continuous reciprocal exchanges, whereby students and families, and environments are constantly influencing each other. An ecological perspective provides

a framework for understanding the nature of transactions between people and different institutions and/or systems. This perspective helps the social worker to identify and take into account all the systems that contribute to the situation of students and families and the existing difficulties. Thus, social workers understood each student as an inseparable part of the various social systems (i.e., school, home, neighborhood, peer group) in which he moves (Dupper, 2002, p. 5). Furthermore, it recognizes that resolution can be more effective when the intervention takes place in more than one system. In social work, schools have worked to create increased calls by school social work scholars to think and practice from a more ecological systems framework within their schools (Dupper, 2002; Frey & Dupper, 2005; Frey, Lingo, & Nelson, 2008; Kelly, 2008). In educational practice in times of pandemic, specialized technicians from the school and local teams, teachers, and parents must maintain effective communication and work together to benefit the development of children and young people. Teachers must also understand the situations that their students' families are experiencing, including knowledge of the social and economic factors that are part of the various systems that affect them and that can put children and young people at risk/danger. According to the ecological approach, if parents and school professionals have a close relationship and effective communication, this should shape the development of the child and youth in a positive way. In positive relationships and communication processes, social workers, having cultural competence played a key role during the pandemic time.

This orientation for intervention anchored in the ecological approach is used by social workers in making the diagnostic assessment and defining and implementing social intervention plans, which always consider the child and young person and their families in transformation, their changing context, and mutual influence 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 (see figure 3):

- The request, as most of the referrals are made by teachers, especially by class principals and head teachers, leaders, 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. Social diagnostic assessment is the process of gathering and processing information to identify 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. Identify problems and needs in the school, socio-family, and individual domains, which facilitates knowledge of the ecological context and the identification of protection and risk factors for each child and young person flagged. It should make it possible to verify the assumptions of integration, identify school capacities and interests and identify local resources likely to form partnerships within the scope of the intervention. 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, committing to change;

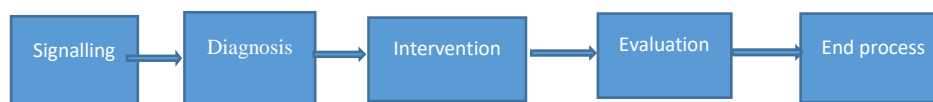
- Following the principles of the construction process of the helping relationship, the social worker does the monitoring at the individual, socio-family, and school levels, articulating information and intervention from local public administration services and civil society partners, that support and accompany students at risk of social exclusion and their

families, promoting activities that guarantee the integration of each child or young person in the school and the local community. That is, the follow-up, to support the student and the family in the actions and check 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 process and the social worker assume the role of mediator between institutions and actors to act in the various social factors that influence the intervention in the school system and with the students and their families, developing 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, to review, whenever necessary, the diagnoses and expected results in the implementation of the action plan. This allows us not only to know the results and effects of intervention but also to correct trajectories if they are undesirable;

- To end the process, the ideal will be 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 institution, or for different reasons.

Figure 3.
Stages of intervention process of social workers.



According to the school social workers, the absence of parental and family support is a risk factor for children/young people already exposed to other risk factors, such as low economic, social, and cultural resources. During the pandemic period, children/young people at risk had no parental involvement or support in school and out-of-school activities, and were subject to the absence or reduced support and monitoring of school tasks, lack of openness to communication about the school, learning, and other themes, absence or lack of family activities and low expectations regarding school success. These are children who, during the pandemic period, had relationship problems with teachers and peers who often gave them even more negative feedback regarding their performance as students, becoming a precursor factor for their disaffection with school and their school dropout.

It is also important, according to the school social workers, to highlight the relevant role that the school has, as an institution whose purpose is to promote learning and, ultimately, the student's success, with a view to the student's integration into society. The pandemic period accentuated the negative and distant relationship of the school towards these students. Although being monitored by the school, the absence of effective support and the teachers' low expectations towards these students, contribute to low school performance. The importance of the relationship with the peer group, colleagues, and friends, who are important agents of socialization, is also highlighted. It is necessary to consider their degree of motivation toward learning and the type of pedagogy toward playful activities they develop.

These risk factors do not occur in isolation, but simultaneously, forming chain reactions of events that increase the likelihood of the child achieving negative outcomes, including failure and dropping out of school and other types of risk.

This theoretical proposal is fundamental for those social workers to understand the development of children/young people through the interdependence of multiple processes,

i.e., through the analysis of systems of interaction between individuals and the different environments in which they move throughout time, of continuities and social changes throughout time, through the life course and the historical period.

When this analysis is made one realizes that risk/danger are the consequence of social organization modes generating inequalities, with repercussions on the different operational groups, and with more repercussive and continuous individual and generational effects regarding children and the childhood/youth generational group who are left in a situation of poverty and social exclusion.

In this way, technical intervention in situations of risk and danger aims not only at eliminating or minimizing these situations, but also at promoting the access of children people, and families to a set of goods and services of an educational, economic, health, social, environmental and technological nature, in a true perspective of inclusion, equal opportunities, and citizenship.

This will only be possible because that social worker relies on real teamwork and partnership with other professionals at the school and with professionals from institutions who accompany the child/young and the family, through an interdisciplinary and inter-institutional approach in the diagnostic evaluation of the situation and the respective intervention project. The importance of a collaborative perspective between the various services and institutions, professionals, and disciplinary knowledge is thus lighted, starting from the case coordination by an entity/professional, to make the best use of resources overlapping responses and to find non-fragmented responses.

The intervention practices of those social workers should rethink the relationship between school and family and develop in this educational institution a space for reflection on the role each one of these elements has in meeting the multiple needs, of the student's well-being and academic performance student's promoting a closer relationship between school and family, with the ultimate purpose of providing children/young people with better conditions to achieve success at school and protection at different levels. It should also be noted that these family-centered intervention practices, besides the identification of their needs and problems, should elect to locate formal and informal resources and empower families to mobilize them. Direct intervention with families should be carried out so that there is active participation of these families in the assessment of the situation and the intervention plan so that they feel respected, valued, and involved. It should also involve the child/young person in the whole process, in a systematic and organized way, based on his/her needs, wishes, and participatory skills. All families have positive factors which should always be the starting point for any intervention. Diagnostic assessment is therefore not just a 'problem list', but rather the identification of protective and risk factors, needs, and concerns in the various contexts relevant to the child's development.

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. The family context and in particular their socio-economic and cultural status 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. The articulation of the family with the school and the school with the entities of the promotion and protection system for children at risk/danger, such as the CPCJ, is essential in the individualized response to be built for each case of risk/danger. 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 at the beginning of the pandemic. 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', and why parents did not answer the phones and did not respond to emails sent.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The pandemic context experienced since 2020 came, suddenly and unexpectedly, to confront social workers with new challenges in the work they develop in schools. When everyone is confined, how can we guarantee the necessary support for students at socio-educational risk/danger? Confinement and the need for physical distancing, therefore, required a reinvention of performance. In this line, it was important to know not only what challenges the interviewees faced in the performance of their professional activity, but also the strategies developed to overcome them. From the outset, the confinement forced the use of technologies to carry out follow-ups, that is, the intervention began to be carried out at a distance through digital platforms and telephone contact. However, in situations of greater social risk, fieldwork was maintained with students and families through home visits, above all, a reorientation of action: the closure of schools forced a greater focus on situations of socio-educational risk, namely through support for children in need and without resources to accompany distance learning, and also in supporting situations of need and poverty to satisfy basic needs, particularly in terms of food. Also highlighted in the speeches was the work with children and young people at risk/danger, carrying out their psychosocial follow-up in the host schools in close articulation with the institutions in the area of promotion and protection (Commission for the Protection of Children and Young People and Multidisciplinary Teams for the Support of Courts, in particular) and social support (municipalities and Private Institutions of Social Solidarity).

Improving relationships and communication between the various actors on the educational scene, implementing the role of mediator, is possible because the social worker in the school context is specialized in making social diagnoses and intervention plans focused on the child/young person who is the student, that is in continuous interaction with its environments. 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, in the group, in the family, in the local community, and in the school. It is the professional with knowledge and skills to understand and work with what is in the school organization and "on the other side of the school". 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 in what is on the other side of the school. The social worker has the knowledge and skills to understand the social reality, identify the needs and problems that

affect children and young people, as well as their causalities, and define pertinent paths of intervention. With an integral look, the social worker perceives the multiplicity of development needs of the child/youth. Is a professional who allows the school to understand the environment where each student is inserted, and 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 can mobilize the local community's resources 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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AUTHOR INFORMATION

Full name: Maria Sidalina Almeida

Institutional affiliation: Instituto Superior de Serviço Social do Porto and Centro Lusíada
Investigação em Serviço Social e Intervenção Social

Institutional address: Av. Dr. Manuel Teixeira Ruela 370, 4460-362 Sra. da Hora.

Short biographical sketch: Ph.D. in educational sciences at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences at the University of Porto. Lecturer at the Superior Institute of Social Work in Porto. Integrated Researcher at CLISSIS – Lusíada for Research in Social Work and Social Intervention, having as areas of research interest; childhood and youth at risk, school social work, and the transition, ns of young people from school to the world of work. She is the author of scientific articles on these topics.