



## **Social Education in Portugal: problems and professional recognition**

*Sílvia Azevedo<sup>1</sup>*

*Fátima Correia<sup>2</sup>*

### **Emergence of Social Education as a profession in Portugal:**

In Portugal, there were several factors that led to the emergence of social education as a profession. With industrialization came a set of social changes, giving a new dimension to work: stable jobs became associated to a global integration in society, while the instability of work originated precarious employment and, consequently, social vulnerability and social exclusion. The increasing complexity of societies and social instability, in turn, led to an increase of the poorer sections of society, ie, resulted in increased marginalization and intensification of the social exclusion problems. Moreover, industrialization also influenced the democratization of societies.

These factors demanded new responsibilities from governments: they had to respond to new social problems. However, there was a need to conceal the consequences of poverty and ensure public order. This increased awareness of responsibility created new forms of social organization, the emergence of new social policies, new social movements. In short, new forms of State. So, we saw the emergence of the Welfare State, that is, a set of policies that guarantee to all citizens the access to a number of services that allows it them survive (not only in biological terms but mainly social).

The emergence of Social Education depended on the evolution of these Welfare States and the requirement of social protection systems and consequent failure of charitable policies and traditional interventions: social work had to be more than to direct citizens for welfare structures, it was necessary to focus on human autonomy, break welfarism and social interventions based on social emergencies and charity and give rise to empowerment, emancipation and solidarity.

And all this, was improved by the gradual importance of Human Rights. This factor was indeed decisive for the emergence of Social Education, because the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948) also brought the interest to the humanitarian ideals of equality and social justice and equal opportunities. It was based on Human Rights that new social policies arose and that social education became a decisive factor so that that opportunity equalities were less of a theory and more of a reality.

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<sup>1</sup> President of the APTSES (Social Educators' Professional Association). Assistant Professor, University Portucalense. [sazevedo@uportu.pt](mailto:sazevedo@uportu.pt).

<sup>2</sup> Social Educator. Board member of APTSES (Social Educators' Professional Association). [geral@aptses.pt](mailto:geral@aptses.pt).



Finally, another major factor to the emergence of social education concerns the change of the concept of education: education is no longer a unique heritage of the school and begins to approach the social dimension, starting to have new functions: people started to conceive education as permanent role, covering even the most marginalized and problematic sectors. Beyond formal education (that of the education system) non-formal and informal education are considered.

Social education emerged in Portugal as a need to depart from some welfare paradigms, which were very reductive of social needs, also emerging the idea that is necessary to educate for a conscious participation and responsibility, investing in new educational policies of human development. Social education in Portugal was developed based on the theoretical framework of Social Pedagogy.

#### **Professional recognition of social education:**

In Portugal, Social Education is a relatively new profession and, therefore, is still in its process of professionalization and affirmation of its professional identity. Portuguese social educators have still many difficulties in the employability and intervening, not by lack of interventional territories or professional skills, but mainly by confusion of similar professional skills areas (social workers, sociologists, social animators, ... ), but also by the evolution of the profession.

In school systems, the evolution of social education was marked by different degrees of training. In fact, in Portugal coexisted different types of social educators training, with different objectives, different degrees of education and levels of performance. Early social educators were technical-professional, later emerged the first graduates (bachelors) and, only after, the first graduates. (see explication below)<sup>3</sup>.

- Technical professionals - appear in the 70's/ 80's. Social educators' functions were to accompany children, often with physical, mental and social behavior problems. Their job was only to be a monitor and facilitator of recreational activities; they did not have any decision in the process.
- Bachelors - appear in the 80's/90's. Social educators perform technical functions; participate in the education of children and adolescents as well as adults ensuring the organization of daily life, in articulation with other professionals, developing skills within the entertainment and recreational activities.

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<sup>3</sup> Until 2005, the portuguese education system was divided in 12 years, corresponding to the non-higher education The higher education completed the levels: bachelors (corresponded to 3 years), "licenciado" (European bachelor) - two years, Master (over two years) and PhD (between 2-4 years). The professionals could complete only one of the levels. With the Treaty of Bologna, ceased to exist the first level, the degrees now comprise 3 to 4 years, and in some cases more than two years of an integrated Master.



- *Licenciado* – The first degree in social education was approved in 1996, at *University Portucalense*. The social educator acts against individuals, groups or communities, children, youth, adults and seniors in a perspective of prevention and rehabilitation of social problems. They started to support individuals in educational and pedagogical way, as well as social and training these individuals to develop social skills, and professional improvement of their living conditions.

The coexistence of these three professions marks, in a certain way, the evolution of Social Education in Portugal, because in a relatively short period of time, the Portuguese social education ceases to be associated with a technical perspective and becomes associated with a perspective of psycho-social and educational intervention. Initially, social education in Portugal aimed to develop recreational activities, but over time it became associated with an importance of extending social sciences and education intervention areas, transforming social educators into completed social intervention professionals. From here, the profession evolved: it was produced knowledge in various fields of social intervention and it was seen a more thorough and integrated preparation of future professionals in different dimensions (as scientific-methodological, technical, personal and social). Furthermore, the curricular practice generated numerous opportunities for social educators to disseminate new fields of action and allowed the possibility of linking theory and practice, particularly in the design and development of locally Social Education' projects.

However, only with the Bologna Treaty comes into existence a certain standardization of Social Education courses. Until then, social education as a degree was marked by diversity of formative plans. This confusion of roles hampered labor insertion and professional recognition of Portuguese social educators.

However, the professional recognition of social educators is still characterized by the similarity with other social areas. Social educators work in social contexts with educational functions. The approach to social work generates actually difficulties in asserting the identity of educators: social educators are social workers, because they reference the same territory intervention and share social characteristics with other professionals, such as proximity to work contexts and recipients. Secondly, the social educators work is developed from an educational and pedagogical perspective, approaching here from other professionals.

The professional identity of social educators is thus constructed in a movement of approach and demarcation with other professionals. For this reason, it is urgent to clarify that the social educators role is fundamentally pedagogical, founded by a theoretical and practical knowledge and ethical and deontological principles.

Social pedagogy is, in fact, for Portuguese social educators more than a simple intervention strategy or discipline, because it is what allows the social educator to act pedagogically, giving them knowledge models, methodologies and techniques that enable social educators to promote the educability conditions of all people, especially the most



vulnerable. As coach of the relationship, the social educator develops its professional profile from a pedagogical intention and respect for all individuals, for their personality. Social educators have the intention to develop a reflective attitude of individuals' condition and their own development. Social education only makes sense if we believe in the evolution of the "other", while mentor of their own personal and social growth. This educational commitment gives a new dimension to social work and confers specificity to social educator's work, distinguishing it from other social workers.

Their socio-educational interventions are characterized by approaching individuals and their contexts. More than working for, they worked with people, in a logic of co-ownership and co-authorship. The social educator recognizes the social capacities of other individuals, empowers them and encourages their participation in their life projects. Their participation is indeed the central feature of the social educator performance. Therefore, social educators are more than a professional involved: they use this implication to achieve changes in the other. In this sense, Social Pedagogy occupies a privileged place in the construction of concepts necessary to understand and follow the life trajectories of individuals, considered protagonists of intervention. The pedagogical knowledge, characterized by a close relationship between theory and practice, between research and action, also allows social educators to be reflective practitioners. Social Pedagogy is actually a theoretical and practical science: theoretical knowledge makes possible a reasoned educational practice and practice makes possible a set of reflections that allow updating of the theory.

Professional recognition of Portuguese social educators suffers from a certain vulnerability to other technicians compared to other technicians, whose profession is already established and accepted in the universe of social action.

**Examples of the Portuguese Social Educators' areas of intervention:**

- Prevention practices
- Monitoring of the disabled people;
- Development social insertion processes;
- Integration of individuals or groups in the community;
- Professional (re)integration;
- Support the participation of individuals in the processes of cultural production.



### **Social Educators' Professional Association**

The Social Educators' Professional Association, also known as APTSES, is an association which aims to represent all social educators, founded in 2008. However, our work began in 2001, with the first Social Education Work Group. In 2001, came to the labor market the first degreed social educators. At this point, those social educators clashed with the assignment of mere executors of recreational activities when the academic training prepared them to act pedagogically and psycho-socially. At this time, began the first attempts of professional affirmation to overcome the difficulties of professional insertion, mainly the small professional recognition and affirmation of their really skills of social educators. Since then there have been several investments made on behalf of the Social Education and Portuguese social educators organized by APTSES, while representative association of social educators, for example:

- elaboration of a code of ethics;
- negotiations among social educators schools for the standardization of curricula and thus standardization of professional profiles;
- negotiations for the existence of the professional category at public and private institutions;
- negotiations for integration of social educators in programs and projects hitherto exclusive to other social workers (eg, new social responses, new roles, new responsibilities);
- meetings with parliamentary groups to publicize the profession of social educator;
- and other functions.

APTSES has as primary objectives, ensuring the dignity and prestige of the profession of Social Educator, promote associative capacity and represent their rights and interests. Currently, one of our missions is to unify all of Portuguese social educators, because we have certainty that their associative capacity is extremely important for a cohesive professional group, as well as external credibility of the profession.

As a professional association, we have to follow the evolutions of social education. We are aware-that the current social reality requires an educational and social work able to adapt to new needs. Current society is marked by the crisis and social risk. In European countries, and particularly in Portugal, we are witnessing austerity measures that attack the promotion of wellness with severe impact on increasing unemployment, precarious work, social exclusion. This will require for Portuguese social educators and for APTSES new professional challenges and new way of thinking. A social education that is intended to transform and cause social change, it also has to be itself able to be transforming and adapt to new social reconfigurations.

In Portugal, the national literature in social education is exiguous. An emerging profession needs public recognition and bringing to public light what do social educators, which its specificity, their practices and experiences. Aware of



this, APTSES has promoted national and international congresses and meetings and published recently “Praxis Educare” ([www.aptses.pt/publicacoes](http://www.aptses.pt/publicacoes)), a magazine with a central theme in each issue where we invite various theorists of social education to contribute to the submission of a scientific article.

We end this workshop with a certainty: social educators are able of exploring a space in the professional affirmation field. It is on the ground, in everyday professional functions, that social educators can monitor the process of their profession reconfiguration. It is in the institutions, in their socio-educational projects that these professionals develop and demonstrate their skills and thus reconfigure their intervention practices. The affirmation of social educators has been built largely from the practices of the professionals themselves. While professional association, APTSES could not fail to appreciate the role of social educators in the accomplishments achieved.

Thank you so much. Greetings.

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