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Narratives of social educators on practices in institutional foster care

Narrativas de educadores sociais sobre práticas no acolhimento institucional

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Abstract

Objective

This study aimed to analyze the narratives of social educators regarding their practices within a foster care institution for children and adolescents in South Brazil.

Method

A narrative interview script and a sociodemographic questionnaire were employed in the investigation, involving eleven participating social educators. The interviews underwent grounded theory analysis, resulting in four emergent categories pertaining to practices (initiation, types, dimensions, context).

Results

The practices initiate in a straightforward manner and unfold gradually through caregiving, the incorporation of play, and affection. Notably, aspects of comprehensive care and humanized attention were identified.

Conclusion

The results underscore that these practices adhere to guidelines outlined by public policies. However, they also emphasize the need for continuing education to discuss specific aspects of care and strategies for evaluating the undertaken activities.

Keywords: Child institutionalized; Children and adolescent code; Early childhood education.

Resumo

Objetivo

O presente estudo objetivou analisar as narrativas de educadores sociais sobre suas práticas numa instituição de acolhimento para crianças e adolescentes no Sul do Brasil.

Método

Utilizou-se um roteiro de entrevista narrativa e um questionário sociodemográfico. Participaram da pesquisa 11 educadores sociais e as entrevistas foram analisadas por meio da teoria fundamentada nos dados. Foram construídas quatro categorias referentes às práticas (início, tipos, dimensões, contexto).

Resultados

As práticas são iniciadas de maneira simples e ocorrem gradualmente por meio do cuidado, da inserção do lúdico, e da afetividade. Foram identificados os aspectos da integralidade do cuidado e a atenção humanizada.

Conclusão

Os resultados mostraram que as práticas estão congruentes com as diretrizes propostas pelas políticas públicas, mas, destaca-se a necessidade de formação continuada para discutir especificidades do cuidado, e estratégias para avaliação das atividades desenvolvidas.

Palavras-chave: Criança institucionalizada; Estatuto da criança e do adolescente; Educação infantil.

In Brazil, the National Council of Justice identified 30,978 children and adolescents in institutional foster care (Conselho Nacional de Justiça, 2021). Consequently, this necessitates the establishment and maintenance of institutions dedicated to protecting this population, aiming to contribute to social development and the preservation of human rights. Addressing this complex situation involves the coordination of responsibilities at the federal, state, and municipal levels to ensure the proper application of legislation related to the comprehensive protection of Brazilian children and adolescents.

The *Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente* (ECA, Child and Adolescent Statute) (Presidência da República, 1990) defines two care modalities for children and adolescents: 1) Foster care, and 2) Socio-educational measures. The first, known as a shelter or foster home, caters to individuals identified in situations of maltreatment, family abandonment, physical and/or sexual violence. In this case, the initial goal is to promote the child's reintegration into the primary family environment or extended family. However, when this is not possible, the child comes under state guardianship for adoption. The second form encompasses designated facilities for receiving children in conflict with the law for the fulfillment of educational measures related to social morality, i.e., those who have violated social norms in some way.

In summary, the first modality addresses child abandonment and maltreatment resulting from neglectful parents or caregivers, factors that necessitate the implementation of preventive measures and the defense of rights outlined in the ECA. Consequently, institutional foster care is employed as a strategy used to ensure a protective environment for children and adolescents in a scenario where family separation may be necessary to prevent severe risk conditions to their physical and psychological integrity (Presidência da República, 1990). This initiative aims to provide comprehensive protection to address general needs.

However, despite the importance of institutional care for children facing vulnerability, the separation from their family context, coupled with the severing of emotional ties with the family of origin and the limited availability of alternative emotional bonds in the institution, exerts impacts on both social and emotional development (Diniz et al., 2018). The separation between parents and children can lead to dysfunctions, such as difficulties in establishing bonds and affection, a tendency toward delinquency, and emotional disorders (Silva et al., 2021). Therefore, the emotional exchanges established between children and educators are fundamental for the development of emotional competencies (Kappler & Mendes, 2019).

As such, foster care institutions serve as dedicated spaces for social and emotional development. The social educator, as a professional working in this environment, guides various activities, including providing essential care such as food, hygiene, and safety; organizing the environment and maintaining individual development records; monitoring children's well-being

in health services, schools, among other services; offering support in addressing life histories, fostering self-esteem, building identity; and preparing individuals for discharge (Ministério do Desenvolvimento Social e Combate à Fome [MDS], 2009). These aspects involve the process of fostering socio-affectivity for the well-being of institutionalized children (Diniz et al., 2018). Thus, there is a need to reflect on the rupture of emotional ties resulting from institutionalization and the possible protective factors involved. In this case, when the social educator possesses the competencies and skills to support an institutionalized child, it represents a positive aspect for the effective implementation of legislation.

Unfortunately, the granting of rights to children and adolescents through the ECA legislation did not ensure effective enforcement, as evidenced by the absence of government plans for the comprehensive protection outlined in public policies (Rodrigues, 2021). According to the author, among the numerous variables, training for the role emerges as a significant factor. Hence, there is a need for investments in the training of social educators, involving the development of a plan to assess the interventions they undertake, enabling continuous improvement in their practices.

Community strategies to prevent the violation of human rights in the child and adolescent population have been discussed, but redirecting support to meet the needs of children/adolescents in communities poses a challenge, especially in countries grappling with inequality, violence, war, and poverty (Lumos Foundation, 2021). Hence, the Lumos Foundation recommends supporting strategic reviews of care systems for children and adolescents in vulnerable situations to enable evidence-based planning in the transformation of care; empirically examining interventions to evaluate outcomes in children, adolescents, and families; and identifying areas of research that can support the transformation of care and the implementation of family-based care. These points relate to the professional characteristics of social educators in foster care institutions, and, complementarily, the need for investments in research is emphasized.

The search in scientific literature yielded some research that explored the educators' training (Halpern et al., 2015; Strong, 2018), their roles within foster care institutions (Bernardes & Marin, 2019; Costa et al., 2018), and some that investigated beliefs related to recreational activities and social skills (Silva, 2019). Other scientific works delved into the bond between the social educator and the institutionalized child/adolescent (Gabatz et al., 2018; Gabatz et al., 2019; Jiménez, 2017; Leitão, 2018) and others have focused on research utilizing photographic records (Ito & Azevêdo, 2022). Notably, there is a scarcity of both national and international research regarding the narratives of these professionals concerning their practices. Thus, studies focused on the practices of these professionals contribute significantly to fostering critical discussions in the scientific environment, aiming to expand research proposals.

In this way, it is relevant to investigate the practices of these professionals through self-reports, considering that these reports reflect on their roles. Simultaneously, this can contribute to the development of social assistance services, seeking to improve the activities carried out. Given this context, this research aimed to analyze the narratives of social educators about their practices in a foster care institution for children and adolescents in the South of Brazil.

Method

Research Design

This is a qualitative research study aimed at understanding and describing social phenomena through the analysis of the experiences of individuals or groups. It involves examining interactions and communications currently unfolding (Gibbs, 2009).

Research Site

This study was conducted in a governmental foster care institution in the Southern region of Brazil. The facility is designed to exceptionally and provisionally accommodate children and adolescents aged 0 to incomplete 18 years, who are in situations of personal and/or social risk.

Participants and Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

The following inclusion criteria were established: social educators with more than six months of experience, of both genders, with an interest in participating. Professionals on sick leave were excluded.

Thirteen social educators were working in this institution; two were excluded, leaving 11 participating professionals. The number of participants was sufficient to meet the criteria of theoretical data saturation, which occurs when data recurrence is evident (Fontanella et al., 2008).

The population of individuals in foster care consisted of five children (two aged 1 year, two aged 9 years, one aged 11), and one adolescent aged 13.

Table 1 presents the participant's sociodemographic information. The sociodemographic profile of the educators mainly comprised women, aged 25 to 52, married, with a high school education, and income ranging from one to two minimum wages. Three individuals had a short time working as social educators, and two had extensive experience in this role. However, all 11 participants had taken part in courses for social educators, demonstrating investments in professional development.

Table 1

Participants' sociodemographic variables

Participant*	Gender	Age	Experience as a social educator in the institution (months)	Marital status	Children	Education	Participation in course(s) for social educators
Maria	Female	44	28	Married	1	Middle/High School	Yes
Ana	Female	34	24	Single	1	Middle/High School	Yes
Antonia	Female	32	24	Separated	1	Middle/High School	No
Adriana	Female	26	46	Married	0	Middle/High School	Yes
Márcia	Female	27	24	Married	2	Middle/High School	Yes
José	Male	52	16	Single	0	Complete Higher Education	Yes
Fernanda	Female	27	72	Single	0	Middle/High School	Yes
Aline	Female	25	10	Married	0	Complete Higher Education	Yes
Patrícia	Female	40	60	Married	2	Middle/High School	Yes
Sandra	Female	37	12	Single	1	Middle/High School	Yes
Camila	Female	48	36	Married	3	Incomplete Higher Education	Yes

Note: *Fictitious name.

Instruments

A semi-structured narrative interview script was utilized, developed in accordance with the research objective to identify how social educators define and operationalize their practices. Specifically, the focus was on understanding the nature of their interactions with children/adolescents, the methods employed in activity development, and the evaluation processes. The narrative interview aims to generate data through questions that can be varied in their sequence,

intending to explore subjective experiences. This approach facilitates the understanding of practices and processes through narrative stimulus (Flick, 2013).

Procedures

The study received approval from the Foster Care Institution's management and the Research Ethics Committee involving Human Subjects at the Universidade Tuiuti do Paraná (opinion No. 4,556,405, registered under CAAE No. 18562019.0.0000.8040).

Participants meeting inclusion criteria were invited to join the study and signed the Informed Consent Form (ICF). Individual interviews were conducted within the institution, in a reserved room, based on a schedule defined by the participant.

The average time dedicated to each interview was 60 minutes. Initially, the semi-structured interview script was presented to explore narratives related to the following topics: how the children and adolescents are approached, how they are perceived, and how their practices are developed and assessed. Subsequently, a sociodemographic questionnaire was administered to collect general information from participants, including gender, age, time in service, marital status, income, educational level, etc. The interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

The data from the narrative interviews were analyzed using the grounded theory approach. In grounded theory methodology, data are systematically collected and analyzed through the research process, allowing theory to emerge from the identified information (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). In this perspective, the authors underscore that data are analyzed through coding stages, referring to analytical processes in which data are divided, conceptualized, and integrated to form theory. During open coding, concepts are identified, and their properties or dimensions are discovered. In selective coding, the integration and refinement of the theory begin. Categories are organized around a central explanatory concept.

In this study, open coding was initially used to identify units of meaning, specifically, isolated words or word sequences in the interviews representing thematic elements. Subsequently, the process of selective coding was employed to identify categories and subcategories, including their characteristics and dimensions. Independent judges conducted the data analysis, and fictitious names were used to preserve the participants' identity.

Results

The results were grouped into categories, subcategories, and thematic elements, as presented in Table 2.

Initiation of Practices

In the first category, related to the initiation of practices, it was observed that through interaction, social educators greet the children by introducing them to the foster care institution. This is evident in the following statements: "I greet them. Say welcome. Ask if they're hungry, if they want to eat something. If it's the right time of day, it's breakfast or lunch, depending on when

Table 2*Presentation of categories, subcategories, and thematic elements*

Categories	Subcategories	Thematic Elements
1 – Initiation of practices	1.1 – Interaction	1.1.1 – Greeting 1.1.2 – Presenting the foster care institution
2 – Types of practices	2.1 – Care	2.1.1 – Welcoming 2.1.2 – Hygiene 2.1.3 – Food 2.1.4 – School activities 2.1.5 – Activities appropriate to the level of development 2.1.6 – Collective rule-making 2.1.7 – The uniqueness of each child
	2.2 – Play	2.2.1 – Play 2.2.2 – Games 2.2.3 – Playground 2.2.4 – Music
	2.3 – Affection	2.3.1 – Bond 2.3.2 – Emotional Aspects
3 – Dimensions of practices	3.1 – Comprehensive attention	3.1.1 – Nutrition 3.1.2 – Health 3.1.3 – Rest 3.1.4 – Rules for coexistence 3.1.5 – Social relationship 3.1.6 – Affection
	3.2 – Humanized attention	3.2.1 – Attention to the needs of each fostered individual 3.2.2 – General counseling
4 – Context of Practices	4.1 – Reflections	4.1.1 – Improving practices 4.1.2 – Positive changes in the fostered individuals
	4.2 – Assessment	4.2.1 – Respect for others 4.2.2 – Continuous assessment of practices
	4.3 – The focus on children and adolescents	4.3.1 – Caress 4.3.2 – Respect 4.3.3 – Empathy 4.3.4 – Equality

they arrive. Then later, it's time for a bath, personal hygiene, you know?" (Adriana); and "The first contact is for introductions, you know? Of the educator, of the foster home, and showing them the spaces where they will be, you know? Using it, and then the usual things are done, right? Like bathing, eating, clothing, all of that, you know?" (Sandra).

There was a welcoming attitude during the presentation of the physical space, and one social educator emphasized the importance of the rules of coexistence and social interaction: "[...] we arrive, talk to the child, introduce them first to the foster children already living here, you know? Those up there in the front. Then, we show them the house, the room where they'll stay, which bathroom they'll use. And we teach them to talk to the other children, to interact, right? Show them how the house is like, explain the rules, you know? Guide the children on how things work, you know?" (Maria). This represents an essential aspect in organizing a safe space for children to feel welcome and gradually develop interpersonal relationships. Therefore, the practices initiated in a straightforward manner with the aim of presenting the institution.

Types of Practices

In the category related to types of practices, the inclusion of care, playful aspects, and affection was observed. By stating that: "[...] the adolescents, we guide them on how to... adolescents who wash clothes, wash shoes, many don't know how [...] we have to teach them so they can learn [...]" (Maria), the social educator reported that care encompasses general aspects, such as using receptivity and assistance with hygiene. The same applied to school activities: "[...] it's a school

task, noticing if the child is struggling with something, is developing along with the other children, right?” (Fernanda).

One participant considered herself as a substitute figure for the family environment from a parental role perspective: “[...] it’s a mother’s job, it’s like being a mother. Mother and father, right? Who are also educators. It’s teaching, hygiene, nutrition, it’s the caress, attention, affection, all of that” (Antonia). Although this participant acknowledges the importance of care, attention is needed when she perceives herself as a parental figure. This may have ethical implications or a duality in the roles undertaken (professional educator and family-like figure).

Social educators considered it important to organize activities appropriate for the developmental stage of children and adolescents, such as in play and school activities: “Children are [...] more into play, into activities, right? Adolescents, on the other hand, are (pause) not so much about playing but about school activities [...]” (Aline). Another aspect was the collective construction of rules to encourage the participation of those involved: “[...] making a schedule to avoid discussion, and doing the same for the game room. When everyone was there, we would make a schedule. In the morning, I took the boys, and in the afternoon, the girls [...]” (Maria).

In this context, there was an appreciation for the uniqueness of children and adolescents, recognizing the foster care institution’s role in structuring their lives. The goal was to focus on the needs of each individual to shape autonomous individuals: “[...] there are children who need differentiated attention, need closer attention, just as there are those who become more independent [...]” (José).

It was identified that caregiving extends beyond basic activities, including those related to food, hygiene, and clothing. Specifically, various actions, such as assisting with school tasks and engaging in health, leisure, and cultural activities, are undertaken with the goal of fostering the acquisition of new behaviors. Consequently, social educators facilitated the development of bonds, leading to improvements in the overall coexistence atmosphere and the establishment of healthy relationships.

The playful aspect integrated activities such as play time, games, playground, music, and recreation with the aim of contributing to social development: “[...] games like these, like these activities, both the younger and older ones, they all like them, the games [...] they really enjoy watching when everyone is involved [...]” (Maria); “[...] they really enjoy going to the foster home’s playground, there are also games that can be played outdoors” (Aline); “[...] they also really like it when I participate! I really like putting on music, you know? They really enjoy music a lot [...]” (Sandra).

Affection represented a form of care when the social educator listened to the child and adolescent in the foster care institution and demonstrated a willingness to stay close in an attentive manner. Professionals observed that the fostered children require attention and exhibit deficiencies due to the fragility of family bonds: “I think it’s affection, right? Affection, they are a bit needy, right?” (Sandra); “Affection, attention, dialogue” (Adriana).

In view of this, there was a willingness to promote interaction and create a space for play with the aim of facilitating the child/adolescent’s connection with their world. The importance of play as a form of expression, through which individuals attribute meaning to their experiences, is emphasized. The playful universe represents the child’s world, and specifically, in the context of institutional care, it is essential to ensure their comprehensive protection.

Dimensions of Practices

In the category related to the dimensions of practice, it was possible to identify that attention occurs in a comprehensive and humanized manner. Comprehensive attention refers to social educators' holistic view regarding the needs of the fostered individuals. Basic aspects (nutrition, health, rest) are emphasized, along with those focused on the construction of morality: "[...] caring about health, caring about nutrition, caring about rest, caring for the relationship with each other" (José); "[...] teach them right from the start, the meal schedule, that eating vegetables is good [...]" (Ana); "I think it's about caring, right? Caring for their well-being in every sense. Everything, both emotionally and physically" (Márcia). Narratives about affective aspects were identified: "[...] giving love and caress and, like, [...]" whatever they need at the moment [...]" (Patrícia).

The aspect of comprehensive care was identified within the routines of social educators, contributing to the social and emotional development of children and adolescents. Institutionalized children often present broken bonds, which are compensated for by other representative figures. Thus, social educators act as guardians, assisting children in their daily needs.

Humanized care entails a stance of active listening by social educators, valuing the individuality of children and adolescents, encompassing both their life history and current situation. Attention directed at general needs and counseling was observed: "[...] it's attention from both, from what I perceive, it's the same, attention. They want attention at all times. Individual attention" (Ana); "I try to listen to them, you know? Understand them and try to give them, you know? An advice or a few words that adds something to them [...] or some words of hope [...]" (Sandra).

Social educators provide support and acknowledge the importance of focusing on the needs of children/adolescents in the foster care institution. It is crucial for the child to perceive the received support, thereby fostering adherence to the proposed activities.

Context of Practices

In the context of practices category, social educators identified that their interventions are advanced, and they reported that it was possible to see positive changes in the fostered individuals. In evaluating their practices, they considered continuous assessment of their actions relevant, i.e., a procedural analysis of activities through observation: "Yes... like we were talking to E. (director of the foster care institution), G. has improved a lot [...] now she's not, as P. (social educator) says, stubborn. She used to argue with P., P. would say 'a', she would say 'b' [...]" (Maria); "Certainly [...] the way they start to behave and interact, their education, respect, and you can see it in their actions, in their good manners, in the growth of these fostered individuals" (José); "Improving every day, I don't consider myself a good person because [...] depending on the situation I get stressed, and sometimes I want to shout [...] I get up and walk away so I don't do that [...]" (Ana).

In the practices carried out by social educators, there are moments dedicated to reflecting on their activities. In this regard, their actions were evaluated positively when they considered their observations of the children's behavior. For example, when the child establishes routines related to eating and studying. In this sense, there was an awareness of their role in the psychosocial aspects that encompass the experiences of children/adolescents.

The practices involve caress, respect, and empathy in an egalitarian manner, meaning there is no differentiation among individuals. Thus, these professionals develop practices that value the person within the context of the foster care institution: "It really does vary a lot, I look at them with affection [...]" (Ana); "I look at them with love. With respect. Between me and them, it's a matter of respect. Respecting their space" (Adriana); "I look at them with a lot of affection, with care, and

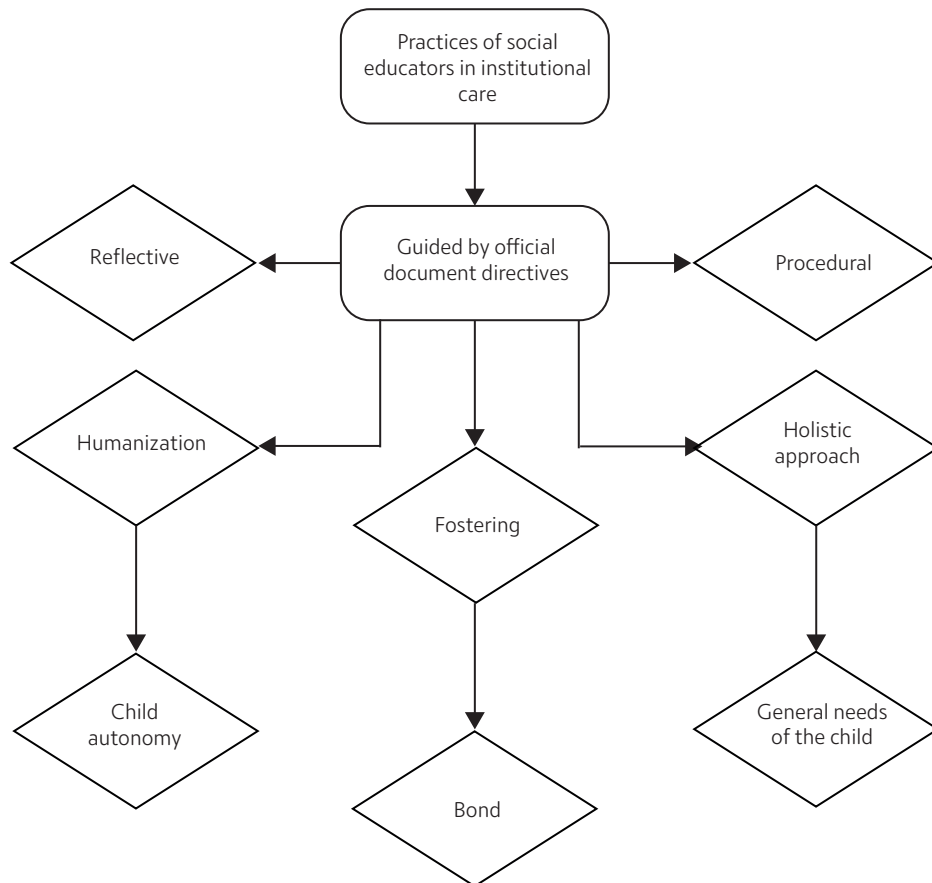
with a lot of friendship for them [...] I think I put myself in their shoes a lot [...]” (Sandra); “[...] I think it’s a matter of not simply focusing on the child’s appearance, it’s talking, having contact with everyone equally [...]” (Aline).

In the narratives, the use of empathetic engagement was evident as social educators placed themselves in the position of the fostered individuals, fostering relationships based on respect. This is how comprehensive and humanized care is operationalized by the secondary elements of empathy and respect, thus creating a relational dynamic in the development of practices.

Figure 1 describes the theory constructed from the narratives of the social educators. The practices are carried out through recommendations from public policies, enabling the development of activities in a reflective posture by considering the characteristics of children and adolescents. Such practices occur gradually and are evaluated and updated systematically. Specifically, the guiding principle of foster care is highlighted, encompassing multiple socio-affective dimensions. The aspect of comprehensiveness aimed at understanding various needs complements a humanizing perspective that focuses on the autonomy of children and adolescents.

Figure 1

Theoretical model of the practices of social educators in institutional care



Discussion

It was observed that the initiation of social educators’ practices was a straightforward process, characterized through greetings and presentations of the rules of coexistence. According

to the Technical Guidelines for Foster Care Services for Children and Adolescents of the Ministry of Social Development and Fight Against Hunger (MDS, 2009), it is necessary to provide fostered individuals with respect and affection, as some are unaware of the reason why they have been removed from their families. This lack of awareness can lead them to perceive the protective measure in a punitive way, generating insecurity. Receptivity through fostering allows children to gradually feel integrated into the institution, serving as a protective factor for establishing bonds.

The utilization of guidelines proposed by public policies was evident within the narratives of social educators. Specifically, they were noted through a welcoming attitude that stimulates social interaction, which has repercussions on the types of practices involving care, play, and affection. This care encompasses guidance in various activities undertaken by those under care, including personal hygiene and school tasks – elements that contribute to the child’s moral development. Another aspect pertains to the significance of play and its fundamental role in facilitating interactions for the child to explore their universe and engage in activities that aim to rescue or strengthen their role in the world. Thus, the care provided by social educators goes beyond practical aspects, encompassing the realm of human relationships and emphasizing the importance of affective connections. This aspect is crucial for the child’s inclusion in the context, positioning them as the protagonist of their life story.

Another study revealed that social educators directed their care toward the basic needs and affective demands of children and adolescents. These professionals perceived themselves as references for those under their care (Costa et al., 2018). In this research, this was evident in an account related to the perception of a substitute figure for the family environment. However, it is necessary to identify the limits of their role, as some children have experienced living with their families of origin and can identify who their caregivers were, even in situations of neglect and abuse to which they were subjected. This represents a distinct role, even though these professionals may provide care similar to that experienced in a family environment. However, the representations of family roles refer to another complex issue that requires ethical considerations. Thus, the relevance of discussing this theme in professional development programs with social educators is evident.

Social educators serve as role models for children/adolescents in foster care institutions, as they provide guidance and comprehensive protection (Leitão, 2018). These roles are crucial for building secure bonds, which helps compensate for children’s affection from previous experiences. Another aspect of care is the appreciation of the uniqueness of those in care. The assistance provided for basic needs and the uniqueness of the child/adolescent in the foster care institution aligns with the results of other studies (Gabatz et al., 2019; Gaspar, 2020). It is the role of the social educator to ensure attention, advocacy, and protection, seeking to develop activities recommended by current legislation (Ito & Azevêdo, 2021). In this sense, when the social educator recognizes that each child has a life history, this makes it possible to meet the demands through empathy with a humanized perspective.

Regarding playful practices, this research found educators’ willingness to interact with children through play and games. However, other studies (Silva, 2019; Strong, 2018) identified that educators did not perceive themselves as prepared for this task. In another study, caregivers acknowledged the importance of providing a welcoming environment for institutionalized children; however, they lacked preparation on how to undertake this responsibility (Gabatz et al., 2019). This clearly indicates the need for continuing education, as unfortunately, there is still a lack of preparation for these professionals, posing a challenge for all involved in the management of institutional foster care.

In practices involving affection, the bond represented the central element in interactions developed in the fostering institution. Scientific research has been conducted to investigate the bond between social educators and institutionalized children/adolescents (Gabatz et al., 2018; Gabatz et al., 2019; Jiménez, 2017; Leitão, 2018), and these professionals recognized the importance of this aspect during essential care. Thus, the bond developed between social educators and children in the foster care institution represents the affective connection that promotes a sense of security and care. Therefore, they are considered stimulating elements for coexistence and comprehensive protection.

In the present study, social educators reported that the bond is built during basic care activities such as during hygiene, feeding, play, and social interactions. This aligns with Jiménez's (2017) recommendation to foster the role of the social educator as a tutor of secure attachments. Conversely, this poses a challenge as there is a need for qualified training for these professionals to recognize the ethical aspects involved. As mentioned earlier, when these professionals see themselves as substitute figures for the family, the implementation of interventions is crucial for them to perceive their professional roles clearly – as caregivers aiming for the comprehensive protection of the child. Therefore, it is recommended that these interventions be developed by the psychologist working in the foster care institution or an external professional upon request.

Some recommendations for social educators have been formulated to meet the individual needs and collective interests of children/adolescents in the foster care institution, such as: providing a receptive and welcoming attitude; promoting information on rules for social interaction; organizing the environment and basic care; monitoring children's well-being in various services (school, health unit); assisting in the development of assertive behaviors; strengthening autonomy; mediating, if necessary, family visits; promoting interaction between the family and the child; building bonds of affection and trust (social educator and child); and valuing life stories (Ito & Azevêdo, 2023). These proposals align with the practices reported by the surveyed professionals, with a focus on building bonds and monitoring the tasks to be carried out by the children and adolescents.

When social educators perceive themselves as substitutes for the family environment, they may assign responsibilities that are not compatible with their professional activities. This can overload them, leading to frustrations arising from the idealization of a parental figure that, in reality, results from a construction marked by fantasies. It is evident that they are interested in meeting the demands of institutionalized children, but there is a need to recognize the limits and challenges inherent in building bonds and their respective social interaction, which have direct implications for all involved. This can create expectations in children, leading to subsequent frustration; similarly, it can have the same effect on social educators attempting to assume a parental role that proves to be less viable in institutional fostering.

In this study, it was found that the dimensions of practices are a part of comprehensive and humanized care strategies. This refers to an expansion of practices that consider the needs of the children being cared for, representing a positive aspect that demonstrates interest and respect for others. In the study conducted by Bernardes and Marin (2019), social educators mentioned that at times their role was merely to provide guidance regarding basic needs for food and personal hygiene. However, they later recognized the possibility of supporting and stimulating the child in various aspects, such as sharing information about morality. In another study, caregivers perceived the need to foster the child's emotional development, considering the benefits for the next stages of their life cycle (Gabatz et al., 2019). These results align with the present research regarding the teaching of morality, social relationships, and attention to the emotional aspect of children and adolescents, highlighting the inclusion of the socio-educational process in practices.

This shows that these professionals are prepared to develop socio-educational actions to meet the needs of the fostered individuals. However, this is not the reality in other foster care institutions, as social educators are often called upon for such activities without proper knowledge and training. Some studies have identified that social educators do not understand the conflicts of the fostered individuals and face difficulties in identifying the psychosocial aspects involved in foster care (Bernardes & Marin, 2019; Costa et al., 2018). Thus, attention to the particularities of institutionalized children/adolescents represents a central task because, when this does not happen, practices are considered “welfare work” and incongruent with the recommendations of current public policies. Therefore, it is important to emphasize that the experiences lived by the fostered individuals have repercussions on their coping with reality and the construction of life perspectives. If these professionals do not recognize such aspects, practices become mere automatic actions in the absence of critical reflections on the needs of the fostered individuals.

Regarding the context of practices, positive reflections and evaluations from social educators were identified. These professionals use observation to assess the behaviors of the fostered individuals. It is important to note that this assessment is limited to the child’s behavior, indicating a lack of a systematic model for evaluating practices. At this point, the need for the development of a work plan sanctioned by public policies becomes evident. Therefore, it is important to emphasize that professionals working with children/adolescents in institutional foster care act as mediators in the process of psychosocial development. There is a need for these professionals to design and implement interventions in institutional foster care, aiming to evaluate their performance (Leitão, 2018).

This aspect poses a challenge in the foster care institution due to the lack of standardized instruments and a specialized team to assess interventions. In this study, the empathy of the social educator was identified, but this is only a starting point for practices, considering that subsequent stages are compromised by the absence of formal evaluation. These professionals need to approach, converse, listen, and understand the needs of children and adolescents. Subsequently, they should evaluate their interventions to enhance care strategies with the goal of comprehensive protection. These represent some challenges identified in this research, providing an opportunity for discussion in the continuing education of these professionals for their proper recognition as social agents in foster care.

Conclusion

This research found that the practices of social educators are consistent with the guidelines proposed by current legislation. The types of practices encompass a variety of activities, as assistance directed towards basic needs and the valuation of individuality were considered fundamental.

This favored the dimensions of practices, as comprehensive and humanized attention in the service contributed to the construction of affective bonds. The construction of morality in interactions was noted, supporting social and affective development. Regarding practices, positive evaluations were identified, but they were based solely on behavior observation, indicating a limitation and the need for instruments and a specialized team to assess interventions.

The institutional reality in Brazil is not fully aligned with the required legal parameters, and there may be foster care institutions that replicate traditional punitive models. However, the location selected for investigation is considered a benchmark for child and adolescent care. The objective of this study was achieved. As for its limitation, the use of a sample of social educators

from a single foster care institution. The results are based on self-reports, focusing on participants' analyses of their workplace relationships. Another point highlights the impossibility of comparing narratives between social educators and children/adolescents, suggesting a potential avenue for future research.

The results of this research contribute to supporting continuing education programs, given that the surveyed professionals possess a humanized and comprehensive perspective. Future studies should undertake longitudinal research for the continuous monitoring of these professionals. Additionally, institutionalized children/adolescents should participate in upcoming studies. The findings of this research can contribute to the planning of continuing education courses to promote discussions aimed at enhancing the professional practices of social educators.

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