

7. Educational Perspective: The challenge of being a childhood educator to a child at risk.

Maria Helena Horta

According to Law no. 147/99, of September 1, a child is at risk and / or in a situation of abuse and neglect when, in particular, he/ she is in one of the following situations:

- does not receive age appropriate or personally relevant care or affection;
- is subject, directly or indirectly, to behaviors that seriously affect her/ his safety or emotional balance.

In this chapter, I will tell the story of Samuel, a child in my kindergarten class, and then I will share some personal reflections, based on the literature of the specialty, and on the role of a childhood educator dealing with a child at-risk. The story that I describe below is an actual case taken from my 2001/2002 school year when I was a kindergarten teacher. Afterwards, I will support my reflection using the recently updated document guiding the educational and pedagogical action of the childhood educator: the *New Curricular Guidelines for Pre-School Education* (Lopes da Silva, Marques, Mata & Rosa, 2016).

The story of Samuel

During that school year I was in charge of a group of 5 to 6 year old children, composed of 20 boys and 4 girls. This group had been formed in the nursery, and I had been with them since they were 2 to 3 years old. It was a very cohesive group that enjoyed challenges. The children were friendly and demonstrated great complicity between themselves and the adults – myself and my educational assistant. They really liked attending kindergarten. According to some parents, with whom we had an excellent relationship, during the weekend many children would wake up in the morning and ask with enthusiasm if it was a "school" day? They would be a little bit "disappointed" when they realized that it wasn't a "school" day and that they weren't going to be able to meet their friends that day.

Around mid-October, Samuel showed up unannounced in my kindergarten classroom. Samuel was a 5 year-old boy who had been referred by Social Security because he was a child-at-risk. I never received any information from Social Security or from his family. I spoke with his mother only once, and whenever I tried to schedule a meeting with her to learn about Samuel's true family situation, I never got a response

from her. Samuel's twelve year old sister would take him to school in the morning and would pick him up in the afternoon.

Samuel was a big child (bigger than the other boys in the group). When he arrived in my classroom, he did not make eye contact with any of the other children or the adults. He was absent-minded, always looking at the floor, often alone, not interested in relating with other children, all of which made any approach difficult. I made observations and formed my analysis. Without a prior development report, I first suspected that I was dealing with a situation within the autism spectrum. But as I unraveled the family and social picture of this child, and began to analyze the information I had, and had been collecting, I quickly dispelled my doubts and concerns regarding the possible autism spectrum.

In informal conversations I had with his sister, when she dropped off and picked up Samuel (mornings and at the end of the day), I began to understand their family picture: Samuel was the fourth of five children and their mother was pregnant again. She was a single mother who did not know who any of the children's father(s) were as she engaged in prostitution as a way to add some money to the minimum income she received from the social security services.

As time went by, around mid-November, classroom objects and some of the children's toys began to disappear for no apparent reason. I never figured out why the toys disappeared or who took them. Then, in December, some children started refusing to go to school. It was the complete opposite behavior that they had shown up until this point.

As I mentioned before, Samuel was a big child. His way of interacting with his peers was through physical aggression, which frightened most of the children. Suddenly, and sometimes violently, Samuel would try to take away the toys or games from his classmates' hands - inside or outside the classroom - without saying a word. It was his way of interacting with his peers and he did not know of any other way of establishing interpersonal relationships.

As one can imagine, I feared that the balance and stability of the class would collapse. The children would constantly come to me crying over Samuel. Around the same time, the parents began to question me, "Who is Samuel?" Every day I would go home and think about what I could possibly do with Samuel, while never forgetting that I had the other twenty four children who also needed my attention. I constantly thought: I cannot punish Samuel for every inappropriate action he does, especially since I do not consider punishment as an education or pedagogical tool. In addition, I thought, Samuel's life was already a punishment in itself. I could not deprive him anymore than what he was already suffering on a daily basis at home. Then I realized that what this child really needs is LOVE!

Within the group, I began to value Samuel's small (but very important) achievements: to run an errand, to take a message, duties were assigned within the classroom (e.g., preparing and storing materials, chairs, cushions, etc.). I publicly recognized his small achievements (in terms of development and learning). I also pointed out his progress to his sister, telling her how Samuel was becoming a responsible boy in the classroom to whom I entrusted certain tasks and responsibilities.

Sometimes I would give him a prominent role in the classroom and in the group (e.g., the "head" of the classroom, "head" of the train, summoning the children for hygiene breaks, etc.). All these actions were developed progressively over time, as I could not neglect the other children nor overestimate Samuel's progress in relation to his classmates.

In the middle of December, I realized that Samuel had made one friend within the group: Maria. Maria was an extremely sweet girl, who was being raised by her grandmother. She had a sister who was three years older and who lived with her mother (financially and professionally, Maria's mother could not keep both daughters in her care). I believe that Samuel identified himself with Maria's family and personal characteristics. As the friendship between these two children developed, I realized that Samuel was smiling (something I had not seen before), that he was able to interact with other children during recess, usually in the presence of Maria, and was showing a better predisposition for interpersonal relations.

It was not always easy for me, as an educator, but my main concern was to foster cooperation among children, trying to ensure that everyone felt valued and integrated in the group, while making sure that the necessary conditions of security, accompaniment and the well-being of the children were created and maintained (Decree-Law no. 241/2001, of August 30). I often cried "tears of blood" for thinking that my increased attention on Samuel may have resulted in neglecting the other children in the classroom. It was their last year of kindergarten. The following year the children would be entering the first grade of primary school. Not that I had to prepare them for this, in the more traditional sense of the term, but I could not neglect their learning and development process as to ensure "continuity of the educational path" (Lopes da Silva, 2012, p. 55).

As the school year unfolded, there was less concern about Samuel, but his fragile family situation was never forgotten. I remember the Father's Day celebration we organized was an activity to be played by teams of parents and their children. I told Samuel's sister (who was the only person with whom I had direct contact) several times that some family member should come to school to accompany Samuel in the competition. It could be his mother, sister, an uncle –anyone...the important thing was that Samuel should not be left alone that day. Unfortunately, when the day arrived, all of the children in the class had

someone with them except Samuel. Eventually, it was my educational assistant who played the role of his parent. During that day I saw Samuel crying, as I had never seen him before. Up until then, I had never once seen him shed a tear. Even thinking about it today, I can still feel the pain of seeing him with the tears running silently down his boyish face and his eyes fixed on the ground. Nevertheless, in the midst of my grief and dismay that Samuel had been alone on this day - a day so important to the group and that I had planned with so much affection and joy- I felt a certain consolation when I realized that Samuel was able to manifest his emotions. Something had been won.

Later, on a different day, when I was pushing Samuel on the swing, he told me something I will never forget. With his eyes on the ground, he said to me: "I already told my mother that when she has the baby, she ought to give it to you". At that moment, I realized that I was an influential reference figure for him in his life.

The role of the educator in the light of the new Curricular Guidelines for Pre-School Education

I am often assailed with complaints from my ex-students, who are now educators that their initial training (at the University) does not prepare them for the reality - often harsh and pitiless - they encounter in the institutions where they work. I always tell them that the initial training qualifies them for the exercise of the teaching profession, but it is only in the course of their day to day work that they will they learn the art of educating. It is in their professional context where they will develop into childhood educators. According to Cortez (2015), the "central question of the construction of identity goes through an intensive analysis of the individual and particular conceptions of each other, although guided by processes of identification and differentiation with others, concretizing themselves in a personal and collective singularity" (p. 13).

At the time, with only four years of teaching experience, I was not prepared for the reality described above. However, it was this reality and the life story of Samuel, who crossed paths with me during my process of becoming a childhood educator, who helped me to grow and to be the person as well as the professional that I am today. According to Borges (2012), the learning to be an educator / teacher "is fundamentally a dynamic process that begins with the initial formation and that is built during the professional life, along with the personal development, the life history of the protagonists and their personal singularities" (p.431).

I am sure that if I had met Samuel in my first year of professional practice as a kindergarten teacher, the development of this story would have been different. Personal and professional maturity are necessary for providing an answer that seems to us as adequate as possible to the reality that we face in the exercise of our teaching duties. In this profession there are no models or recipes to follow, and it is often our heart and personal instincts that compels us to act in a certain way. Increasingly, I am certain and hold the conviction that it is the "person who underlies the educator who can actually determine the changes necessary to the development of his educational action, in a complete symbiosis between his intrinsic motivation and the attentive look to the needs and expectations of the children with whom he works "(Horta, 2016, p. 143).

Before worrying about teaching and transmitting any (pre) school knowledge and content, I think what really matters in childhood education is "to bet on education as the main factor of human and social development" (Costa, 2016, p. 4), particularly in the case of children at risk. Accordingly, the new Curriculum Guidelines for Pre-School Education [OCEPE] (Lopes da Silva et al., 2016, p. 5) highlight that the quality of the relational climate where education and care are closely intertwined. This was always my primary concern as Samuel's educator.

One of the foundations and principles of childhood pedagogy (Lopes da Silva et al., 2016) is that development and learning are considered inseparable aspects of the process of child development. This means that the interactions and relationships that a child establishes with adults and with other children, as well as other experiences that are provided by the social and physical contexts in which he moves, are learning opportunities that will contribute to its overall process of development. The child's unique characteristics - motor, social, emotional, cognitive and linguistic - also play a unique role in this process. The interconnection between the particularities of each child, their process of biological maturation and the lived experiences of learning, makes each child a unique being, with his/her own abilities, characteristics and interests, with an individual and unique course of development and learning.

Taking these factors into account, and seeking to ensure a culturally rich and stimulating environment, as well as a pedagogically coherent and consistent process, one important point of my intervention has always been to promote the development of stable affective relationships among the children's group (Lopes da Silva et al., 2016). Accordingly, in order to promote in Samuel a sense of well-being and willingness to interact with others and with the world, I tried to make Samuel feel welcomed and respected within the existing group, but with the understanding that he also had to respect others.

However, as the new OCEPE reminds us, children do not develop and learn only in the context of early childhood education. I was aware that Samuel received innumerable influences from other contexts, most notably his fragile family structure, whose educational practices (or lack of them) and the culture itself influenced his learning and development process. As stated by Lopes da Silva et al. (2016), "learning itself is carried out in its own way, assuming a holistic configuration, both in the attribution of meanings, as well as in the understanding the relationships and in the construction of an identity" (p.10).

Since that year, I have never heard from Samuel or anyone else in his family. I know that I did my best trying to somehow to fill the gaps in his family. Today I am grateful to Samuel for having taught me something that we do not learn during our initial training or in any of our continuous education: one educates with love! With this child I became truly aware of the kindergarten teacher's role in the life of his/ her children: he / she works as structural reference for children's development and learning process.

I am also grateful to the Soroptimist International (SI) Club of Tavira-Portugal for the opportunity they gave me to take this story out of my drawer of professional memories and share it with you. It is a story that, I believe, made me a better person and a better professional.

References

- Borges, M. L. (2012). *Da prática à praxis: os saberes experienciais dos professores na construção do ser professor do 1.º ciclo do ensino básico* (Tese de doutoramento). Lisboa: Universidade de Lisboa.
- Cortez, M. G. (2015). *A profissão de educador de infância e o género masculino*. Santo Tirso: Whitebooks.
- Costa, J. (2016). Preâmbulo a I. Lopes da Silva (Coord.), L. Marques, L. Mata. & M. Rosa, *Orientações Curriculares para a Educação Pré-Escolar* (p. 4). Lisboa: Ministério da Educação / Direção-Geral da Educação.
- Horta, M. H. (2016). *Linguagem escrita na educação de infância: da intenção à prática*. Viseu: PsicoSoma.
- Lopes da Silva, I. (2012). Dilemas e problemas da avaliação nas primeiras idades. Em M. J. Cardona & C. M. Guimarães, *Avaliação na educação de infância* (pp. 151-170). Viseu: PsicoSoma.
- Lopes da Silva, I. (Coord.), Marques, L., Mata. L. & Rosa, M. (2016). *Orientações Curriculares para a Educação Pré-Escolar*. Lisboa: Ministério da Educação / Direção-Geral da Educação.

Legislation

Decreto-lei n.º 241/2001, de 30 de agosto – Aprova os perfis específicos de desempenho profissional do educador de infância e do professor do 1.º ciclo do ensino básico.

Lei n.º 147/99, de 01 de setembro – Lei de proteção de crianças e jovens em perigo