

## **The Place of School Social Workers within Education Public Policy: The Portuguese Case**

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**ABSTRACT:** Social workers promote justice and social change, work to optimize access and promote citizens' rights, among which is the access of all students to education. In Portugal, social workers presence in schools fluctuated throughout times, as a consequence of the variable appreciation the profession deserved in the successive public policies regulating the educational sector. Thus, two purposes guide this paper review: (i) to unfold the main legislative initiatives in the field of public education to reflect upon social workers participation in Portuguese schools, over time; (ii) emphasize the multidimensionality of the work accomplished by social workers in schools, conceptualized the open systems permeable to the diversity and complexity of the problems (failure, abandonment, indiscipline, violence, bullying, discrimination, ..., consumption) that encompass students' social origins and their needs. Resting on exploratory-descriptive research, this paper is based on the selective literature review from school social work's and educational policies scientific fields, subsequently subjected to content and argumentative analysis procedures. Main results emphasize the central role fulfilled by social workers in Portuguese schools, stressing out the ways by which political theoretical-methodological, ethical and technical-operational dimensions permeating social work practices, are mobilized to build critical professional projects capable of responding the challenges school social workers face nowadays.

**KEYWORDS:** social work, social intervention, school, educational policy, Portugal

### **Introduction**

This work aims to present the partial results arising from research carried out in the scope of our PhD thesis in Social Work, which is in the stage of finalizing the design of the research project. The ongoing research stems from our growing interest in framing the presence of social workers in Portuguese schools, knowing and understanding the dimensions involved in the intervention that social work develops within the educational context, and the nature of social worker's professional practices used, namely to mediate socio-educational relationships between the various educational agents – the school, students, families and communities. We are convinced of the essential role social workers have in schools, the work that influences the increasingly complex and diverse socio-cultural environment of schools and their surrounding communities very positively, and which contributes decisively to safeguarding the access and attendance of all students to education, understood as an essential human right for the individuals' integral development and their participation in society as citizens with full rights..

From a methodological point of view, this paperwork rests on an exploratory-descriptive research, based on the selective literature review from social policies of

school social work and its research fields, subsequently subjected to content and argumentative analysis procedures. From the research field of school social work, we collected and analysed several master dissertations to understand the ways in which the intervention context is represented by researchers and social workers, and the framework that social workers use to explain their professional practices within the different empirical dimensions researched (student, family, organization, community, their practice's political focus). From the scientific field of political science, various legal instruments used by Portuguese governments to regulate the educational sector were reviewed, framing the professional integration of social workers in Portuguese schools.

The work here presented, thus, gives an account of the reflection we are conducting about social work intervention in Portuguese schools, and is sectioned into two parts that reflect on: 1) education as an intervention context for social work, revisiting, to this end, the main legislative measures adopted in education sector in Portugal; 2) the intervention nature of the practices which professional social workers adopt in education, emphasizing the multidimensionality of their professional action in schools, conceptualized as open systems permeable to the diversity and complexity of the problems (failure, abandonment, indiscipline, violence, bullying, discrimination, ..., consumptions) that encompass students' social origins and their needs. At the end, some concluding notes are made regarding the investigation conducted.

### **How Education Policy set the place for School Social Workers**

The centrality of education in contemporary societies, as a promoter not only of the knowledge and skills necessary for the inclusion of individuals in the labour market, but also of trajectories of social inclusion tending to promote their integral formation and access to full citizenship, configures education as a right to be safeguarded by the State, which is responsible for ensuring equal opportunities for access and attendance through the creation of social regulatory policies and a system of public educational establishments for everyone to access.

The concern with access to education and with the population educational levels has long entered the majority of national political agendas as a goal for which it is urgent to establish goals and define political measures that guarantee their reach, despite the long historical path that has been necessary to achieve the transition from an elitist education perspective reserved for the most favoured social classes, to a democratic education, of public, secular and universal nature.

In Portugal, the great changes regarding education and the educational system occurred only after April 25, 1974, with the publication of the first Constitution of the Republic on April 2, 1976, in which education and teaching, as its necessary correlate, appeared safeguarded in articles 73 and 74 which, after successive constitutional revisions, refer, today, respectively, in article 73, points 1 and 2: “1. Everyone has the right to education and culture; 2. The State promotes the democratization of education and the other conditions so that education, carried out through school and other training means, contributes to equal opportunities, overcoming economic, social and cultural inequalities, the development of personality and the spirit of tolerance, mutual understanding, solidarity and responsibility, for social progress and for democratic participation in collective life”. While Article 74 states that “everyone has the right to education with a guarantee of the right to equal opportunities for access and academic success”, being the State the entity which should “ensure universal, compulsory and free basic education”, creating, for this purpose, a public system capable of “guaranteeing permanent education and eliminating illiteracy” and “guaranteeing all

citizens, according to their abilities, access to higher degrees of teaching, scientific research and artistic creation” (Constitutional Law No. 1/2005).

The State's legislative intervention in education, initially in the sense of establishing the principles that regulate it and ensuring the existence of a public education network, had to be progressively expanded as the school population expanded and diversified, as a result of the obligation teaching; the school gradually became a reflection of the heterogeneous society that characterizes us and the different profiles of the students who attend it carry their life stories and social and family complexities with them, guided by socio-economic and problematic inequalities stem from social change and the escalation of the social issue (Martins 2018).

Historically going back to the origin of the first political measures adopted, in our country, to face students' academic failure, understood as the problem that in the school context best expresses the learning difficulties manifested by students from socioeconomically disadvantaged family contexts and exclusion environments, the Portuguese government used, from the end of the 1980s, the following programs/measures (Ferreira and Teixeira 2010):

- The *enlargement of compulsory basic education for nine years*, and the creation of: support and educational supplements (Cap. III) to promote school' success (24); support to pupils with special educational needs (25); psychological and educational support, and vocational guidance (26) – later complemented by Legislative Decree no. 98-A/92, of August 20, which pointed to the equal opportunities of access and school success enshrined in Law no. 46/86, of October 14;
- The Interministerial Program for the Promotion of Educational Success (PIPSE): formalized on December 10, 1987 and published on January 21, 1988, was designed with the purpose of reversing school failure through the cancellation of dropout and dropout rates, and the reduction of failure and repetition rates;
- The creation of *Schools of Priority Intervention* (including the schools of PIPSE) regulated by Ministerial Order no. 119/ME/88, determined that the classification of school of priority intervention depends on their localization in a degraded or isolated zone, with a great instability of the faculty, and the existence of a significant number of children with learning difficulties and systematic underachievement;
- The *Program Education for All (PEPT Program 2000)*, created by Resolution of the Council of Ministers no. 29/91, of August 9, focused on accelerating the universalization of access to basic education for nine years, accompanied by the decisive enlargement of secondary and higher education levels.

Consisting of an increasingly diverse population, school environments have become more complex and are increasingly affected by problems (failure, abandonment, indiscipline, violence, bullying, discrimination,..., consumption) that mirror students' social origin and the shortcomings and problems which accompany them from their families, raising the need for intervention and compensatory support, only possible through the creation of “territorialized and networked responses with municipalities, health centers, employment centers, Social Security, student and family associations and other society associations” (Carvalho 2018, 5).

The democratization of education as the guarantor of equal opportunities of access to education , initially conceived and organized by a centralized administration, based on the idea of uniformity, tends to give rise to the acceptance of students' diversity and heterogeneity, making evident the need to decentralize decisions, delegate powers and give autonomy to schools, in order to involve all actors and local partners in the

elaboration of educational projects aligned with their needs and the resources available in each community (Ferreira and Teixeira 2010).

The perspective that solving problems experienced in schools requires the establishment of partnerships and the construction of local dynamics oriented towards the social and school integration of children and their families, has, in our country, as its first corollary in the politics of *Educational Territories of Priority Intervention Program (TEIP)*, published by Ministerial Order no. 147-B/ME/96, of August, 1. Conceived with the clear purpose of combating school failure and the early abandonment of students who attended schools located in geographic areas characterized by their social, cultural and economic weakness, the TEIP educational policy was a measure of positive discrimination affecting a given geographic unit, aiming at school and educational success and the promotion of equal access for all students, through the creation of a network of educational establishments of different levels of education, favouring the relationship of the student and the family with the school and including the school community and different partners from the local community in the schools' educational project, integrating local actors through the establishment of partnerships (Barbieri 2003).

The second generation of the Program, beginning in the 2006/2007 school year (1st phase), focused its focus on school and social exclusion and urban violence and included 35 non-grouped clusters/schools in Lisbon and Oporto, which benefited exceptional measures to combat school insecurity, indiscipline, failure and dropout (Barreiros and Serra 2018, Ferreira and Teixeira 2010, Tomás and Gama 2014). Two years later, with the publication of Normative Order No. 55/2008, of October 23, already called TEIP2, the program was expanded to a further 24 groups of schools/schools not grouped in other urban areas and rural areas, selected based on result indicators from the educational system and social indicators of the territories in which the schools are located. Finally, in November 2009, the Program included another 45 groups of schools/schools not grouped, making a total of 104, considering the three phases of TEIP2 (Barreiros and Serra 2018, Ferreira and Teixeira 2010, Tomás and Gama 2014).

The third generation of TEIP, triggered by Regulatory Decree no. 20/2012, of October 3, covered 137 schools not grouped/grouped schools around the country, which applied for and negotiated their improvement plans (formerly known as Projects) with the tutelage (Ministry of Education and Science) in the light of the guidelines and complying with the rules established for the preparation of program contracts or autonomy contracts to be granted (Ferreira and Teixeira 2010). Preserving the principles that guided the elaboration of the Program – combating absenteeism, early school leaving and indiscipline the third generation of TEIP has reinforced the articulation between schools, social partners and local training institutions, and the creation of conditions for a qualified transition from school to active life (Mendes 2017).

In order to join the TEIP Program, non-grouped schools/school clusters had to negotiate their Educational Projects, setting out the positive discrimination measures they planned to adopt to meet the objectives established by the Program, taking into account the social context in which they were inserted, resources available in that educational territory and the articulation of interventions by its various local partners, and, in return, being able to require the additional availability of financial and human resources (socio-cultural animators, psychologists, sociologists, teachers for educational support and social workers) (Ferreira and Teixeira 2010, Tomás and Gama 2014).

Figure 1 summarizes the territorial expansion of TEIP's coverage along the Regional Directions of Education (DRE), in its last two generations, between 2007 and 2012.

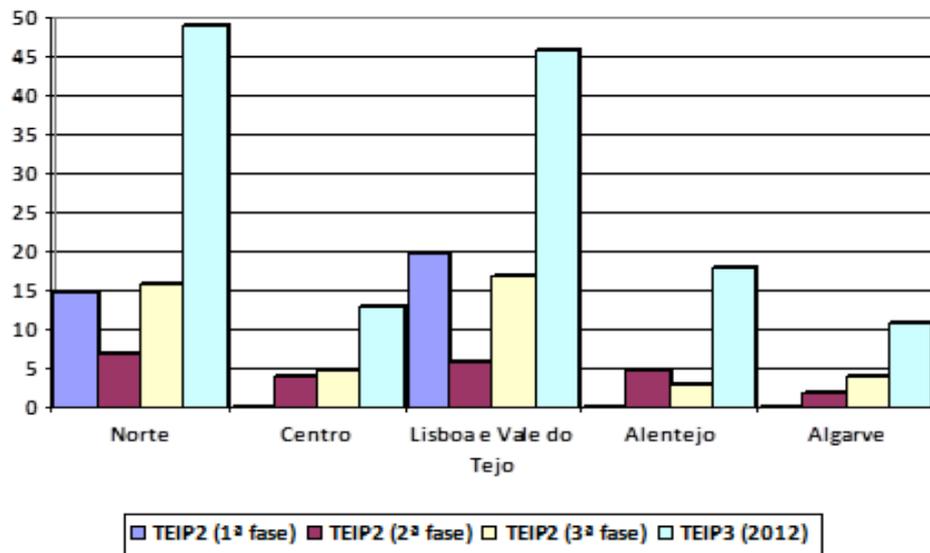


Figure 1. Territorial expansion of TEIP2 and 3's coverage along DRE  
 Source: Adapted from Mendes 2017, Tomás and Gama 2014

Going back in history, it is nevertheless possible to identify other moments in which Social Work had, prior to the TEIP Policy, been called upon to intervene in the Portuguese school context, namely in the period of the first Republic, in 1911, when school hygiene services were created in schools. Even so, it would be necessary to wait a few more years for the professional presence of social workers in Portuguese schools to be formalized, a fact that occurred in 1971, following the creation of the *School Social Action Institute* (IASE), having then been admitted to schools, twelve Social Assistants, with a performance aimed at providing economic aid to students from disadvantaged social classes and to participate in support structures for students. Between 1975 and 1978, IASE was restructured and the Pedagogical Medicine Centers emerged, in which Social Workers were integrated essentially to promote a better integration of students and intervene in the articulation between students, families and schools. Later, in 1991, with the publication of Decree-Law No. 190/91, in May 17, the Psychology and Guidance Services (SPO) emerged, which could include in their technical teams, a professional to be selected among psychologists, specialists in educational support, guidance counselors, and Social Workers. The creation of the career of Senior Technician of Social Work, in the same year, integrated in the group of careers of senior technical staff of general regime, allowed professional regulation within the scope of public administration, despite the integration of social workers in the technical teams of SPO came to occur very residual, with most of the technical teams being composed of psychologists (Branco 2015a, Branco 2015b, Martins 1999, Mendes 2017).

From 1990 onwards, political programs aimed at education have assumed, as we have seen, a territorialized orientation and focused on combating the high rates of absenteeism, failure and school dropout, of which TEIP were the first example.

Within the same perspective, in 1999, the *Integrated Program of Education and Training (PIEF)*, governed by Joint Order no. 882/99, published on October 15, and subsequently revised by Joint Order no. 948/2003, published on September 26, was assumed as an educational response to fight the exploitation of child labour, slanted towards the reintegration of children and young people (between 15 and 18 years) in regular school paths, with a view to fulfilling compulsory schooling and its entry into the labour market, providing, for this purpose, the elaboration of a personalized

education and training plan, adjusted to the interests and situation of young people, which would prevent their preparation and acquisition of skills (Joint Order No. 948/2003). To assist in the implementation of the program, a position of a Technician of Local Intervention (TIL) was predicted, who should be specialized in the areas of psychology or Social Work, or holder of a relevant *curriculum* in the area, having submitted an application, would be selected to carry out the social diagnosis and monitoring of each of the minors.

As the existing adjustment between the functions to be performed by TIL and the skills profile that characterizes the training of social workers is evident, the truth is that the number of social workers who will have been hired to accompany minors in the PIEF classes is unknown, knowing only that in 2015/2016 there were 156 of these classes distributed by 95 schools in the national territory (DGE 2017, Mendes 2017).

Formally legislated since 1998, by means of Decree-Law no. 115-A/98, of May 4, *Autonomy Contracts (CA)* is a political program that transfer powers and responsibilities from the Ministry of Education to schools, enabling them to decide on administrative, financial, strategic, pedagogical and organizational matters, taking into account their educational projects. However, it was necessary to wait for 2008 so that the first 22 CA become formalized with the publication of Decree-Law no. 75/2008, of April 22, later amended by the publication of the Decree-Law no. 137/2012, of July 2 (Decree-Law no. 137/2012). In 2017, the number of schools with concluded CA already totalled 212 (Mendes 2017).

The legislative changes that have framed the Autonomy Contracts, since their formalization, have given schools greater freedom to manage curricula and make the hours of some subjects more flexible, making them responsible for the necessary creation of strategies and measures to enhance the participation of families and local partners in the strategic management of schools, through their openness to the outside and involvement with the communities around them, benefiting the quality of education and expanding citizenship, inclusion and social development. The expansion of the number of CA has been accompanied by the hiring of social workers who intervene in mediation between schools, students, families and local communities, in order to meet the objective's set, alongside their classic intervention in the field of support and social action for students in need (Mendes 2017).

The *National Program for School Success Promotion (PNPSE)* approved by resolution of the Council of Ministers no. 23/2016, published on April 11 2016, established that schools should outline their strategic action plans, curricular and organizationally adjusted to their reality, in close liaison with local educational partners – community institutions and local training bodies – aiming at improving educational practices and student learning, and educational success (2016). Authorized to allocate technical expertise to the program's implementation, most schools hired psychologists, having only an exceedingly small number of them requested social workers.

Although, as Mendes' study claims (2017), the number of social workers in schools is very low (112 to 811 groups of schools/schools not grouped), translating, of course, very worrying ratios *per* student, and mirroring what may be considered a “divestment in the profession and its goals in the area of education” (Carvalho 2018, 6), education was, in a sample of 1604 social Portuguese workers, pointed out as the third sectorial area where more social workers work, showing that the activity of social workers in education is not limited to schools, since it occurs in other organizations, such as municipalities, public institutes, universities, associations, ..., ministries, in which educational projects are developed (Carvalho 2018).

Due to the socio-historic inscription of the profession, social workers are professionals who promote social justice and change, acting to optimize the conditions

of access and safeguard citizens' rights, so the work associated with ensuring equal access for all students to education, as a human right to ensure, legitimize their presence and intervention in all organizations where education constitutes a field of activity or work. The path traversing the analysis of the adopted social policies in Portuguese education has served the dual purpose of knowing the evolution that guided the perspectives on education and its goals, and, concomitantly, of knowing the legal-political context framing social worker's participation in Portuguese schools and justifying their presence, even residual, and intervention.

### **The nature of the intervention and the Professional Practice of social workers in schools**

As a result of public policies adopted for the educational sector, one may find, nowadays, an increasingly number of social workers working in Portuguese schools, who, integrated into student and family support offices, cooperate in multidisciplinary teams composed of other professional profiles, such as psychologists, teachers, social educators and/or mediators.

Reducing the scope to literature references surrounding school social workers dimensions of intervention and professional practices, we find references to four levels of intervention: students; families; the organization; and the community, dimensions in which we may situate several practices (Table 1).

Table 1. Dimensions of social worker's intervention in Portuguese schools

<p><b>Student</b> (Allen-Meares, Montgomery and Kim 2013)</p>	<p><i>Intervention covering the entire school</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Actions to raise awareness and prevent problematic behaviours and promote appropriate social behaviours</li> </ul>
	<p><i>Intervention with groups</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Actions aimed at students at risk (emotional, behavioural, psychosocial and learning)</li> </ul>
	<p><i>Individual intervention</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Case management and advocacy of child and family</li> </ul>
<p><b>Family</b> (Bye and Alvarez 2007)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work with the family to capture your prospect about the problems</li> <li>• Help the family understand academic and behavioural expectations of the school, as well as the services that it offers;</li> <li>• Inform the family about the resources available in the community and support it in the access to them;</li> <li>• Recognize and affirm the strengths of families</li> <li>• Streamline groups of parents/carers on different themes</li> <li>• Promote dissemination actions that facilitate the knowledge of the school by parents</li> <li>• Provide information on new learnings</li> <li>• Represent the families so that their voice is heard in decision-making on education (advocacy)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Organization</b> (Frey and Walker 2007)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planning the intervention intended to all the pupils of the school following an interdisciplinary approach (along with other professionals and services, both within and outside the school), through the needs assessment and the design, implementation, coordination and evaluation of intervention projects (discipline, conflict resolution, <i>bullying</i>, racism and xenophobia, mental health,</li> </ul>

	..., violence)
<b>Community</b> (Wilson 2007)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop collective actions that contribute to the creation and strengthening of sustained partnerships between the different members of the Community, and the identification and response to needs</li> <li>• Involve all members and community groups in reflection and creation of an action plan identifying the needs, objectives and strategies to improve student's educational performance</li> <li>• Support the community in social change, particularly in response to social problems</li> </ul>

*Source: Own elaboration*

The social, emotional and behavioural support and guidance of students and their families is at the main core of school social worker's professional intervention, emphatically pointed out as justification for their presence in schools, highlighting their key role on counselling, crisis management and problem solving, as in the reflective mediation processes in which they engage with students and families, and from which, together, they anticipate and find solutions adjusted to each problem situation (Barreiros and Serra 2018).

However, beyond the actions developed in their performance while mediators of student/family and school/family relations, it is up to the social workers to develop intervention strategies that minimize the expressions of the social issue that swarm in schools that weaken students, families and other educational agents, and support the access, permanence and educational success of children and of young people – although some of them are not directly related to the teaching-learning process.

Considering the various actors in the educational process as representatives of different systems that interact and interact with each other, the approach used by social workers in schools must be holistic in relation to the systems and environments that surround students, taken as the focus of the intervention, so social workers must develop services and interventions that mobilize the resources available in social policies to ensure the students' educational success, from a micro, meso and macro perspective (Amado and Pena 2018).

Due to the identity inscription that historically marked the appearance of the profession, social workers are specialists in social policies, and their presence in schools is justified by the facilitating role they can assume in the process of articulation or articulated management of the education policy with the other social policies, although the conditions of accessibility to a social policy retroact, in most cases, on the conditions of access and quality of participation in other policies. Thus, their performance in terms of the management of educational policy can contribute to guarantee the students' full protection, insofar as their theoretical methodological and ethical-political knowledge allows them to interpret the social relations established between the different agents (students, families, teachers, school), in the overlap that these relations have with the social realities that underlie them (territory, community, society), and act in order to have the appropriate measures to minimize or suppress social issues in schools.

The political dimension of the social workers intervention refers to all practices involved in the design, implementation and evaluation or reform of social policies, in order to improve their ability to respond to the needs of the subjects to whom they are addressed, which, in the context of schools, implies that social workers intervene with the systems that prevent equal opportunities of access and attendance for all students, underlining the macro-dimension of their intervention, more directed at issues like

social inequality, poverty and exclusion from the labour market, health and housing (Wilson 2007) and the development of communities that establish the social fabric of the territories where schools are located.

In schools, social workers, when critical and reflective, intervene to achieve equal access and opportunities for students to the right to education, mobilizing available resources in educational policies and other social policies that transform the conditions that determine their possible disadvantaged or oppressed position (Freire 2018). Such orientation presupposes a holistic analysis of the students' social reality as well as their families, school dynamics, the community and the territory in which the school is located, knowledge that should take into account "native theories" or, if we prefer, the narrative that the subjects present to report their position, not neglecting that this same narrative is the result, on the one hand, of the lived experience and, on the other, of the structural conditions that determined it.

The reflected and reflective relationship they establish with students and families should result in an analysis that promotes a process of raising awareness among students / families / employees / teachers about the factors that determine their situation and how they can, through their behavior, empower themselves, change that situation of disadvantage and promote a change in their disadvantaged condition (Carvalho 2018).

As we had the opportunity to mention, the recent education policies in our country have allowed the integration of social workers in schools, in line with the decentralizing principles that guided them. Now these professionals are seen as possessing the skills necessary for structuring educational projects, involving educational agents and local community partners, that articulate in an integrated way with the territory and the cultural-economic social reality that characterizes it, aiming to combat school failure and dropout. The development of social diagnoses and networking within the framework of the implementation of social policies is, therefore, one more aspect of the work of social workers who intervene in education, believing that, due to their holistic and critical perspective on the social reality, they can mobilize the school community around participatory educational projects adjusted to the needs and resources available in a given educational territory.

## **Conclusions**

The educational policies that have been adopted in our country have opened space for the participation of social workers in schools and propose the decentralization and celebration of autonomy contracts that delegate to schools, organized in networks of schools of different educational levels around the territory where they are located, competencies to manage their resources according to the educational needs of the population and, according to these needs, together with local partners, organize their educational plans using existing resources and strategically planning their performance in the future, aiming the students' educational success.

With the perspective of education as a right whose access must be guaranteed, the political dimension of the intervention of social workers in schools is assumed to be fundamental for their expertise in social policies and for their ability to articulate the different existing social policies. In addition, due to the skills they have at the level of advocacy, interculturality, the establishment of partnerships with community stakeholders, and they also handle the work of social diagnosis of the various interacting systems, in addition to the holistic, critical and reflective vision that is necessary for the elaboration of an educational project for a territory and its community.

Invited to participate in the implementation of educational policies and to intervene in issues that, emerging in schools, are nothing more than manifestations of the social issue (social inclusion/discrimination, ethnic racial issues, intolerance to diversity, ..., social violence), social workers must make use of the triple dimension of their intervention framework (political ethics, theoretical-methodological and technical-operative), recreating and adopting new practices and new instrumentalities to respond to the challenges they are faced with.

Reflected, albeit briefly, those we believe to be the main dimensions of the work done by social workers in education and, more specifically, in schools, showing the importance of their presence in the context of the implementation of educational policies, we consider that their performance scope and the countless actions they do with students, families, the direction of schools and the surrounding community, show the importance of their emancipatory and markedly political approach, decisively contributing to the development of transforming strategies and enhancing the desired change in educational organizations, and in education.

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