

**ANALYSIS OF THE PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE OF SOCIAL
EDUCATORS IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS**
**ANÁLISIS DE LA PRÁCTICA PROFESIONAL DEL EDUCADOR SOCIAL
EN CENTROS DE EDUCACIÓN SECUNDARIA**
**ANÁLISE DA PRÁTICA PROFISSIONAL DO EDUCADOR SOCIAL
NOS CENTROS DE EDUCAÇÃO SECUNDÁRIA**

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ABSTRACT: This article focuses on the social educator as a professional in the social education context who is qualified to carry out social education activities in schools, taking on functions aimed at resolving situations and problems that affect students and families. The main objective of this study was to see which professionals were responsible for attending to the socio-educational needs that arise in secondary schools in Spain's different Autonomous Communities, and to analyse what functions they carry out. It is a descriptive-correlational study in which a digital questionnaire was given to a sample of 440 agents of socio-educational intervention. Descriptive techniques of central tendency and dispersion as well as correlational and inferential techniques were used through non-parametric testing of hypotheses. The results show that the social educator is a professional that performs social-educational functions addressed to attending to situations of conflict or need on a more regular basis than other professionals who work in schools. The results show that the work of social educators focuses mainly on actions aimed at preventing absenteeism and controlling the students as they arrive at school, tasks of detection and prevention of risk factors, organising parents' schools and information programmes, conflict mediation, development of communication programmes, socio-educational support and assessment for the educational community, and preparation of cultural events.

PALABRAS CLAVE:
acción socioeducativa
educador social
centros escolares
funciones

RESUMEN: El presente artículo se centra en el educador social como profesional del ámbito socioeducativo, que se encuentra cualificado para realizar una actividad socioeducativa en los centros escolares, asumiendo funciones encaminadas a solventar situaciones y problemáticas que afectan a alumnos y familias. El objetivo principal del estudio que se presenta ha sido comprobar qué profesionales se encargan de atender las necesidades socioeducativas que surgen en los centros de Educación Secundaria en las distintas Comunidades Autónomas y analizar las funciones que realizan. Se trata de un estudio de tipo descriptivo-correlacional en el que se ha aplicado un cuestionario en formato electrónico, a una muestra total de 440 agentes de intervención socioeducativa. Para el análisis se han utilizado técnicas descriptivas de tendencia central y de dispersión, correlacionales e inferenciales, a través de pruebas no paramétricas de contraste de hipótesis. Los resultados po-

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	<p>nen de manifiesto que el educador social es un profesional que desempeña funciones socioeducativas encaminadas a la atención de situaciones conflictivas o de necesidad más habitualmente que otros perfiles profesionales que trabajan en los centros escolares. Los resultados apuntan que, el trabajo del educador se centra, principalmente, en actuaciones de prevención del absentismo escolar y control del alumnado a la llegada al centro escolar, tareas de detección y prevención de factores de riesgo, organización de escuelas de padres y programas de información, mediación en conflictos de convivencia, desarrollo de programas de comunicación, asesoramiento y apoyo socioeducativo a la comunidad educativa y preparación de ofertas relacionadas con servicios culturales.</p>
<p>PALAVRAS-CHAVE: intervenção socioeducativa; educador social; centros escolares; funções.</p>	<p>RESUMO: O presente artigo centra-se no educador social como profissional no domínio socioeducativo que está qualificado para levar a cabo atividades socioeducativas nos centros escolares, assumindo funções orientadas para a solução de situações e problemáticas que afetam os estudantes e as famílias. O objetivo principal do estudo que se apresenta foi comprovar que profissionais se encarregam de atender às necessidades socioeducativas que surgem nos centros de Educação Secundária nas diferentes Comunidades Autônomas e analisar as funções que realizam. Trata-se de um estudo de tipo descritivo-correlacional em que se aplicou um questionário em formato eletrônico a uma amostra total de 440 agentes de intervenção socioeducativa. Na análise utilizaram-se técnicas descritivas de tendência central e de dispersão, correlações e inferências, através de testes não paramétricos de contraste de hipóteses. A análise dos resultados mostra que o educador social é um profissional que desempenha funções socioeducativas orientadas para dar atenção a situações de conflito ou de necessidade habitualmente mais do que outros perfis profissionais que trabalham em centros escolares. Os resultados revelam que o trabalho do educador está centrado, principalmente, em situações de prevenção do absentismo escolar e de controle do aluno à chegada ao centro escolar, tarefas de detecção e prevenção de fatores de risco, organização de escolas de pais e programas de informação, mediação de conflitos de convivência, desenvolvimento de programas de comunicação, aconselhamento e apoio socioeducativo à comunidade educativa e preparação de ofertas relacionadas com serviços culturais.</p>

Introduction

The society we live in, which is dominated by intense political, economical and social change processes, creates instances of instability and concern for both policy-makers and the general public. In the field of education, just like in other scenarios, there are also moments of doubt about which path to take to make education answer to society's requirements and demands and, therefore, obtain the much desired educational quality that all systems long to provide.

Wanting to link school education with the figure of the social educator is a need that stems from the complexity of the current social, political, economic, technological and cultural times, which generate difficulties for the classic educational institutions to adjust to the changes they must undertake. In particular, schools must cope with a variety of situations that affect both the relationships among the members of the educational community and the professional actions of the educators. Consequently, the idea of considering new professional profiles and new socio-educational practices aimed at promoting quality education for all is starting to gain strength.

In this regard, social education, embodied in its professionals, is gaining relevance because it constitutes a disciplinary, reflexive and critical knowl-

edge, and a socio-educational practice that shares the general objectives of improvement, optimisation and qualification of education. It is a practice primarily and specifically concerned with the promotion of actions to enhance the citizens' quality of life, through the social inclusion of groups and individuals and the promotion of the community's social coexistence (Caride, 2006). Ultimately, it deals with learning to coexist, which is a value appointed by UNESCO as one of the cornerstones of education in the 21st century.

Within the school field, we find a space where the social educator can be integrated and from where they can promote action and participation projects and, together with the rest of educational agents, collaborate in the reformulation of the school, offering new educational possibilities and a socio-educational outlook on problems based on answers, which are not only normalising, but also normalised (Sánchez, 2013).

Although it is true that the education system is not, to date, a traditional and preferential field for the social educators, their presence is becoming increasingly necessary, as evidenced by several Autonomous Communities incorporating the social educator figure to their schools.

1. The role of social educators in the education system

In order for the education system not to suffer from “a pretended self-sufficiency and a lack of structure adaptation, tending to marginalise non-regulated elements as unfit for the system” (Polo & Palau, 2013, p.2), it is essential to consider the school as an intervention space for professionals with diverse profiles, in the interest of developing an optimal interdisciplinary cooperation.

We agree with López (2013) that “in a moment like the current one, multi-professional teams in schools are the only way to tackle the complexity of human relationships, as well as to meet the social, educational and skill-related needs that society demands from us” (p.4). The incorporation of new professional profiles that educationally complement the work being done in schools can provide new lines of intervention which allow us to advance towards a comprehensive education.

Without excluding or trying to make the presence of other professionals in the school invisible, we consider the social educator to be a professional with special characteristics who has the necessary education, skills and professionalism to intervene in this space. Their profile characterises them mainly as integrating, dynamic, flexible and socialising agents with a potential role as experts in the diverse contexts that surround the school and that affect the well-being of the educational community, and in addition, as professionals with a professional skill and qualifications to detect needs and design prevention and intervention strategies within the educational framework (Hernández & Chamseddine, 2013).

According to Chozas (2003), the presence of social educators in schools “must be subject to the existence of a realistic and efficient educational plan which is based on educational practice” (p. 133) in each particular context, based on which the educator must:

1. Support and cooperate with the educational activities by joining other professionals to offer comprehensive and quality education.
2. Care for the socialisation of the students in normal situations (Sáez, 2005), understanding socialisation as the processes of culture adoption, as well as the development of the individuals’ personality and identity (Ortega, 2005), and also address situations of conflict (Segura, 2013). Ultimately, they must take care of “education

for sociability and socialisation processes” (Úcar, 2004, p.3), making an emphasis in the acquisition of competences to handle adult life in an autonomous way.

3. Establish communication channels that optimise school and social mediation. They must act as mediators among the agents of the educational community and as a link with the context and other educational agents. (De León, 2011; Muñoz, 2010).

According to the specific intervention situation, the social educator will establish:

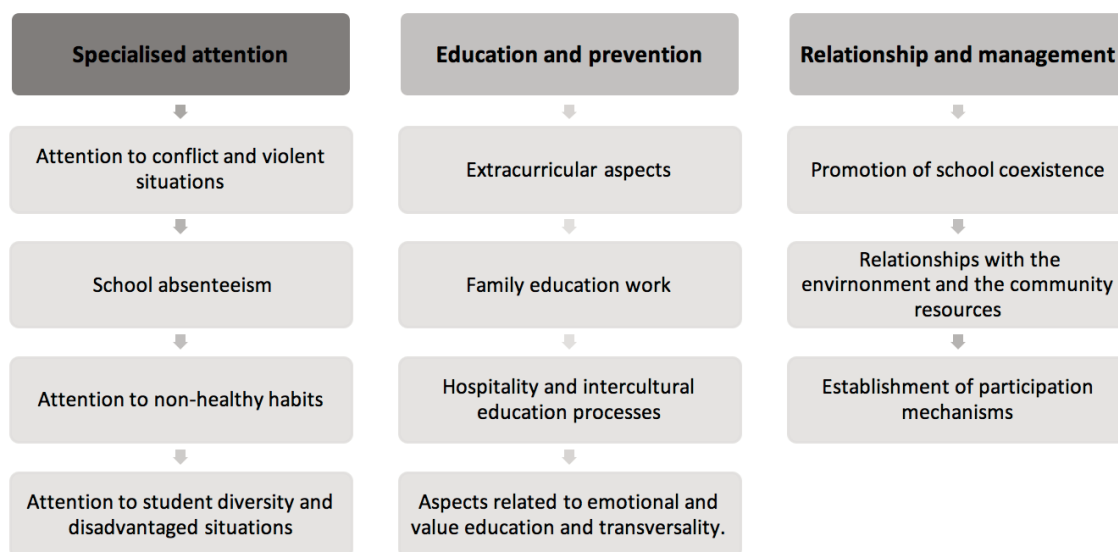
- Actions to promote civic education, aimed at all the educational community and manager through non-specialised interventions.
- Pre-emptive actions that avoid the generation of specific problems that affect the daily life of the school and the relationships among its members.
- Re-education or compensatory education actions for situations of difficulties and conflict.

To carry out these actions, the social educator must be considered as a regular member of the school community. This incorporation must not be reduced to immediate remedial actions, nor should the social educator figure be associated to a “simple firefighter, a watchman, a controller of situations and people who are or are at risk of being troublesome” (Vega, 2013, p. 5), and neither should they be perceived as the “specialist who intervenes to operate on problems and solve illnesses like surgeons do” (Castillo, 2013, p. 9). They should be seen as professionals who offer opportunities for change and renewed options to handle problem resolution.

We don’t consider the social educator to be a jack-of-all-trades, because this image blurs their professional abilities, although it is true that their versatility and heterogeneity enable them to perform a vast array of functions, to adapt to the intervention context, to address actions by considering both plurality and the specific situation of each school. However, this requires that the planning and organisation of the actions is based on socio-educational aspects.

Therefore, it is worth mentioning, based on the abovementioned aspects, that the social educator will perform specific functions and tasks in different work spaces¹ within the school context (González & Serrate, 2014, p.13) as we can observe in figure 1.1:

Figure 1.1. Intervention spaces for the school social educator



Source: Compiled by authors based on Méndez (2007) and Santibáñez (2006)

Indeed, to synthesise the social educator functions within the school demands to take into account the different ideas of the authors who have reflected on it (Barranco et al., 2012; González & Serrate, 2014; Hernández and Chamseddine, 2013; López, 2013; Méndez, 2007; Valín, 2006), and the current demands of socio-educational intervention within the school framework. In this regard, we list the different functions of social educators:

- **socio-educational guidance and socio-personal counselling** for the students,
- **mediation** with situations, contexts and people to facilitate conflict resolution and promote the community's well-being,
- **prevention**, aimed at avoiding situations that might result in non-healthy and/or risky behaviours and habits,
- **management of school relationships** among its members and with its context and the external agents directly related with the school,
- **coordination** of socio-educational prevention and intervention projects and programmes,
- **project management and administration** of community and social resources.

The analysed situation leads us to propose a nationwide study aiming to get to know the work that the educational agents in charge of socio-educational intervention² do in Secondary education schools, and to verify if this job is being done by social educators, whether their profile is regulated like in the Autonomous Communities of Extremadura, Castile-La Mancha and Andalusia, or incorporated to schools where the level of com-

plicity allows for it, like in other Communities. The intervention of social educators, where applicable, would comprise the abovementioned functions.

To this end, we selected the following **objectives**:

- to know which professionals intervene to care for the socio-educational needs in Secondary education schools
- to verify the functions that the intervention agents perform,
- to analyse the work that sets the social educator apart from the rest of the professionals.

2. Methodology

In line with previous works on the topic (Ortega et al., 2007; Ortega et al., 2010), we proposed, during 2012-2014, a study whose research design falls in the category of *non-experimental* (Kerlinger & Lee, 2002) or *ex post-facto* (Arnal, Del Rincón & Latorre, 1992), resulting in a descriptive-correlational study carried out through electronic surveys (Kerlinger & Lee, 2002).

A questionnaire with Likert-type scales, together with open response items, was designed for the data gathering phase. Two blocks of content were considered, the first one consisted of data on the professional profile: job position, professionals in charge of socio-educational tasks and frequency with which certain situations are dealt with in schools; the second one consisted of the valuation of the professional activity: frequency of execution and importance of the socio-educational functions, positive aspects of the job and

difficulties related to the socio-educational intervention.

We decided on an online self-administered survey after pondering its strengths and weaknesses (Díaz, 2012; Torrado, 2009). For the questionnaire distribution process we constructed a Secondary education school database with information provided by the Provincial Departments of Education. Each school was assigned an identification number, the questionnaire was set up with Google Drive and it was sent to the schools via personalised e-mail through a PHP page.

Content validity was guaranteed through an evaluation of the formulation of the questions made by expert judges. As for the internal consistency of the instrument, we used Cronbach's alpha coefficient on all the scales that make up the questionnaire, which yielded a value over .7 in all cases.

2.1. Population and sample

The population of the study is composed of all Secondary education schools from the different Autonomous Communities, which were 7209 schools (we know the number of schools but not the number of professionals working in each school). Consequently, we considered the population unknown and we calculated the size of the sample with maximum variability ($p=q=0.05$); a confidence level of 95% ($z=1.96$) and an error of 5%, obtaining a sample size of 385 subjects. A total of 440 intervention agents from 378 schools have participated in the study, of whom 76% are women and 23% are men.

2.2. Data analysis

For the data analysis we have used descriptive central tendency and dispersion techniques, correlation techniques through the Pearson coefficient, and inferential techniques. Once we verified the assumptions of normality (Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk) and homogeneity (Levene) we used non-parametric hypothesis tests, specifically, the Median test. All analysis were carried out using the statistical package SPSS v.21.

In a complementary manner, we conducted a content analysis (Tójar, 2006) of the answers given to the open response items, grouping them according to the similarity of their meanings and establishing categories and the relationships among them. To this end we made a matrix to quantify the number of answers in a given category and those who referred to two or more categories. For a better understanding of the results obtained we used the computer programme Gephi 0.8.

3. Results

3.1. The socio-educational intervention agents within the schools

We verified that there is a professional profile that performs the socio-educational duties in schools – the guidance counsellor (57.5%) – because it is a regulated position. 10.5% of them are social educators. It is worth mentioning that 95.9% of the surveyed agents considers that the guidance counsellor is the person in charge of this kind of actions in schools, while 25.9% believe that socio-educational action is the duty of social educators.

Table 3.1. People in charge of the socio-educational actions

Staff in charge of socio-educational action	S _i (n=440)	
	f	%
3. Guidance counsellor	422	95.9
4. Teacher	320	72.7
7. Therapeutic pedagogy professional	277	63.0
1. Social Educator	114	25.9
5. Community Service Professional	100	22.7
2. Social Worker	81	18.4
Other	55	26.6

Note: ranked in descending order according to percentage value.

As we can observe in figure 3.1, besides the seven professional profiles considered in the variable *staff in charge of socio-educational actions*, according to the agents there are other professionals who also intervene in the resolution of problems and situations that require specific interventions. The figures that were most frequently mentioned by the participants were the Management Team, External Staff and Coordinators (of coexistence, cycle, extracurricular activities, etc.)

Regarding *attention to specific problems* (table 3.2), the situations that require specific actions more frequently (1.37) are, on the one hand, the problems affecting the students, such as absenteeism, bullying or school violence, and, on the other hand, problems derived from the context, which might be related to a marginalised environment, a lack of family attention or situations caused by a lack of economic resources.

As we can see in figure 3.2, agents refer to other situations that require specialised interventions from the socio-educational action professionals.

Figure 3.1. Other people in charge of the socio-educational actions

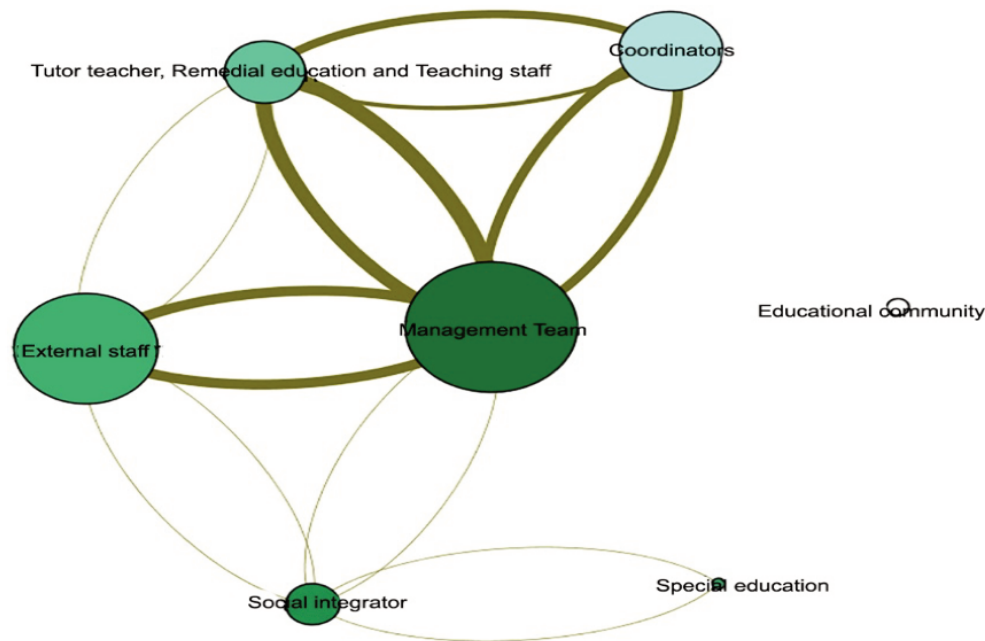


Table 3.2. Socio-educational intervention situations (range 0-3)

Specific actions	\bar{X}	Sx
1. School absenteeism	1.74	.99
7. Marginal environment	1.70	.90
9. Lack of attention	1.62	.87
3. Bullying	1.40	.87
2. School violence	1.38	.89
8. Lack of economic resources	1.37	.92
4. Substance abuse	1.18	.89
5. Eating behaviour issues	1.04	.85
6. Sexuality	0.91	.95
10. Other	1.97	.97

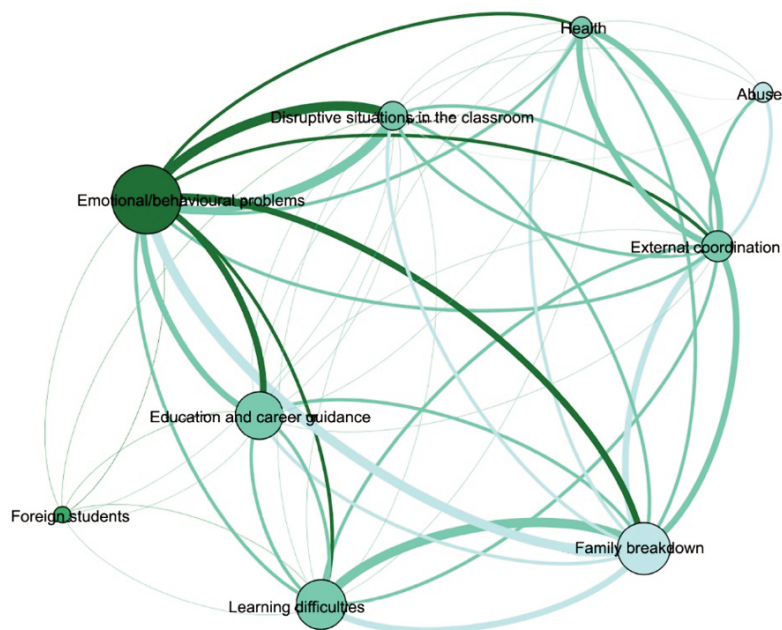
Note: ranked in descending order according to mean value.

This information shows that it is important to work with the students, making a special emphasis on learning difficulties and vocational guidance needs to draw up a lifelong education project, and also on emotional and behavioural problems which are a part of the developmental stage. They should also pay attention to family-related situations, such as family breakdown situations whose negative consequences might cause emotional and behavioural problems in the students, which in its turn might affect school coexistence.

3.2. The activity of socio-educational intervention agents

As shown in table 3.3, made from the data obtained from the study of the tasks, the functions more frequently performed and considered most important (mean values over 1.67 in frequency and 2.57 in importance) can be organised according to three aspects:

- attention to the students:
 - through the design and implementation of programmes addressing student diversity (F.6) and,
 - absenteeism prevention and control actions (F.11);
- coexistence promotion:
 - through conflict mediation and resolution processes (F.2) and,

Figure 3.2. Other situations of socio-educational intervention**Table 3.3. Functions according to frequency and importance (range 0-3)**

Functions	Frequency		Importance	
	X	Sx	X	SX
6.Design and implementation of student diversity attention programmes	2.26	0.88	2.77	.44
13.Provision of socio-educational support and counselling	2.19	0.84	2.66	.53
10.Implementation of guidance programmes	1.83	1.07	2.52	.58
2.Mediation and resolution of coexistence conflicts	1.80	0.73	2.73	.47
3.Organisation and coordination of the Coexistence Plan	1.78	0.90	2.59	.55
1.Detection and prevention of risk factors	1.77	0.82	2.69	.49
11.Development of absenteeism prevention and control programmes	1.67	1.04	2.57	.58
16.Counselling related to the teaching-learning process	1.63	0.99	2.36	.67
14.Teaching activities	1.61	1.10	2.13	.85
8.Design and implementation of communication programmes	1.52	0.92	2.38	.64
17.Design and implementation of socio-educational projects	1.28	0.90	2.19	.69
9.Organisation and implementation of schools for parents	1.11	0.93	2.36	.65
15.Tutoring groups of students	1.08	1.02	1.79	.87
4. Organisation and management of cultural services	1.07	0.82	1.95	.74
12.Organisation of extracurricular activities	1.03	0.92	1.74	.82
7.Design and implementation of cooperation programmes	0.97	0.84	1.90	.73
5.Design and implementation of intercultural programmes	0.91	0.78	2.00	.68
18.Control of students in school transportation	0.43	0.91	1.11	.99

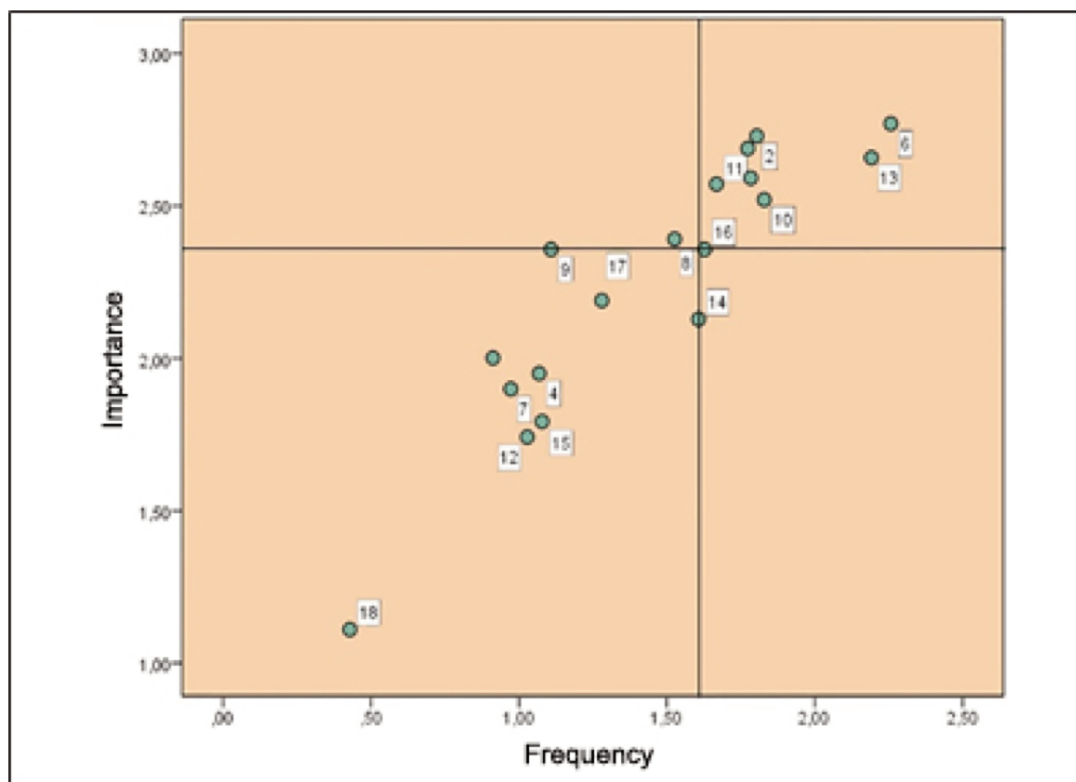
- the coordination of activities from the plan for the improvement of school coexistence (F.3);
- c) prevention, guidance and counselling processes:
 - through the detection and prevention of risk factors that can cause disadvantaged socio-educational situations (F.1),
 - socio-educational counselling and support for the general educational community (F.13) and,
 - development of guidance programmes, in particular those related to professional integration (F.10).

In figure 3.3 we can see that there are diverse functions that the intervention agents perform on a relatively infrequent basis but which get a high level of reported importance, and they are the promotion of relationships with the families through the organisation of schools for parents, and information programmes (drug addiction, school failure, bullying, inclusion problems, etc.) (F.9), and the functions aimed at skill training through the design and implementation of programmes, seminars, workshops, talks and/or interpersonal communication activities (violence prevention, social skills, etc.) (F.8). The biggest difficulty for the performance of this functions is the lack of time and of professionals in charge of their implementation (see

table 3.4). However, although they are performed on a less frequent basis than others, they are valued as essential and necessary. Conversely, there is a function that is performed frequently but which obtains a lower level of importance, and it is the teaching activity (F.14), which is not performed by all the surveyed agents, but those who do perform it believe it hinders the implementation of other functions with higher levels of reported importance.

There are some *problems with the implementation of the socio-educational work* pointed out by the agents (data presented in table 3.4) which are related, on the one hand, to the lack of economic resources to carry out the activities and lack of specific spaces and time to attend to the students and their families. On the other hand, the scarce professional delimitation of socio-educational intervention because of the lack of definition of the professional tasks involved and the lack of professional recognition of the socio-educational action becomes an evident issue. In this regard, we believe it is essential to continue to work towards the establishment of a clear and specific definition of socio-educational tasks within the school framework, and define which professional profiles should be in charge and which functions they should perform. Without this specification, each community will decide, according to available resources, whether to establish segregated plans that would provide a palliative care to the present needs of

Figure 3.3. Frequency-importance relationship based on the median of the functions



the schools, instead of implementing specialised prevention and intervention plans that answer to the socio-educational needs of students, families, and the educational community in general.

Table 3.4. Problems in the implementation of the socio-educational work.

Difficulties of the socio-educational work	\bar{X}	Sx
6. Lack of economic resources	2.05	0.83
2. Lack of definition of my professional tasks	1.94	0.77
4. Lack of structure and infrastructure	1.93	0.86
1. Lack of professional recognition	1.87	0.85
7. Lack of foreign languages knowledge	1.63	0.82
5. People in charge of socio-educational actions are kind of a "jack-of-all-trades"	1.59	0.86
8. Too many schools to attend to	1.50	1.01
3. Lack of comprehension and collaboration on the part of fellow teachers	1.47	0.80
9. Assignment of teaching duties	1.46	0.90
10. Other	2.03	0.91

Note: ranked in descending order according to mean value.

The surveyed agents propose the following improvements for the intervention:

- To report and derive to Social Services those cases that cannot be treated solely in the school (95.9%).
- To promote collaboration and coordination with the municipal Social Services, cultural and civic organisations (95.7%).
- To provide spaces and times for the attention to families, students and teachers and the implementation of cultural activities (95.5%).
- To include the figure of the Social Educator in schools in a stable and regulated manner (89.3%).

3.3. Socio-educational functions of the social educator

One of the aspects we were interested in was whether there were statistically significant differences (n.s .05) in the performance of the proposed socio-educational functions among the different professional profiles who participated in the study, with the aim to verify which task differentiates the social educator from the rest of the professionals.

The results obtained in the Median test, table 3.5, show statistically significant differences (n.s .05) in the performance of fifteen out of the eighteen socio-educational functions on the part of the different professional profiles that comprise the sample. To determine the groups among which the differences occurred, we carried out a paired comparison which allowed us to confirm that the functions performed by the social educator more often than the other professionals are the following:

Table 3.5. Median test

Functions	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	F7	F8	F9
χ^2	30.180	27.210	13.031	26.622	4.237	92.362	5.537	22.475	21.093
gl	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
Asymptotic sig.	.000	.000	.011	.000	.375	.043	.237	.000	.000
Functions	F10	F11	F12	F13	F14	F15	F16	F17	F18
χ^2	78.450	61.020	12.092	22.935	78.308	20.065	28.992	8.277	34.067
gl	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
Asymptotic sig.	.000	.000	.017	.000	.000	.000	.000	.082	.000

Table 3.6. Functions implemented by social educators in schools

Functions	Categorías	
1. Detection and prevention of risk factors that cause unfavourable socio-educational situations	Teacher-Educator	($\chi^2=7.936$;p.0.048)
	Educator-Guidance Counsellor	($\chi^2=9.204$;p.0.002)
2. Mediation and resolution of coexistence conflicts	Therapeutic Pedagogue-Educator	($\chi^2=14.992$; p.0.001)
	Educator-Guidance Counsellor	($\chi^2=20.521$;p.0.000)
4. Organisation and management of cultural and leisure services	Guidance Counsellor-Educator	($\chi^2=14.988$; p.0.001)
	Therapeutic Pedagogue-Educator	($\chi^2=11.711$;p.0.006)
8. Design and implementation of programmes, seminars, workshops, talks and/or interpersonal communication activities	Teacher-Educator	($\chi^2=8.994$;p.0.027)
	Therapeutic Pedagogue-Educator	($\chi^2=19.329$;p.0.000)
9. Organisation and implementation of schools for parents and information programmes	Therapeutic Pedagogue-Educator	($\chi^2=17.575$;p.0.000)
	Teacher-Educator	($\chi^2=9.201$;p.0.024)
11. Development of absenteeism prevention and control programmes and actions	Teacher-Educator	($\chi^2=18.535$;p.0.000)
	Therapeutic Pedagogue-Educator	($\chi^2=23.706$;p.0.000)
	Guidance Counsellor-Educator	($\chi^2=25.157$;p.0.000)
13. Provision of socio-educational guidance and support to teachers, families and students and, should it be necessary, implementation of individualised intervention programmes	Teacher-Educator	($\chi^2=10.220$;p.0.014)
18 Control of students who arrive to school by school transportation	Guidance Counsellor-Educator	($\chi^2=31.296$;p.0.000)
	Community Service-Educator	($\chi^2=8.141$;p.0.043)
	Teacher-Educator	($\chi^2=8.202$;p.0.042)
	Therapeutic Pedagogue-Educator	($\chi^2=15.611$;p.0.001)

The results obtained indicate that the social educator performs tasks that have an impact on the attention to diverse situations that occur in the schools and which have been defined in the first part of this paper as the intervention spaces of this professional. Specifically, this figure performs specialised attention tasks (conflict and violence situations, absenteeism, etc.), education and prevention tasks (family education, emotional and value education, health education, leisure education, etc.) and relationship and management tasks (establishing participation mechanisms, promoting contact with families and the school environment, etc.).

4. Result interpretation and discussion

Firstly, it is worth mentioning that the figure of the social educator in Secondary education schools has gained a notable recognition among the educational agents, despite the low level of incorporation of this professional profile to schools.

Within the study, it is relevant to mention that the issues of absenteeism, the marginal character of the school environment and the lack of family attention to the students require interventions by the socio-educational agents on a more regular basis. These are related situations, taking into account that, in some occasions, absenteeism is a reflection

and direct consequence of the marginal social and family situation (Cuadrado, 2010) and that they require specific socio-educational prevention and treatment (De la Fuente, 2009), actions for which the social educator is prepared. As Melendro (2008) claims, the social educators, integrated in multidisciplinary teams, work with issues related to absenteeism and early school leaving, assuming monitoring and support tasks, prevention, compensation of the learning deficits, as well as coordination with the professionals working at the schools. In most of the Autonomous Communities, these tasks have been assumed by non-school authorities, with the exception of the ones that have already regulated this professional figure, namely Extremadura, Castile-La Mancha and Andalusia.

We have verified that the functions generally performed by intervention agents are aimed at the resolution of specific issues; we are referring to *absenteeism prevention and attention, control of the students on their arrival to school, development of professional guidance programmes or detection of risk factors that can cause disadvantaged socio-educational situations*, all of which are functions performed by social educators in Extremadura and Castile-La Mancha in the past few years (González et al., 2012; Ortega et al., 2010). The comparative analyses between the different professional profiles that composed the sample and the socio-educational functions determine that this profile performs these tasks more often than other profiles such as the guidance counsellor, the teacher, the therapeutic pedagogue or the technical teacher of community service.

It is worth mentioning that tasks aimed at the *promotion of the relationship with the families*, which were valued as important by the agents, are not being frequently implemented in schools. Still, the social educator is the professional that most frequently performs this type of actions, organising and implementing schools for families and information programmes, and providing socio-educational support and guidance. Therefore, it becomes clear that the implementation of this kind of functions by the social educators is facilitating the attention to those situations that affect the students and families and which might be related to disadvantaged situations caused by the context of the school, and these results justify their specific contribution to the intervention.

Furthermore, violence and bullying constitute two of the most worrisome problems for the educational community, and they require specific interventions. The rise in violence and conflict in the classrooms, as well as the proliferation of new types of school violence, have raised concern for

establishing effective solutions that prevent and/or resolve these situations (Martín et al., 2005). As some authors, such as Martín (2006) and Ochoa and Peiró (2010), have verified, in schools there are indiscipline issues, such as verbal aggressions, social isolation and property damages or thefts more frequently than there are explicit violence or bullying cases. It is necessary to implement interventions that prevent these situations and ensure the peaceful coexistence of the educational community, as the participants in the study have pointed out. In fact, on a legislative level, some actions fomenting the positive interaction of all the members within schools have been established (González & Serrate, 2013) by using mediation and prevention (Viana, 2012) and, in some Autonomous Communities, this has been embodied in the social educator (Conde, 2012; Barranco et al., 2012).

Our research confirms that the social educators are the professionals who perform the following tasks more frequently than the other professional profiles: *conflict mediation and coordination of activities that promote the relationships among the members of the educational community*, in response to given situations, circumscribed to School Coexistence Plans and Programmes.

To teach coexistence demands to pass on the skills to handle the conflicts that might arise, to be aware of the diversity and plurality of societies, to face injustice and commit to the values (Arroyo, 2011), working, therefore, with attitudes such as sensitivity (Jiménez et al., 2014). In this regard, among the functions valued as important by the intervention agents are those related to the *design and implementation of programmes, seminars, workshops, talks or interpersonal communication activities*. We have to take into account that these activities are not carried out as often as others in schools, however, the comparison by professional profiles we performed revealed that the social educator performs these functions more often than the rest of the professionals. Again, this aspect is consistent with the results of other studies, where it becomes clear that the social educator performs this kind of tasks, which are typical of their professional profile (Ortega et al., 2010; Vallés, 2011).

The results have revealed that social educators are performing other functions that, on their part, other professionals perform less frequently in schools, related to the *organisation and management of cultural, leisure and free time services*. Although we have found greater similarities with the technical teachers of community service, this might be due to the fact that these teachers' positions have an open profile, to which social educators can also apply.

5. Conclusions

On the whole, the results reveal a favourable perception of the role of the social educator within the school on the part of the socio-educational agents. This is supported at a national level by this study, and by others carried out at a more local level (Álvarez, 2013; Ballester & Ballester, 2014; Conde, 2012; Barranco et al., 2012; González et al., 2012; Ortega et al., 2010).

Although the assessment is positive, and despite some Autonomous Communities having the social educator's profile and functions regulated, as is the case for Extremadura, Castile-La Mancha and Andalusia, the school situation which was described and analysed proves, once again, the little definition of the tasks they must perform, bringing up the need to establish a professional profile with specific tasks that define the work of the school social educator, and to elaborate a more sound definition of their intervention spaces. To resolve this insufficient delimitation of the tasks to perform will entail an advance for the profession within this field, thus preventing the inclusion of social educators to be conditional to the existence of problems or situations that require specific socio-educational interventions (Castillo, 2013; Galán, 2008).

The data of the study reveals that the social educator specifically holds functions which are considered important and necessary for the resolution of conflict and problematic situations, for the promotion of family-school-environment relationships, for the attention to aspects affecting the students and for maintaining the coordination with educational agents. This allows us to state that the social educator constitutes a figure that meets the professional characteristics required to deal with socio-educational interventions in the school, thus becoming clear that their incorporation to socio-educational intervention is justified and it would complete or complement the responses given by the school institution to the current society that demands them.

In accordance with the actions that the social educator implements, and according to the theoretical models that deal with their professional inclusion in this space (González & Serrate, 2014; Ortega & Mohedano, 2011), we conclude that the social educator is responding to the model of *socio-educational action*, which considers this professionals within the schools, making interventions and collaborating with the rest of agents in tasks aimed at providing a comprehensive education. In this regard, we claim that this figure holds the responsibility to implement actions aimed at the prevention of disadvantaged situations and the

promotion of coexistence, to assume functions aimed at favouring the communication and cooperation of the school with its environment and the families involved, and to generate training processes dealing with the skills necessary for the personal and social development of the students, with a view to achieving a true social integration. Consequently, and not without assuming risks and limitations, we consider that the array of responsibilities of this professional entails the implementation of the following functions: specialised attention, primary and secondary prevention, and relationship-related actions, all of which still needs to be defined and delimited.

In conclusion, it is worth noting that this research allows us to advance on the configuration of the school social educator thanks to results coming from the educational reality itself. At the very least, this results constitute a starting point on the current socio-educational situation in schools and the specific socio-educational work that social educators do. Thus, it would be essential for educational administrations to consider the incorporation of social educators to socio-educational intervention, especially in secondary education schools where there are higher rates of absenteeism and early school leaving, and more conflict and coexistence issues.

We should also mention some limitations that arose during the development of the study and the conclusions presented above. In the first place, we consider that generalisations cannot be established with regard to the profile of the school social educator, because their role within the school is not implemented in all Autonomous Communities. Secondly, the sample of the study, although representative, could have been wider. This is the reason why this research opens the way for different study pathways, on an Autonomous Community level, so as to obtain more generalisable conclusions.

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Notes

¹ We would rather refer to work or intervention spaces instead of scope of intervention. In our approach, the scope of intervention is the school, and within this scope we can establish different work spaces from where the action of the social educator is configured.

² With socio-educational intervention agents we refer to all those professionals that have been assigned specific tasks related to attention to diversity in situations of conflict, problems or social or educational necessity manifested by the students or any other member of the educational community. In the absence of a single professional figure performing socio-educational intervention, these agents would be social educators, social workers, Community Service technical teachers, Social Integration technicians, Socio-educational Intervention professionals, Therapeutic Pedagogy professionals, Hearing and Speech teachers, or in the case of the absence of these figures in the school, any teacher that takes on socio-educational intervention.

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