The construction of professional knowledge: A comparative study of Social Assistants and Mediators

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ABSTRACT

This work is centred on the dynamics of identity and professional development of two socio-professional groups: namely, Social Assistants and Mediators. The professionalization of the social groups matches the dynamics of identity development and presupposes social recognition of their professional knowledge and competencies that are built in situations of real work and professional socialization (Dubar, 1997; Wittorisky, 2008). Schön’s (1996) “epistemology of professional practice” is paramount in this context, as theoretical knowledge and learning developed in formal training settings are insufficient for their professional daily work.

The study of a qualitative nature was carried out using case studies in four countries - two in Europe and two in Latin America – Portugal, France, Brazil and Argentina. It had as its principal objectives the identification and analysis of the dynamics of identity and their articulation with the construction of professional knowledge in two socio-professional groups, which have been the subject of an increasing social visibility.

Key words: Professional Knowledge, Social Service, Mediation, Dynamics of Identities.

INTRODUCTION

The studies about the processes of professionalization recognize three fundamental dimensions and structuring of professional groups: specialization (specific activity), structure (mobilization of characteristic knowledge) and professionalism (particular function) (Demazière & Gadêa, 2009). These three dimensions are interactive and are connected with learning and professional knowledge.

Professionalization is a process of updating and renewal of the epistemological foundations of a profession and the training for its practice (Tardif, 2000), through which professional knowledge represents one of the essential elements for the visibility of professional groups and the expression of professionalism of the individuals, who are part of that group.

According to Roche (1999, p. 35), questions related to professionalization gain special relevance “in the moment in which knowledge does not guarantee in a linear way the competency or professionalism of individuals in an economic and social context that knows profound changes”. From this it is important to pay attention to: i) questions of professional development in close relationship to the processes of external and internal change for the subjects, who appeal, among other things, to the acquisition and mobilization of the many experiences incorporated in competencies suited to the complexity of their contexts and situations; ii) training and lifelong learning; iii) formal initial training and continuous training in its many contexts and iv) reflective practices.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative methodology (Huberman & Miles, 1991; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) was considered and this was guided by the interpretative paradigm. Phenomenology, symbolic interaction and ethnography constituted the principal methodological strategies considered for the gathering, analysis and interpretation of the information.

The mobilization and links between different theoretical perspectives, which shared common and complementary methodological features (Tesch, 1990), permitted access to the phenomena under study in distinctive ways and of a more profound nature, through the combining of written information, records of a historical, normative, theoretical and scientific nature with oral, unique, biographical and contextualized information. In the choice of information we favored documentary research and in depth biographical interviews.

The documentary research focused on legal, technical and specifically scientific bibliographic documents about each of the professional groups, which were published in the different countries involved in the study.

The biographical interviews centered on specific aspects and moments from the biographies of the subjects interviewed and particularly about feelings about work and the way it was carried out.

The study concerned comparative case studies, of professionals in several countries: Portugal, France, Argentina and Brazil.

CONCLUSION

This investigation showed the availability and interest of the professionals for learning and their own professional development, which recognized the necessity of learning more and about diverse domains, as well as the setting of that learning in distinct contexts including formal contexts, such as universities, and in contexts where their work in interaction with colleagues occurs. The competencies that Social Assistants and Mediators consider relevant to learn about show their enrollment in an epistemology of professional action. This enrollment also reveals that the necessary professional knowledge for the specificity of professional practice is, at the same time, plural and heterogeneous, personalized and positioned (Tardif, 2000). In other words, professional expertise does not give rise to mere applied science but to knowledge that is socially positioned and locally constructed, which needs to be reflected, suitable and shared in the community of the professionals in the same office, so that it can be communicated publicly and have social visibility.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Knowledge about professional activity in the working contexts

The biographical interviews carried out with the Social Assistants and Mediators revealed their difficulty of explaining about their work, which was shown to cover a varied range of activities and a diverse nature of fundamental resources covered by fields of theoretical knowledge, experiential learning, working conditions and personal conditions of the professionals. Diversity of resources was identified as important for the work that they carried out, which required a balanced appreciation of theoretical knowledge and experiential learning, as well as personal conditions and characteristics (particularly those shown by the Mediators). To these they added in a significant way their working conditions of a variable nature, which reveals the specificity they have in social complexity. This was further reflected in their difficulty of saying what they do, which can - in certain measure - express knowledge of learning and its invisibility on the part of Social Assistants and Mediators, which thus affects their social recognition.

Assistants and Mediators.

Theoretical Knowledge

Theoretical and disciplinary learning

Experiential Knowledge

Experiential and contextual learning

Working contexts

Personal conditions and professional characteristics

Ethical learning

Mobilization of learning and construction of professional knowledge

The professional knowledge identified by the respondents, which at times was difficult to communicate in an organized, rational and understandable way, remains and recovers itself in the competencies and capacities recognized as necessary by the Social Assistants and Mediators.

In the biographical interviews of the Social Assistants and the Mediators, the competencies and capacities identified by both professional groups is - in large measure - coincident knowledge i.e. the capacity to communicate knowledge, the capacity for self-evaluation and the capacity to manage time. Whereas the different capacities highlighted by both groups were: the capacity for planning, negotiation and analysis and capacity of engagement and commitment for the group of Social Assistants and the capacity for empathy, understanding and presentation for the Mediators.

The organization of knowledge, the competencies identified and their allocation to the domains of personal, social and emotional competencies - the domains especially relevant in field of intervention of both professional groups discussed here - can be read in Tab 1. The links between knowledge and the competencies identified by the interviews with both socio-professional groups permits one to recognize a continuity between knowledge and competencies and to perceive the relationship between contextual knowledge and the social competencies of the Social Assistants and the Mediators, as well as between ethical knowledge and emotional competencies.

The process of (re)construction of knowledge and competencies identified by the Social Assistants and Mediators interviewed presumes an acquisition of knowledge, the mobilization of knowledge in professional practice, the appropriation of this knowledge for reflection, sharing, supervision and evaluation and reconstruction of knowledge and production of new knowledge in an interactive and dialogical dynamic. In the last years (Pineau, 2013), this process translates into a construction in interchange and into the development of a reflexive practice in which the production of knowledge is explicit, interpersonal and formal.

The communication, exchange and socialization of knowledge is an aspect especially appreciated by professionals of both groups, giving notice of the continuity and relevance of communication, as well as in their work activities. The activity becomes an "obligatory passage" (Falls & Donato, 1998) for the mobilization, appropriation and production of knowledge and competencies.