

THE ROOTS PROJECT OF THE UNIVERSITY OF BRASÍLIA: SOCIAL COMMITMENT OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This work is a brief report on the “Projeto Raízes” of the University of Brasília, a tutoring project aimed at students with special income (Indigenous students, refugees and foreigners participating in the PEC-G), mostly freshmen. The aim is to present the project and the main issues that arose between July 2017 and March 2019, a period in which we participated in its coordination, and also the possible contributions that School Psychology could bring to the creation and development of this type of action, which we understand to have a character of resistance and transformation regarding the current educational model that is directly related to market interests and less to human and social issues. Many were the challenges encountered along this path and we are aware of the difficult mission we assumed in relation to maintaining this work, but we believe in its creative, integration and transformation potential, which necessary for understanding who we are as a Brazilian public university and what we want to be.

Keywords: University; educational psychology; cultural change

El Proyecto Raíces de la Universidad de Brasilia: compromiso social de la Psicología Escolar en la Educación Universitaria

RESUMEN

Este estudio es un breve relato sobre el Proyecto Raíces de la Universidad de Brasília, un proyecto de tutoría volcado a estudiantes provenientes de ingresos especiales (Estudiantes indígenas, refugiados y extranjeros participantes del PEC-G), en su mayoría iniciantes. Tiene el intuito de presentar el proyecto y las principales cuestiones que surgieron entre julio de 2017 y marzo de 2019, período en que participamos de su coordinación, y, también, las posibles contribuciones que la Psicología Escolar podría traer a la creación y desarrollo de este tipo de acción, que entendemos poseer un carácter de resistencia y de transformación en relación al actual modelo educacional que está directamente relacionado a los intereses mercadológicos y menos a las cuestiones humanas y sociales. Encontramos muchos desafíos en ese trayecto y sabemos de la difícil misión que asumimos en relación con la manutención de este estudio, pero creemos en su potencial creador, de integración y de transformación, necesario para el entendimiento de quien somos como universidad pública brasileña y de que queremos ser.

Palabras clave: Universidad; psicología educacional; cambio cultural

O Projeto Raízes da Universidade de Brasília: compromisso social da Psicologia Escolar na educação universitária

RESUMO

Este trabalho é um breve relato sobre o Projeto Raízes da Universidade de Brasília, um projeto de tutoria voltado para estudantes provenientes de ingressos especiais (Estudantes indígenas, refugiados e estrangeiros participantes do PEC-G), em sua maioria calouros. O intuito é apresentar o projeto e as principais questões que surgiram entre julho de 2017 e março de 2019, período em que participamos de sua coordenação, e, também, as possíveis contribuições que a Psicologia Escolar poderia trazer para a criação e desenvolvimento desse tipo de ação, que entendemos ter um caráter de resistência e de transformação em relação ao atual modelo educacional que está diretamente relacionado aos interesses mercadológicos e menos às questões humanas e sociais. Muitos foram os desafios encontrados nesse trajeto e sabemos da difícil missão que assumimos em relação à manutenção desse trabalho, mas acreditamos em seu potencial criador, de integração e de transformação, necessário para o entendimento de quem somos como universidade pública brasileira e do que queremos ser.

Palavras-chave: universidade; psicologia escolar e educacional; mudança cultural

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THE BIRTH OF THE PROJECT

The Projeto Raízes was a pilot project created under the auspices of the University of Brasília (UnB)¹ and initially designed after the mentoring model (Kram, 1983), in which the veteran students (tutors) would be able to choose and provide support to freshmen (tutored students). The activities got started in 2017 by means of public notice DEG/DAC/INT 05/2017 (University of Brasília, 2019). It was one of the devices included in the student support set of policies named “Política Integrada da Vida Estudantil da UnB” with the purpose to provide reception, support, and guidance to UnB students. The name “Raízes”, or roots, is a reference to the students supported by the project, who come from special programs for university entrance², and it also conveys the notion that, with the promotion of integration, they will be able to get their own “roots” into the institution. The students coming from diverse indigenous communities from Brazil and from other countries such as Benin, Chile, Ivory Coast, Paraguay, Democratic Republic of Congo, Republic of Congo, Senegal, Syria, and so on.

After analyzing the situation of these students, the managers of the “Decanato de Ensino de Graduação” (DEG), or Graduation Deanery, identified difficulties other than providing support in their disciplines such as challenges in the adaptation to university life due to native languages, cultural differences, homesickness, and so on. As school psychologists in this deanery, we were invited to play a role in the project as coordinators. Thus we had the opportunity to insert other important concepts into the process, in order to deconstruct hegemonic patterns in the academic structure that do little for collectiveness and for the eradication of inequality and injustice. This study was initially based on Guzzo (2007), inspired by the ideas of Martín-Baró (1996), who sees the role played by the school/educational psychologists as:

¹ Idealized by the dean for the Graduation Deanery and by the director of the Board of Directors for Academic Support and Integration of the respective deanery of the University of Brasília with a public notice in partnership with the Deanery for Communities Affairs and the International Council of the university.

² Entrance by means which are not traditional, such as entrance tests and the SisU: Indigenous Entrance Test (Affirmative Action policy with the inclusion of vacancies every semester in order to promote access for indigenous communities, by means of specific selection process); Student program – graduation agreement - *PEC-G*: selection of foreigners from developing countries, with whom Brazil keeps international and cultural agreements, for university graduation in the country; and refugees, admission of refugees by means of unoccupied graduation vacancies, with the presentation of specific documentation and approval by the university (Universidade de Brasília, 2019b).

[...] providers of intervention in the subjective processes that sustain the structures of injustice by making them feasible; providers of help towards the discovery of means to replace violent acts with more rational courses of action; and contribute to the formation of a collective identity that will effectively respond to reality. (p. 28).

As socially committed school psychologists, our main preoccupation was to make the project produce an effect that would surpass matters of mere academic performance for the assisted students, to contribute to the critical and creative development of participants, and to lead the university into rethinking, by means of its experiences, a mutual and constant exchange. Thus, we reinforce, among other urgencies, the importance to promote moments of continuous formation with tutors and students, in order to process concepts, and promote dialogue and the exchange of ideas.

Just like Pulino (2016), we understand that human development:

taking place both in the history of humanity and in the histories of each one of us, humans – does not restrict itself to productivity devices because it involves people and their singularities, individual rhythms, and creative possibilities, which might come together in collaborative contexts, and produce new ways to deal with the world, to interact, to get in touch with past generations, and to keep on the process of knowledge construction. (pp. 57-58).

Our intention was to make this project able to contribute to the deconstruction of prejudice – racial, cultural, or of class – and to the gradual transformation of university, which is in need of such changes so that the institution will finally be up to the challenges faced by our society, according to the original project of the University of Brasília, designed by Darcy Ribeiro (1978), in which the author states that the purpose was to reform the university and its organizational ways:

[...] to empower the institution so that it would not have to subserviently serve the purposes of traditional and modern elites. Instead, the institution would produce new citizens equipped with renewed mentalities, no complex of colonial inferiority, and no classist subservience. That is the way we intended to produce the frameworks we need to reform the university and reformulate the nation. (p. 73).

PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

The “Projeto Raízes” took place once every semester. Three editions were realized until March 2019. It was developed by means of five main activities:

Selection of tutors: public notice for the selection of scholarship-holding and volunteer tutors every

semester. The criteria up to the 3rd edition were: students were supposed to have accomplished at least 25% and at most 75% of the course, to have rates of academic performance above 3,5; availability of 12 hours for dedication to the project, and to have no professional connection whatsoever or any sort of scholarship. Priority was given to tutors enrolled in the same graduation course as the tutored students, tutors with experience in monitoring/tutoring, and tutors who were registered receivers of student assistance. The number of tutors was defined by means of the number of tutored students, which would vary every edition, according to the contingent of freshmen in that semester, or veteran students who required tutoring, with an average of three tutored students per tutor.

Initial formation course for tutors: mandatory initial course for tutors selected in the public notice. Moment of presentation of the services directly linked to the project and of overall information on the tutoring process. It was an opportunity for getting to know the tutors, for working on integration between the group and the coordination, for reviewing the tutoring process by means of impressions by the tutors themselves, and for readjusting agreements when necessary.

Tutoring per se: tutorship process (meetings, services, referrals among tutors and tutored students). After confirmation of participation in the project, the tutors were designated by their assisted students, who either belonged to the group or came from connected areas. We had a first presentation encounter with them, in which they talked and defined the trajectory of the tutoring process (attendance, onsite meetings at the university, contact information, and other related matters). The participating institutional services of the project were available for explanations and further support for students on demand and throughout the whole process.

Continuous formation: weekly support meetings and supervision of tutors and monthly formation meeting, with the development of activities and lectures on themes of interest for the project (inclusion, diversity, education, and so on), academic exchanges, and the integration of all involved ones, with the extensive participation of the tutored students.

Project assessment by the participants: continuous assessment of the project. Weekly meetings for supervision on the tutors; questionnaire of qualitative order sent to assisted students so that they can assess the tutoring process; final report by the tutors containing their process diaries (realized orientations, date, time, referrals, comments, difficulties, discoveries, etc.); assessment meetings and final session with all participants (reports on experiences in the project and related discussions).

Approximately 250 students, tutors and tutored

students, participated in the 3 editions of the project. In the 3rd edition, for example, we had 30 tutors (20 scholarship holders and 10 volunteers) and 46 tutored students (33 indigenous students, 11 PEC-G, and 2 refugees).

Most important questions

The tutors revealed too much anxiety and also fear concerning tutorship and the encounter with their assisted students. Some participants were excited and confident, whereas others were somewhat worried and wondering whether they would be up to the task. The tutored students, on the other hand, were even less trustful, worried with the possibility of tutorship turning into further surveillance by the institution rather than actual support for their personal development. All these circumstances became increasingly comfortable as the project unfolded. In the collective meetings, the assisted students shared their life stories in their communities, and contributed with curious facts regarding their cultures, the difficulties they faced (with a highlight on refugee students and their trajectories until their arrival in Brazil), the impressions concerning our country, and political and social issues. Their reports sounded quite true, spontaneous and, sometimes, represented very distinct backgrounds.

Financial problems experienced by the tutored students, especially regarding delays in the payment of their scholarships proved difficult factors. In other words, they most often did not have access to computers, telephones and even mobility to the university, which hindered communication. Besides that, the tutors presented a preoccupation with the limits to be established in this relation, in order to avoid abusive relations and exposure to violence, or even to prevent the tutorship from abusing its power of intervention concerning financial matters and the lack of resources for tutored students, and requests for tutorship out of the schedule times or out of the university premises. Another matter for concern was emotional involvement between tutors and tutored students that exceeded the established professional limits of tutorship.

We also paid attention to reports by tutors on how their activities with the students promoted changes in their own personal lives that led to new perspectives. Also, tutored students reported on the importance of support and considered it essential so they would not feel lonely, lost, or helpless while nurturing feelings of affiliation to the university.

All these emerging issues provide us confirmation for the idea that the tutoring process is much more complex than simple organization and frequency of activities, it reflects social problems and injustices in our society. Such issues need to be thought over and processed according to Guzzo (2007). The collaborative space constructed there by the established relations

between tutors/tutored students/coordination is a fertile field for the construction of new knowledge, and for deconstructing prejudices that are so deeply rooted in our society and harmful to human development. That leads to creativity and critical thinking. It also produces new possibilities for innovation by means of bringing more intellectual oxygen to the university, according to the vision of Darcy Ribeiro (1978).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In the development of this project, we can create space/time for our practice as school psychologists, working as members of the team of the Graduation Deanery in the construction and elaboration of the tutorship proposal. Assuming that school psychology professionals dedicate themselves to taking care of the relations among people in educational contexts, while promoting the humanization of people and institutions, and their socialization in the cultural-historical dimension and the subjectivation process for each one of the students, we can confirm the importance of participation in the Projeto Raízes.

Many actions are still being discussed and need to be developed within the project. We managed to advance towards respect for group identities, to feelings of affiliation to the university, to the deconstruction of some socially naturalized prejudices, to the humanization of relations, and to cultural interchange among participants. We could observe the need for further proximity with the students' courses, which would help both in advertising and in providing support to the tutors' work. Undoubtedly, the more integrated courses get with the project, the more able they will be to act as multipliers of its essence and, in addition, help improve actions of reception and support for students.

This type of projects is still underrated because it does not lead into a product or an immediate reward of quantitative nature. The demand for numbers in academic performance that serve the purpose of certification is still a problem. Most of the tutored

students are freshmen, who are just beginning university life. Many students at this first moment do not present academic performance considered satisfactory. The questionnaires of qualitative order for support and assessment on the project by tutors and tutored students, as well as final reports in the activities developed by the tutors with personal accounts on the importance of the project and the feelings it brings about, are apparently not enough for the institutional validation they need to get their justification before control organs for the existence of this type of action. Nevertheless, we go on with the project. We fight for the opportunity to demonstrate its importance for academic performance, and especially for the promotion of institutional and personal development of the students participating in the Projeto Raízes.

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