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Structured X unstructured: family perceptions among education professionals

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Abstract

At school, it is common to hear comments about "structured" or "unstructured" families. With the need to understand this reality, we seek to understand what education professionals mean when they use the terms "family" or "structure". The theoretical framework is based on research by Colus & Lima (2007), Lazzari (2014), Moreira & Toneli (2014), among others, which deal with these themes. Data collection was performed in three cities of Mato Grosso do Sul with a total of six women, three teachers and three school managers. The results show that the families seen as "structured" are those that follow the traditional model, composed of father, mother and child(ren), while all other family arrangements are seen as "unstructured". However, we question that what characterizes a family as unstructured are attitudes and behaviors, or the lack of safety and protection for all members, and there is no direct relationship with the different forms of family arrangements. Keywords: Family settings. Protection. Family structure. Schooling.

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Estruturadas X desestruturadas: percepções de família entre profissionais da educação

Resumo

Em âmbito escolar, é comum ouvir comentários acerca de famílias "estruturadas" ou "desestruturadas", surgindo a necessidade de entender essa realidade, buscamos compreender o que os profissionais da educação querem dizer quando utilizam o termo "estrutura" ou "desestrutura" familiar. O referencial teórico baseia-se em pesquisas de Colus e Lima (2007), Lazzari (2014), Moreira e Toneli (2014), entre outros, que abordam sobre essas temáticas. A coleta de dados foi realizada em três municípios sul-mato-grossenses com um total de seis mulheres, sendo três docentes e três gestoras escolares. Os resultados evidenciam que família "estruturada" é vista como o modelo tradicional, composto por pai, mãe e filho/s, enquanto que todas as outras configurações familiares são vistas como "desestruturadas". Contudo, problematizamos que o que caracteriza a desestrutura familiar são atitudes e comportamentos, ou a não garantia de segurança e proteção a todos os membros, não havendo relação direta com as diferentes formas de arranjos familiares. Palavras-chave: Configurações familiares. Proteção. Desestrutura familiar. Educação escolar.



Estructuradas X no estructuradas: percepciones de familia entre los profesionales de la educación

Resumen

En la escuela, es común escuchar comentarios sobre familias "estructuradas" o "no estructuradas", surgiendo la necesidad de entender esta realidad, buscamos comprender lo que los profesionales de la educación quieren decir cuando utilizan el término "estructura" o "desestructura" en la familia. El marco teórico se basa en investigaciones de Colus y Lima (2007), Lazzari (2014), Moreira y Toneli (2014), entre otros, quienes discuten esos temas. La recopilación de datos, se llevó a cabo en tres ciudades del Sur de Mato Grosso con un total de seis mujeres, tres profesoras y tres gestoras de escuelas. Los resultados muestran que la familia "estructurada" se ve como el modelo tradicional, que consiste en padre, madre e hijo, mientras que todas las demás configuraciones familiares se ven como "no estructuradas". Sin embargo, nos ocupamos de lo que caracteriza a la desestructura familiar, en lo cual son actitudes y comportamientos, o la no garantía de seguridad y protección para todos los miembros, sin relación directa con las diferentes formas de arreglo familiar.

Palabras clave: Configuración familiar. Protección. Desestructuración familiar. Educación escolar.

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Introduction

During undergraduate classes in a Pedagogy major, especially in the compulsory teaching internship courses, it is common for university students to report that they hear – from the teachers of the elementary schools where they are interns – that some children, especially those with learning disabilities, come from "broken" families. This understanding, which is common among elementary education teachers, is problematic, because generally the opinions about what are "structured" or "unstructured" families vary and are based only on common sense, without any theoretical or scientific basis. Thus, the interest arose to better understand this situation, justifying the present study, which aims to understand what teachers and school managers mean when they use the terms "structured family" and "unstructured family".

To carry out the research, a bibliographic survey of theoretical references was conducted, especially seeking Brazilian scientific articles that presented discussions involving these subjects. A field survey was also conducted in three different cities in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul, with a teacher and a school manager from each city, to identify how participants perceive this terminology regarding structured and unstructured families.



Structured families X Unstructured families

Before analyzing families seen as structured or as unstructured, it is important to consider that, historically, families were formed in different ways, according to different cultures, although in general one ideal or more adequate model predominates in the social imaginary (LAZZARI, 2014). In the largely Christian West, starting from the so-called Modernity, the most predominant family model is patriarchal. To a large extent, if we look at studies such as those by Phillip Aries (1981), we can see the predominance of paternal legal power, even in extended families. Differently, however, when analyzing family relationships today and, more specifically, in a Latin American and Brazilian context, we have to agree with Perez (2009, p. 3), who states that “What characterizes the contemporary family is the fact that it is a social unit formed by different family arrangements, but with similar purposes and objectives”. The author argues that:

Among some family constitutions, we have: the nuclear family, consisting of the father, mother and child(ren); extended family, in which, besides the family nucleus, other relatives join the group; recomposed family, which is the result of a second union of one or both parents; matrifocal family, in which the mother heads the domestic group alone or with the help of other relatives; and patrifocal family, where the father is responsible for the children, whether or not with other relatives (PEREZ, 2009, p. 3).

That is, there is a diversity of family arrangements, so it is difficult to adopt just one of them as the ideal, but unfortunately this is what usually happens in society. A study by Rosso & Serpe (2012) with 26 basic education teachers from the city of Ponta Grossa, Paraná, found that, according to the teachers, the ideal family model is one that prepares children for school life and guides them to live in this educational space. Moreover, the family arrangement should be, according to the teachers' view, a united heterosexual couple, where the man/father should guide and dictate the norms of conduct, while the woman/mother should maintain family relations and educate the children with affection, care and dedication. In this scenario, if perhaps one of the parents was missing, due to death or abandonment, the family could face problems that would also be



reflected in the school environment, because the proper conditions to promote the social adjustment of the children would cease to exist in the family context.

In the study mentioned above, this representation manifested by teachers is associated with the idealized family model, which is generally seen as "structured" and as more suitable for the development of the new generations, as highlighted by Vianna & Ramires:

It is, in fact, the so-called structured family, that is, the idealized family as nuclear – father, mother and child –, middle class, in which the parents are well-educated and fully dedicated to guiding their children's school merits. This family arrangement becomes the norm from which a model considered universal, common and unalterable is built (VIANNA; RAMIRES, 2008, p. 349, italics added by the author).

4 However, this family model is devoid of cultural and historical references, since "[...] the lack of family structure, understood as lack of economic and cultural capital, is diagnosed by the school as the cause of low performance, poor self-esteem and especially behavioral problems, which can range from apathy to aggression" (VIANNA; RAMIRES, 2008, p. 349, italics added by the author). It can be noted that the idea of family structure corresponds to the economic and cultural capital of its members, and in this case low-income people could be wrongly stereotyped as a model that does not have an adequate structure. Lazzari (2014, p. 98) mentions, however, that the National Plan for the Promotion, Protection and Defense of the Rights of Children and Adolescents to Family and Community Living (PNCFC, from the Portuguese), which guides actions geared towards children and young people, postulates that "[...] it is necessary to move away from the ideal family view and to perceive the diversity of family organizations in the historical, social and cultural context".

In addition, the aforementioned PNCFC, as well as the Federal Constitution, both recognize the family context as an ideal space for the process of socialization of the new generations and signal the understanding that all family models can be considered adequate to raise young people and children. Thus, Lazzari (2014, p. 99, italics added by the author) warns that one should not talk about "[...] an unstructured or structured family, but about its capacity to protect", indicating that family protection is the most important aspect – one that should generate concern if not complied with –, and not the family model or



configuration. Corroborating these ideas, Kaloustian (1998, p. 11) stresses that “[...] family is the indispensable space for ensuring the survival of development and the full protection of children and other members, regardless of family arrangement or how it is structured”. Consequently, it is the family that must ensure “[...] the affective inputs and, above all, the material inputs necessary for the development and well-being of its components [...]” (p. 12), besides fulfilling an educational function and creating the bonds of solidarity that are important for human survival.

When the family does not endure safety and protection to its members, or has its rights violated, then a condition of vulnerability arises and, therefore, this family unit needs support to overcome this reality, as stated by Lazzari:

Families are no longer considered to be unstructured, as they were called by the welfare state, and are now called unassisted, which indicates a terminology that is appropriate to the new approach to the doctrine of social protection of rights and the definition of family itself (LAZZARI, 2014, p. 99, italics added by the author).

It is interesting to note that, especially in the school environment, it is not considered that the family of a child may be unassisted, and therefore cannot guarantee the protection of its members. In general, the family is said to be unstructured. What can be observed is that there is much judgment and little action to help families which are in a vulnerable condition. It should also be noted that, according to Lazzari (2014), there is a significant difference between the terms “unstructured family” and “unassisted family”:

From the point of view of law and welfare policies, institutions for violent children, battered mothers and drunken fathers are for unstructured families. Social protection, which presupposes networked care, reaffirming integral protection – income programs, food security, school security, protection of the rights of children and adolescents, and many others – aimed at keeping families safe and secure in their environments, are for unassisted families (LAZZARI, 2014, p. 99-100).

The idea of unstructured families presented has to do with the behaviors of members, such as violence suffered or practiced and alcoholism, including other addictions and attitudes that hinder the well-being of people who belong to a particular family group, as stated by Moreira & Toneli (2014), who point out



that families do not become unstructured due to one of the parental figures being absent, but due to the abandonment of the caregiver function due to deviations such as alcoholism, chemical dependence or mental disorders, prostitution, etc.

Both Lazzari (2014) and Moreira & Toneli (2014) state that unstructured family dynamics are related to behaviors and attitudes that do not provide care, safety and protection for all individuals, evidencing that the families configurations or models have nothing to do with being structured or unstructured, as is commonly believed in various social contexts, including the school environment. That is, it does not matter whether or not the family is arranged according to the traditional model – father, mother and child(ren) –, but whether the behaviors are adequate and ensure the well-being of all individuals.

Lazzari (2014) also brings reflections about unassisted families, understood as the situation when a family does not have the resources to ensure safety and protection, so it is necessary to have assistance programs – such as income, housing, education, health – so that the constitutional rights of all are guaranteed. Once again, the issue of the unassisted family is not linked to the family model or configuration, but to the adequate conditions for the survival of all subjects that are part of it.

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If unstructured families are related to a lack of safety and a lack of protection, and a lack of affective and material inputs vital for the development and well-being of its members, then structured families would be the opposite of this, as analyzed by Vencato (2015, p. 10, italics added by the author): “[...] the idea that there are unstructured families presupposes, on the other hand, the existence of structured families or, or, at least, a model of family structure that should be central to all kinship relations”. Considering this statement, what do some studies conducted in schools in Brazil suggest about the idea of “structured family”?

In a study developed by Cadete, Ferreira & Silva (2012, p. 107) with 16 representatives from the Recife school system, including elementary school teachers, school managers and school staff, it was evident that the family seen as structured was associated with the traditional model. This assumption was confirmed by one of the teachers, who considered: “A structured family has a father, a mother and child(ren), in a normal context, right!”. She further justifies that, in practice, this is not what happens, because nowadays “everything is twisted” and “From the moment an exception was made for the family context



to be any other than this, society began to break down. In this mess, it is hard to be balanced”.

These representations of “structured family” had already been pointed out by Costa, Silva & Cunha (2005), when they conducted a study with 16 teachers from Minas Gerais who worked in the early years of elementary school. The prevailing results were that families should be arranged according to the traditional model, in which the father works outside the home and the mother is responsible for the household duties and raising the children. Accordingly, most participants believed that families become unstructured because father and mother work outside the home and have to leave their children with nannies or in childcare facilities.

It is interesting to note that at no time do teachers analyze the issue of family life: whether there are behavioral problems, violence, addictions, etc. They only highlight the traditional model, as if it were the only acceptable one to consider a family as structured.

Similar representations were also found by Colus & Lima (2007), after conducting a study with 13 teachers of the early years of elementary school in the state of São Paulo. When analyzing the data, the researchers noticed that the families considered to be “structured” or “normal” and “ideal” should be composed of father, mother and child(ren), who should live in a welcoming environment, without major conflicts. Teachers indirectly mentioned the issue of safety and protection, but it seems that only in traditional family models can there be such a cozy, conflict-free environment.

Colus & Lima (2007) alert to the fact that these representations do not correspond to the reality of many students who attend schools, because they come from different family models. Consequently, the relationship of education professionals with the families of these students may denote a sense of indifference and detachment, as they do not correspond to the family model considered “ideal” for the school community.

The studies conducted by Rosso & Serpe (2012) with teachers from Paraná also found that families organized according to the parameters of the traditional model – composed of father, mother and child(ren) – were seen as ideal, while other family configurations were seen as “unstructured”. In this sense, Colus & Lima (2007) analyze that the traditional family continues to be



father, mother and child(ren) living without conflicts, that is, an idealized, middle-class understanding, with a patriarchal approach.

It is possible to infer from the studies by Costa, Silva & Cunha (2005), Colus & Lima (2007), Cadete, Ferreira & Silva (2012), and Rosso & Serpe (2012) that in several states In Brazil, education professionals have similar views of what is a "structured family" is, with this structure always associated with the traditional model, consisting of father, mother and child(ren), without considering other factors, such as safety, protection and predominant behaviors within the family. Thus, as pointed out by Vianna & Ramires (2008, p. 349, italics by the authors): "When considering the so-called structured family as the norm, the celebration of differences becomes only self-referred. Arrangements that deviate from the norm are therefore rejected on the basis of a view that opposes structured and unstructured families". Consequently, "[...] those who do not follow the norm do not work, do not succeed, and the difference is then used to build a hierarchy that distinguishes and values some groups to the detriment of others". That is, when trying to standardize the family model understood as more appropriate or "structured", one ignores the differences that exist in school, and often justifies the difficulties experienced by members of families that belong to different family constitutions, as Perez points out:

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The idealization of an ideal family model strengthens the biased discourse that disqualifies groups that are not part of the nuclear family constitution. The consequence of this discourse is to justify any difficulty faced by members from different models as due to the diversity of arrangements, that is, they are now identified as unstructured families (PEREZ, 2009, p. 2-3).

If the idea of structured family is related to the traditional and, therefore, patriarchal model, it can be assumed that the idea of family disruption is the opposite, that is, other models that do not follow the arrangement of father, mother and child(ren). Thus, Vencato points out:

If in some discourses the idea of 'family disruption' coming from educators has to do with the idea of parental absence (either via abandonment, via 'broken homes' or 'not devoting time to the education of children'), recently, another issue has been emerging, in addition to the previous ones, in the discourses that blame family



structure for the students' learning difficulties: the issue of sexuality, especially homosexuality (VENCATO, 2015, p. 10).

Thus, it is observed that gender relations are present in this discussion about "structured" or "unstructured" family, because, for many people, the word "family" is restricted only to the conjugal model, "[...] a family that implies the co-living of a couple and their children – with the house as the place for women and children, and the public space of the street, the dominion of men" (FONSECA, 1995, p. 20).

Similarly, Cadete, Ferreira & Silva (2012, p. 109) mention that the basic education teachers that participated in the research saw as structured only the traditional family model, which is usually "[...] based on rules of coexistence based on authoritarianism and centrality of the father figure, the children being generally considered as passive individuals without autonomy".

The presence of both parents may not always contribute to the developmental process of their children, as this depends greatly on family life and the attitude of the parents. Moreover, as in society, gender relations are unequal in schools, as reported by Vencato (2015, p. 10), because there are "[...] criticisms of mothers (more often than fathers), who are held responsible for the 'lack of education' of children in school and, consequently, in social environments".

The matter of gender is closely associated with the idea of a "unstructured" family, when the child does not live with both parents or, especially, if they spend most of their time only with their mother. And many students who attend school belong to some family model that does not fit the traditional one, which does not mean that they belong to a "unstructured" family.

Today, there are different family models, some as common or more common than the standard nuclear family. We know that 38% of Brazilian households are headed by women and there is a significant growth in the number of households with this profile. We also know that there are children who are raised by aunts and uncles or grandparents or by only one parent, but we have difficulty understanding that this is not a problem for the development of that individual. School finds it difficult to deal with nontraditional family models, and it turns difference into problems when it deals with differences between families in order to qualify some as structured (therefore 'adequate') and others as unstructured (therefore 'problematic') (VENCATO, 2015, p. 18).



Indeed, many students live only with women, usually mothers, grandmothers, aunts, stepmothers, etc., which does not mean that they have a problem, as long as there is affection, safety and protection within the family. Still, schools find it difficult to recognize different forms of family arrangements, since they still argue that the traditional model is the only one that is appropriate or “structured”.

Furthermore, studies by Szymanski (2005), Colus & Lima (2007), Vianna & Ramires (2008) and Perez (2009) suggest that “unstructured” families are pointed as one of the main causes of learning disabilities and students’ poor performance at school, as indicated by Szymanski (2005, p. 24): “When outside this context, families are considered ‘incomplete’ and ‘unstructured’. They are more commonly held responsible for emotional problems, behavioral deviations and [...] school failure”. The context mentioned by the author is that of the traditional family model, indicating that all other forms of family configurations are seen as “incomplete”, “unstructured” and responsible for students’ failure at school.

Colus & Lima (2007, p. 203) state that the results of their studies with teachers indicate that “[...] the families of students with learning disabilities were seen as ‘unstructured’, as ‘different’ in affective-relational relationships when compared to those that are implicitly considered ‘structured’”. The authors conclude that:

[...] the social representations teachers hold about the family of students with learning disabilities reveal that the student’s unsatisfactory school performance is caused by the family, which does not follow school tasks and is not interested in their children’s daily school life. With this, the school exempts itself from its social responsibilities and delegates the failure of these students to their ‘unstructured’ families (COLUS; LIMA, 2007, p. 206).

Another worrisome aspect of attributing students’ school failure to families seen as “unstructured” is the stereotype that traditional and middle-class families would meet the “ideal” model, while people from the lower classes would be devoid of “family structure”. Based on these assumptions, Vianna & Ramires postulate that:

In this discussion, one often tries to gain strength by classifying a family as unstructured, attributing to it the detrimental effect on the offspring’s school performance. Several characteristics are invoked



to justify this view: poverty, absence of father and/or mother (to be replaced by aunts and grandparents), job instability, illiteracy or poor education of both father and mother, among others (VIANNA; RAMIRES, 2008, p. 349, *italics added by the authors*).

Once again the idea of the family arrangement or model arises, with the mention of the absence of parents and children raised by other relatives, but there is clear evidence that issues inherent to poverty, job instability and illiteracy also influence “unstructured families” and the low performance of children in school. Thus, Fonseca (2005, p. 56) analyzes: “‘Unstructured’ is a word we use to describe the other people’s families. Not simply others... more than that, poor people’s families”. Corroborating such ideas, Perez (2009) emphasizes that education professionals generally assume that families are primarily responsible for solving children’s learning problems, since:

[...] when family intervention fails to achieve positive results, teachers often point out that students’ families are disinterested and negligent in monitoring their children’s schooling. This biased representation limits the understanding of the dynamics of the family institution of the poorer strata, since the supposedly cohesive and engendered ideal family stereotype of the middle classes is the opposite of the unstructured stereotype of poor families, which accentuates and hierarchizes social, cultural and economic differences (PEREZ, 2009, p. 7).

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In the school environment, there really is this ideological clash, where middle-class families are seen as ‘structured’, while poorer families are seen as ‘unstructured’. These stereotypes result in prejudice and disrespect for cultural differences.

Similarly, Colus & Lima (2007, p. 206), based on a study carried out with 13 elementary school teachers, found that there is a hidden conflict between education professionals and the families of students who are part of different family models, because “[...] there is a representation of the ‘ideal’ family, that does not correspond to ‘real’ ones”. This “idealized” model is characterized only by middle-class families, without including or considering all other models that exist in school. Thus, the teachers who were part of the study believe that “real” families are unable to provide children with support, care and affection, and this reality is considered difficult, because, in this case, “[...] the



teacher not only has to teach, but also offer emotional and relational support (teaching children to be 'well behaved', to respect their peers, among others) behavior considered appropriate" (COLUS; LIMA, 2007, p. 206).

The authors also observe that, based on their own representations, one of the teachers suggested that there should be "a school for the family" as a way to prevent problems that could damage the family "structure". She believes that: "The issue of values that make families unstructured, the lack of boundaries, this I don't see how to solve today, unless we set up a school for the family. That would be ideal, a school for the family" (COLUS; LIMA, 2007, p. 205).

It is important to emphasize that this "school for the family" should follow the standards that the teacher understands as adequate for family relationships, not considering, however, the different models from which the school students come.

Based on these results, it seems to us that the analysis by Colus & Lima (2007) reveals the importance of considering the heterogeneity of family structures. The new arrangements are new attempts at coexistence in affective relationships and, therefore, they are not wrong nor are they "unstructured".

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Assuming that society changes and undergoes modifications, it would be possible to think that the family institution would be alienated if it did not change. But that does not mean that changes are bad, as long as the different forms of family arrangements are organized to ensure care, protection and safety for all its members. In this sense, Cadete, Ferreira & Silva (2012, p. 107) postulate that "[...] culture has a strong influence on the way people act and think, imposing a model of life in which everything is taken to be pre-established, in particular, the social role that belongs to each subject". On the other hand, ne should also consider that "[...] in the current context of socioeconomic changes, new technologies, etc., the redefinition of social roles emerges as a consequence of these transformations that society has been going through, thus affecting the forms of parental arrangements".

In fact, families, regardless of their models or configurations, are inserted in a historical and social context that has been undergoing transformations, especially in the last decades. Consequently, families also change and acquire new arrangements, which does not mean that they are unstructured. Despite this being the reality, schools have been finding it difficult to adapt to these social and family transformations, as this environment still reinforces the idea that the



traditional family model is the most suitable for children, even knowing that the people who attend the school environment belong to different types of family arrangements.

Methodological procedures

For the research on “structured” families and “unstructured” families, we chose to conduct a qualitative research, since, according to Günther (2006), it is a scientific referral based on texts, since the collection of data produced texts that were interpreted based on other studies conducted in the area.

The field research was conducted in three cities of the state of Mato Grosso do Sul, by recording interviews. These interviews were guided by a semi-structured script with previously elaborated questions. For Günther (2006, p. 202), instruments used in qualitative research must fit the study object and are characterized by “[...] a spectrum of methods and techniques, adapted to the specific case, instead of a single standardized method”.

It should be noted that the research included several discussions about the family institution. However, when we realized that some teachers and managers commented on structured and unstructured families, we became interested in understanding these themes, because they are very frequent in school, especially in the speeches of education professionals.

Thus, the first step was surveying the theoretical framework, with emphasis given to articles published in scientific journals that addressed discussions concerning structured or unstructured families, especially in the field of education, in order to understand the meaning of this terminology and how this language is used in the school environment.

A field research was also carried out with teachers and managers of public elementary schools in three different cities of the state of Mato Grosso do Sul. For data collection, we initially contacted the Municipal Departments of Education, requesting the referred the name of a school and gave us the phone number, so we could talk about conducting the research. After the telephone contact with each of the three schools, a day and time was scheduled for the recording of individual interviews with some teachers and school managers.

Although several teachers and managers were interviewed in the three cities, for the present study we considered only the participants who, at some



point in the interviews, made comments about “structured” and/or “unstructured” families, resulting in a total of six (6) women, one teacher and one manager from each of the cities surveyed.

As for the formal training of the participants, four had undergraduate degrees in Pedagogy, one in Languages and Literature, and another in Visual Arts. The predominant age group was 32 to 38 years old, and only one of the managers was 56 years old. To preserve the identity of these participants, we chose to present the reports with the denomination of Teacher 1, 2 or 3 and Manager 1, 2 or 3, as can be observed in the results presented below.

Predominant views on family among the people interviewed

Similarly to what happened in the studies by Costa, Silva & Cunha (2005) in Minas Gerais, Colus & Lima (2007) in the state of São Paulo, Cadete, Ferreira & Silva (2012) in Pernambuco, and Rosso & Serpe (2012) in Paraná, in Mato Grosso do Sul it was found that education professionals associate the family configuration or model with the idea of a “structured” or “unstructured” family. It is very common to identify reports in which teachers claim that the traditional configuration, composed of father, mother and child(ren), is “structured”, while other family arrangements are seen as “unstructured”, as can be observed in the reports below:

The families of the students in our school, for the most part, are not structured like... with father, mother and child. They are usually raised by grandparents, sometimes aunts and uncles. If you examine it, I think more than half are part of incomplete families (TEACHER 1, 2019).

[...]

Look, our reality here, in this neighborhood, is of totally underprivileged children, who have no family structure at home. We see that the values that they [students] know are only what we have been teaching at school, precisely because they do not have a family structure. So, families are totally unstructured, they are people who do not think of passing on values to their children [...]. Unfortunately, this is the reality. I worked with children who lived with their mother's ex-husband, who is not even their father, and this ex-husband already had another wife. So the child lives with the ex-husband, with a



stepmother who is not a stepmother, with whom they have no family ties (TEACHER 2, 2019).

[...]

I think over time families have been wearing away, they have become unstructured. Here at school, families are very unstructured, and I think the main focus of family, having a father a mother and children, has been losing importance, right. I think it's something like that (TEACHER 3, 2019).

It is clear that, for Teacher 1, the family seen as “structured” is only the family that meets the traditional model, and that is not what predominates in the school in which she works; she even acknowledges that possibly more than half of the students belong to different family arrangements.

Similarly, Teacher 2 also associates the idea of “unstructured” with family models, although she broadens her scope and cites an important aspect, which is the family bond. She argues that families do not teach principles and values and, consequently, only the school has assumed this role. In a way, the teacher, although not clear, even refers to the issue of safety and protection, which must be guaranteed by the family, since, according to Seleglim, Marangoni, Marcon & Oliveira:

The family is socially constituted as a primordial unit in the context of the construction, formation and development of the individuals that are part of it, transmitting values, rules, customs, ideas, as well as models and patterns of behaviors to the next generations [...] The existence of healthy relationships between individuals and families, such as delimitation of responsibilities, support and family affection, is pointed as factor of protection (SELEGHIM; MARANGONI; MARCON; OLIVEIRA, 2011, p. 3).

In the case of Teacher 3, she believes that the evolution of society has made family relationships “unstructured” and lose what she understands to be “the main focus of family”, which corresponds to the traditional model. That is, this teacher also considers only family arrangements to describe what she characterizes as “structured” or “unstructured” families.

Similarly to what the teachers pointed out, two managers from different regions of Mato Grosso do Sul suggested that family arrangements that are not only composed of father, mother and child(ren) are stereotyped as “unstructured”



and “dysfunctional”, and, therefore, they result in problems for the school. Thus, the school managers stated:

Our students here, for the most part..., we even say it's dysfunctional, really. Because they even leave the kids home alone, you know? So much so that here, when the child comes to school for the first time, we notice if the child has a family. You don't even have to ask, looking at the supplies, the clothes, the commitment to homework, everything, because the child who has no support system. These are cases that usually live with the mother, but we also have cases of living with the father. Several cases where moms left, and dads take care of the children (MANAGER 1, 2019).

[...]

We have students who are raised only by the mother, only by the father; children raised by two women, we don't have any by two men...; there are children who only have their grandmother, there are many children with only the grandmother... there are children whose fathers killed their mothers, children who... It's a complicated social situation, and I think they see school as a safe haven. We have a lot of children like that... but there are few who have father and mother, most have a stepfather, stepmother... They have other arrangements: grandmother, grandfather, uncle, aunt, these things (MANAGER 2, 2019).

Initially, Manager 1 mentions that many students' families are “dysfunctional” due to the following attitudes: leaving children home alone, not helping with school activities, and not taking proper care of school clothes and supplies. If we agree with Lazzari (2014), who states we should not argue if families are structured or unstructured, but whether they can protect, it is possible to infer that the family attitudes mentioned do not fulfill this protective function, as they do not follow the children's educational process and leave them alone.

Manager 1 says that as soon as the students start attending school, she can see “if the child has a family”, which begs the question: did some of the students live alone or not belong to any kind of family model? Perhaps what Manager 1 tried to express is that right away the school can see if the children belong to families that assume this protective function, or even if these students come from families that meet the traditional model. Therefore, according to the arguments of Manager 1, a family is considered “dysfunctional” if it does not fulfill the protective function or if it belongs to other family models, such as



the single-parent model, for example, since many children lived only with their mother or only with their father.

Manager 2 also mentions different family models, such as single parents and homosexual parents, as well as cases of family violence in which the father killed the mother. She recognizes that this is a “complicated social situation” and, therefore, believes that children “see school as a safe haven”, that is, the protection that should be guaranteed in the family environment does not exist there, and therefore it falls to the school to assume this social function as well. Still, Manager 2 also states that there are few students “who have a father and mother”, evidencing that the “ideal” family model is the traditional one, although other arrangements are predominant in the school, with stepmothers, stepfathers, uncles, aunts, grandfathers and grandmothers, and other models as well. These data corroborate the assumptions of Cadete, Ferreira & Silva (2012, p. 107), that: “[...] the traditional family model seems to be the only model capable of promoting the healthy development of the subject. The only one capable of transmitting the values and principles that govern the contemporary social structure”.

The issue of protection and family arrangement was highlighted by Manager 3: “Some children tell us crazy things! I told one of them: ‘Your mom was here’, ‘No, she’s my stepmother!’. I said: ‘Oh, your stepmother. It’s not your mom?’”. He said: ‘No, my mom was no good...’ – in his words – ‘She was no good at taking care of me’”. It is interesting to note that while recognizing that children come from various types of family settings, what is reinforced in practice is the idealized or traditional model, since from the fact that a woman went to school, Manager 3 concluded that she was the child’s biological mother, when in reality she was the stepmother, because the mother would not have performed her role of protecting and caring for the child.

Another aspect pointed out by the research participants are the consequences of being part of “unstructured” families, or models that oppose the traditional, for the students’ school life, as can be observed in the following reports:

Most children have families like this: one has a father, the other doesn’t, one has a mother, the other doesn’t, some are raised by the grandfather, grandmother. We have students who live in the shelter, right, with their uncle. And they are like, kind of abandoned. To tell you the truth, there is no commitment to the schoolwork, no



school attendance. Some parents are present, of course, but most are totally helpless (TEACHER 2, 2019).

[...]

Homework, for example, is a torment, it's an Achilles Heel for us to have children do their homework. The vast majority damage the papers. Then you ask: 'Why didn't you do it?' And the students answer: 'Oh, but I didn't know! Oh, I forgot! Oh, my mother couldn't help me...' So they have no one to help them... They do try, but... We have to help them at school... (MANAGER 1, 2019).

[...]

I believe it is a problem, because you try to hold them to it and they're like [student]: "Oh, I don't have a mother!" Then: "Oh, I don't have a father!". Who are you going to talk to? So I think that unstructured families are a problem (TEACHER 3, 2019).

Once again, they bring up the issue of family arrangements where children have no father, mother, or are raised by their grandparents, or even those living in shelters, as factors that contribute to students' disengagement from school activities, especially with regard to the tasks they should do at home. Thus, Manager 1 stresses that children have no one at home to help them, and it is only up to the school to teach students. Teacher 3 also reports that there is no way to keep students accountable because they say they have no mother or father and, in this sense, this "unstructured" family ends up disrupting the students' performance at school. Similarly, Vencato (2015) points out that, according to teachers, the family seen as "unstructured" exerts negative influences, including on students' behavior in the classroom. Thus, the author explains:

It was common to find, in the observed speeches, the idea that this 'unstructured' family model negatively influences the performance of the student body in the classroom, especially regarding the 'lack of commitment to the schooling of the children' and the consequent 'lack of respect' and 'misbehavior' in class (VENCATO, 2015, p. 10).

The lack of commitment on the part of family was also pointed out by Dal'Igna (2005), who, when conducting a research with basic education teachers in public schools in São Leopoldo, in Rio Grande do Sul, realized that families are seen as mainly responsible for the students' poor performance, as



they are negligent and do not help with the children's school activities, especially those to be performed at home.

Regarding family arrangements, there are exceptions, according to one of the managers, because there are cases of children who do not belong to the traditional family model and yet have good results in school. However, she believes that, in general, it is not in the best interest of a child to live with only one parent or grandparent, because family models seen as different not always adequately meet children's needs. Thus, the manager stated:

We have students, it's just him and his mom, who's so cute, it works perfectly. And we have students who live only with their mother and it doesn't work, only with their grandmother and it doesn't work. So, I can't say that... for the most part, I see that it's not very good for children. It is not always good for children to have a different model, because they feel so left out (GESTORA 2, 2019).

The report given by Manager 2 has to do with the analysis by Moreira & Toneli (2014, p. 38), when they say that the terminology related to unstructured families "[...] points to a certain expectation of family structure and of functions for each of its members [...]", that is, it is expected that, in the family, each member performs some functions, possibly to ensure the protection and care of all who belong to the same family group. However, the expectation of family structure is not associated with family arrangements, because different models may present harmonious living, resulting in the well-being of all members.

It should also be noted, regarding the school or the way the school deals with issues related to different family arrangements, that we agree with the assumptions of Machado & Vestena, when they say that:

[...] It is important that teachers, managers, and staff are aware that all affective relationships are real, and any child who is loved, cared for, and respected can lead a peaceful and happy life, regardless of the family model in which they are included (MACHADO; VESTENA, 2017, p. 6).

Although this is not the understanding of family relationships that is most common in schools, as presented in this study, we believe that it is really vital to consider whether the child has the necessary conditions to develop, regardless



of the family model in which they are inserted. Moreover, we draw on Colus & Lima (2007) to emphasize that it is necessary to respect the heterogeneity of family arrangements, because the different arrangements represent new attempts at socializing in affective relationships and, consequently, all need to be respected at school and other segments of society.

Final considerations

Given that this research sought to understand what education professionals mean when they use the terms "structured" or "unstructured" to refer to families, it should be noted that we found that the term "unstructured family" is connected to behaviors and predominant attitudes such as violence suffered or practiced, alcoholism, prostitution and other addictions and behaviors that hinder people's well-being. The idea of "family structure" is related to the family's function of ensuring the safety, protection, affection and care necessary for the development and well-being of all family members.

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We also found that in the studies by Costa, Silva & Cunha (2005) in Minas Gerais, Colus & Lima (2007) in the state of São Paulo, Cadete, Ferreira & Silva (2012) in Pernambuco, and Rosso & Serpe (2012) in Paraná, just like in Mato Grosso do Sul, the representations of "structured" families, in school, are connected to the traditional family model, the family composed of father, mother and child(ren), while other models are seen as "unstructured".

Among the six research participants, most consider that if the student does not belong to a family that has a father and a mother who live together, the family is therefore stereotyped as unstructured or dysfunctional. One teacher even acknowledges that there are single-parent families where the child lives only with the mother, and that works well, but other cases of single parenting do not work. The idea prevails that it is not good for children to have different family models, showing that patriarchal assumptions remain very present among the education professionals surveyed.

These are, therefore, misconceptions these professionals hold, since the family must ensure the well-being, safety and protection of its members, regardless of whether it has a different model or arrangement. However, it is common for education professionals to believe that families who do not comply with the traditional model cannot adequately educate their children, leaving it up to the



school to assume this role, which is not met due to the so-called neglect of “unstructured” families.

The problem is that these representations, which are very common in the school environment, can result in negative consequences for students who come from other family arrangements, who can be disqualified before their peers because they do not fit the “ideal” family model. Moreover, this unilateral understanding of what a “structured” family is, which is restricted to the traditional model only, disregards the prevailing diversity in schools, as if all other forms of family models were dysfunctional, which sociologically is not real.

Therefore, it must be understood that, regardless of the family arrangements from which students come, the important thing is that each child feels cared for, protected and educated, so that he/she can learn and develop in a school and social context that respects individual and family differences. The question that the school should ask is, therefore, if the children and adolescents are being treated with dignity by their families and, consequently, the school should treat with dignity all those who go to school to learn.

Note

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- 1 This article is the result of a few scientific products based on a post-doctoral project carried out with the Graduate Program in Education of the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul (PUCRS), initially supervised by Prof. Claus Dieter Stobäus and, after that, by Prof. Edla Eggert.

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