

Original Article

Maternity during high school and the challenges for retention: the unique, territorial follow ups for young mother students in a public school

A maternidade durante o ensino médio e os desafios para a permanência: o acompanhamento singular e territorial de jovens mães estudantes de uma escola pública

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Abstract

This article was developed from a broader research project conducted by researchers from the Metuia Network - Social Occupational Therapy, titled “Active and Democratic Care: Theoretical and Practical Contributions for the Implementation of Policies Supporting the Return and Retention of Young People in School in the Post-Pandemic Context.” More specifically, this work was carried out at a public high school in the Northwest Zone of the Municipality of Santos (SP), resulting from a thesis that described and analyzed, from the perspective of social occupational therapy, two unique and territorial follow-ups of young mothers facing daily challenges to remain in school. Among the main findings, the desire to complete high school was highlighted, competing with the concrete demands of motherhood, which was experienced by both in a markedly solitary manner. The work addresses motherhood as a condition influenced by the challenges imposed by gender inequality and socio-economic disparities. These factors, on one hand, weaken and reduce the social support network, while on the other hand, they highlight the absence of social public policies capable of protecting young mothers and ensuring their right to remain in school. Finally, the article shares a journey built upon technical, ethical, and political commitment, aiming to contribute to new reflections on the creation of unique and territorial follow-ups that can support these young women in their singularities and in their present and future projects.

Keywords: Occupational Therapy, Adolescence, Youth, Student Dropouts, Maternity.

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Resumo

Este artigo foi desenvolvido a partir de um projeto de pesquisa mais amplo executado por parte dos pesquisadores da Rede Metuia - Terapia Ocupacional Social, cujo título é “Cuidado Ativo e Democrático: subsídios teórico-práticos para a implementação de políticas de apoio ao retorno e à permanência de jovens à/na escola no contexto (pós)pandêmico”. Mais especificamente, este foi um trabalho realizado em uma escola pública de Ensino Médio regular da Zona Noroeste do Município de Santos (SP), decorrente de um trabalho de conclusão de curso que descreveu e analisou a partir da perspectiva da terapia ocupacional social dois acompanhamentos singulares e territoriais, de jovens mães enfrentando desafios cotidianos para permanecerem na escola. Entre os principais resultados, destacou-se a existência do desejo de concluir o ensino médio concorrendo com as demandas concretas advindas pela maternidade, sendo esse um período vivido por ambas de maneira marcadamente solitária. O trabalho aborda a maternidade como uma condição atravessada pelos desafios impostos pela desigualdade de gênero e pelas desigualdades socioeconômicas. Esses fatores, por um lado, fragilizam e reduzem a rede de suporte social, por outro, evidenciam a ausência de políticas públicas sociais capazes de proteger as jovens mães e assegurar seu direito de permanecer na escola. Por fim, compartilha-se um percurso construído a partir de um compromisso técnico, ético e político, com o intuito de contribuir para novas reflexões sobre a criação de acompanhamentos singulares e territoriais que possam apoiar essas jovens em suas singularidades e em seus projetos de presente e futuro.

Palavras-chave: Terapia Ocupacional, Adolescência, Juventude, Evasão Escolar, Maternidade.

Introduction

This article emerges from a large multicentric research project conducted by researchers who are part of *Rede Metuia - Terapia Ocupacional Social*, titled “Cuidado Ativo e Democrático: subsídios teórico-práticos para a implementação de políticas de apoio ao retorno e à permanência de jovens à/na escola no contexto (pós)pandêmico” (Lopes et al., 2024).

This research involved faculty members, researchers, undergraduate and graduate students, as well as young people from schools and communities in six cities located in five different regions of Brazil, aiming to create an empirical field that could offer a better understanding of the issues related to dropout/withdrawal and difficulties in school retention among young people in public high schools. The cities involved were: São Carlos (SP), Santos (SP), Petrolina (BA), João Pessoa (PB), Ceilândia (GO), and Simão Dias (SE) (Lopes et al., 2024).

The central objective of the project was to investigate how active and democratic care, based on the theoretical-methodological framework of social occupational therapy, can contribute to processes of return and retention of young people in regular public high schools, aiming to outline a specific “active search” that is part of public education policies. To achieve this goal, some of the strategies adopted in the research were: conducting an active search for students in situations of school dropout and/or

difficulties in retention; promoting partnerships with the school management team and establishing contact with the students; administering questionnaires and interviews with dropped-out students and/or those facing retention difficulties; and conducting unique and territorial follow-ups (Lopes et al., 2011; Pan et al., 2022) with the young people who joined the research proposal.

The text now presented¹ arises from the systematization and analysis of data that comprised a course completion project carried out in the city of Santos². In a school located in the Saboó neighborhood, in the Northwest Zone, which, together with four other regions –Morros, Centro Histórico, Orla and Área Continental –, make up the city as a whole. These regions present significant differences between them, mainly in terms of infrastructure conditions and vulnerability, with the Northwest Zone having the highest rate of social vulnerability, according to the 2022 Santos Epidemiological Bulletin.

The Saboó neighborhood, in turn, is a territory surrounded by hills and is characterized by the strong presence of stilt houses³. These areas face problems with the basic sanitation network, which is insufficient, and in adverse weather conditions, such as heavy rains, pose a high risk of landslides.

In a broader context of the project we outlined, the thesis aimed to address youth motherhood and the challenges that impact student retention. In this way, it was possible to get to know and follow, in a unique and territorial manner, young mothers over a period of nearly two years—long enough for two of them to become the main interlocutors of this study. Part of this process will be presented below, along with the reflections derived from this journey.

Being a mother, being young

According to the Statute of Children and Adolescents (ECA) (Brasil, 1990), adolescents are defined as individuals aged between 12 and 18 years. In contrast, the World Health Organization (WHO) (1965) considers the age range between 10 and 19 years. The Youth Statute (Brasil, 2013a; Organização Mundial da Saúde, 1965) defines youth as those in the age range between 15 and 24 years.

Although age demarcations are important for the formulation of public policies, this work considers youth from a broader concept than simply a phase of life, as presented by Augusto (2005). The author argues that youth goes beyond a chronological phase, as it is commonly associated with adolescence. He defines it as a phase of life with transformative social force and its own identity. In his analysis, he questions the different ways of understanding youth, emphasizing that there is no single experience of being young, since socioeconomic inequalities have a significant impact on the formation of

¹Because the results come from the field of research that comprised the first author's final course work, the first person singular will be used in this work at times.

²This city is home to the Núcleo da Universidade Federal de São Paulo (UNIFESP) da Rede Metuia, which brings together different projects developed by professors in the area of Social Occupational Therapy of the Occupational Therapy Course. The project that originated this text is registered with the Office of the Vice-Rector for Extension and Culture of UNIFESP, under the title "Active and democratic care: support for the return and permanence of young people to/in school in the (post) pandemic context". In addition, three undergraduate scientific initiation research projects, eight high school scientific initiation research projects, two doctoral research projects and two final course works were articulated.

³Stilt houses are elevated constructions, generally made of wood or other light materials, which, supported on stakes or pillars, are above ground or water level.

individuals. Thus, there will be various ways of experiencing this phase, depending on the socioeconomic situation of the young person. For the author, the construction of “being young” requires the availability of resources, alternatives for social integration, and paths offered throughout their trajectory.

Additionally, Lopes & Silva (2007) point out that school is a fundamental strategy for promoting and fostering projects that can offer better living conditions and experiences for young people. Therefore, we consider education to be an essential right that should be guaranteed to every young person, as described in Article 227 of the Federal Constitution, which states:

It is the duty of the family, society, and the State to ensure, with absolute priority, the right to life, health, food, education, leisure, professionalization, culture, dignity, respect, freedom, and family and community life for children and adolescents, as well as protecting them from all forms of neglect, discrimination, exploitation, violence, cruelty, and oppression (Brasil, 1988).

However, despite this being a right that should be guaranteed by the State and the family, we still face high rates of school dropout and difficulties in accessing basic education for children and young people from popular and peripheral classes, which, in Brazil, is directly related to social and racial issues.

Barriers to access and retention in the educational system are a historical issue in our country. Data from the latest Continuous National Household Sample Survey (PNAD) indicate that 20.2% of young people between 14 and 29 years old have not completed any level of education, either due to dropout or never having attended school (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2024). For children and adolescents, the numbers are more favorable, especially in Early Childhood Education and Elementary School, where 99.7% of young people aged 6 to 14 years are enrolled. However, this rate significantly decreases in High School, with only 89.2% of adolescents aged 15 to 17 years enrolled (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2024).

The data also reveal a high rate of age/grade distortion, with 32.4% of young people aged 18 to 24 years still enrolled in Basic Education, showing that this distortion, associated with school dropout, intensifies in the transition from Elementary School to High School. At age 15, 14.1% of young people drop out of school, compared to 8.1% at age 14, and this rate increases to 18% after age 19. Among young people aged 18 to 24 years, 11% had school delays, and 63.5% were not in school and had not completed their studies (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2024).

Moreover, recent data from the Continuous National Household Sample Survey (PNAD) conducted by Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE) between 2023 and 2024 reveal that approximately 9 million young people aged 14 to 29 have not completed high school, either due to school dropout or never having attended school. Within this group, 58.1% are boys and 41.9% are girls.

In 2023, 41.7% of young people in this age group, with an education level below complete high school, cited the need to enter the labor market as the main reason for school dropout or absenteeism, representing an increase of 1.5 percentage points compared to 2022.

Among the boys, 53.4% identified work as the main factor for dropping out of school, followed by lack of interest in studies, mentioned by 25.5%. Among the girls, the main reason was also the need to work (25.5%), followed by pregnancy (23.1%) and disinterest in studies (20.7%). Additionally, 9.5% of girls cited domestic responsibilities or caregiving as the main reasons for not completing high school or never having attended school, while only 0.8% of boys mentioned this factor.

These figures reflect the diversity of obstacles faced by young people in continuing their studies in high school. In the case of boys, the social pressure resulting from social inequality stands out, pushing them to enter the labor market to contribute to the family income. For girls, in addition to this same need, motherhood, pregnancy, and household responsibilities emerge as additional barriers to staying in education (Nascimento et al., 2020).

For a long time, society treated early pregnancy and early motherhood as something common, without seeing it as a “social problem” (Rodrigues Gaia et al., 2020; Heilborn et al., 2002). However, teenage pregnancy began to be seen as a “social problem” starting in the 1960s, a period when demographic transition in Brazil accelerated, evidenced by a decline in the fertility rate. Between 1940 and 1960, the average number of children per woman remained around 6.2, but by the year 2000, this number dropped to 2.4 children per woman.

According to data from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), in Brazil, for every 1,000 live births, 62 are children born to mothers aged 15 to 19 years, significantly higher than the global average, which is 44 per 1,000 (Brasil, 2019).

It is important to emphasize that motherhood, in itself, profoundly changes the daily life of women. When experienced during youth and compounded by factors such as poverty, machismo, domestic violence, and territorial vulnerabilities – such as distance from essential health and education services – this context becomes even more challenging and complex. In this way, teenage pregnancy is shaped by dimensions that define the form and content of how the trajectories and experiences of these young women who undergo motherhood are constituted. In order to generate discussion about youth motherhood, Cabral & Brandão (2020, p. 1) argue that:

Discussing teenage pregnancy in a context with profound social, racial/ethnic and gender inequalities such as Brazil requires acuity, theoretical and technical competence, and above all respect for the lives of millions of adolescents. These are subjects of rights, in the process of learning autonomy, self-care and control, and sexuality, as an inherent dimension of social relations.

In this sense, the objective of this work is to present, from a social occupational therapy perspective, the difficulties faced by young mothers in remaining in or returning to school in the context of high school, taking into consideration, primarily, issues related to gender and socioeconomic inequality. Additionally, this work aims to explain how the processes of singular and territorial follow-ups could contribute to addressing these difficulties.

Methodology

The resource of social occupational therapy that formed the basis for carrying out the entire research process with the two young women was the singular and territorial

follow-up (Pan et al., 2022), where the core of all actions is guided by a territorial perspective, understanding that the concept of territory goes beyond geographical boundaries. This concept necessarily includes the local historical constitution and the socioeconomic and cultural relationships developed within it, where different ways of life and social exchanges can be observed (Oliver & Barros, 1999).

The perspective of territorial action in occupational therapy stems from the early experiences mobilized by the technicians of the Italian psychiatric reform. It has remained a strategy of action and construction of social public policies, with an emphasis on the health and social assistance sectors, since both the Unified Health System (SUS) and the Unified Social Assistance System (SUAS) advocate for the development of territorial actions (Oliver & Barros, 1999). In these policies, services must be geographically and contextually close to their target population, considering the social, historical, economic, political, and cultural aspects of the place in question. The aim is to understand and share how relationships in that space unfold; how people live, think, dream, work, organize their daily lives; where they circulate; how they access public goods; what values they attribute; how networks activate and redirect; how potentialities manifest and remain silent (Barros et al., 2007).

These follow-ups are defined as a technology guided by attentive listening to the needs of individuals and groups, seeking to address essential issues in their lives, often determined by social inequality and lack of access to social services and goods. Thus, this technology is aimed at professional actions that effectively capture the realities experienced by the subjects, which are necessary for this intervention (Lopes et al., 2011; Pan et al., 2022).

Therefore, these follow-ups became one of the main methodological resources of this work, conducted alongside other tools that enriched the research, such as the application of a questionnaire and in-depth interviews (which were recorded and transcribed) with each of the young women. Field diary records were also made, which allowed capturing the experiences shared by the young women regarding issues that cross their lives as mothers and students with difficulties in remaining in school.

It is important to highlight the follow-up as a meaningful space that facilitated more attentive listening, welcoming, and the problematization of the everyday situations faced by young mothers. Additionally, it sought to expand the social support network of these adolescents — either through indirect mediation of family conflicts, identifying the limited legislation and access to social rights in the school context, or through contact with possible support, such as services and benefits from the school, social assistance, among others.

The young women were introduced to and incorporated into the research project through another student from the school who participated in the project as a young researcher. It is worth mentioning that the presence of these students in the project was also a strategy adopted to facilitate the approach, knowledge, and follow-up of young people in the process of school dropout, as these researchers, by being inserted into the everyday school context and the territory, and also being young themselves, facilitated and mediated the process of identification and approach.

It is worth highlighting that, in the context of the follow-up, due to the need to gain a deeper understanding and maintain more frequent contact with the young mothers, one of the essential tools was the WhatsApp messaging app, which made it possible to find ways to overcome various obstacles that made it difficult to maintain regular face-

to-face meetings. The difficulties encountered were generally caused by the instability and changes present in the daily dynamics of these young women's lives, resulting from their current socioeconomic condition and the absence and/or fragility of their social support networks, as well as the demands of motherhood and the recurring illnesses of their children.

Thus, it was from the field experiences, the singular and territorial follow-ups, and the other records – questionnaire, interviews, and field diary – that we extracted the information organized for this article. This gathered material was analyzed based on the main theoretical references studied, with a focus on social occupational therapy and gender studies.

All stages followed the ethical procedures approved by the Substantive Opinion of the Human Research Ethics Committee at Universidade Federal de São Carlos, under registration number 5.230.833, including the collection of the Informed Consent Forms, as well as the Assent Forms.

Results and Discussions

Among the important aspects that interfere with student retention, we highlight, for the purposes of this research, those considered the most significant in light of the reality of these young women. These are: issues related to gender, i.e., the experiences and consequences of being women, the fragile socio-economic situation, and how these two aspects relate to the events of motherhood and school dropout.

Thus, as two stories that were built and are constituted distinctly, we briefly present each of the young women and their respective paths, experiences, and situations, which at times resemble each other and at other times differ. Although there are similarities in how the trajectories of each of these girls unfold, it is striking how they follow different paths despite being in such similar contexts.

In this text, due to the young women's choice not to use their real names, we have opted for fictitious names: Giovana and Joana.

Giovana

Giovana is a 16-year-old white girl who lives in the Northwest Zone of Santos, more specifically in the São Manoel neighborhood; she is Iury's⁴ 1 year and 4 months old mother and, at the time, Giovana was attending the second year of high school at the same school as Joana. It is important to highlight that Giovana's neighborhood, unlike Joana's, is farther away from the school. Initial contact with Giovana was made through WhatsApp, which allowed the establishment of agreements and the beginning of a follow-up process involving a series of in-person meetings in her territory.

During the meetings with Giovana, it was possible to move through the environments that were familiar to her, such as her home and her neighborhood – spaces that consistently presented numerous vulnerabilities, such as high levels of violence, an openly armed population, drug trafficking points, floods, and inadequate infrastructure at her home for studying. The high degree of social vulnerability in the area, coupled with the

⁴Fictitious name suggested by the participant.

limited presence of the state and public policies, indicates a series of issues that directly affect the living conditions and the difficulty of this young woman's school persistence.

It was through these meetings that it became possible to get to know Giovana better as a young person, beyond her role as a mother, revealing that she is someone who is fun, enjoys studying, talking, getting ready, and seeks ways to improve her life, despite the responsibilities imposed by motherhood and the fragility of her social support networks.

Lopes et al. (2011) argue that it is through the creation and/or strengthening of social support networks that greater autonomy and social inclusion can be ensured for individuals experiencing processes of social rupture, considering this as one of the resources of social occupational therapy.

In light of the importance of social support networks for social occupational therapy, it is worth noting that Giovana's relationship with the father of her child was always problematic, as he sometimes presented himself as present and at other times as absent. Her relationship with her family is equally complex, as her father helps with some expenses, though these contributions do not fully meet her basic needs. Beyond this, there are conflicts and judgments from her mother as well, which led Giovana to leave their home when she had her son, Iury. When asked about her friendships, Giovana mentioned that after becoming pregnant, "almost no friends were left," and she only had one friend who sometimes helped her with the baby so she could go to school or do other activities. The situation described above mirrors what Aquino (2006) pointed out in a study with 674 young women mothers aged 18 to 24, where 72.1% of the participants reported a decrease in their social interactions after the birth of their children, something that does not seem to happen in the same proportion with young fathers. In this sense, it reinforces the perception that Giovana's motherhood is also a solitary experience.

The most evident demand during the follow-up that Giovana expressed was related to financial issues. Although she received some support from her father and mother, this assistance was very limited and vulnerable to the conflicts and arguments within their relationship. The same was true for her relationship with the father of her child, who at the time also worked but provided varying levels of financial support depending on the state of their interactions. This situation can be interpreted as financial violence, as **Law No. 11.340/06** (Brasil, 2006) specifically addresses financial abuse in the context of domestic violence. According to the article,

Forms of domestic and family violence against women include, among others: [...] IV – patrimonial violence, understood as any conduct that involves the retention, subtraction, destruction, partial or total of their objects, work tools, personal documents, assets, values, and rights or economic resources, including those intended to meet their needs" (Brasil, 2006, Art. 7).

Thus, Giovana would ask us about the possibilities of accessing resources through income transfer programs offered by the government, whether federal or state. However, there was a crucial issue: she did not have a document that proved her residence, and being under 18, she was legally dependent on her parents. Her guardians, in turn, had a financial situation that prevented access to income transfer programs. Even so, during the follow-up with the young woman, some attempts were made to contact the Regional Social Assistance Reference Center (CRAS) to clarify the situation. However, we

received no response, only the information that proof of residence was one of the requirements to access the benefits.

Since Giovana did not meet the criteria due to the lack of proof of her address, it was possible for her boyfriend to receive the aid, as he was over 18 and had proof of residence. However, even after obtaining the benefit, the young man did not give the money to Giovana, only helping with household expenses and the financial needs of the baby when they lived together, causing the discontinuation of the aid when Giovana returned to her mother's house. As noted by Dias (2009), once the couple is separated, the father often disclaims his responsibilities for raising and educating the child, rarely recognizing his duty to accompany the child's development.

During the follow-up period, Giovana was often separated from her partner/boyfriend, which resulted in fewer resources and support for caring for her child. Among these separations, another important demand from Giovana related to school. In her speech, she represented the school as a discouraging place, such as "not being able to wear flip-flops or the excessive number of empty classes and teachers who don't teach."

In Giovana's case, there was also a very urgent socioeconomic condition: the lack of money to attend school competing with the expenses required for the baby, a difficulty that is common in many families of different configurations, as observed by Dias and Aquino (2006). These authors highlight that most young mothers have low levels of education, as there is a need to abandon their studies to care for their children. Giovana's journey reaffirms and reinforces this hypothesis, as we can observe.

In addition to the conditions already mentioned, another problem evident in the region is the lack of spaces in Early Childhood Education, a right guaranteed by Article 208 of the Constitution, which ensures the state's duty to offer this level of education to children up to 5 years old (amended by Constitutional Amendment No. 53, 2006). This right is violated when Giovana reports the lack of vacancies in daycare centers in the region, as, according to her perception, "there are more children being born than nurseries being built." It is important to note that daycare centers are one of the most important social support networks for young mothers, given the historical struggle of the feminist movement for the existence and expansion of these spaces. It is women, not men, who are socially pressured to abandon their daily routines and activities to take care of the home or others – whether children or not (Schifino, 2016).

In this sense, it is necessary to delve into some concepts related to gender and motherhood in order to understand the challenges faced by young mothers remaining in school. Therefore, the concept of gender and its problematization are fundamental to understanding and analyzing its implications for the way social support networks are configured for young mothers, particularly for Giovana.

To begin the discussion on gender, it is essential to refer to some authors who challenge the "scientific theories" that reinforce motherhood as an instinct, part of nature, or even a biological factor. Furthermore, the historical perspective reveals sociocultural changes in relation to motherhood, especially juvenile motherhood. What was once considered natural is now widely rejected (Badinter, 1985; Perrot, 2007). This shift occurs when analyzing motherhood as one of the foundations of society and, consequently, the consolidation of the state (Perrot, 2007). In this context, the role of the state has changed throughout history. Today, the state encourages, promotes, and invests in social policies of birth control, aiming for young women to enter the labor

market, receive an education, and integrate into a consumer society. According to World Bank studies, “Brazil would increase its productivity by more than US\$ 3.5 billion if young women postponed pregnancy until after the age of 20” (Brasil, 2013b).

There are several ways to interpret motherhood, many of them tied to the conditions imposed on the female gender. Two critical positions stand out and oppose each other: the predominant view, which sees full feminine fulfillment exclusively through motherhood as the ultimate feminine act, and the opposing view, which, as previously mentioned, perceives women's bodies as oppressed and manipulated to serve the market and a society largely structured by men and for their benefit.

In line with Butler (2003), there is an ideal and socioculturally “desirable” way for a young woman to behave: conforming to social norms; accepting and limiting herself to the roles assigned to her by the family or husband; being submissive within institutions (family, school, church, etc.); knowing how to express sensuality, but only if it serves male desire; exercising her freedom within the prescriptions and limits imposed on her youthful condition, that is, not becoming a mother prematurely and outside the socially accepted marital frameworks, and preparing herself for marriage, devotion to her husband, and to her children.

Thus, several issues arise from the reality analyzed above: i) the qualification of youth motherhood as something premature or undesirable; ii) the control of the female body within the logic of production/reproduction and consumption in capitalist society, which dictates the most appropriate time for motherhood to occur; iii) the historical determination of women's procreation conditions, accompanied by the definition of the period in which motherhood should occur; iv) these highlighted aspects reveal the existence of control over these bodies, placing young mothers in a sociocultural state of subjugation, rooted in patriarchy, thus making the issue of youth motherhood a social problem with severe consequences; v) society, in general, considers that a woman, once pregnant and becoming a mother, even during her youth, should relinquish her other rights as a young person in development.

This analytical path leads us back to the starting point: the experience of accompanying Giovana. The situation becomes even more complex in the absence of social support networks, which are virtually nonexistent and fragile due to the lack of support from the partner, family, friends, school, and the state. After all, now this young woman is a mother, and in society's view, she loses all rights as a young person in the process of development, because, in this sense, motherhood removes her adolescent identity, equating her to mothers who are over 18 years old. Furthermore, it is important to highlight the lack of structure and legal support for young mothers, which further aggravates Giovana's condition, especially regarding her continuation in school, which, most of the time, was pushed to the background compared to other priorities in her life.

It is important to emphasize that the only student retention policy for pregnant young women in Brazil is maternity leave, which provides a period of absence from school for approximately 90 days, with the mandatory application of home exercises to compensate for the absence from classes, regularly carried out by schools in order to establish rules and conditions for students during pregnancy. This is stated in Law 6.202 of 1975,

Art. 1º: From the eighth month of pregnancy and for three months, the pregnant student will be assisted by the home exercise regime established by

Decree-Law No. 1.044, October 21, 1969. Sole paragraph: The start and end of the period during which the absence is allowed will be determined by a medical certificate to be presented to the school management (Brasil, 1975).

The effects of this lack of public policies and the scarcity of legal, economic, political, and social resources for young mothers are reflected in the low levels of education attained by these women. The results are jobs with lower earnings for these young women, and consequently, their teenage daughters will likely become future working mothers, perpetuating this vicious cycle of poverty across generations (Heilborn et al., 2002; Padilha, 2011).

During the follow-up, it was also possible to observe the lack of support and motivation to continue her studies from Giovana's own family, which is relatively understandable given the young woman's claim that her parents also did not finish school, thus naturalizing the situation of motherhood as a priority over education and, in a way, contributing to the maintenance of this cycle of poverty.

Joana

Joana is the other young partner in this study, with a completely different configuration from Giovana. She is a black girl, 17 years old, who lives closer to the school, located in the Saboó neighborhood, and is João's mother⁵, a 2-year-old baby, and at the time, she was in the third year of high school.

The first contact with Joana was also made through WhatsApp. Due to the challenges she faced, we scheduled our first meeting at a park near the school, where the first questionnaire was conducted.

Joana mentioned at that time that, despite the difficulties arising from the process and responsibilities of motherhood, she tried to attend school more regularly. I remember the teenager adding in her accounts that sometimes she was prevented from entering the school building because she didn't arrive at the designated time, even though she explained the reason for her tardiness: the fact that she had to drop her child off at daycare at the same time as school started. Additionally, Joana attended high school and simultaneously took a technical accounting course at the São Paulo State University (FATEC) in Cubatão – which demonstrated the young woman's commitment to gaining technical training that could provide her with better professional opportunities.

During the interview, Joana shared that her pregnancy was unplanned, and initially, the father of her child was afraid to assume fatherhood, which led him to leave for Bahia. Joana mentioned that this was a very difficult period, one filled with much loneliness, similar to Giovana's experience. During the pregnancy, she felt unwell and sometimes experienced fear and anxiety about the experience of motherhood. Although facing this period of many challenges, she always had the support and presence of her mother, with whom she has always had a very good relationship, considering her the main member of her support network in these and other moments.

⁵Fictitious name suggested by the young woman being monitored.

Through the follow-up, Joana, as a young black woman, shared in our meetings her experiences related to racial issues and how manifestations of racism directly impacted her educational journey many times. The reality she expressed allowed for a critical discussion about the school and its deeper contradictions. Thus, although the school is an educational space that should guarantee a welcoming environment, respect for diversity, and the formation of critical citizens, for Joana, it represents a demotivating space that reproduces situations of discrimination and prejudice. Despite this, Joana is strengthened and supported by a solid social support network, which enabled her to complete high school and achieve, for her story, an outcome different from what is common for young people like her.

Joana is currently with the father of her baby (1 year and 9 months old)⁶, who left the school system due to the need to work to provide for the family. According to Joana's account, he contributes to the household expenses, being responsible for working and supporting the family, alongside her mother and stepfather. As for Joana, throughout the follow-up, she was at risk of dropping out of school, as she took on the responsibilities of caring for her child, her brother (the child from her mother's current relationship with her stepfather), and the household. As Henriques (2022) points out, unpaid domestic work is a result of a social reproduction that leads to the continuous labor of performing "invisible work," completely altering the daily life of women.

Women, by performing reproductive tasks, such as caring for children, husbands, partners, or even elderly family members (without considering that many of them work a double shift), unconsciously legitimize the domination imposed by the capitalist system (Federici, 2021).

Regarding the reasons that led Joana to have difficulties staying in school, most of them relate to the responsibilities of "being a mother" to her younger brother, as the practice of motherhood and caregiving is seen as one of the main roles women are expected to perform, often feeling obligated to do so, regardless of the circumstances. Thus, we can say that:

Domestic work is much more than just cleaning the house [...]. It is about taking care of our children – our future workforce – and ensuring that they act in the way that capitalism expects of them. This means that behind every factory, every school, every office or mine there is the hidden work of millions of women (Federici, 2021, p. 29).

Joana, in the end, managed to graduate from high school, but emphasizes that it was only possible because she was in her final year and because of the support she received through the follow-up. In the young woman's view, she would not have been successful if she had to face another school year, given all the challenges she reported.

It is important to highlight the relevance of the support offered to the young woman for her high school graduation, as it was necessary to establish continuous agreements with the school management to create flexible conditions that would enable this goal. One of the agreements involved negotiating Joana's school entry time, allowing her to drop her child off at daycare and arrive about 15 minutes late for the first class. Another agreement,

⁶At the time of writing this work in July 2024.

towards the end of the school year, was the request for an extension on the deadline for submitting the assignments that would make up for the absences accumulated throughout the year, considering that Joana, as a young mother, was still overloaded with caregiving tasks. Despite the difficulties, Joana made a great effort to complete the tasks, receiving support through the follow-up to carry out her school activities, in a practice that reflected the commitment to “truly being with the other” (Freire, 2005). Thus, she was able to complete the activities and, consequently, finish high school. These approaches, strategies, and instruments constitute the theoretical-operational and ethical-political scope of social occupational therapy. This is a set of coordinated actions that enable the identification of problem-situations, the formulation of technical and operational resources adopted by social occupational therapy, and the execution of this planning for the transformation of reality. The follow-up carried out with the young mothers informs us of the potential of this resource for the necessary changes in their lives, assisting in the expansion and strengthening of the social support network, and making this follow-up itself also a constitutive part of their network.

Considerations on the WhatsApp Tool

The use of technology, specifically WhatsApp, is currently the main digital means of direct communication between users. This was an essential tool for creating bonds and maintaining an ongoing dialogue with the young women, in order to ensure that the facts, changes, achievements and ruptures that might occur in their lives were monitored.

When reflecting on the possibilities related to the use of WhatsApp as a research tool, we understood that there are contradictions in incorporating the use of technology as one of the main means of monitoring the young women. On the one hand, the use of this communication tool made it easier to overcome certain barriers, such as, for example, the difficulty of meeting in a physical place to hold face-to-face meetings with the young women, who often found themselves in unstable housing situations or had unforeseen events in their routines that made previously arranged meetings impossible. This type of situation was common due to the dynamic nature of their daily lives and the demands arising from their children, due to their health conditions, for example. On the other hand, an effort was needed to ensure that the contacts that occurred through the application did not replace the face-to-face meetings with the young women, which took place in their territory, as it is understood that, in order to carry out monitoring and better understand the realities of the subjects, it is essential to be present in the territories where they live.

Throughout this process, we realized that, despite the need for knowledge, the use of digital technologies sometimes represents a form of digital exclusion⁷, even though the use of such technologies still presents a constructive and positive potential for use during this follow-up process, the use of this communication tool required adjustments based on the daily lives of the young women being followed. In this case, by identifying the possibilities and limitations of the tool as a fundamental resource, it was necessary

⁷The concept of digital exclusion points to the conditions of access to technological innovations. This full, precarious or no access marks the differences established by the capitalist economic and social production mode. In this way, it manifests itself as one of the expressions of the social issue (Veloso, 2010), that is, of a process of private appropriation of wealth produced socially by collective work. Although these technologies are the product of work carried out collectively, workers often do not appropriate them.

to plan how contacts would be made, how messages would be written, and which days and times would be chosen to establish contact, as the aim was to optimize this tool in the procedural work of the follow-up. Therefore, it was crucial to choose strategic times for communication, considering the daily demands and needs of each individual.

It is worth noting that this tool, together with the follow-up, was essential for creating closeness and building a bond with both young women, allowing them to share their experiences regarding their school period and other important aspects that interfere with the continuity of their studies.

Final Considerations

This article stemmed from the development of a broader collective research from Rede METUIA - Terapia Ocupacional Social, and, based on the follow-up of the stories of young mothers and the theoretical studies that assisted in reflecting and analyzing this process, it was possible to understand how motherhood is primarily shaped by issues of gender, but also by class and race.

In this way, the issue of gender is tied to its social construction, that is, how society conceives and imposes principles, values, and behaviors for women, which directly interferes with the weakening of young mothers' social support networks. This occurs because the socially determined responsibility of motherhood burdens young women with multiple tasks, such as caring for another human being while also performing household chores as part of the very system that keeps them tied to their roles social reproduction of capital⁸ (Federici, 2021).

It is highlighted that although the Brazilian state advocates for the postponement of motherhood in order to envision an economically active female population that participates positively in the labor and consumer markets, when the event of motherhood occurs, young mothers remain embedded in a context of social reproduction of capital. This happens because they are subjected to the exploitation of their female condition, the overload of multiple tasks from invisible domestic labor, and, in most cases, are the sole bearers of responsibility for the future workforce that will be available for the production/reproduction of capital. Furthermore, this research highlights a failure and contradiction within the state itself in promoting effective public policies for pregnancy prevention, as the young women themselves did not plan their pregnancies nor had access to resources and means for such planning.

This reality contributes to the process of school dropout among the two young mothers, leading to profound changes in their daily lives. The young women we followed understand that there is a socially acceptable way to be a young mother, yet under the conditions imposed on them, they are denied autonomy over their bodies, the spaces they can, should, and are able to occupy, or even the social roles they may desire to have at different stages of their lives. In this sense, we established a relationship between how motherhood is socially signified and the direct interference in the process of school dropout/abandonment by young mothers.

In Giovana's case, it was possible to observe that the reception and qualified listening from social occupational therapy, which mainly considered the variables part of her daily

⁸Capital is not a material thing, but a specific social relation of production, corresponding to a specific historical formation of society, which takes shape in a material thing and infuses it with a specific social character" (Marx, 1975, p. 754, free translation).

life and the structure of her routine expanded her understanding of her reality. Such developments shape the life of this young woman, influencing her stance on seeking services, programs, or demanding and being present in certain social spaces.

Thus, this follow-up was able to alter this young woman's perception of her own life and trajectory, which did not necessarily mean it was sufficient to promote a more effective change regarding her return to the school system and completion of high school. However, we observed during Giovana's follow-up that the lack of a social support network was determinant in limiting changes in her daily life and the flexibility of her routine as a young mother, making her participation in social spaces such as school unfeasible.

Furthermore, not less important, there are several material, economic, and social motivations that influence the decision for school dropout and hinder social participation. Among them, the exclusion of these young women from a space that should be guaranteed as a right stands out: the school. These social spaces, considered fundamental for the development of their "self" as young people and individuals beyond motherhood, frequently become inaccessible. Issues related to gender inequality affect poor girls more acutely due to their limited access to essential social goods, such as education, work, remuneration, and prestige (Villela & Doreto, 2006).

It is noteworthy that capital and neoliberal society often tie these young women, as in Giovana's case, to their respective partners due to economic reasons. As they are in a condition of social vulnerability, they find themselves, to some extent, obliged to primarily perform the traditional female role, which precedes motherhood—namely, the role of the caregiver of the home. This means that, once again, the freedom and autonomy of these young women, without social support networks and resources, are delimited and controlled by others, in this case, by the supposed partner.

In Giovana's case, the socio-economic vulnerabilities, combined with family and marital conflicts, along with the lack of public policies for young mothers in the periphery, prevented her from returning to or finding alternative future plans outside of the more immediate ones in her concrete daily life: caring for her child and staying alive. Thus, the realization that the difficulty of these young mothers' persistence in school stems from this set of complex variables, mainly due to issues intersecting gender, age, and socio-racial conditions.

Regarding the follow-up process with Joana, her social support network played a key role in modifying her routine. With the presence of daycare, school, her mother, and her partner, they collectively enabled her to respond to other demands in her life, such as organizing herself to attend school, completing school tasks, and occupying other spaces of sociability.

This perspective stems from the understanding that school is one of the central elements in the composition of these young women's social support networks (Lopes & Borba, 2022), and is also an essential space for breaking the cycle of poverty. Therefore, completing high school and continuing their educational trajectories can contribute to ensuring that motherhood becomes only one of the multiple roles these young women can play throughout their lives. Based on the analysis of this research, we reinforce the continuous need for discussion and expansion of the demand for public policies aimed at supporting this segment—young mothers—ensuring them access to support networks that enable autonomy and effective management of their daily lives in a planned and effective way. Thus, it is crucial that their rights as young individuals in development are not violated but rather expanded.

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Author's Contributions

Graziela Massi and Patrícia Leme de Oliveira Borba were responsible for the conception of the text, data analysis, writing and review. Graziela Massi was also responsible for the collection and organization of the sources. All authors approved the final version of the text.

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