

**DEBATING THE UNIFIED HEALTH SYSTEM (SUS) IN THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.**

DEBATENDO O SISTEMA ÚNICO DE SAÚDE (SUS) NO ESPAÇO ESCOLAR DURANTE A PANDEMIA DO COVID-19.

DEBATE DEL SISTEMA ÚNICO DE SALUD (SUS) EN EL ESPACIO ESCOLAR EN LA PANDEMIA DEL COVID-19.

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**Abstract:** The extension activity is an attribution of the university to assist demands from the external community for development of social actions, bringing benefits to both groups. Therefore, in 2020, the extension project “Debating the SUS in the School Environment” was created by students and professors from Medical School, to insert, into two municipal schools in the city of Uruguaiana, Rio Grande do Sul, reflective and informative activities for high school students about the objectives and principles of Unified Health System (SUS) and the rights of its users. However, in March 2020, a state of pandemic was declared due to infection by Sars-Cov-2, with the recommendation from health agencies of social distancing and all non-essential activities to migrate to remote mode. Thus, this descriptive study has the objective of reporting the students experience on workshops developed in two public schools about the SUS. Different dynamics and audiovisual tools executed enabled the active participation of students in the construction of ideas about SUS. In closing, it was possible to actively build knowledge with young participants of the dynamics about the SUS and its principles, moreover the people’s social duties as users of the system.

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**Keywords:** Adolescent. Public Health. Health Promotion. COVID-19.

**Resumo:** A atividade de extensão é uma atribuição da universidade de atender demandas da comunidade externa pelo desenvolvimento de ações sociais, propiciando benefícios a ambos os grupos. Por isso, em 2020, criou-se o projeto de extensão “Debatendo o SUS no Espaço Escolar” por discentes e docentes do curso de Medicina, para inserir, em duas escolas municipais da cidade de Uruguaiana, Rio Grande do Sul, atividades reflexivas e informativas a estudantes do ensino médio acerca dos objetivos e princípios do Sistema Único de Saúde (SUS) e dos direitos dos usuários. No entanto, em março de 2020, foi declarado estado de pandemia devido à infecção por Sars-Cov-2, com recomendação dos órgãos de saúde de distanciamento social e que todas as atividades não essenciais migrassem para modalidade remota. Assim, este estudo descritivo tem como objetivo relatar a vivência de discentes acerca de oficinas realizadas sobre o SUS com adolescentes de duas escolas públicas. Foram executadas diferentes dinâmicas e ferramentas audiovisuais que possibilitaram a participação ativa dos alunos na construção de ideias sobre o SUS. Conclui-se que foi possível construir ativamente conhecimentos com os jovens participantes das dinâmicas acerca do SUS e seus princípios, além dos deveres sociais da população enquanto usuários do sistema.

**Palavras Chaves:** Adolescente. Saúde Pública. Promoção da Saúde. COVID-19.

**Resumen:** La actividad extensionista es una atribución de la universidad para atender las demandas de la comunidad externa para el desarrollo de acciones sociales, trayendo beneficios a ambos grupos. Por eso, en 2020, fue creado por estudiantes y profesores de la carrera de Medicina, el proyecto de extensión “Debatiendo el SUS en el Espacio Escolar”, para inserir, en duas escuelas municipales de la ciudad de Uruguayana, Rio Grande do Sul, actividades reflexivas e informativas para estudiantes de secundaria sobre los objetivos y principios del Sistema Único de Salud (SUS) y los derechos de los usuarios. Sin embargo, en marzo de 2020 se declaró el estado de pandemia por contagio de Sars-Cov-2, con la recomendación de las agencias de salud de distanciamiento social y que todas las actividades no esenciales migren a la modalidad remota. Por lo tanto, este estudio descriptivo tiene el objetivo de relatar la vivencia de los estudiantes acerca de actividades sobre el SUS desarrollados en duas escuelas públicas. Se realizaron diferentes dinámicas y herramientas audiovisuales que permitieron la participación activa de los estudiantes en la construcción de ideas. Se logró el objetivo de

construir activamente conocimiento con los jóvenes participantes de las dinámicas sobre el SUS y sus principios, además de los deberes sociales de la población como usuaria del sistema.

**Palabras Clave:** Adolescente. Salud pública. Promoción de la salud. COVID-19.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The mission and duty of universities in the country, especially public ones, are to sustain the academic tripod, which consists of the articulation of research, teaching and university extension. The extension activity is an attribution to the university to meet the social needs of the popular layers through social actions developed by academics under the supervision of teachers coordinating projects (JESINE, 2004). The mandatory execution of extension activities in Brazilian higher education institutions dates from 1968, corroborates the need for the university to leave the restricted academic space to fulfill the social commitment to the reality and needs of the population (BISCARDE et al., 2014; SANTANA et al., 2021).

In addition, the extension action provides interaction between academic knowledge and popular daily life and creates a transforming and emancipatory space, with the purpose that the population exposes their demands and develops their reflective capacity in the face of their social determinants. When these actions are developed in the school environment, the teaching-learning process is potentiated and collaborates in the formation of more conscious and active children and adolescents in the face of their social obligations, in addition to acting as propagators of knowledge in their environment (TABILE and JACOMETO, 2017).

Faced with this, the importance of higher education courses in the health area is noted in taking to school content related to health promotion and disease prevention, as well as on the rights of users of the Unified Health System (SUS), their respective duties and how access to services is made, in addition to discussing and reflecting on the principles of the SUS.

Faced with the presented context, this article has as a general objective to report the experience of students about workshops held on the SUS with adolescents from a public school.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This is a descriptive study, a report of experience modality with a qualitative approach. The descriptive research aims to describe a certain event, reality or situation (GIL, 2008). The

qualitative study responds to very particular questions, as it is concerned, in the social sciences, with a level of reality that cannot be quantified, bringing as analysis the distribution of some event in a population or community. For this, it uses as a basis questions such as: who, when, where, how and why, in which variables are studied about the diversity of people, places and time (PEREIRA, 1995). In other words, it works with the universe of meanings, motives, aspirations, beliefs, values and attitudes, which corresponds to a deeper space of relationships, processes and phenomena that cannot be reduced to the operationalization of variables (MINAYO, 2016).

The experience report is a lived experience that has relevance to the academic environment by understanding phenomena of intervention possibilities in the area and assisting in academic training, and also in the professional (MUSSI et al., 2021).

As this manuscript is an experience report, it is necessary to first contextualize about some challenges that the team faced during its execution. On February 26, 2020, the Ministry of Health of Brazil confirmed the first case of COVID-19 in the country, and, 13 days later, the Health Department of Rio Grande do Sul confirmed the first case of infection by the virus in the state. Faced with this scenario, by recommendation of health agencies, all daily, work and educational activities needed to be modified, and what was previously carried out in person became a remote activity, mainly via the internet (NUNES et al., 2021). With this, the full execution of the extension action was hampered, as the target audience of the project - students from public schools - had their school activities completely suspended in March 2020, in addition to many students from higher education courses, among them those responsible for the execution and organization of the project. In this sense, with undergraduate activities suspended and/or postponed, it was necessary to adapt to new teaching practices in the midst of the social distancing situation.

In order not to interrupt the extension practice, due to its great social relevance, even during the suspension of academic activities by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) due to the COVID-19 pandemic in the country, it was decided to continue the project via remote teaching.

In this way, the project started in April 2020, when the active team carried out essential planning for the subsequent execution of the project, such as: search for updated bibliographies, creation of strategies, direct contact with the direction of a municipal school, assembly of a preliminary schedule and separation of materials and manuals from the Ministry of Health that address the SUS. Until the month of September 2020, the project was not implemented with the inclusion of the school community due to the difficulties imposed by the pandemic.

Already during the month of September 2020, the structure of the activities to be applied was organized, through a meeting between the project coordinator and the scholarship holders. In October, a meeting was held with the vice-director of the Marechal Cândido Rondon State School, in order to expose the objectives of the project and agree on the following actions. It is emphasized that this school was chosen for regional reasons.

With the purpose of facilitating the beginning of activities, a group was created on WhatsApp in which the 3rd year students interested in the activity were included, together with the vice-director. Through this resource, information was disseminated about the execution of the project, such as content to be covered and application dates, which were in accordance with the availability of most participants, obtained from an online form.

During these two months, audiovisual materials were produced, such as videos and slides to be presented in the action. In November, during a meeting with the project coordinator, the materials produced were evaluated and finalized. The first activity was carried out at the end of November and some students from the 3rd year of high school and the vice-director of the school were present. This first activity aimed to present and discuss the history of the SUS and its operation. In this context, its doctrinal and organizational principles were presented, of which: universality, equity, integrality in health services and actions, decentralization in health, regionalization and hierarchization and social participation (BRASIL, 1990).

In this sense, to make the activity more dynamic, we carried out an exercise entitled "myth or truth" in which students could express their knowledge and bring questions that resulted in debate. From this, some doubts about the functioning of the SUS and the role of society as actors in health could be cleared up. A few days later, feedback was given on the activity with the project advisor, where the success of the activity was perceived, with regard to the objective of building a reflective debate around the SUS with high school students. In the month of December, the second activity was carried out with the presence of 1 high school student and the school's vice-director, on which occasion the discussion was about Primary Health Care, its structure, its role as the gateway to the SUS, as well as about the Family Health Strategy and its conformation.

In the continuity of the activity, in order to make the activity more interactive, hypothetical situations of users who needed health care were listed and the present student was given the opportunity to respond to the cases. The final reflection was based on the resolvability of Primary Care and its ability to meet most of the demands of the community. Again, after the activity, feedback was carried out with the project coordinator, at which time the potentialities

and limitations encountered during the execution of the action were discussed, highlighting the success in achieving the listed objectives. Finally, participation certificates equivalent to 2 hours were made for the students present in each activity. It is emphasized that the entire execution of the project occurred remotely via Google Meet.

The activities of 2021, unlike the previous year, were planned for face-to-face application. In June, contact was made with the coordination of the new school and the production of new audiovisual resources for the dissemination of the project.

In July it was possible to visit the CIEP - Ambassador José Luzardo school to define the dates and times of the face-to-face meetings with the students according to the availability of the teachers. This School was chosen for reasons of social vulnerability of the neighborhood, in addition to the fact that young people who reside in this neighborhood have difficulties in accessing social, economic and cultural opportunities.

On the 12th of this same month, the first activity took place with the students of the 1st and 2nd year, during which the history of the SUS and its doctrinal and organizational principles were briefly presented. On the occasion, after a presentation by the scholarship-holding academics through slides, 14 adolescents, aged between 16 and 18 years, participated in a "myths and truths" dynamic, which provided a moment of dialogue and exchange of experiences. We left as a task the search for the leader of the neighborhood where they lived so that they could appropriate the process of popular participation in the SUS in the municipal context.

In the following week, the 2nd face-to-face meeting took place, in which the levels of Health Care were discussed, especially Primary Care. 17 high school students were present. A slide presentation was made explaining the functioning of Primary Care, within the scope of the Family Health Strategies, and their objectives. Next, a floor plan of the physical structure of a Basic Health Unit was displayed, explaining its potential. Afterwards, a dynamic was carried out with the students, who were divided into trios and pairs, to answer which level of care should be sought by the fictitious patient. A prize was given to the winning trio, to encourage the participation of students in the dynamics and consolidate knowledge. Finally, the health application of Uruguaiana, App SAU, was demonstrated, which brings important information about the health services of the municipality (BUENO et al, 2023). In addition, the instagram of the city hall was also presented, so that students were encouraged to take part in the health situation of their municipality through social networks that they use frequently, in addition to being a source of information.

Already in the month of August, after the organization of the activities, the 3rd face-to-face meeting was held. Initially, concepts covered in previous activities were briefly resumed, in order to promote greater interaction with the students and a review, on the part of these also, of the subjects already presented. The students were divided into 3 trios, with materials for making posters, in which the students should explain, in their own words, the meaning of the terms social participation, decentralization and regionalization; equity and equality; and universality and integrality. Afterwards, the trios presented their productions to the large group.

In the month of September, the 4th face-to-face meeting took place for the execution of the project and on the occasion a slide presentation was held on the Rights of SUS Users, introducing the Health Users' Rights Charter, according to the Ministry of Health, providing for the current legislation (BRASIL, 2011). To finish, a dynamic of Myths and Truths was proposed so that students could interact.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Brazilian university education is structured around three main pillars: teaching, research, and extension. The latter, originating in 19th-century England, became mandatory in 1968 and was carried out through "courses and special services extended to society," as stipulated by law no. 5,540 of that year. Over time, it became an important means of connection between students and the socio-political reality in which they were immersed, as occurred during the military dictatorship (Medeiros, 2017). During this historical period, university students were expected to carry out actions with the neediest populations, as happened in the widely disseminated Rondon Project, for example.

In this context, in the 19th century, the idea of extension as a means of democratizing academic knowledge and new technologies in a mutual exchange between students and the community was strengthened, with the aim of promoting transformations and improvements in the daily lives of individuals, as well as in the environment in which they live. Today, 54 years later, activities are carried out with different audiences, such as the elderly, children, and institutionalized people, for example, aiming to appropriate them with new knowledge and make them active subjects in the transformation of their space (Medeiros, 2017). From this, the evolution and importance of extensionist action in the country is undeniable, both for educational and welfare activities, and corroborates the need to find ways to carry it out even in adverse conditions.

Furthermore, the inclusion of extensionist academic activities in the public-school environment aims to integrate the experiences of young people at different levels of education, in order to promote the exchange of technical and popular knowledge. For this, the graduates, supervised by their teachers, carry out different dynamics, games and use audiovisual tools that allow the active participation of students in the construction of ideas and concepts. In this way, the articulation between education and health in these environments favors the formation of students empowered about the basic principles of health promotion and disease prevention. With regard to knowledge concerning the SUS, it is essential that the population appropriates the principles that guide it and its attributions as users of public services (Medeiros, 2017).

The doctrinal principles of the SUS are three and include: universality (access of the entire population to health services), equity (consideration of the differences between individuals, in order to prioritize those with the greatest needs) and integrality of health care for people, that is, the articulation between prevention, promotion and recovery in the care provided to each citizen. The organizational principles include: decentralization, regionalization and hierarchization of the system and participation and social control (Brasil, 1990).

These principles point to democratization in health actions and services, enabling universal access, regardless of contributing or not to social security or other prerequisites, organizing itself in a decentralized way, in order to facilitate access and participation of citizens in decisions and directions of health policy. It is important to emphasize the organizational principle referring to participation and social control, which, according to the Ministry of Health, is the constitutional guarantee that the population, through its representative entities, will participate in the process of formulating public health policies, controlling and implementing them, at various levels - from local to federal (Brasil, 1990).

In this context, participation presupposes the democratization of knowledge of the health-disease process and services, encouraging the community to effectively exercise social control in the management of the system. In this context, the Health Council stands out, which, in the scope of action (National, State or Municipal), on a permanent and deliberative basis, is a collegiate body composed of representatives of the government, service providers, health professionals and users, acts in the formulation of strategies and in the control of the execution of health policy in the corresponding instance, including economic and financial aspects, whose decisions will be approved by the head of the legally constituted power in each sphere of government (Brasil, 1990). On the other hand, it is important to emphasize that during the experience in the workshops with adolescents in the two schools, it was noticeable that they



knew little about the principles of the SUS, that is, in the daily lives of our actions, it was evident that most young people are unaware of the existence of the Health Councils and the importance of the population's contribution to the formulation and implementation of local public policies, demonstrating that social participation is not accessible to everyone.

In this sense, the contribution of the university, especially university extension, is understood as introducing reflective and informative activities and workshops with high school students about the objectives and principles of the SUS, even though the COVID-19 pandemic, which began in 2020, disfavored the execution of academic practices, including extensionist practices, and this brought challenges to be overcome, and even so, it was possible and profitable to continue extensionist activities.

In November 2019, in a city near Wuhan, China, the first case of respiratory infection caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus in the world was identified. Soon after, cases multiplied exponentially across different countries of the world and the first case in Brazil was confirmed in February 2020, days before the WHO declared the state of contamination by this coronavirus a pandemic. With this, it was quickly recommended to maintain social isolation and paralysis of non-essential activities, commercial, leisure and teaching, in order to reduce the potential for contamination of the population and the practically inevitable collapse of health systems. On this occasion, local authorities, under the command of the National Council and state education councils, began planning teaching activities for public and private institutions of basic and higher education, according to the financial and structural conditions of both the institutions and the students enrolled in them.

However, far beyond the psychosocial changes, the reality imposed by the pandemic worsened and evidenced scenarios of socioeconomic difficulty, impaired the population's access to consumer goods, in addition to exacerbating the unemployment situation. Thus, with the need to use technological devices (Notebooks and/or Smartphones) and even internet connection to continue the planned activities, it was directly confronted with the limited access to these resources by public school students.

In this context, the federal IESs encountered difficulties related both to the inability to carry out remote teaching and to access their students and identify their social demands. In order to overcome these adversities, the coordination of universities and schools carried out surveys, via e-mail, in order to collect information on students' access conditions to internet connection and computers, for example. From this, some institutions implemented strategies to promote the acquisition of equipment for individual use and internet data packages necessary for

adequate access to the proposed activities. With regard to private institutions of basic and higher education, the reality was different and many of them did not even interrupt their calendars (Nunes et al., 2021 and Remi et al., 2021).

At the end of 2020, still under the conditions imposed by social isolation, efforts were made to implement the project remotely with students in the 3rd year of high school in a public school in the municipality of Uruguaiana/RS. At the time, 80% of Brazilian capitals already offered remote teaching via the internet, despite the different access conditions of the population to information technologies and the social situation in which young people were inserted. Difficulty in clarifying doubts with teachers, lack of adequate space to study, lack of access to study materials and equipment to attend classes were some of the obstacles encountered by Brazilian students of different levels of education during the pandemic. Moreover, according to the TIC covid19 panel, 56% of internet users over 16 years old questioned in the survey were not following school/university activities in the last month because they needed to seek employment to help with family expenses and 48% of them did not do so because they needed to take care of the house, siblings, children or relatives (Brasil, 2020).

These national data meet the local difficulties encountered when carrying out the extension project, considering that the maximum number of students present in the activities proposed by the remote training project was 3 students and it is observed, unfortunately, that the adversities transcend the determinants of digital exclusion related to access to electronic devices and quality internet. In line with the described, after the easing of social isolation restrictions in 2021, and with the return of face-to-face classes, greater adherence of students to the extensionist dynamics carried out in the school environment was obtained.

Finally, despite the great impact caused by the COVID-19 pandemic on the adherence of students to the remote activities of the project "Debating the SUS in the School Space" and considering the importance of health education in the environment of public schools, the objective of actively building knowledge and concepts with the young participants of the dynamics about the SUS and its principles, in addition to the social duties of the population as users of the health system, was achieved.

Furthermore, the importance of empowering the population about the Health System, their rights and duties, which contributes to the proper exercise of their citizenship and the full use of public services, is noted. Thus, extensionist actions in health enable learning for both the internal community (students and professors of the medical course) and the external community (adolescents and teachers of schools) with the socialization of knowledge about the SUS and

with this it was possible to stimulate autonomy in relation to their rights and duties as users of the SUS.

## CONCLUSIONS

Although the planning, development, and execution of the project were hampered by limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and its repercussions on implementation, there was a need to continue activities adapted to the reality of schools and the university. This was done in order to achieve one of the main goals of the project, to discuss the history, foundations, functioning, and potential of the SUS with young students in the municipality of Uruguaiana, overcoming some initial difficulties of access and adherence to meetings.

Furthermore, the importance of extension activities in the formation of citizenship is evident, with a key role in the education of children and young people, improving their knowledge about public health and their rights as users of the SUS. This is also shown in the moment when information about this system is passed on, so that more and more people can appropriate the objectives and guidelines of the SUS, becoming aware and mobilized of their roles as contributors in the dissemination of health for the population.

Finally, research and extension projects that contribute to the discussion and bring evidence that improves and encourages the development and expansion of the public system are of extreme relevance, at a time when they allow for the improvement of Brazilian health and the SUS, so that there is more and more access for the entire population and greater resolution in the conduct, promoting better quality of life for all people and always trying to approach a concept of more comprehensive health.

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