

Reflection Article/Essay

Occupational therapists in education? Routes and possibilities for/in Latin America and the Caribbean from a Community of Practice

¿Terapeutas ocupacionales en la educación? Caminos y posibilidades para/en América Latina y Caribe desde una Comunidad de Práctica

Terapeutas ocupacionais na educação? Caminhos e possibilidades para/na América Latina e Caribe a partir de uma Comunidade de Prática

Magno Nunes Farias^a , Javiera Salazar Rivera^b , Pedro Sánchez^c , Lina Chambilla^d , Concetta Giorgini^e , Eliana I. Parra Esquivel^f , Carolina López^g , Jessica Massuco^h 

^aUniversidade de Brasília – UNB, Brasília, DF, Brasil.

^bUniversity of Exeter, School of Education, Devon, England.

^cUniversidad Peruana de Ciencias Aplicadas – UPC, Lima, Peru.

^dUniversidad Mayor de San Andrés – UMSA, La Paz, Bolivia.

^eInstituto Venezolano de los Seguros Sociales, Caracas, Venezuela.

^fUniversidad Nacional de Colombia, Bogotá, Colombia.

^gCentro de Terapia Ocupacional Club de Infancia, Bogotá, Colombia.

^hEscuela de Educación Especial 502, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

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Abstract

This paper results from discussions carried out in a Community of Practice of Occupational Therapists from Latin America and the Caribbean who work with Education (TOE Latin America). TOE Latin America arises to strengthen the collective work of occupational therapists in the field of education within the specificities of Latin American social organizations. Therefore, here we come to share a little of this path, presenting three themes in this essay: First, we describe the concrete reasons for our existence, how we work and what the group's proposals really are; Then, we bring a central debate on the right to education and the historical problems that involve Latin America and its populations, as well as identifying the role and importance of the Occupational Therapist in access to equal conditions in education; Finally, it seems relevant to point out the emergence of the current debate that involves the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on the lives of

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individuals and populations, which directly interferes with education, to say once again about our therapeutic-occupational task facing this.

Keywords: Occupational Therapy, Education, School, Inclusion, Professional Practice.

Resumen

Este trabajo es el resultado de discusiones realizadas en una *Comunidad de Práctica para Terapeutas Ocupacionales Latinoamericanos y del Caribe que trabajan con la Educación (TOE Latinoamérica)*. TOE Latinoamérica surge con el fin de fortalecer el trabajo colectivo de los terapeutas ocupacionales en el campo de la educación dentro de las especificidades de las organizaciones sociales latinoamericanas. Por tanto, aquí venimos a compartir un poco de este camino, presentando tres tópicos en este ensayo: primero, ponemos las razones concretas de nuestra existencia, como trabajamos y cuáles son en realidad las propuestas del grupo; luego, traemos un debate central sobre el derecho a la educación y los problemas históricos que involucran a América Latina y sus poblaciones, así como identificar el rol y significancia del Terapeuta Ocupacional en el acceso a condiciones de igualdad en educación; finalmente, nos parece pertinente señalar el surgimiento del debate actual que involucra a la pandemia COVID-19 y sus impactos en la vida de individuos y poblaciones, que interfiere directamente en la educación, para decir una vez más sobre nuestra tarea terapéutica-ocupacional ante esto.

Palabras-clave: Terapia Ocupacional, Educación, Escuela, Inclusión, Práctica Profesional.

Resumo

Este trabalho é resultado de discussões realizadas em uma Comunidade de Prática para Terapeutas Ocupacionais latino-americanos e caribenhos que trabalham com Educação (TOE Latino América). TOE Latino América surge com o objetivo de fortalecer o trabalho coletivo de terapeutas ocupacionais no campo da educação dentro das especificidades das organizações sociais latino-americanas. Por isso, aqui passamos a compartilhar um pouco desse caminho, apresentando três temas neste ensaio: primeiro, colocamos as razões concretas para nossa existência, como trabalhamos e quais são as propostas do grupo; em seguida, trazemos um debate central sobre o direito à educação e os problemas históricos envolvendo a América Latina e suas populações, bem como identificamos o papel e a importância do Terapeuta Ocupacional no acesso a condições iguais na educação; por fim, parece pertinente apontar o surgimento do debate atual envolvendo a pandemia COVID-19 e seus impactos na vida de indivíduos e populações, que interfere diretamente na educação, para dizer mais uma vez sobre nossa tarefa terapêutico-ocupacional diante disso.

Palavras-chave: Terapia Ocupacional, Educação, Escola, Inclusão, Prática Profissional.

Introduction

This paper results from discussions held in a *Community of Practice for Latin American Occupational Therapists who work with Education (TOE Latin America)*. Souza (2021, p. 195, our translation) when talking about the challenges of inserting occupational therapy in the field of education, especially in Brazil, proposes that

[...] the horizon to look for are the possibilities of actions of occupational therapists oriented to basic formal education of quality, public, diverse, radically inclusive, therefore democratic, that offers the full development of the person, preparation for the exercise of citizenship, providing everyone with the necessary tools for good living.

Therefore, a Community of Practice of Occupational Therapists is constituted, especially focused on education to strengthen collective work within the specificities of Latin American social organizations.

A Community of Practice: Why Do We Exist and What Are the Proposals?

Occupational Therapy (OT) has been historically building its position and identity in Latin America, within a diversity of methodologies, theories, strategies, and demands, announcing different ways of doing and thinking about OT in recent years. As part of this process, the authentic knowledge of the role of the Occupational Therapist has allowed the inclusion of professionals within the educational system, both in special and regular education centers (Pereira, 2018; Pereira et al., 2021; Rocha et al., 2018; Villagra, 2019; Souza, 2021; Bello, 2010). Taking this fact into account, the **Community of Practice TOE - Latin America** is created in 2020, bringing together an independent group of Latin American and Caribbean Occupational Therapists interested in the contribution and development of OT in education in our region.

This community emerges from the experience of the therapist Javiera Salazar Rivera¹ in the School-Based Occupational Therapy-SBOT International Network, which is a group that gathers Occupational Therapists mainly from European and North American countries. With the aim of creating similar spaces for the exchange of experiences that did not previously exist, various therapists, who form the foundations of this community, were contacted through the support of the Latin American Confederation of Occupational Therapists-CLATO. These foundations were built through monthly encounters/meetings, in which issues of interest are discussed, which allows for the consolidation of this field of practice and its production of knowledge in our region.

At the date of submission (March 2022), the community has close to 40 members representing 11 countries, including Chile, Colombia, Argentina, Costa Rica, Peru, Bolivia, Venezuela, Brazil, Mexico, El Salvador, and Panama. However, TOE-Latin America is created as an open and available community for all Occupational Therapists who research, work or are interested in the role, function, and practice of OT in the educational context. Thus, the number of members varies constantly, aiming to include

¹Javiera Salazar Rivera is one of the authors of this document and has authorized the use of her name in it.

as many countries as possible. This allows accompanying and supporting each other to contrast various social realities that can directly impact the profession in the educational context, acting as a collaborating entity from a professional and personal point of view.

Thus, TOE Latin America works as a community of practice, engaging in learning and sharing work, interacting periodically, sharing resources, solving problems, and creating new ways of doing things. The community is organized into four work committees, including the organization committee, in charge of coordinating the monthly meetings, the communication committee, in charge of making the community known to the public, research committee, in charge of developing research projects and articles, and the committee of good practices in charge of delivering information regarding the evidence of OT in the educational context.

These characteristics echo what the literature indicates for communities of practice, which are defined as a joint initiative characterized by three main elements: a domain of interest, a community of people who learn from each other, and a shared practice (Wenger & Wenger-Traynor, 2015). These characteristics are relevant in contexts where professionals frequently work as members of interdisciplinary teams and participate collectively in various activities. Also, communities of practice are characterized by the mutual commitment of their members, which unites them to form a single social entity (Wenger, 1991). These characteristics are based on constructive theories mainly from Lev Vygotsky and John Dewey, who attach great importance to the social context of learning.

In OT, Barry et al. (2017) carried out a bibliographic review about communities of practice and their contribution to the continuous professional development of qualified Occupational Therapists. They found that these communities provide opportunities to share and translate knowledge, and reflect on action and learning across borders. This is relevant for Occupational Therapists, who are constantly encouraged to develop and maintain professional networks to support ongoing professional development and facilitate the acquisition of new knowledge and concepts relevant to their professional roles (McKinstry et al., 2009).

For TOE Latin America, the school is one of the places where children, adolescents and young people spend the greatest amount of time, being a critical and fundamental environment for academic development, the exercise of citizenship, social participation, and mental and physical health. In addition, human occupation with meaning is essential for the quality of life of all its members. Occupational Therapists have much to offer in this context, promoting social inclusion in daily life and occupational performance in various areas that include learning in classrooms, participation, and interaction with others during breaks, lunch rooms, in extracurricular activities, among others.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, there is no knowledge, so far, of another community of practice that includes Occupational Therapists who work in the educational context. Thus, the creation of this group reflects an important milestone for an area that is usually invisible and about which little is known in our region. Despite this, the creation and development of this community, like any social group, has faced various challenges. For instance, the date of its creation was amid the COVID-19 Pandemic, which forced it to be conceived as a virtual community of practice from the beginning. This means that its members use information and communication

technologies as their main mode of interaction, which may include social networks, web applications, online platforms or forums, wikis, and podcasts (Dubé et al., 2005). Although this feature limits the access of those members who do not use information technologies, or who do not find it easy to manage them (Hurtubise et al., 2019), it allows the community to connect with Occupational Therapists of various countries, despite geographical distances and time differences.

This community has been meeting monthly for more than a year and working together to meet its objectives, which have been achieved through various strategies such as the creation of work committees. This has allowed the roles of community members to be multiple, which in the literature has been described as necessary for its success (Li et al., 2009; Barnett et al., 2012). Additionally, the community gathers a group of Latin American professionals with various levels of training, different socio-cultural and economic realities, and a diversity of experience and workload. This sometimes generates differences in the participation in the various existing roles in the community, which have been emerging in the course of collaborative work. This diversity creates opportunities and challenges at a collaborative and logistical level since any community of practice requires the active participation of its members to be sustained over time. Within this perspective, there is awareness of these difficulties, so strategies are developed that allow members of the community to participate according to their times, interests, and potentialities. Also, the community is constantly reviewing its actions and strategies to motivate existing members or new Occupational Therapists who want to be part of it.

Right to school education² in Latin America and the Caribbean and the ways of OT

In the text *Descobrimento da América*, Freire (2000, p. 34) states: "I don't think anything of the 'discovery' because what happened was conquest. And about the conquest, my thought, in the end, is rejection". Thereby, the author makes an important analysis of the process of colonization of this territory, which historically, within various movements for change, has (re) produced processes of oppression to those subjects marked by poverty, and ethnic/racial discrimination. The marginalization and other forms of oppression that expose these issues today, make up the groups that have the greatest difficulties in accessing and staying in formal education.

Some reflections of the above can be seen in the data from the Global Monitoring Report on Education in Latin America and the Caribbean, called *Inclusión y Educación: todos, sin excepción*, from 2020 (Organização das Nações Unidas para a Educação, a Ciência e a Cultura, 2020a), which shows some problems such as:

- Latin America and the Caribbean continues to be the most unequal region in the world, which directly reflects the consolidation of an educational system for all.

²TOE began by bringing together therapists who work or are interested in the school context. However, the group's discussions generated a debate around the need to extend this approach to all educational stages. Being a community of practice, we are constantly evolving, so, although in some aspects we refer to work in schools, there is recognition of the educational process as a whole.

Across 21 countries, the richest 20% are, on average, 5 times more likely than the poorest 20% to complete upper secondary education.

- In Panama, 21% of indigenous men aged 20 to 24 have completed secondary education, compared to 61% of their non-indigenous peers in 2016. In Paraguay and Honduras, 32% of indigenous peoples are illiterate. Afro-descendants were 14% less likely in Peru and 24% less likely in Uruguay than non-Afro-descendants to complete secondary education in 2015.
- On average, children between 12 and 17 years old with disabilities were 10 percentage points less likely to be in school than those without disabilities. Furthermore, for students with disabilities, laws provide for education in separate settings in 42% of countries and inclusive education in only 16%; the rest opt for combinations of segregation and integration.
- Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students in seven countries reported facing a hostile school environment; those facing higher levels of victimization were at least twice as likely to skip school.
- Gender parity in participation and completion of education has been achieved in most Latin American and Caribbean countries in primary education, but the region has considerable disparity to the detriment of men in secondary and tertiary education. This theme permeates the logic of the school, which reproduces gender stereotypes, for example, in the performance of learning in the first years of primary school, boys outperform girls in mathematics. Thus, gender roles and social expectations can influence school dropout. In addition, being a girl brings disadvantages that impact education, since girls are more likely to be involved in domestic and care work, marry or have children at an early age, and suffer domestic violence, rape, and sexual violence.

Thus, we present here some of the several issues related to access and permanence in education as a right, as established by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. However, as Gentili (2009, p. 1069) states.

Today there are more opportunities to access school than 60 years ago when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was proclaimed, but forms of educational exclusion and denial of school opportunities have become more complex and widespread for those who, being within the system, continue to have their right to education denied.

In this sense, there are many challenges to consolidating a democratic school, based on what Freire (1987) proposes as a liberating education, in which everyone has the same opportunities to choose to experience participation and school and social insertion. Give a place to the school as a space that must be built on two axes: contribute to the radical development of the compensatory function, which seeks to alleviate inequalities and expand life possibilities; and, as a place of reconstruction of knowledge and experiences, where everyone, without exception, can have access to debates and knowledge to become autonomous subjects in social practices (Pérez Gómez, 1998). This would be a school recognized as a space for exchanges and democratic actions, in

which occupational therapists can contribute, as the field of Social OT proposes (Lopes et al., 2008; Pan & Lopes, 2020).

Santos (2019) proposes a complementary perspective on the uncertainty that can go through the practices in education that are developed in OT. This has to do with the possibility of historical recognition, the current process that may be going through the pandemic, and at the same time the possibility of denunciation. That is, to understand the phenomena of education, the OT must know the classroom, the institution, the educational system, and the history that gives context to all the above. The probability of indignation at the inequities of human existence is favored by actions after reflection. He then states: “[...] an education for nonconformity must be nonconformist. It must result in knowledge and practices that are uncomfortable in the face of that same suffering” (Santos, 2019, p. 18). That is, being trained or being an Occupational Therapist does not imply raising awareness of indignation, this is something that should be discussed, promoted, favored, and evidenced in the training for the consolidation of Occupational Therapists who permanently claim the issue of Human and Social Rights in people's lives, and favor human occupation and participation as inalienable rights. In this sense, Santos proposes the pedagogy of conflict and links it with history, denunciation, communication, and the articulation of fields of knowledge. In this last point, one of the fundamental bases of OT is found.

The work of the Occupational Therapist within the educational field responds to the very definition of OT, whose main objective is to allow people to participate in the activities of daily life. Thus, despite the challenges that surround the field of knowledge and practices of OT in education, we understand that the actions are aimed at the production of increasingly inclusive education, in a radical perspective, of all the excluded, for some reason, of school dynamics (Pereira, 2018; Rocha et al., 2018; World Federation of Occupational Therapists, 2020). From this perspective, the search for the creation of moments and spaces that favor the participation of all students is fundamental, especially those who are often markers of class, race, disability, sexuality, or excluded by the school culture. This will contribute to overcoming the historical processes of oppression, as Bittar & Bittar (2012) suggest.

That is, from 2000 to 2009, the Organization for Education, Science, and Culture (Unesco), has developed international guidelines favoring the issues of equity, relevance, and social inclusion. In the last decade, it has promoted the issues of inclusive and equitable education and the same time, the trends on assurance and continuous improvement. It has favored issues of values in education and stressed the concern for the institutional organization; elements that also impact OT education practices.

In dialogue with Rocha et al. (2018), it is urgent to combat the mechanisms that distance children, adolescents, and young people from schools, to focus on understanding the attitudes that can hinder learning and the factors that can promote and support learning and social participation of the educational field, to “[...] build a comprehensive, flexible, differentiated education, in which everyone, without exception, has the same rights of access to school and to a transformative, free and quality public education” (Rocha et al., 2018, p. 15, our translation). For example, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities recognizes that disability is an evolving concept and that it results from the interaction between people with disabilities and attitudinal and environmental barriers. These attitudes and

environmental barriers prevent their full and effective participation in society on equal terms with others.

Thus, with this professional action project, the intention is to encourage and collaborate so that the school environment trains students to be themselves and at the same time for a school and social participation in which they can face difficulties, being capable agents to produce and enjoy educational, social and cultural goods (Manacorda, 2007; Freire, 1987). This is only possible from and within the school, but in an intersectoral perspective, focused on access to rights and social participation, considering that confronting situations of oppression, vulnerability, and disruption of the social support network is only possible from practices that articulate social policies and their public facilities, in the context of education, culture, health, social assistance, among others. Interdisciplinarity is also central in actions that involve working together with other professionals, and the students and their families.

Thus, by understanding the historical, social, cultural, and political aspects of Latin America, and each context of its countries, territories, and communities, OT in education can contribute to the construction of an inclusive educational process, thinking, together with others professionals and communities paths for this work that focuses on daily multiples occupations and activities³, looking at social participation.

Education in the Current Context of the Pandemic in Latin America: Commitment to OT

The COVID-19 pandemic is having a profound impact on the lives, health, and well-being of individuals, families, and communities around the world (World Federation of Occupational Therapists, 2020). Education is one of the systems that have suffered a great impact, accentuating the differences and difficulties in how people carry out their daily lives, occupations, and activities. Thus, OT, like many professions, has had to rethink and restructure its roles to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring and reaffirming the importance of its contributions in the face of the complexity of the demands of the moment we live in (Malfitano et al., 2020; Farias & Leite Junior, 2021).

At the educational level, this emergency has led to the massive closure of face-to-face activities in educational institutions in more than 190 countries to prevent the spread of the virus and mitigate its impact (Organização das Nações Unidas para a Educação, a Ciência e a Cultura, 2020b). More than 160 million students in Latin America and the Caribbean have stopped having face-to-face classes, which causes negative effects in the different social sectors, in addition to health and education, employment, and the evolution of poverty (Comissão Econômica para a América Latina e o Caribe, 2020).

The closure of schools represents the most important simultaneous crisis that all educational systems in the world have suffered in our time. Learning will be reduced, and school dropouts will increase, especially among the most disadvantaged people.

³It is worth pointing out the differences in terms of the references and guiding principles of practice and the production of knowledge among the members of the Community of Practice, and especially among the authors of this article. Therefore, sometimes this work brings concepts from different fields, duly referential, for example the option of using the categories of social justice (Farias & Leite Junior, 2021) and occupational justice (Parra-Esquivel, 2015), as well how to bring together the categories of occupation, daily life and activity to point out and contemplate diversity. However, we do not intend to delve into this debate in this article.

Most students will stop learning academic subjects. The reduction in learning may be greater for preschool children, since their families are less likely to prioritize their learning during school closures, given the social context of lack of support and resources, associated with the precariousness of work, an aspect that is aggravated by the absence of a school with a support network (World Bank, 2020).

This situation, in addition to having a strong impact on the different areas of child development of this generation, has an impact on the development of occupations, activities, and daily life of all members of the family, changing the meaning, form, and purposes of everyday actions in their lives. Hence the importance of developing strategies to help them assume their occupations and daily lives (Malfitano et al., 2020), promoting “[...] strategies of equality and recognition, in the democratization of possibilities to continue life, autonomously and as citizens during a pandemic and after it” (Farias & Leite Junior, 2021, p. 11), including in the field of access and permanence in education.

Social and/or occupational justice seeks the fulfillment of the right of all people to participate in the occupations, activities, and daily life that they require to survive, defined as significant, and that contribute positively to their well-being and social insertion and their communities (World Federation of Occupational Therapists, 2020; Malfitano et al., 2020; Farias & Leite Junior, 2021; Parra-Esquivel, 2015). Therefore, OT seeks that all children, adolescents, and young people receive an education that allows them to feel part of their community and gives them a sense of well-being and social participation. The pandemic has exposed the enormous scale of inequalities that exist in this regard and that we have normalized.

In this same line, the lives of each child, adolescent, and a young person depend on the circumstances that surround them: the experiences with their parents and caregivers, the relationships they establish with their friends, the material conditions of life; the opportunities they have to play; etc. The effects of the pandemic will continue to undermine the aspirations and lifetime earnings of a generation that was forced to interrupt their education (Fundo das Nações Unidas para a Infância, 2021). Thus, the role of Occupational Therapists in an interdisciplinary way within the community is of vital importance.

For this reason, we leave some questions to reflect on the practice of OT in education, which is entrenched in practices at different times, but, above all, in times of the Pandemic:

- How can we create spaces for dialogue and collaboration between colleagues from different cities and countries, reflecting and building joint strategies, starting from the promotion and restructuring of our role in education?
- Reaffirming the broad meaning of inclusive education, as a project of social inclusion, what does it say about the access and permanence of ALL people to education, whose participation is hindered by issues of disability, social class, gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, territory, etc.?
- How can we use technology to be able to accompany and guide distant educational communities with less access to OT?

- How can we integrate health promotion strategies, well-being, and social and educational participation as goals of the quality of life that we aspire to as Occupational Therapists?
- From what perspective can we rethink the role of OT in education in times of pandemic and help in the transition with the subsequent reopening of schools? - What can we do to promote collective work that also understands the demands of teachers, parents, school principals, and the other people who make up the school communities?
- How can we formulate proposals that meet the needs of specific groups, such as people with disabilities, people with economic vulnerability, refugees, and indigenous populations, among others, at all educational levels?
- How do we manage to continue and enrich the accompaniment of families in their daily space?
- What strategies can we use to promote research that enables us to make visible the inequalities and shortcomings most evident by the pandemic in the educational field?
- What can we do to raise the voice of all children and adolescents about how they experience their return to school and how they want their school to be?
- How do we determine strategies for the detection and elimination of attitudinal barriers, such as lack of awareness and misconceptions about disability? These misconceptions may be based on cultural beliefs and practices. It is common for parents to discover that their child has a disability, and they struggled to accept this diagnosis.
- How can we advise by showing that learning should be seen as a lifelong process that happens everywhere? A central factor that must be present in all attempts to promote and support learning is to work collaboratively with all the parts involved. Thus, learning will not be expected to occur only within schools. Children, parents, families, caregivers, Occupational Therapists, teachers, and communities must work together to also involve as many family members as possible because they have a great influence on the values of parents, their thinking, and actions.
- Where can we go for information regarding access to resources, such as support services having identified support needs and priorities, and how can we best be supportive? After all, a family and teaching community that can handle the stress and daily responsibilities will be better able to support the child.
- How do show the advances of OT from the academy and universities in the schools in Latin America, its common and differentiating domains?
- What could be the challenges and routes within the educational systems of Latin American and Caribbean countries that allow the legalization of the exercise and the visibility of the practice of the Occupational Therapist in the school?

We understand these as some demanded ways for OT in Latin American to think and intervene in education, which need to work better collectively with all those professionals interested in this field of action. We also should highlight that the pandemic has led to curricular and teaching changes at different levels. With diverse proposals, beyond the skills and educational activities associated with cognitive learning,

it is very relevant to train for self-care and effective development of risk management strategies (Fundo das Nações Unidas para a Infância, 2021). OT can contribute effectively to these topics.

In this way, as a Latin American community of practice, we must join efforts with different professions and specialties to develop strategies that allow access to adequate education based on social and/or occupational justice. This crisis should be considered as an opportunity to rethink and assume our important role in the development of the subject, individual and collective, from their social relationships and concrete lives. As Malfitano et al. (2020, p. 121) state: “More than ever we need to use our spaces, our actions, and our voices to problematize what is happening in society in terms of inequities in access to essential social benefits for all people”.

Occupational Therapists are called to actively participate in the educational transformation of our countries, within a holistic and critical plan that does not focus only on the curriculum, but also considers how schools influence development, well-being, social participation, and the exercise of citizenship of boys and girls, adolescents and young people.

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Author's Contributions

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Corresponding author

Magno Nunes Farias

e-mail: magnonfarias@hotmail.com

Section editor

Profa. Dra. Ana Paula Serrata Malfitano