



**TEACHING IN THE PANDEMIC: TECHNOLOGY, ISOLATION AND PSYCHIC SUFFERING**

***A DOCÊNCIA NA PANDEMIA: TECNOLOGIA, ISOLAMENTO E O SOFRIMENTO PSÍQUICO***

***LA DOCENCIA EN LA PANDEMIA: TECNOLOGÍA, AISLAMIENTO Y SUFRIMIENTO PSÍQUICO***



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**ABSTRACT:** This article presents the mental health conditions of teachers in public schools from three municipalities in the South Fluminense region of Rio de Janeiro during their work in the COVID-19 pandemic. It does not aim to provide a diagnostic characterization but instead qualifies the psychological state of the teachers as "psychological distress." Through online focus groups conducted via the Google Meet platform, it was concluded that the lack of support and public policies dedicated to education made the work of teachers challenging, resulting in a certain degree of distress.

**KEYWORDS:** Mental health. Teachers. COVID-19.

**RESUMO:** Este artigo apresenta as condições da saúde mental de professores de escolas públicas de três municípios da região sul fluminense do estado do Rio de Janeiro, durante o exercício laboral na pandemia da COVID-19. Não pretende trazer uma caracterização diagnóstica, mas qualifica o estado psicológico das docentes de "sofrimento psíquico". Através de grupos focais on-line, realizados pela plataforma Google Meet, concluiu-se que a falta de suporte e políticas públicas voltadas a educação dificultou o trabalho dos professores, gerando assim certo grau de sofrimento.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Saúde mental. Professores. COVID-19.

**RESUMEN:** Este artículo presenta las condiciones de salud mental de los profesores de escuelas públicas de tres municipios de la región sur del estado de Río de Janeiro, durante su trabajo durante la pandemia de COVID-19. No pretende traer una caracterización diagnóstica, pero califica el estado psicológico de los docentes como "sufrimiento psíquico". A través de grupos focales en línea, realizados por la plataforma Google Meet, concluimos que la falta de apoyo y de políticas públicas dirigidas a la educación dificultó el trabajo de los docentes, generando así cierto grado de sufrimiento.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Salud mental. Profesores. COVID-19.

## Introduction

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the impossibility of in-person classes, the Ministry of Education decreed, through ordinance no. 343, on March 17, 2020 (BRASIL, 2020) that classes would be conducted remotely. This measure was taken to ensure the continuity of the school year and prevent the spread of the virus in schools. Students, families, and the school staff had to adapt to the online environment. Regarding the activities carried out by teachers, many changes, adaptations, and concessions had to be made, resulting in excessive work and countless hours of dedication to comply with the new regulations.

A survey conducted by the *Instituto Península* (Península Institute) (2020) with 7,734 teachers from all over Brazil showed that after six weeks of quarantine, 83% of these professionals did not feel prepared to deal with the virtual environment, and 55% of them did not receive any training or support during the period of social isolation to cope with this virtual environment. The survey also indicates that 75% of the professionals stated that they did not receive any emotional support or assistance from schools to deal with the situation they were experiencing.

Even before COVID-19, a survey conducted by *Nova Escola* in 2019 (OLIVEIRA, 2019), with 5,000 teachers throughout Brazil demonstrated that 60% of teachers suffered from anxiety, stress, and headaches, and 66% had felt weakness, incapacity, or fear of going to work. For 87% of the respondents, these problems were related to their work. Thus, it is evident that even before the pandemic, education professionals already showed high rates of mental health problems related to their work environment.

A study was conducted to understand teachers' experiences with remote teaching during the pandemic. The objective was to identify how municipal education departments organized themselves to meet the new teaching regulations given the pandemic conditions. Then, the aim was to hear from the teachers about their experiences. In addition to aspects related to technology practice methodological and content adaptations, the identified scenario stood out: teachers suffered psychologically due to the conditions imposed by the pandemic. This finding could not be ignored. Teaching, in Brazil, is something that causes illness. Carlotto (2011), in his research on the prevalence of Burnout Syndrome in teachers, highlights that 1) the teaching profession is one of the most researched when it comes to psychological suffering; 2) it is a profession that is subject to numerous stressors and is highly technocratic; and 3) the International Labour Organization considers the teaching profession as one of the most stressful.

For Alles (2021), incorporating the necessary technologies for remote teaching, combined with a lack of interaction and an increased workload, led to the development of Burnout Syndrome in teachers during the pandemic. It is worth noting that Burnout Syndrome is recognized as an occupational disease by Decree-Law no. 6.042/2007 (BRASIL, 2007).

This article does not categorize the psychological distress of teachers as "Burnout Syndrome" but seeks to reveal the psychological conditions of educators that corroborate the syndrome's symptoms: anxiety, exhaustion, insomnia, negative feelings, and feelings of incompetence, among others. Psychological suffering, in addition to being caused by the conditions of the teaching profession itself, was exacerbated by the demands brought about by remote teaching: difficulty in dealing with technological resources, increased workload, lack of support for adapting teaching methodologies, reduced contact and communication with parents and students, and a shortage of necessary technical equipment for carrying out activities.

This work presents the psychological conditions of teachers who worked in remote teaching during the pandemic in schools in three municipalities in the southern region of Rio de Janeiro, characterizing these conditions as "psychological distress." It is important to note that this is not a comprehensive diagnosis, nor is it the research's objective, but rather to highlight the circumstances related to the pandemic that led teachers to experience psychological distress.

## **Methodology**

The research adopted a qualitative approach with descriptive objectives. The qualitative course investigates subjective phenomena, while the illustrative purpose seeks to characterize the phenomenon or population under study (MORESI, 2003).

Data collection was conducted through the organization of focus groups, a technique widely employed in research in the fields of human and social sciences. This technique, of Anglo-Saxon origin, involves group interviews conducted in a conducive environment for discussion, promoting interaction and communication among participants. It is widely used in social sciences and public health studies due to its low cost and ability to obtain valid and reliable data quickly, especially when the focus is on assessments (TRAD, 2009). Thus, given the circumstances of social isolation, the online application of the method proved favorable.

As these are semi-structured interviews, we used prompting questions that encompassed three aspects: 1) communication between the Municipal Department of Education and the

students, including the department, teachers, students, and parents; 2) teaching work: access to technological resources, teaching strategies, teaching-learning process, and assessment; 3) the use of technological resources (websites, platforms, connectivity). Repeatedly, responses addressed fatigue and emotional overload.

The groups were conducted remotely via Google Meet, coordinated by two researchers and students who were part of the "Violence Observatory" research group. The meetings with teachers were held separately from the families to ensure free expression. All sessions were recorded with the participant's permission and subsequently transcribed for results analysis.

## Results and Discussion

Psychological distress can be defined in different ways, as it is an inherent human phenomenon that changes over time, reflecting the transformation of social bonds and social organization. A quick search for the term "psychological distress" on Google yielded the following results:

Intensified psychological distress is considered here as related to intense anguish, which can be manifested in the form of a disruption of the previously established psychosocial balance, generally difficult for the person in distress to manage (GOMES; CARVALHO; SILVA, 2021, p. 4, our translation).

According to Dunker (2015, p. 23, our translation) psychological distress is historically constructed and can be:

From character neuroses of the 1940s to post-war narcissistic personalities, from borderline cases of the 1980s to depression, panic disorders, and anorexias of the 2000s, there is a variation in the preferred modes of suffering.

Considering these aspects, it can be understood that there is a social determination for suffering. In the introduction of the book "*Neoliberalismo como gestão do sofrimento psíquico* (Neoliberalism as the Management of Psychological Distress)" (SAFATLE; SILVA JÚNIOR; DUNKER, 2021), the authors mention this metamorphosis of suffering and highlight its relationship with social, economic, and political changes. They point out that:

Each era prescribes the way in which we should express or conceal, narrate or silence, and recognize or criticize specific modes of suffering. This explains the seasonal emergence and decline of specific clinical conditions at the expense of others (SAFATLE; SILVA JÚNIOR; DUNKER, 2021, p. 12, our translation).



However, major classification manuals reduce psychological distress to a nosological category, diagnosing a condition inherent to human existence. Thus, suffering ceases to be just a phenomenon of human experience and becomes a symptom of various pathologies. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) was first published in 1952 by the American Psychiatric Association and is in its fifth edition. In the DSM-5, psychological distress is defined as "a variety of symptoms and experiences within a person's inner life that are commonly disturbing, confusing, and out of the ordinary" (APA, 2014, p. 830, our translation).

However, it is problematic to equate psychological distress with a pathology, as it arises from the subject's social relationships with their environment, which change as they are named. On the contrary, what characterizes an illness is the stability of its course, regardless of social relationships, meaning it has a beginning, middle, and end. Dunker (2015, p. 24, our translation) says:

Mental illnesses are neither diseases in the sense of a natural morbid process that infiltrates individuals' brains, following an inexorable and predictable course, nor are they mental in the sense of a deformation of personality. Mental illnesses, or rather their symptoms, realize universal possibilities of the subject, which become coercively particular or privately necessary. In other words, a sign is a fragment of lost freedom imposed on oneself or others.

Understanding the social and subjective dimension of psychological distress, it is impossible not to relate it to the social dimension of work. The individual is embedded in a capitalist system that demands increasing productivity and efficiency. Considering psychological distress and career from a psychoanalytic perspective, Silveira, Feitosa and Palácio (2014, p. 3, our translation) comment:

We understand, from a psychoanalytic clinical perspective, that all the subject's experiences will be significant according to the place the subject occupies about language. Thus, the psychological distress of the worker cannot be thought of merely as inherent to external stimuli (work organization, infrastructure, production rate) but must be approached from how this relationship with work fits into each one's psychic economy. Suffering depends on the meaning it assumes in time and space, as well as in the body it touches, producing something beyond the pleasure principle.

As mentioned earlier, the COVID-19 pandemic led to the suspension of classes as a measure to contain the virus's spread, causing educational institutions to adopt remote learning as an alternative. Teachers needed to adapt to this new working tool and work from their homes, which resulted in some implications for their mental health. Educators began to balance family

and professional life and had to invest in self-guided training, as there was no support from educational institutions. They needed to transform the methodology from in-person to remote teaching, create appropriate materials, and establish ways of interacting with students, among other things, which placed an excessive demand on each professional, leading to psychological distress.

The female teachers interviewed in focus groups referred to feelings of fatigue and work overload, central complaints discussed by the professionals during the meetings. One teacher expressed:

*Teacher Respondent 1:*

*I'm trying to throw myself in every direction to see if I can manage because it's difficult to figure out what to do and what I'm saying, I don't know how to name what my workload is like today because it's a lot of work. It demands much time. Then you feel like the person who swam and swam and ended up empty-handed. Because you couldn't achieve the goal. [...] My feeling is like this: of doing things and not getting the return, I expected so much.*

The teachers also stated that there was an uneven distribution of workload, which made it challenging to manage their tasks, causing an overload. One of them expressed:

*Teacher Respondent 2:*

*Whether you like it or not, it's a much bigger job because I have to type, I have to look for other texts, find images, I have to credit the image source, I have to create eight questions. [...] I'm in mid-April today, and I'm already dead tired.*

Furthermore, many teachers are also mothers, and this causes distress because they perform a dual role. Some of them explained how they felt anxious when they had to assist their parents and, at the same time, follow their children's routines. They placed excessive demands on themselves because they believed they needed to develop materials that parents could understand and use to help their children. One teacher and mother said:

*Teacher Respondent 3:*

*And I felt this way, even being a teacher, thinking about how it would be for the students and how it would be within my home with my children. And it wasn't easy. Adapting to sitting down and every hour, the phone beeps because there's a message from the school group. It wasn't easy. You follow this whole process, and when you look at the messages, they've already piled up with many. Then, one parent asks several things, and another parent asks things, too. [...] Sometimes I say, "What are they saying?" I can't keep up with all the messages*

*[...]*

*I put myself in the parent's shoes, and I got nervous, I got anxious, there were days when I thought about how I would manage my two children here.*

Another factor that caused distress for the interviewed teachers was the difficulties arising from technology. Despite their preparation, these technical glitches were beyond their control. One teacher recounts:

*Teacher Respondent 4:*

*As soon as the meeting started, everything went wrong; the video froze, and nothing worked. I got very nervous. It was my first actual contact. I felt like crying. I stopped it and apologized, I was honest. I prepared myself and did everything to program it correctly. And I told them that just as it was new for them, it was for us teachers too.*

The lack of participation by parents and students in the proposed activities, coupled with their significant effort to develop them, also appears as an exacerbating factor in terms of the emotional state of these teachers, as we can observe in the following account:

*Teacher Respondent 5:*

*In the beginning, I felt very frustrated with the intention of spending sometimes a whole weekend preparing those activities and then on Monday and Tuesday, expecting that someone would come to pick them up, but no one did. [...] I talked to the principal over the weekend, and I was lost and very sad with the situation because I told her that it was practically work elaborated with so much difficulty at times, but it wasn't being fulfilled.*

Concerns about students' progress throughout the school year became a central point of discussion, and the issue of teachers adapting to a new mode of work took a back seat, causing specific implications for the mental well-being of teachers.

It is also evident that a highly relevant factor contributing to the psychological distress experienced by these professionals during the period of isolation is the inability to carry out their work duties effectively. Even in the face of a pandemic situation that induced considerable stress and anxiety due to uncertainties surrounding the disease and the ongoing increase in the number of infections and fatalities, work and productivity remained at the forefront of these teachers' lives. Some accounts emphasize that the distress is not solely due to work overload, as many had experienced such burdens previously, but rather the lack of tangible outcomes despite their efforts, stemming from low student and parental participation. Additionally, the teachers and mothers had to juggle a dual role by overseeing their children's educational journey.

This centrality of work reflects the system in which we are embedded, where the neoliberal ideal demands increasingly more production. Safatle, Dunker and Junior (SAFATLE; SILVA JÚNIOR; DUNKER, 2021, p. 11, our translation) explain:



The neoliberal way of life has discovered that one can extract more production and enjoyment from suffering. Finding the best use of torture at work, removing the maximum fatigue with the least legal risk, and full engagement in the project with the minimum mutual loyalty to the company becomes the spontaneous rule of a life in which each relationship must present a balance and a metric.

In this context, the research has identified that the pandemic highlights the suffering associated with teaching in Brazil, emphasizing the lack of technical, methodological, and psychological support for public school teachers. Therefore, this is a topic of relevance that demands the attention of researchers, emphasizing the urgency in promoting the strengthening of educational policies and in providing care for teachers and other professionals working in the public education system.

### Final considerations

The research demonstrated that the noticeable lack of support and public policies focused on education, especially in the context of primary education, represented a significant obstacle to the work of teachers during the pandemic. In addition to the workload, there were also technological difficulties, which posed a considerable challenge, as distance activities became the only viable option during the isolation. The current scenario required not only preparation for this transition but also the availability of technological tools such as computers, educational platforms, video production, internet services, and so on. The lack of these resources, both in technology management and the absence of suitable equipment, was a reality for teachers, families, and students in the public school system.

During the interviews, the teachers complained about the lack of student participation, caused by difficulty in accessing platforms and participating in forums and chats provided on the platform. This situation generated a certain degree of distress because, even though they made efforts to meet the demands of the learning process, it was still not enough. Teachers attempted to fill the support gap by seeking alternative ways to assist these students, but they could not meet the demands of all. However, the lack of contact with students and the difficulty of interacting with parents and students left them in a void that was impossible to overcome or fill.

Suppose we consider that one of the leading causes of teachers' psychological distress results from their inability to perform their work effectively, we are addressing not only the need for improvements in teachers' working conditions but also for ensuring more appropriate

access conditions for these students. The lack of policies focused on education and the lack of investments in the area predates the most significant health crisis of the century.

The pandemic highlighted these pre-existing problems and exacerbated them due to the need for isolation, causing many students to drop out of school. Strengthening these support policies for teachers and other public education workers is necessary, especially regarding better working conditions, emotional support, provision of suitable work equipment, and careful consideration of the access conditions for these students.

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**Data and material availability:** The data and materials used in this work are available for access upon request via the authors' email.

**Authors' contributions:** **Mariana Barbosa Miquilini** – Contributed to the methodology, described the results, and provided the final considerations. **Nicole Silva dos Santos** – Participated in data collection, contributed to the introduction, described the results, and provided the final considerations.

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