SUCCESSFUL EXPERIENCES OF TEACHERS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A FLOWER ON THE ASPHALT

EXPERIÊNCIAS EXITOSAS DE PROFESSORES DURANTE A PANDEMIA DE COVID-19: UMA FLOR NO ASFALTO

EXPERIENCIAS EXITOSAS DE DOCENTES DURANTE LA PANDEMIA DEL COVID-19: UNA FLOR SOBRE EL ASFALTO

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ABSTRACT: The work aims to present the successful experiences of family members and teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. It starts from the hypothesis that the pandemic brought about a drastic change in the learning processes, forcing mothers and teachers to deal with the challenges of adapting and creating strategies to continue their children's and students' studies. The accounts of mothers and teachers were obtained from a segment of the research titled "Education and Pandemic Impacts," conducted by the Violence Observatory at the University Center of Barra Mansa (UBM) in three municipalities in the Southern Fluminense region of the State of Rio de Janeiro. Interviews were conducted through online focus groups, which were divided into subgroups of mothers and teachers, using Google Meet. Teachers, parents, and the community created resources and conditions to ensure education for the students. There is a recognized need for further research that can shed light on these experiences.

KEYWORDS: Successful experiences. Education impacts. Teachers.

RESUMO: O presente trabalho objetiva apresentar experiências exitosas de familiares e professores durante a pandemia de COVID-19. Parte-se da hipótese de que a pandemia proporcionou a mudança drástica nos processos de aprendizagem, levando mães e professores a terem de lidar com os desafios de se adequar e criar estratégias para ser possível dar continuidade nos estudos de filhos e alunos. Os relatos das mães e das professoras foram obtidos a partir de um recorte da pesquisa intitulada "Educação e Impactos da Pandemia", realizada pelo Observatório da Violência, do Centro Universitário de Barra Mansa (UBM), em três municípios da região Sul Fluminense do Estado do Rio de Janeiro. As entrevistas foram executadas por meio de grupos focais on-line, que se dividiram em subgrupos de mães e de professoras, através do Google Meet. Professores, pais e comunidade criaram recursos e condições para garantir a educação aos alunos. Identifica-se a necessidade de mais pesquisa que possam evidenciar as experiências.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Experiências exitosas. Impactos na educação. Professores.

RESUMEN: El presente trabajo tiene como objetivo analizar experiencias exitosas de familiares y docentes durante la pandemia del COVID-19. Se parte de la hipótesis de que la pandemia brindó un cambio drástico en los procesos de aprendizaje, llevando a madres y docentes a tener que enfrentar los desafíos de adaptarse y crear estrategias para poder continuar los estudios de niños y estudiantes. Os relatos das mães e das professoras foram obtidos a partir de um recorte da pesquisa intitulada "Educação e Impactos da Pandemia", realizada pelo Observatório da Violência, do Centro Universitário de Barra Mansa (UBM), em três municípios da região Sul Fluminense do Estado de Rio de Janeiro. Las entrevistas se realizaron a través de grupos focales online, que se dividieron en subgrupos de madres y docentes, a través de Google Meet. Docentes, padres de familia y la comunidad crearon recursos y condiciones para garantizar la educación a los estudiantes. Se identifica la necesidad de realizar más investigaciones que puedan resaltar las experiencias.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Experiencias exitosas. Impactos en la educación. Maestros.

Introduction

The COVID-19 virus arrived in Brazil on January 26, 2020, with the first confirmed case in São Paulo. Shortly after, on February 5, it emerged in Rio de Janeiro, in the city of Barra Mansa, in the Médio Paraíba region. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) elevated the status of what was then an epidemic to a pandemic. Since then, the world has suddenly transformed. At the time of writing this article, the country had accumulated 689,000 deaths from the virus. In addition to the tragic health effects, we have witnessed impacts in various spheres of society and personal life, including education.

Considering this, the Violence Observatory at the University Center of Barra Mansa (UBM) conducted a research study titled "*Impactos da pandemia na educação* (Impacts of the Pandemic on Education)," using the technique of focus groups as a data collection method. The research focused on listening to the experiences of teachers and guardians of students in the municipal education system of three small municipalities in the Médio Paraíba region (RJ). The meetings took place online and were guided by the following themes: communication between the Municipal Education Department and schools, using technological tools by teachers, communication between schools and parents, and the learning process during the pandemic.

According to the research "*Resposta educacional à pandemia de covid-19 no Brasil* (Educational Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic in Brazil)" (BRASIL, 2020), 99.3% of Brazilian schools suspended in-person activities, with an average of 287 days of distance from classrooms during the 2020 school year. As a result, the internet and telecommunications equipment became essential for continuing educational activities. The relationship between education and technology became paramount and no longer arbitrary as it had been until then.

With this change in the learning environment, students, parents, teachers, and other stakeholders in the education project found themselves greatly challenged by something still very unknown. This process intensified the workload of teachers, who worked full-time as they dedicated themselves to independently unraveling the functioning of virtual platforms and other technological tools to provide pedagogical support as quickly as possible to students and parents. Parents, in turn, also found themselves burdened as they had to take on the role of teachers while working and managing household tasks simultaneously.

> The closure of schools and the practice of remote teaching presented a struggle to balance concurrent responsibilities with limited time and energy resources. The organization of daily family life became a challenging task as all family members started to carry out their work and study demands in a single

environment, and at times, schedules may clash with individual interests and obligations (LUNARDI *et al.,* 2021, p. 14, our translation).

From the initial research conducted by the Observatory, various challenges and problems were identified during remote learning in the pandemic. We also found significant arrangements that made the learning process possible because "[...] despite the many difficulties faced in the current period, families resorted to creativity and demonstrated great adaptability to face the situation" (LUNARDI *et al.,* 2021, our translation). Regarding the new ways teachers have adapted, Carolina Cordeiro (2020, p. 06, our translation) tells us that

> the creativity of Brazilian teachers in adapting to the new reality is indescribable when it comes to creating media resources: creating video lessons for students to access asynchronously, in addition to video conferencing classes for synchronous activities as in the classroom. It's an educational revolution in how technology has proven efficient and how people must be adept at this technological advancement.

Thus, this article aims to present some successful experiences of families and teachers during the pandemic as an offshoot of the primary research. It is essential to emphasize the need to avoid romanticizing the scenario, as distance learning (EAD) exposes various realities experienced by students and their families. In this context, there was a wide range of efforts to compensate for the lack of support from the public sector in providing pedagogical support during the period of distancing. The responsibility to provide all the essential conditions for quality education falls on the public sector.

Methodology

To conduct the research, the technique of focus groups was employed. The method was applied remotely, through a video conferencing platform - 'Google Meet' - due to social distancing measures. It involved the participation of public schools in early childhood education and the first and second cycles of primary education in three municipalities in the Médio Paraíba region (RJ) during the years 2020 and 2021.

> Active encouragement of group interaction is, of course, related to guiding the focus group discussion and ensuring that participants converse with each other rather than just interacting with the researcher or "moderator." It is also related to the necessary preparation for developing a topic guide (script) and the selection of stimulus materials that promote interaction, as well as decisions regarding the composition of the group to ensure that participants have enough in common so that the discussion appears appropriate, but also diverse enough in experiences or perspectives to encourage some debate or differences of

> opinion. Likewise, while attention to group interaction pertains to the process of moderating discussions, with the researcher focusing on differences in participants' perspectives or emphases and exploring them, it is also associated with the importance of observing group interactions: the dynamics of the group and the activities in which it engages - whether reaching a consensus, developing an explanatory framework, interpreting health promotion messages, or weighing competing priorities (BARBOUR, 2009, p. 21, our translation).

Throughout the research, recordings of the dialogues in the focus groups were distributed among the researchers, and they transcribed the conversations in their entirety, aiming to understand the adoption of strategies, content appropriateness, and the adaptation of teachers, parents, and students during the pandemic. With the transcriptions in hand, a focused reading was conducted on the successful experiences that emerged from the pandemic and distance learning. This reading was done in light of the following question: what could be the creative potential in such an exhausting situation as a pandemic?

Results and Discussion

To conduct the research, it was essential to divide the participants into five focus groups, composed of legal guardians of the students and three additional groups involving teachers and researchers. This process resulted in a total of eight distinct groups that were consulted and served as the foundation for the development of this article.

The research aimed to understand the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on school activities and the measures being taken at the institutional level. As a result, it was observed that, amid the disruption caused by the pandemic and the lack of resources on the part of municipalities, parents and teachers still innovated and had successful experiences or initiatives that facilitated access to education.

Our intention is not to use the distress caused by a pandemic as a pedagogical approach but instead as a tool of revelation, in line with philosopher Bárbara Buril's reflection on pandemic times: "Suffering does not necessarily teach us something: the tendency is even that it does not teach us many things. However, we cannot deny that suffering reveals" (BURIL, 2020, p. 30, our translation).

Buril (2020) understands that the primary fact revealed by the pandemic is how "psychologically necessary society is to us." Considering this proposition, we can emphasize how essential the bond and network of camaraderie established among the teachers in the face of technology was. Faced with little or no support from the school authorities regarding the use

of platforms, portals, and websites, teachers pooled their knowledge to adapt, as will be demonstrated through the experiences of three distinct teachers:

> *Teacher Respondent 1:*
> *I can always count on the help of my colleagues; a little input there, especially since I follow Júlia. She brings much innovation and excellent know-how in technology, so we always take advantage and catch a ride with her.*
>
> *Teacher Respondent 2:*
> *Only the principals and guidance counselors went above and beyond to help us. If it were 10 p.m., they would help me; they helped each other. From the office at the beginning, there was a tutorial, and this year, the platform changed a lot. We received a short tutorial. But what I see the most is my principal. She knows how to use the platform because she discovered it. It's more exclusive to the principal and the guidance counselor. They make it work, and of course, we do too! But I see them more than the education department.*
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> *Teacher Respondent 3:*
> *[...] they didn't know either; they were learning. There were things I asked, and the Educational Advisor would say, "Joana, I'll find out how to do it," and then he would come and tell me. [...] That's how it was done: one helping the other, one teacher helping another.*

It's worth mentioning that each municipality and its respective education departments had their way of dealing with the pandemic, which also varied with the transition from 2020 to 2021, as in the case of municipalities that changed mayors and secretaries. For example, the municipality's government played an influential role in distance learning, something that, with proper maintenance, can continue even post-pandemic.

However, even in cases where there was more involvement from the public authorities, the bulk of the educational work fell on the shoulders of the teachers, who, despite the overload, succeeded. For instance, one teacher who, on her own, provided synchronous classes to her students and another teacher who, at the beginning of the pandemic, created ways to connect, respectively:

> *Teacher Respondent 4:*
> *So, last year, I volunteered. I used 'Meet.' The class I was following last year, I had been with them since the seventh grade. It was the class where I did projects, and we won awards, so it was a class dear to my heart. So, when they were going to take the entrance exams for those technical high schools, we decided, via WhatsApp, in a group with around 60 students, to exchange information and coordinate their classes. But it wasn't official through the education department.*
>
> *Teacher Respondent 5:*

> *[...] I had practically only one month of classes with them, which was then interrupted. I had a personal issue at the beginning of the year; I had an accident and couldn't teach for 15 days, so there were some disruptions. Then, I recorded a little song with gestures, making them start to be more on my side. They would go to school to pick up activities to do... In the beginning, there was the story of the beanstalk, giving two more practical examples of what happened. I planted beans at my house... Because when I do experiments with them, I don't use cotton; I use soil because things are different nowadays, you know. We have to do things differently! I planted them in an eggshell, and the beanstalk grew, and they followed along with me on WhatsApp.*

The implementation of simple techniques that facilitated the learning process was also observed. An example is a teacher who formulated instructions in the exercises as a means of communication with the guardians, who, from home, assisted children and adolescents in completing the activities:

> *Teacher Respondent 6:*
> *So, seeing this, I started making agreements; I work in education, and I have a habit of saying that. For example, in the actual activity, I send a text for comprehension. Something that worked with my group of parents but couldn't work with another class. I use an explanatory text strip as if I were talking to them. And this has served to guide the parents. For example, sometimes, when I ask for math, they organize a sequence in numerical order, in ascending or descending order. They might know what that is, but it's been a long time since they studied it, and others don't have access to it. They will exchange the information. The activity encourages the student to mess everything up because he will say, "My dad helped me." This creates a complicated situation. When I ask for ascending or descending order, I put a little box next to it with a simple statement, "from largest to smallest." Do you understand what I'm saying? That has also worked well. [...]. The use of explanatory strips and lighter subjects has worked well.*

Another example was Teacher Respondent 7, who used "WhatsApp stickers" to motivate her students:

> *[...] The teacher always emphasizes the importance of family support, and she uses those stickers. As the activities approach, she says: "You've earned another star".*

It was possible to observe that the sense of community played a significant role in the continuity of education for these young people, who relied on the support of neighborhood associations and churches, as well as the care of the teachers through active outreach:

> *Teacher Respondent 8:*
> *There are computer labs that families can access. They also have them in neighborhood associations. So, families that don't have a computer or internet access at home can use these resources in schools and neighborhood associations. [...] It was a real partnership between the neighborhood*

associations, the Education Department, and the Social Assistance Department.

If a student is struggling or forgets to return the notebook... What's happening? We're helping in the best way we can. We know that in our municipality, there are many churches, so many churches are doing voluntary work to help children with significant difficulties. We're making progress, but it's not an easy task for anyone.

Gabriela did active outreach, even to the extent of going to their homes to understand if they had a cell phone. If they didn't, we taught them some basics, like how to make a call. Now, he can answer the phone, but it's a challenge for us to make a WhatsApp call with everyone.

There was a group of parents living in a settlement area who could hardly access the lessons and the chat we had. So, I coordinated with them, doing things like storytelling and explaining video calls, arranging for us. Understand? It wasn't within the platform because it couldn't handle it, so one parent would talk to another.

Additionally, it was possible to observe the effective involvement of mothers in their children's learning process, interacting more closely with the teachers:

Teacher Respondent 9:
I ask: do you have any doubts? No, teacher, it's okay, my mom helped me. Or the mom sends me a private message. I like it when I'm with my sixth-grade group. And the parents, I'm pleased when they're helping their children and say, "Teacher, we have a question about this problem." The mother sends me a picture of the problem, the notebook, and then I go, I assist, I send an audio explaining the issue because it's either that they got it wrong, or I say: "Take the workbook, read from paragraph such and such to paragraph such and such; the answer is there. Let's think together."

Final considerations

While incredibly selfish and even cruel actions have occurred and continue to happen around the world, the pandemic has sparked a wave of caring attitudes toward others, attention to strangers, and a sense of belonging to communities and the human species as a whole as hasn't been seen for a long time.

From the results found, it was possible to observe the care that mothers and teachers provided to their children and students during the pandemic. Their challenges necessitated relentless efforts to build, adapt, and create strategies to support the continuation of students' studies in the municipalities.

It was evident that, even in the face of resource constraints, teachers showed dedication in seeking ways to adapt to the pandemic reality. One of these ways was through the connection between colleagues and parents, forming a support network. For example, in the face of difficulties in using technological equipment, it became clear that cooperation and solidarity among education professionals were crucial for the adaptation journey and the search for tools for lesson planning.

The teachers' attention was not solely on the students but also on the parents since they had to assume the role of "educator" at home. These professionals resorted to creativity, too, for instance, adapting materials according to the parent's level of education so they could assist their children with their tasks.

Additionally, the active participation of the neighborhood association, the Education Department, and Social Assistance became evident to provide technological support to the neediest families who lacked access to computers for attending classes and completing activities. This involvement underscores the importance of the community in addressing emergencies in contexts of social vulnerability.

This study reveals a scenario that, at first, was believed not to be possible during a challenging time like a pandemic. We witnessed teachers, parents, and the community developing new strategies and seeking resources to ensure students had access to education as they rightfully should. In light of this, further research to highlight these experiences and delve deeper into the topic is warranted.

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