

**PROJECT TO STIMULATE THE DEAF STUDENT'S PROTAGONISM**

**PROJETO DE INCENTIVO AO PROTAGONISMO DO ALUNO SURDO**

**PROYECTO PARA FOMENTAR EL DESARROLLO DEL PROTAGONISMO DEL ESTUDIANTE SORDO**



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**ABSTRACT:** This is an experience report of an inclusion project for deaf students conducted during the Coronavirus pandemic in two elementary schools in a municipality in the interior of the State of São Paulo. The project aimed to minimize communication barriers, expand the vocabulary of both spoken and sign language, and promote educational actions to facilitate the inclusion of deaf students. Deaf students recorded short thematic videos at school every 15 days, edited by a specialized Libras (Brazilian Sign Language) teacher. The videos were then sent to the school administration, which, in turn, distributed them to teachers for use in their classes. The project provided deaf students with the opportunity for development through Libras during the pandemic and ensured the establishment of their identity. Additionally, hearing students had contact with and used Libras at school. Considering its effectiveness, the project became a permanent initiative.

**KEYWORDS:** Inclusive education. Pandemic. Deafness. Libras.

***RESUMEN:** Este es el relato de experiencia de un proyecto para la inclusión de estudiantes sordos, realizado durante el período de la Pandemia de Coronavirus en dos escuelas primarias de un municipio del interior del Estado de São Paulo. Su finalidad fue minimizar barreras comunicacionales, ampliar el vocabulario de la lengua oral y de señas, promover acciones educativas para hacer efectiva la inclusión de los estudiantes sordos. Los estudiantes sordos grababan videos temáticos cortos en la escuela a cada 15 días con una edición del profesor especializado en Libras. Los videos eran enviados a la dirección de las escuelas que los pasaron a los maestros para utilizarlos en las clases. El proyecto ofreció a los estudiantes sordos la oportunidad de desarrollarse a través de Libras durante el período de pandemia y asegurar el establecimiento de su identidad; los estudiantes oyentes tuvieron contacto y utilizaran Libras en la escuela. Considerando su eficacia, el proyecto se ha convertido en permanente.*

***PALABRAS CLAVE:** Educación inclusiva. Pandemia. Sordera. Libras.*

***RESUMO:** Este é um relato de experiência de um projeto de inclusão de alunos surdos, realizado no período da Pandemia do Coronavírus, em duas escolas de Ensino Fundamental em município do interior do Estado de São Paulo. A finalidade do projeto foi minimizar barreiras de comunicação, ampliar o vocabulário da língua oral e da língua de sinais, e promover ações educativas para efetivar a inclusão de alunos surdos. Os alunos surdos realizavam gravações de vídeos temáticos curtos na escola a cada 15 dias, que eram editados por uma professora especializada em Libras (TILS). Os vídeos eram encaminhados para a direção das escolas que, por sua vez, os repassavam aos professores para utilizarem nas aulas. O projeto ofereceu aos alunos surdos a oportunidade de desenvolvimento por meio da Libras durante o período de pandemia e garantiu o estabelecimento de sua identidade. Além disso, os alunos ouvintes tiveram contato e utilizaram Libras na escola. Considerando sua eficácia, o projeto tornou-se permanente.*

***PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Educação Inclusiva. Pandemia. Surdez. Libras.*

## **Introduction**

With the Coronavirus Pandemic, changes occurred in the daily lives of every citizen, especially students. Humanity was unprepared for this atypical moment that necessitated a change in its routine, as the pandemic disrupted many homes, professions, and, most notably, the school environment. School plays a fundamental role in an individual's life, as it offers the possibility of making them more compassionate and humane (HONORO; FRIZANCO, 2008).

Considering that language acquisition is an evolutionary process in which children construct hypotheses and engage in discursive reorganization, the school's responsibility is significant, indicating that those who work in this space need to take actions that promote the child's language development broadly (LACERDA, 2015, p. 7).

In this context, it is essential to emphasize that school is the primary means of interaction in a child's development, and language is the key to the community's coexistence. Therefore, it was essential to remain aware of the need to double efforts to achieve active participation by children in education and society, especially the participation of deaf children. For this reason, it was crucial to analyze the situation of students whose means of communication involve hand articulation, body and facial expressions, and empathetic gaze but who were hindered by the mandatory use of masks for personal protection and to prevent the spread of the virus. However, this caution complicated the means of expression for people who are deaf or hard of hearing, as facial expression is part of sign language grammar, leading to expressive isolation within the deaf community.

Given the above, the school could not remain silent because deaf people, even with all the obstacles they have faced in the history of their rights struggles, have never been "silent." Quadros (2017) reported that, even with the prohibition of using heritage language within the school environment, during their historical, educational struggle, the deaf resisted, organized meetings, gathered, and socialized through Libras, not preventing interaction.

The Brazilian Law for Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities, Law No. 13,146/2015 (BRASIL, 2015), provides in its Article 28, Item II for "improvement of educational systems, aiming to ensure conditions of access, permanence, participation, and learning through the provision of services and accessibility resources that eliminate barriers and promote full inclusion." For the deaf, communication through Brazilian Sign Language - Libras is provided, favoring these students' education and social inclusion. Brazilian Sign Language was legally recognized in Brazil, ensuring its use as a means of communication for the deaf community by

the government in Article 1 of the Brazilian Sign Language Law, Law No. 10,436/2002 (BRASIL, 2002).

According to Dias (2004), one should consider that humans define their particularity by producing and transmitting symbols due to their ability to manipulate communication. In this regard, they accumulate information and develop differentiated means of relationships to organize themselves in the world. From these perspectives, we can perceive that the deaf person constantly lives in a communication-manipulating environment, described by the author as "[...] a vicious cycle of complexity-simplification-complexity [...]" (p. 26, our translation). Adapting to this reality and being present in society becomes necessary. Therefore, social interactions must occur through a versatile set of actions that establish and direct communicative processes.

Considering this interactive reality focused on people who are deaf or hard of hearing, it is possible to see the importance of their language in interaction in the school environment and, especially, in the social environment, where the Portuguese language predominates.

The traditional teaching mode is in-person, a modality in which classes are planned and adjusted according to the identification of students' needs, and often involves the presence of assistants, aides, and interns to support the teacher. To operate in the pandemic context of the COVID-19 virus, the immediate implementation of a new modality in basic education was necessary: remote teaching. This made it possible to restructure the annual calendar, improvising classes according to the days and periods of in-person courses, whether synchronous or asynchronous, and readjusting schedules. It became essential to discover new ways for people who are deaf or hard of hearing to remain in educational processes regardless of the limitations imposed by the pandemic.

This experiential report presents a project structured and developed in a municipal education network in the interior of the state of São Paulo from March 2021 to December 2021 during the pandemic. With the recognition gained during this period, the project became permanent.

## **Project History**

Education is the primary instrumental source of citizen formation, and according to Article 205 of the Federal Constitution of 1988 (BRASIL, 1988), education is the "right of all." The Salamanca Declaration (1994), which aimed to provide basic guidelines for developing and transforming educational policies and systems in line with social inclusion, defines the concept of inclusion as a principle of an "inclusive school." Comparing the two documents, there is no doubt that the school should provide education for all in an environment that involves the full participation of the entire school community.

In an elementary school in a municipality in the interior of the state of São Paulo that included deaf students, before the pandemic, in face-to-face situations, the only contact the deaf students had was with hearing students, in addition to the teacher and the educational Libras interpreter in the classroom. Other interactions with their peers were brief, often only during breaks between classes, without the presence of the Libras interpreter.

It is necessary to highlight that the Educational Interpreter (IE) is important to meet the greatest need of deaf students: communication within the school environment. The role of the IE in the classroom is not to take on the role of the teacher or to teach, as this professional provides "differentiated practices" to support the learning of deaf students (LACERDA, 2015) and can also contribute to the communication of deaf students throughout the school environment.

At the end of 2017 and the beginning of 2018, encouraged by the interest and curiosity shown by hearing students in getting to know deaf students, their culture, and their language and thinking about minimizing the need for interaction between them, the author of this report developed a project, with the assistance of the school's administration, titled "Libras in Art," aiming to promote educational and social inclusion and disseminate Libras in various practices, such as singing, theater, and literature.

The project, conducted outside of regular class hours, involved the study of Libras to expand knowledge of signs (vocabulary expansion, interpretation, and more) through musical texts, poems, and theatrical texts. Thus, hearing students began to play the role of mediators when the responsible interpreter was not present, with the assistance of school staff, including the participation of a deaf staff member, a model of active deaf representation in the school.

Such actions were based on the arguments of Honoro and Frizanco (2008), according to whom deaf children acquire language through experiences obtained by interacting with another person. It should be emphasized that the acquisition of language by deaf children preferably

occurs through interaction with someone proficient in sign language, such as an adult deaf person (GOLDFELD, 2002), or by people fluent in Libras. With accessibility to the deaf child's mother tongue, Libras, happening within the school community, language practice begins to flow, allowing for more interactions between hearing or deaf students and teachers.

However, starting in 2020, due to limitations on social contact due to the coronavirus pandemic, the activities of this project were severely affected. Deaf students began to perceive a masked world, significantly interfering with communication processes.

In the initial adaptations to comply with social distancing imposed by the pandemic, the classroom teacher was responsible for structuring and developing materials and activities that were most suitable for the students, often with remote activities. In this context, once again, people who are deaf or hard of hearing became victims of reality, being harmed in linguistic, emotional, and social aspects.

The technology used to transmit classes did not allow for simultaneous interpretation because most teachers filmed only the activity to be performed by the child and provided explanations through audio in the same recording, which was then sent via social media a few minutes before the start of the classes, making access to information and knowledge difficult for deaf students.

Despite the teachers' efforts, there were difficulties in accessibility because not every child had access to the internet, a cellphone, the maturity to handle technological devices, and especially, not every deaf child had a family member who could communicate in sign language. Deaf students remained in their homes, meeting their needs to interact with their peers, others, and the world.

To overcome these difficulties, groups were formed on social media to work with students in the municipal network, mainly through the WhatsApp application. It was possible to see the deaf student by accessing the list of participants in the group, but the child was part of the group without being truly included.

Therefore, there was a search to include this public by seeking to stimulate the practice of Libras with students/employees/family members and society through its users, the deaf students and staff, to strengthen the identity of deaf children through the development of their linguistic foundation. With this premise, a new project was structured to facilitate the integration of deaf students with their peers and society during the pandemic.

## Project Libras: Paths that Never Stop

The "Libras: Paths that Never Stop" ("*Libras: caminhos que não param*") project was conceived by the author of this report to minimize communication barriers and stimulate the participation of the deaf during the pandemic, contributing to the development of their identity.

It is necessary to understand that language's role goes beyond communicating and expressing thoughts; it can also convey emotions and feelings (QUADROS; KARNOOP, 2004). The authors refer to this as "Phatic Communication," which is communication that facilitates contact with society. In this context, the first person in the discourse must maintain contact with the receiver and vice versa. For people who are deaf or hard of hearing, this maintenance of communication is greatly hindered, as few people are proficient in Libras.

The premise for the elaboration and development of the new project "Libras: Paths that Never Stop" was that the dissemination of Libras would create conditions for deaf students and employees to overcome the pandemic situation experienced by society. This project's main objective was to enable interaction among deaf students with special educational needs, deaf employees, their hearing peers, and family members during the pandemic, thereby eliminating educational and social barriers in this period of social isolation.

As secondary objectives, the following were proposed: minimizing communication obstacles, exploring and ensuring the development of skills and competencies, expanding acquired knowledge, promoting the development of new knowledge, expanding vocabulary in oral and sign languages, and facilitating collective work and educational actions across various sectors to include deaf students during the pandemic period effectively.

### 2.1 Project Organization and Development

The project was structured with activities focused on events, commemorative dates, and semantic categories, with a preferred biweekly frequency and a class duration of 30 minutes provided by the lead teachers of the remote classrooms. With the project structured, a series of steps were necessary to initiate the presentation to other stakeholders for its implementation.

The recordings were made using the project initiator's cell phone in meetings held initially twice a month for the respective organization and distribution of the schedule (event period, commemorative dates), as described in the following steps.

#### Step I

Presentation of the project to the student's parents, initially through the WhatsApp application, and then retransmitted at the beginning of the meetings. They would be responsible for ensuring the student's presence on recording days and consenting to the use of images for presentations, contributing to the development of their children.

#### Step II

Presentation of the project to the classroom lead teachers, who needed to allocate approximately half an hour to work on each project presentation. The step with the teachers was conducted in a meeting via Google Meet and received significant participation and support.

#### Step III

After these two steps, the author of this report contacted the press office of the “*Grandes Pequeninos*” project – a musical project of musician Jair Oliveira’s family that aims to work on the initial communication of humans through music – to request the use and adaptation of the music video “*Normal é Ser Diferente*” in Libras as the opening video of the project (for the project to develop in compliance with Law No. 9,610 of February 1998, which regulates copyright) (BRASIL, 1998). After the response, authorization was obtained for the requests regarding the use and adaptation of the music video, specifically for this project, from April 2021 to December 2021.

#### Step IV

Development of themes and the schedule for the meetings. The development was carried out in accordance with commemorative dates and themes of annual events that are part of the educational calendar of the municipality. Each event was named "MOMENT," organized in numerical order, and their dates were specified according to the month and occurrence. For example, World Environment Day is celebrated in June; therefore, the theme was planned to be presented in the same month and on the same day, which helped maintain organization in the students' study routine, as shown in Table 1 below:

**Table 1** – Schedule of project milestones and topics addressed

| YEAR  | ACTIVITY   | THEME   |
|-------|------------|---|
| April | MOMENT I   | Presentation.                                     |
| May   | MOMENT II  | Labor Day.  |
| May   | MOMENT III | Mother's Day.                                     |
| June  | MOMENT IV  | Environment Day.                                  |
| June  | MOMENT V   | June Festival (traditional Brazilian celebration) |
| July  | MOMENT VI  | Quitute Festival                                  |



|           |             |                                   |
|-----------|-------------|-----------------------------------|
| August    | MOMENT VII  | Father's Day.                     |
| August    | MOMENT VIII | Folklore Day.                     |
| September | MOMENT IX   | Brazil's Independence Day.        |
| September | MOMENT X    | Deaf Awareness Day.               |
| October   | MOMENT XI   | Children's Day.                   |
| October   | MOMENT XII  | Teacher's Day.                    |
| November  | MOMENT XIII | Proclamation of the Republic Day. |
| November  | MOMENT XIV  | Black Consciousness Day.          |
| December  | MOMENT XV   | Christmas.                        |

Source: Project Files (2021)

### Step V

Once the project sequence was organized, meetings at the school began, with all the necessary precautions for the pandemic being observed. Initially, these meetings took place every fifteen days, but to accommodate parents' work schedules, it became essential to reschedule them to occur once a month. The deaf staff member also participated in the meetings, assisting in communication between the deaf students and other participants.

The meetings were not only intended for recording purposes; it was also necessary to study and understand the reason for celebrating a particular event. Thus, they were focused on:

- Studies on the origin of the historical data to be presented.
- Summarizing readings.
- Interpreting musical texts.
- Studying signs.
- Expanding vocabulary.
- Researching on the internet to enhance knowledge.
- Interaction among students and between students and staff.
- Recording and viewing the recordings by the students.

### Step VI

Editing the videos to send to the teachers. The videos were structured according to the following sequence for editing:

1. Opening: a clip titled "Normal is to be different" with the adaptation of sign language (Libras) by the project participants and the presentation of the MOMENT
2. Presentation of the theme: historical context.
3. Sign vocabulary: glossary of the respective signs related to the theme.
4. Activity: the activities varied, such as drawing, following a musical text, or objective

questions with answers at the end of the project's interaction with secondary participants (students and the community).

5. Closing: at the end of each project activity, closure was done with the data of all participants and sources from that moment.

## Step VII

Commencement of the distribution of the videos created to the school community and society. To do so, on the date of the commemorative event, each classroom's responsible teacher posted the videos in WhatsApp groups.

### 2.2 Effects of the "Libras: Paths that Never Stop" Project - During the Pandemic

At the beginning of the project, it was possible to observe the low self-esteem of the participants because they had not seen each other for a year, had no more contact, and felt insecure in their communication, almost without identity. As the meetings progressed, they began to open up and improve their self-esteem, and their communication started flowing again. This evolution was evident in the participants with each meeting on the recording days.

The implementation of the project contributed not only to communication between deaf and hearing individuals but, above all, to rethinking, restructuring, and valuing different approaches to the development of these deaf students. They are often only exposed to the teaching and learning process, with teachers who have little or no experience in Libras and who face the curriculum offered by the system within the perspective of inclusive education. These difficulties are also experienced by the students, as "[...] in general, deaf students are included in regular classrooms with hearing students, believing that this would safeguard the principle of equal rights" (GESSER, 2012, p. 90, our translation). Therefore, there is a need to open new paths that facilitate interactions among deaf students, hearing students, and teachers.

The participation of teachers, students, and staff in the project opened new perspectives for learning Libras for all participants, fostering communicative interactions with deaf students, contributing to diverse knowledge, and enhancing interpersonal relationships among all participants.

## **Final considerations**

In this account, it was possible to describe an inclusive experience through implementing the "Libras: Paths that Never Stop" Project, which took place in two municipal primary and secondary schools in the interior of the state of São Paulo during the coronavirus pandemic. The project's dissemination occurred through social media, spreading Brazilian Sign Language (Libras) to ensure accessibility for deaf students and promote their identity development.

We needed to utilize all available technological and social resources to achieve our goal. Initially, meetings were held bi-weekly and monthly to study the topics to be addressed in videos by deaf students. It required a strong partnership with the school community. It is important to emphasize that planning and developing the project required the involvement of family members, education professionals, both deaf and hearing students and other participants with expertise in the technologies used in filming and dissemination within the school and social environments. Recording activities through images was fundamental since deaf individuals communicate visually.

This project enabled a differentiated and inclusive approach, bringing together the entire school community and society to build an egalitarian and inclusive society during an unprecedented time.

We conclude this account by highlighting the need for further studies and projects to optimize communication with deaf students. Considering the importance of the interpreter in the classroom, it would be relevant to conduct in-depth research on the relationship between the regular teacher and the sign language interpreter, focusing on the linguistic specificities of the deaf language. To translate everything said in Portuguese into Libras, this professional must master both languages. Additionally, more studies are needed to propose activities in teaching planning that address the specific needs of deaf students and promote integration with their classmates.

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