

**CHALLENGES OF EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN'S LEARNING IN THE
PANDEMIC SCENARIO: CASE STUDY**

**DESAFIOS DA EDUCAÇÃO INFANTIL PARA A APRENDIZAGEM DAS CRIANÇAS
NO CENÁRIO DA PANDEMIA: ESTUDO DE CASO**

**DESAFÍOS DE LA EDUCACIÓN PARA EL APRENDIZAJE DE LOS NIÑOS EN EL
ESCENARIO DE PANDEMIA: ESTUDIO DE CASO**



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ABSTRACT: In the context of the pandemic, the social inequality reflected in access to technological resources by different social classes has proven to be a challenge for guaranteeing rights to preschool students. The article aims to reflect on the impacts of the pandemic on the educational process. The research methodology involved a case study in two five-year-old classes at a Municipal Early Childhood Education Institution in a medium-sized city in the interior of the State of São Paulo in the year 2021. The methodological procedures involved the analysis of school records of activities during the pandemic times of those classes and reports from teachers of the two classes at that stage. The results point to the obstacles faced and the harm to children's learning due to being away from the school space.

KEYWORDS: Early Childhood Education. Children's learning. Guarantee of rights. Impacts of the pandemic.

RESUMO: No cenário da pandemia, a estampa da desigualdade social refletida no acesso aos recursos tecnológicos pelas diferentes camadas sociais mostrou-se um desafio para a garantia de direitos aos alunos da pré-escola. O artigo tem por objetivo refletir acerca dos impactos da pandemia no processo educativo. A metodologia da pesquisa envolveu um estudo de caso em duas turmas da faixa etária de cinco anos de uma Instituição Municipal de Educação Infantil de uma cidade de médio porte no interior do Estado de São Paulo no ano de 2021. Os procedimentos metodológicos envolveram a análise dos registros escolares das atividades em tempos pandêmicos daquelas turmas e os relatos dos docentes das duas turmas daquela etapa. Os resultados apontam os obstáculos enfrentados e o prejuízo na aprendizagem das crianças em virtude do afastamento do espaço escolar.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Educação Infantil. Aprendizagem das crianças. Garantia de Direitos. Impactos da pandemia.

RESUMEN: En el escenario de pandemia, el sello de desigualdad social reflejado en el acceso a recursos tecnológicos por parte de diferentes estratos sociales resultó ser un desafío para garantizar los derechos de los estudiantes de preescolar. El artículo tiene como objetivo reflexionar sobre los impactos de la pandemia en el proceso educativo. La metodología de la investigación implicó un estudio de caso en dos clases de cinco años de una Institución Municipal de Educación Infantil de una ciudad de tamaño mediano del interior del Estado de São Paulo en el año 2021. Los procedimientos metodológicos involucraron el análisis de la situación escolar, registros de actividades en tiempos de pandemia de dichas clases e informes de los docentes de las dos clases en esa etapa. Los resultados señalan los obstáculos enfrentados y el daño al aprendizaje de los niños por estar fuera de la escuela.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Educación Infantil. El aprendizaje de los niños. Garantía de Derechos. Impactos de la pandemia.

Introduction

Beyond conceiving the school as a space for the transmission of historically systematized knowledge, it is necessary to understand it as a place where individuals possess peculiarities and carry with them distinct social and cultural backgrounds. In the fabric of school life, relationships are often permeated by a sense of sharing and empathy. Putting oneself in another's shoes and understanding their needs is an exercise that develops in the daily routine of the school environment. All the richness that human interaction can produce within the educational unit was interrupted in March 2020. With the advent of the Coronavirus pandemic, school doors were closed, and the social interaction of the school community was halted. Empty classrooms, an unmoving cafeteria, and an unoccupied outdoor area—silence fell over the school. Students, now at home, no longer shared knowledge with their peers.

In this atypical context, the challenge for schools in ensuring the rights of the primary target audience of early childhood education became evident. Considering that every child has the right to learn, without any distinctions, the situation of students in conditions of greater social vulnerability was particularly concerning. In the context of the pandemic, the right to education for children from lower social strata was compromised due to the lack of access to technological resources. Regarding the right to education, the Federal Constitution (1988) defines education as integral to the full development of the individual:

Art. 205. Education, a right for all and a duty of the State and the family, shall be promoted and encouraged with the collaboration of society, aiming at the full development of the individual, their preparation for the exercise of citizenship, and their qualification for work (Brasil, 1988, p. 118, our translation).

During the pandemic, the school, as a space promoting learning, was challenged to reinvent itself in order to guarantee access to curricular knowledge for students, especially the right to full-day enrollment for the children of working mothers. Regarding full-day attendance, beyond access to the formal curriculum, the school also offers children the opportunity to experience a diversified curriculum through recreational activities centered around interaction and play. Concerning full-day attendance in daycare centers, Serrão and Oliveira (2021) state:

In a country without a tradition of full-day schooling, and considering the history of daycare as a space replacing the family (Haddad, 2002), the provision of early childhood education (ECE) on a full-day basis has not been considered a necessary and legitimate action in current public education policies, especially as almost all education for 4- and 5-year-olds is offered on a part-day basis, and the provision of daycare in this format is increasing. In

many municipalities, full-day attendance is only granted through judicial orders, mandating the enrollment of infants or children in both morning and afternoon shifts, which is an improvised measure and not a proposal for full-day education (Serrão; Oliveira, 2021, p. 167, our translation).

In addition to how enrollment is structured—part-time or full-time—for children, it is essential to consider the school as a very specific place from a structural point of view. A rural school is different from an urban educational unit. A school in an affluent or central city neighborhood differs from one in the periphery. These disparities certainly impact the educational process, as they involve varied didactic, pedagogical, and technological resources.

The disparate realities have highlighted the educational divide caused by the pandemic. Social inequality, which has always been a chronic issue in the history of Brazilian education, became even more pronounced when the poorest children were prevented from attending school during the pandemic:

Another highlight under the pandemic's magnifying glass was social inequality, revealed by the refutation of the naive claim that the pandemic placed everyone in the same boat. The storm may be the same, but we have some secure and luxurious cruise ships sailing alongside small, motorless, leaky, and oarless boats. The widening of this enormous social wound exposes the technological, structural unemployment and the scandalous reality in which the school fails to prepare students for dignified work, that is, work that cannot be replaced by machines or systems (Furtado, 2021, p. 86, our translation).

This situation only exacerbated school dropout rates and academic failure, contradicting the provisions of the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (1990) regarding fundamental rights:

Art. 3º Children and adolescents enjoy all the fundamental rights inherent to the human person, without prejudice to the full protection referred to in this Law, ensuring them, by Law or other means, all opportunities and facilities to enable their physical, mental, moral, spiritual, and social development under conditions of freedom and dignity (Brasil, 1990, p. 1, our translation).

From this perspective, it became evident during the pandemic that social disparity had an impact on the development of educational opportunities for children, considering the differences in their social class affiliations. Away from the school environment, students whose parents were able to provide sufficient technological resources to facilitate distance learning maintained a more efficient learning process. In contrast, children from vulnerable social classes faced significant disadvantages in accessing systematic knowledge due to the lack of access to technology.

In this scenario, early childhood education institutions were challenged to ensure the

inherent rights of children: the right to learn and develop their physical, social, cognitive, emotional, and moral aspects.

The aim of this article is to present some reflections on the impacts of the pandemic on the educational process. The research methodology involved a case study and document analysis. The methodological procedures included school records of the activities developed during the pandemic and reports from the teachers involved in these activities. To understand how learning occurred for children in the pandemic context and the challenges schools faced in ensuring intrinsic learner rights, formative activities carried out throughout 2021 in two groups of five-year-old students from a Municipal Early Childhood Education Institution were analyzed.

The case study focused on monitoring the pedagogical practices developed by the teachers from a formative perspective. Following the teachers' work, considering how the activities were created and how the pandemic context altered the dynamics of teaching and learning, are key areas of investigation in this study.

Regarding the topic of this research, it is important to highlight that the repercussions of the pandemic's impact will continue to be the subject of study and research in the long term, both in educational and social aspects. This historical period brings significant reflections on the ways in which the teaching and learning process was conducted to ensure the right to education for all students. As a theoretical foundation, several studies were selected to support our analyses and reflections, among which we highlight the texts by Araújo and Argenti Perez (2021a, 2021b, 2022), Argenti Perez and Araújo (2022), Araújo (2023), Chicarelli and Argenti Perez (2021, 2022), and Chicarelli (2023).

The Challenge for Schools to Ensure the Right to Learning

From 2020 to the first semester of 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic, activities at the early childhood education institution under study were adapted to meet social distancing restrictions and ensure the safety of children, teachers, and staff. Based on a survey of communications in the WhatsApp group, we found that the school year involved the following pedagogical practices:

- the sending of educational materials and activities by teachers through the app to families;
- preparation and distribution of educational activity kits, containing printed materials, books, games, and art supplies so that children could continue learning at home;
- recording of short videos, allowing students to watch at their own pace and schedule, according to the families' availability;
- sending proposals for playful and recreational activities, even remotely, to maintain the fun and motivating aspect of learning in early childhood education;
- Increased communication between teachers and parents to provide additional support, clarify doubts, and ensure the continuity of children's cognitive and emotional development;
- family involvement in educational activities, encouraging parents' participation in the learning process of students at home;
- recommendation of interactive educational apps and online games suitable for early childhood education;
- encouragement, when possible and safe, for outdoor activities, respecting social distancing guidelines, to promote movement and social interaction among children;
- presentation of the adaptation of the pedagogical project to meet the specific needs of students during the pandemic, considering the changes in the educational environment;
- a message emphasizing the care for children's emotional well-being, with activities that stimulated the expression of feelings and promoted emotional support.

We observed how the school environment gave way to the students' homes becoming the place for studying and developing educational content. The family played a crucial role in this new study format, as the caregivers assisted the children in learning activities, ensuring that knowledge became a process of continuous construction.

The return to in-person activities at the Early Childhood Education institution in 2021 involved a careful assessment of local health conditions, considering infection rates, vaccine availability, health authorities' guidance, and the schools' ability to implement safety measures. In the context of the research, safety measures included social distancing protocols, mask usage, enhanced hygiene measures, classroom ventilation improvements, and the possibility of conducting outdoor activities. Additionally, transparent communication with parents, students, and teachers was crucial to ensuring understanding and adherence to the return to school activities.

The atypical years of 2020 and 2021 spurred discussions about the importance of recognizing children as subjects of rights and being capable of perceiving what happens in their surroundings, constructing knowledge based on the interactions they develop with others and according to their age group.

We assume that the human being is a subject in constant transformation and capable of continuous learning; learning is understood as a process that occurs in attempts to grasp the object of study. It is important to emphasize that learning takes place in the construction and reconstruction of an evaluative proposal, including in activities aimed at developing the social aspect. The teachers explored the children's imagination so that the students could create imaginary contexts and experience the enchantment of "pretend play." This characteristic is defined as an integral part of play:

Free and pleasurable play allows the child to be led into an imaginary realm, a conscious make-believe world, yet capable of reproducing the relationships they observe in their daily life, symbolically experiencing different roles, exercising their ability to generalize and abstract (Mello; Valle, 2005, p. 45, our translation).

Teacher intentionality played a crucial role in the return to in-person teaching in early childhood education post-pandemic, ensuring that the educational process was adapted to the specific needs of children and promoting a healthier and more effective learning environment.

A playful activity promoted by one of the teachers involved asking the students to use a school object as if it were another item, creating a system of representation through "pretend play." In this way, the children were able to develop their creative capacity by using their imagination.

During the activity, one student asked the teacher for the eraser to transform into a race car. The teacher agreed to lend the object but made a deal with the student: he had to act like a responsible driver and avoid crashing the eraser into the wall so as not to "break" the car.

Excited student moved around the room, pushing the eraser as if he were driving a powerful Formula 1 car.

In the symbolic field, the sandbox at the Early Childhood Education Institution became a stage for performances. In this space, the students played theater. The teacher guided them to be careful with the use of the sand: they should not throw it in a friend's face or put it in their mouth. The students acted out various contexts. They pretended to be superheroes with magical powers. They performed theater as if they were circus artists. Some were clowns, others dancers, others magicians. It was a unique moment to foster symbolic play. In this "world of imagination," the children could experience playful situations and create a parallel reality, a product of their imagination, to play and represent imaginative places and characters.

During interactions and play, there was difficulty among the children in accepting each other's perspectives. When one student said he was going to be the king of the castle, the other would reply that he was not, asserting that he was the king, which was the end of the discussion. The children were resistant to role exchanges. They generally wanted to take on the central characters who had more participation in the scenes of this "pretend play" world.

When the students showed a lot of resistance to exchanging roles in the theatrical plays, the teachers intervened in a dialogical and reflective way. They would gather the children to talk and explain that everyone had equal rights. It was important for each one to experience different characters so that everyone had the chance to showcase their talent. The children would reflect and then switch roles, though sometimes reluctantly. In the learning context, animism commonly occurs when the teacher proposes a drawing activity. The children would attempt to draw a sun and give it eyes and a mouth, humanizing the celestial body as if it were a being capable of interaction. Vygotsky (1998, p. 137, our translation) states: "The essence of play is the creation of a new relationship between the field of meaning and the field of visual perception, that is, between thought situations and real situations."

In interactions and play, animism is observed when the child attributes feelings to toys. In their interaction with dolls, dialogue and the creation of familial bonds take place. The doll is generally the child's son. Sometimes, it is the sibling or the father. The child combs the doll's hair and cares for it as if it were a human being. The child talks to and interacts with the toy, thus humanizing the inanimate.

The teachers valued the experiences that the children developed with their peers and toys. The learning process relied on these exchanges, whether real or imaginary, within the students' realm of understanding to enhance creativity, imagination, and playfulness. The

educators were always very careful in designing the activities and monitoring the children's learning progress. They were open to dialogue and new ideas, seeking to understand each child's pace, while respecting the specificities and characteristics of each student.

The data analysis revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted young children's development and learning. The closure of in-person educational institutions limited many students' social interactions and structured learning opportunities. Social distancing led to isolation for young children, limiting their interactions with peers and adults, which negatively affected their social and emotional development. It is essential to consider that not all families have access to electronic devices and high-speed internet, which may have restricted access to online educational resources. Besides the school adaptations during the pandemic, it is crucial to understand that the pandemic brought economic, health, and emotional challenges to many families. Family stress negatively impacted the home environment, affecting the well-being and emotional stability of the children. Considering that children learn through active experiences and exploration, it was observed that the limitation of opportunities for practical activities and sensory experiences may have negatively affected cognitive development.

Reframing Learning in an Unconventional Teaching Context

The return to in-person education in Early Childhood Education after the pandemic presented various challenges in the investigated context. It is relevant to consider that children in this age group require a safe, welcoming, and stimulating environment for their holistic development. They may have experienced traumatic situations during the pandemic, such as the loss of loved ones, social isolation, and changes in routine. The return to school demanded sensitivity from educators to handle the students' emotions and help them readjust.

Some children felt afraid of contracting the disease upon returning to school. Educators needed to be prepared to address their anxiety and create a secure environment, which was a constant challenge. Additionally, it was necessary to ensure that the facilities were always clean and that health protocols were followed.

Educators were challenged to address the specific demands of this return, including the emotional issues of the children, the implementation of safety protocols, and the adaptation of the curriculum to the new circumstances. They needed to identify learning gaps and implement strategies to help the children recover without putting undue pressure on them.

In the research conducted, it was observed that the proposals valued the students'

developmental processes and had pedagogical intentionality. The teacher of Class A frequently mentioned that the children had spent a lot of time at home with remote learning and had become more sensitive to social interactions. With the return to in-person education, they strengthened their interactions and developed camaraderie and a sense of sharing. They learned to divide things and respect each other's space.

The teacher of Class C stated that the students had no way to stay protected within the school. The virus was causing many deaths. Without a vaccine, remote learning was the only option. Despite remote learning not achieving the same outcomes as in-person education, the teacher noted that other values were strengthened, such as family cohesion, increased parental involvement in the children's school lives, and the importance of valuing the school and its professionals. These lessons served as both learning and overcoming experiences.

In summary, the teachers understood that the pandemic context affected the social and emotional lives of everyone, including the children. Therefore, the school routine needed to be handled with affection, always respecting the environment in which the child was situated.

Children are influenced by the environment in which they are immersed. With the return to in-person schooling, within a more promising scenario due to vaccination, it became necessary to provide a social environment filled with affection and security for the students. This way, the children felt safer and more empowered socially and emotionally. Most of them belonged to vulnerable social classes. It is crucial to consider the social reality of the students to understand how the learning process impacts the children. Students with greater social vulnerability require a differentiated approach when considering the pedagogical practices to be developed in the learning process.

We live in a culture that devalues emotions due to an overemphasis on reason, in a desire to assert that humans distinguish themselves from other animals by being rational beings. However, we are mammals, and as such, we are animals who live through emotions. Emotions are not something that obscures understanding; they are not constraints on reason: emotions are bodily dynamics that define the domains of action in which we operate. An emotional change implies a change in the domain of action (Maturana, 2002, p. 56, our translation).

Emotions are intertwined with the learning process. Considering the child's vulnerability, it is necessary to strengthen their emotional aspect so that they feel encouraged to face the challenges and learning opportunities presented to them. The teachers in the classes studied were sensitive to the student's life contexts. They never assessed them based on isolated moments. On the contrary, they sought to understand the students' family situations, the

conditions in which they lived, and who they interacted with at home. In summary, they paid careful attention to the children's emotions. These considerations assisted the teachers in managing evaluations that valued the process and the constructions made by the students during the learning course.

The case study developed in this article aimed to portray different perspectives on the learning situation, considering the school's challenge to ensure children's rights. Looking at the evaluations performed by the students, it was evident how necessary family involvement was for achieving a higher quality of education. The year 2021 continued to be atypical. Social distancing within the school was maintained in the second semester. It was challenging to contain the children's excitement. The teacher of Class A reported that when there was not enough time to complete a pedagogical activity, she would talk to the family at the end of the class and ask them to help the child with the activity. There was a considerable level of compliance. It was a period when many parents were working from home with reduced hours or were unemployed.

However, there were also complaints from many families regarding the execution of tasks. The same teacher reported that some families claimed they did not have much time to spend with their children on homework. These were often single mothers who cleaned every day, worked a lot, and lacked the time and energy to spend with their children daily. They helped within their means but did not have many moments to study with their children.

Despite these isolated cases, the adherence to both remote and in-person activities was significant. The teachers mentioned that some parents reported that the quality of education during the pandemic was affected. They said that keeping the child out of school was a mistake. However, without the existence of a vaccine, in-person attendance at the school was not feasible.

Final considerations

The research conducted was crucial for reflecting on the perspective of learning within a pandemic and post-pandemic context. Although there remains a scarcity of empirical studies on the impacts of the pandemic on the learning process due to the novelty of the virus and its global repercussions, it is necessary to expand research to understand the social and educational challenges of this period within the educational space. Studies focused on this theme are essential for redirecting pedagogical practices to improve education quality.

Pedagogical practices that serve meaningful learning place the child at the center of planning. In this regard, it is important to regularly analyze educational practices so that educators continually reassess their teaching methods and adapt their instructional actions to ensure that the curriculum content is meaningful to students.

The school, as a guarantor of rights, had to be reconsidered. From this perspective, it is necessary to view assessment as part of the process and not as an end in itself. Redirecting the path of learning becomes relevant for teachers who view learning as a mechanism for the growth of knowledge. Therefore, investing in pedagogical and ongoing professional development is a primary need for public institutions.

The study conducted at the observed early childhood education school demonstrated that it maintains a well-defined model of pedagogical practices, particularly during the pandemic, when children's learning was monitored through technological resources that tracked student progress in acquiring knowledge.

In this way, the school was able to commit to providing continuous, comprehensive education to students, ensuring their inalienable right to learning and preparing them for citizenship and full development in their physical, mental, and social aspects, always in conditions of freedom and dignity.

The final considerations affirm that the concept of the child and learning is a broad field subject to ongoing reflection. Promoting meaningful pedagogical practices and refining them in the name of educational quality is an intrinsic part of the educator's role and the responsibility of the school to uphold students' learning rights in the early stages of primary education.

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