ACTIONS OF SCHOOL PRINCIPALS IN THE PANDEMIC SCENARIO: BETWEEN OFFICIAL GUIDELINES AND SCHOOLS LIMITATIONS

AÇÕES DE DIRETORES ESCOLARES NO CENÁRIO PANDÊMICO: ENTRE NORMATIVAS OFICIAIS E LIMITES DA ESCOLA

ACTUACIÓN DE LOS DIRECTORES ESCOLARES EN EL ESCENARIO DE PANDEMIA: ENTRE LA NORMATIVA OFICIAL Y LOS LÍMITES ESCOLARES

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ABSTRACT: This article deals with the second stage of an investigation that investigated elements that affected the work of school directors in the state education network of São Paulo. The information collected through the focus group allowed us to apprehend the initiatives and actions of these actors to implement the guidelines recommended by the Secretary of Education of the State of São Paulo to enable distance learning and the gradual return to face-to-face activities, during the Covid-19 pandemic. In the context of deepening social and educational inequalities and political uncertainties, there are still countless challenges to face in order to overcome the effects of the biggest crisis that has hit Brazilian education in the last century.


RESUMO: Este estudo aborda a segunda fase de uma pesquisa que examinou os fatores que influenciaram o trabalho dos diretores escolares da rede estadual de ensino de São Paulo. Através de grupos focais, foram coletadas informações que permitiram compreender as iniciativas e ações desses líderes na implementação das diretrizes estabelecidas pela Secretaria de Educação do Estado de São Paulo, visando facilitar o ensino remoto e o gradual retorno às atividades presenciais durante a pandemia da COVID-19. Em um contexto de agravamento das desigualdades sociais e educacionais, juntamente com incertezas políticas, persistem numerosos desafios que precisam ser superados para mitigar os impactos da maior crise enfrentada pela educação brasileira no último século.


RESUMEN: Este artículo aborda la segunda etapa de una investigación que examinó elementos que influyeron en el trabajo de los directores escolares en la red de educación estatal de São Paulo. La información recopilada a través de grupo focal nos permitió comprender las iniciativas y acciones de estos actores para implementar las directrices promovidas por la Secretaría de Educación del Estado de São Paulo para viabilizar la enseñanza a distancia y el retorno gradual a las actividades presenciales durante la pandemia de Covid-19. Em um contexto de profundización de las desigualdades sociales y educativas y de incertidumbres políticas, existen numerosos desafios por enfrentar para superar los efectos de la mayor crisis que ha impactado a la educación brasileña en este último siglo.

Introduction

In Brazil, the pandemic caused by the Coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) between 2020 and 2022, exacerbated the economic, social, and political crises, adding new elements to ideological disputes and contributing to the country’s prominent place in the scenario of the growing weakening of Western democracies. The government of Jair Bolsonaro at that time, apart from acknowledging the national reality, minimized the chaos, discouraged vaccination, and deepened political polarization, leading to what many researchers called “necropolitics”5. Consequently, the pandemic further increased unemployment rates, escalated the number of families in socially vulnerable situations, and unequivocally exposed the structural inequalities of Brazilian Society.

In the field of education, like the healthcare sector, ideological motivations were responsible for the inaction or sluggishness of the federal government in providing the necessary responses demanded by the economic and health crisis. Consequently, state and municipal governments implemented actions based on two main approaches: common proposals and individual solutions, depending on the economic and institutional condition of each federal entity. This scenario resulted in the adoption of diverse and unequal strategies, further exacerbating regional inequalities.

Given the lack of political articulation between the Union, states, and municipalities, the federal entities found themselves compelled to take responsibility for legal measures and guidelines regarding the implementation of remote teaching and the gradual resumption of face-to-face activities in public education systems. Several obstacles were identified in the implementation of Emergency Remote Teaching (ERE) in public schools, and the following are noteworthy: low or no connectivity between teachers and students; precariousness of technological resources in schools and residences; lack of proficiency among teachers, family members, and students in dealing with digital tools; difficulty for parents and/or guardians in monitoring and guiding home activities; inadequate physical conditions in homes to carry out remote activities; increase in domestic violence; low motivation to maintain and reconcile domestic routines with professional activities, among many other challenges (Lunardi et al., 2021; Macedo, 2021; Martins et al., 2022; Santos, Marques, Moura, 2021).

Thus, this article focuses on the final stage of the investigation entitled ‘Remote teaching: the implementation of guidelines from the State Department of Education of São Paulo by school principals’⁶. The study aimed to address elements that influenced the work of school managers in their efforts to implement the guidelines recommended by the State Department of Education of São Paulo (Seduc-SP) during the pandemic. The main objectives were to enable emergency remote teaching (ERE) and facilitate the return to face-to-face activities amidst a scenario of political and institutional asymmetry between the federal entities.

Grounded in the concept of triangulation, the research involved the following steps: 1) surveying, systematization, and analysis of a broad scope of official guidelines for the remote teaching processes as well as for the resuming in-person activities in the state schools of São Paulo; comprehensive description of the hierarchical structure and functioning of São Paulo’s educational system, as well as the Department of Education’s pedagogical programs, projects and regulations aimed at schools reorganization; 2) empirical research through a focus group with school principals and deputy-principals of Sao Paulo’s state schools.

The systematization and discussion of the first stage results have been published in v.60 of Textos FCC (Martins et al., 2022)⁷. This report presents a range of 133 legal documents issued between March 2020 to May 2021. The documental analyses revealed the efforts made by Seduc-SP to foster educational actions during the pandemic, covering aspects such as operating school buildings, pedagogical recommendations and guidelines, and teacher training actions. Notably, the involvement of Seduc-SP was particularly pronounced in the first two months of the pandemic (March and April 2020), and during the mobilization for the reopening of schools by the end of 2020 and for the beginning of the school year of 2021. However, despite all the efforts made, the data indicated that initiatives were taken on a trial-and-error basis, given the complexity and unpredictability of the health crisis, which led to several uncertainties and low effectiveness.

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⁶ The study had the participation of a research team from Fundação Carlos Chagas (FCC), in partnership with professors from Universidade Municipal de São Caetano do Sul (USCS) and Universidade Cidade de São Paulo (Unicid).
Notes about the research’s scenario

The Secretary of Education of the state of São Paulo oversees approximately 5.400 independent but linked schools, catering to around 3.5 million students. The department employs about 234.000 individuals, including 190.000 teachers and 5.000 school principals. The state education system is organized into 91 Education Directorates (DE), which are further grouped into 15 central regions (São Paulo, 2020b). Currently, SeduC-SP is engaged in several programs, encompassing policies approved at the national level, such as the New Secondary School program. Among the initiatives taken during the pandemic period, some projects are to be mentioned: Public Leaders (Líderes Públicos); Innovative Education (Inova Educação”; School Meals at Home (Merenda em Casa); Connected Teacher (Professor Conectado); New Secondary School (Novo Ensino Médio); and the Integral Teaching Program (Programa de Ensino Integral/PEI) (Martins, et al., 2022).

It is also important to highlight that the São Paulo Education Media Center (CMSP) – a department that already existed within the Seduc-SP’ structure before the pandemic to promote continuing education for teachers and school managers – was strengthened with additional resources by the Decree n. 64.982 of May 15, 2020. The digital platform was designed to assist students, teachers, and school administrators in conducting remote activities. It comprises a repository of recorded class contents that can be accessed through the CMSP app with no cost for internet usage. It is also accessible through live broadcasts on Education TV digital channels (Martins et al., 2022).

With such a technologically advanced infrastructure, Seduc-SP believed that it would be enough to mitigate the teaching and learning processes disruptions caused by school closures and to address the pre-existing educational inequalities. The second stage of this research aimed to understand the school managers view on the efficacy of these strategies, whose results are described and discussed further on.

Methodological approach

In the second stage, a qualitative exploratory study was conducted, an approach described by Stake (2011), where observers play a significant role in defining and redefining the meanings of what they observe and hear. To ensure the reliability of interpretation, a triangulation was made between the documentary data collected in the first stage of the
investigation and empirical material obtained from a focus group\textsuperscript{8} with school managers of
different state schools in São Paulo.

It is important to mention that from 1940 onwards, investigation that took groups as
central elements of analysis were expanded, with relevant contributions to the field of human
and social sciences (Godoi, 2015). When discussing the David Blackledge & Barry Hunt’s
(1985) research, Lapassade agreed with the principles they established. The author emphasizes
that crucial aspects “of the educational system lies in the daily activities of teachers, students,
administrators, and inspectors” (2005, p.24). He also observes that there are always margins of
freedom and autonomy in educational spaces, despite the normative and coercive context.
School actors construct meanings and/or significations, i.e, they retain what they take as
significant in their daily work, based on the meanings of their actions and on the intention that
drives teachers’ activity. In his own words: “when I give meaning to my actions, I attribute
meaning to the actions of other actors around me”, which generates interpretations of the
behavior of others (Lapassade, 2005, p. 24).

In other words, the ‘weaves’ of these interactions promote negotiations, as meanings are
constantly reinterpreted through daily coexistence and context of stimuli/coercions. Furthermore, because government programs frequently change, professionals change the ways
they perceive and the meanings they attribute to their everyday practices.

It is also necessary to clarify – albeit briefly – the diversity of approaches regarding the
term perception, derived from the Latin ‘perceptio’ – generally defined as “[...] act or effect of
perceiving; combination of the senses in the recognition of an object; reception of a stimulus;
faculty of knowing independently of the senses; sensation; intuition; idea; image; intellectual
representation” (Marin, 2008, p. 12). The literature in the area of human and social sciences has
been pointing out the complexity and diversity of the term – constructed long before the field
of psychology was set up –, studied by physiologists and physicists who defined the
mechanisms of functioning of the world and the biological aspects of phenomena, studies
justified by the requirement to correct “[...] the data of perception with the rigor of science”
(Marin, 2008, p. 14). This complexity has promoted in the history of science the permanent
search for explanations about the term, in specific fields of human thought, leading to the
establishment of different theories in psychology and philosophy.

\textsuperscript{8} Regarding the literature on implementation and its various conceptual contributions, see the discussion
conducted in Martins et al., 2022.
These assumptions anchored the online focus group made with principals and deputy principals from three Education Directorates (DE) of the state of São Paulo: DE/Sul 1; DE/Osasco and DE/Baixada Santista. The focal group was carried out with seven members: five female principals and two male principals, making a total of seven members. The schools where they work are in the following regions: three in peripheral neighborhoods of the city of São Paulo; two of them are in municipalities belonged to the Metropolitan Region of São Paulo; and the other two in municipalities of the southern coast of the state. As for the teaching stages offered, three attended only students in the early years of elementary school, one of them full-time; three only the final years of elementary school and high school; and one offered only high school divided in three terms.

Out of the seven participants, one was serving as deputy-director at the time, having been invited by her headteacher. Three reported accessing the directory position through a public tender process. One was appointed to the role in 2020 and the remaining two participants did not provide information about how they accessed the school management position. All of had solid teaching and management experience and had pedagogical training through undergraduate and/or postgraduate courses.

The focus group was conducted through the Google Meet platform, which lasted 156 minutes. To document the discussions, the session was audio and video recorded with the participants’ prior authorization. Afterward, the entire content was transcribed and organized into thematic blocks, following a pre-established script. Content Analysis (CA) was the methodological approach used, enabling systematic organization of the material collected. The technical procedures of Content Analysis (CA) enable researchers to make inferences based on the conditions of message production and reception, thus facilitating the construction of analytical categories, which were configured after successive floating readings of the entire material.

According to Bardin (1994, p.104-107), the record unit “is the meaningful segment to be coded, serving as base units for categorization and frequency counting”. On the other hand, the units of context provide additional information to “encode and comprehend the precise meaning of the record unit”. After these steps, the material yielded the following descriptive categories: a) Organization and functioning of schools; b) Challenges of resuming face-to-face activities; c) Discrepancies between support activities and school life during the pandemic; d)

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9 In accordance with ethical procedures in research with human beings, participants were contacted through an invitation letter, disagreeing about the objectives and methods of the research, at which time they consented to be part of the group and overcame the Informed Consent Form (TCLE).
Effects of educational inequalities. Given the scope of this study and the constraints of this article, the four categories will be addressed in an integrated manner.

Organization and functioning of schools

The school staff had to mobilize a great creative and adaptive capacity to devise strategies for implementing the huge number of regulations issued by Seduc-SP, as the state government’s guidelines underwent constant changes, directly impacting the school calendar. Under normal conditions, the school year calendar is defined and published in the state Official Journal in the previous year of the current one, whereas minor adjustments might be done by school managers after the School Council approval. During pandemic, school principals often had to modify work arrangements in response to urgent measures taken by the Government of São Paulo. In such an exceptional situation, not seldomly, they were addressed to schools even before officially formalized by Seduc-SP.

The pandemic situation was totally unusual! On March 13, 2020, we got the order to shut the schools down for 15 days, from March 16 on. So, we closed everything down as we are said. But, in fact, after the 15 days, we all realized that it was much more serious than we initially thought! It was a chaotic situation, you know? Like, nobody knew what to do next. We’re just trying to figure things out and see how it would move forward. That’s what I remember?

They [referring to Seduc-SP] always released the communications, first on social media, on social platforms. The Secretary [of Education] went on live on Facebook to announce that they were anticipating schools ‘holidays, and only later they issued an official resolution. After that, the Education Directorate (DE) would inform us, and then we’re meant to inform the teachers. So, it was like that throughout the year, and now, again in 2021, things are happening this way again.

This situation placed an extra workload and demanded more energy from school professionals, especially from the management team who were responsible for coordinating schools’ daily activities. The testimonies clearly reflect this perception of the participants.

Within these three and a half years that I oversee the school management, I think I’ve never seen so many shifts in the school calendar […]. As a school principal, for years now, I’ve never seen so many changes: they released a resolution today and two days later they changed it, and then change it again. I mean, it’s as if they [referring to Seduc-SP] were figuring out what the state education system really is. And then, when it [information] reaches us, they say ‘well, everything will be fine’[…].
The lack of information about the disease and the uncertainties about how long the school closure would last led to a certain sense of inaction at the beginning of the pandemic. During March and April 2020, several administrative and support activities were scaled back or put on hold, with the hope that life would eventually return to normality. However, as the measures of social isolation persisted, it became imperative to reorganize teaching activities in a remote format. The resort to social media, which was already utilized to reach students, was intensified during the two years of pandemic.

We were all lost, like using various technological tools, as blogs, Facebook, websites, Google Classroom; we began to use everything to see how we could reach the greatest number of students possible, but it was a chaotic situation […] because of the school being so big, the school team didn’t even sleep.

Creating websites to post homework was a strategy adopted in many schools. However, as other studies showed (Cammarano, Rosa, 2021; Martins et al., 2022; Pimenta, Sousa, 2021; Sehnem, Martins, 2021,), few teachers were able to maintain direct contact with their students. This is understandable in a country where less than 50% of families have a computer with an internet connection at home (UNICEF, 2021).

We used social networks and created a website for the school where we used to post tasks for the students, as teachers had limited contact with them. Later, the Media Center (CMSP) offered distance classes for them. Teachers used to watch online lessons with the students to create some exercises to be posted later in the school website.

The functioning of democratic management and collective work was another aspect related to school organization during the pandemic discussed in the focus group. The positive performance of schools’ governing bodies through digital tools was consensual among the participants. Their perception was that, having more flexible schedules, there was a significant adherence from the school community to online meetings. Additionally, the Collective Pedagogical Work Classes meetings (ATPC) were much more productive in this format. As a result, the group expressed their wish to keep this dynamic when the schools are reopened, except for activities with students.

APM [ Parents and Teachers Association] board remote meetings have become much more effective now. In the past, in-person meetings, we had difficulties to gather all families because their conflicting work schedules and personal commitments.
Online meetings significantly facilitated adult-to-adult relationship. However, students don’t enjoy remote classes; they often complain a lot. That’s why APM and School Council meetings were more effective […] as they are geared towards adults, let’s put it that way! Even the ATPC worked very well as a collective pedagogical activity. Yet, students need the socialization offered at schools, including their interactions with teachers. Regarding everything else, remote meetings were very helpful.

Articles that have addressed the democratic management subject offered little information to outline a broader picture on the functioning of school governing bodies during pandemic. Nonetheless, some suggest that this principle has been further weakened due to difficulties of communication between schools and parents, as well as to the increase of school professional’s workload. (Assis, 2021; Louzada, Amancio, Rossato, 2021; Nascimento, Silva, 2020; Rodrigues, Oliveira, 2021; Rosa, Martins, 2021).

Regarding the effectiveness of remote teaching, it can be stated that the Media Center’s resources (CMSP) have largely contributed to ensuring the continuity of classes in state schools of São Paulo. However, despite Seduc-SP’s powerful technological apparatus and the investments made in digital infrastructure by the government of São Paulo, the measures were not enough to mitigate social inequalities, and the disparities between schools belonged to the same public system.

The distribution of financial and technological resources was not equitable and did not occur homogeneously between schools, as reported, and explained by two participants of the focus group.

[…] the budget is based on the schools’ enrolment numbers. So, that is it: I managed to set up just one Media Center room [at my school]. Therefore, students were not assisted in the same way, because the amount of money vary between schools. In my school we went through many hardships concerning access to technology […] even to Media Center. Some mothers came forward to say that they couldn’t access it because they didn’t have internet or connection to the TV Channel at their homes. It was not easy […] So, you know what we did here? With the funds – I can’t deny it, the government sent a lot of money, really did – we managed to set up the entire school: we’ve installed a Media Center in every classroom; all of them with internet, computer, projector, home theatre. In short, they are all equipped. […] Thus, teachers would come to school to teach through Meet [for the students at home] and stayed alone in the classroom.

Discrepancies between Seduc’s initiatives and the reality of schools were felt in aspects not scrutinized by the central and intermediate spheres of administrations of the system, which
compelled school managers to use their “discretionary authority” to make decisions within the limits of each school's possibilities.

**Disparities between support activities and school life during pandemic**

Beyond the restrictions imposed by Seduc-SP regulations, it became evident how school principals have exercised their (relative) autonomy to tailor the guidelines and resources to their specific contexts. While recognizing the Media Center as a pivotal initiative in enabling remote teaching, the participants were candid in highlighting its limitations and shortcomings, which required practical adaptations.

[...] I understand that the Media Center was created very quickly. They managed to set up many studios in a short period of time. Obviously, it does not replace the teacher in the classroom. Moreover, the online classes are relatively short. Students have classes only one hour and a half per day. It will never replace the seven classes they have every day!

[...] the Media Center is a significant resource made available by Dept. of Education to the students. Teachers currently use it, and the students submit their homework through it. However, we also give lessons on [Google] Meet, and teachers are mentioning that students prefer this way. We’ve arranged classes schedules through Meet, and it has been much more approved by students compared to Media Center’s classes alone. So, my perception is – and the students also shared [this opinion] - that classes through Media Center are not conducted by their own teachers. So, they don’t feel they must stay and watch a teacher that they don’t even know, even if he/she is good. Therefore, we kept giving classes through Meet instead […]

Regarding continuing teacher training, it became evident that Seduc-SP has centralized this process through the Media Center and by the Center for Training and Development of Education Professionals (EFAPE). The amount of time allocated for Collective Pedagogical Work Classes (ATPC) was split to meet the demands from three hierarchical spheres of the state educational system: those from the Media Center of São Paulo (CMSP); that from the Education Directorates (DE), and from the schools themselves. Such an organization was seen negatively by the schools’ managers teams.

The problem was that: many times, we needed training provided by the school itself to address our specific needs, to match our own challenges and the students’ experiences. But, generally, we have not a spare time for that; so, we felt that the contents were superficial and not fully tailored to our requirements, which, in my opinion it fell short.
According to Ball, Maguire, and Braun (2016), policies are often reinterpreted and recreated when brought into specific contexts, and they are subjected to many negotiations. The following testimony highlights how policies are frequently challenged by school actors.

At my school, we’re somewhat rebellious (laughs). We didn’t strictly follow the Secretary of Education’s guidelines; we conducted our Collective Pedagogical Work Classes (ATPC) in a different time than the one recommended (from 1:30 pm to 3 pm). Our agenda focused our own professional development; we discussed our own reality, shared our teaching practices, which were our main concerns. Each teacher helped our pedagogical coordinator in the preparation of the topics to be discussed, targeting specific challenges that were troubling us at that moment. We didn’t adhere to the DE’s or Seduc-SP priorities; instead, we collectively decided which topic was relevant to be addressed or not; and we shared these practices between us.

Another example of a mismatch between the central educational bodies’ measures and the school unit’s reality occurred when the schools were closed, but the delivery of school supplies was not suspended, causing several inconveniences to school principals. Because of that, they faced difficulties in managing school food stock, which is meant to feed more than 3 million state school students. To prevent wastage, many principals had to use their means to get it done, which meant an extra workload for the school staff.

[…] the school meals arriving, and I couldn’t turn it down; the snacks were about to expire; we’re aware of families who were starving, but we’re not allowed to donate it for them. At the last minute, the authorities intervened, so that we had permission delivered the food baskets for them. But it was difficult to get in touch with them; I had no way to contact the families by phone. So, I took my own [car] to hand out the baskets at the students’ home, because I knew they were going hungry.

The lack of communication between the central administration and school units was evident regarding the efforts needed to reach out to the students who did not have access to remote teaching. Many times, teachers took it upon themselves to search for their students through WhatsApp groups or, as a last resort, rely on the school manager team to visit the families at their places.

As teachers had these WhatsApp groups, they tried to reach out these families through their personal contacts. It was a real partnership. We have a very close-knit group here in our school, a great team. Since there was no response at all, we moved on to the next step. The director went with our pedagogical coordinator to some residences because there were cases where the child had moved to a new place, without asking for a transfer; they simply moved to a new rented house, because they couldn’t afford [the rental] and just
disappeared. They wouldn’t give us any explanation, so we had to go after those kids. Can you believe it? There were kids we found playing on the streets (laughs), and then we had to call out, “Is there anyone at your home? Who are you with?” Or, right there in the middle of the street: “Hey so-and-so, what’s going on? Why aren’t you going to school?” We also tried going to the child’s house just to see if there was any adult there to give him/her some homework.

The insufficient tools provided by Seduc-SP to locate students caused tension among teachers and school managers. Conflicting guidelines, issued through successive resolutions, raised questions over the responsibility assigned to each school member, for instance, over whom was to be responsible for monitoring absence and finding ways to keep the students in touch with schools.

Last year, all resolutions stated that active search was under the school managers responsibility. But then they [referring to Seduc-SP] launched, along with that Teacher’s Chip Program, a resolution saying that it was also the teachers’ job to go after the students. It was like they left us hanging, you know? We asked for the teachers’ help; some of them were totally on board, but others were like, ‘No way, that’s not my job. I’m not using my personal phone for that’.

To meet the requirements of students’ active search, some school managers had to adopt thorough strategies to monitor students’ frequency, which further intensified their and the teachers’ workload.

We made an Excel spreadsheet that all teachers could access, and they kept updating it. And they went ‘Hey, I managed to talk to so-and-so, and to “such-and-such”. So, we had all 48 classrooms listed in that spreadsheet, with a bunch of questions where the teacher in charge of a classroom could share information with their colleagues. For example, ‘Hey, this guy doesn’t have internet at home, so we’ll print an activity for him”; “The mother of this other one came to school, and we’ve already agreed that she’ll come every 15 days to pick up and drop off her son’s homework.

Statements made by the government of São Paulo clashed many times with the actual schools’ conditions, which caused some discomfort between school teams and families, as well as the feeling of helplessness among teachers and managers. For instance, frequently, they found themselves unable to effectively ensure remote teaching, as the media officially announced it.

When parents heard the Secretary [of Education] saying on TV that everything was working well, that everything was so beautiful, that everything was wonderful, we asked ourselves: ‘But wait, is it only here, then, that things are
badly functioning?” Then we started exchanging these stickers with friends, with colleagues, with other schools, and we said, ‘Hey, it’s all fake really’. Because a student’s father came here questioning me about it, since the governor had said that everyone was studying, that everyone was fine, that everyone had a cell phone […]

The participant who works in a coastal town of São Paulo described the insurmountable challenges he faced at the school was running, due the disruption caused to families in the context of pandemic.

The coast is a place that normally doesn’t have many job opportunities because they are seasonal. So, during the period of the year when there was no work at all, many parents left without bothering to request a transfer to their children. So, active search for students was tough. I mean, I got it, but this pandemic period was just catastrophic for them to learn.

The gradual process of returning to school and regular activities was no less difficult. Despite health protocols outlined in the Resolution Seduc n. 61, issued on August 31, 2020, to ensure a safe resumption, professionals expressed concerns over the effectiveness of those measures. The concerns were particularly heightened with young children, requiring constant reminders to keep proper body distance.

[…] we’re very insecure all the time because when you least imagined, a child was already close to his/her friend, wanting to play with him/her. They wanted body contact, they’re children, so they need it, and it is art of our teaching for this age group. So, it was very complicated indeed, a daily challenge. And I can tell you that we spent many days in such an anxiety. If a student sneezes in the classroom, we go ‘Does he/she have Covid?’ ‘Oh, my God, this student has blown his nose twice!!! […]

The lack of material and human resources, which were essential for a safe return to school activities, was the subject of many studies (Cipriani, Moreira, Carius, 2021; Duarte, Hypólito, 2020) that corroborate the participants’ concerns. The effects of all these adversities and mismatches potentialized pre-existing inequalities and brought new challenges to civil servants of public education in the return to “normality”. The multiple setbacks mentioned above affected the 2020 curriculum, whose gaps spilled over into the following years. In addition to difficulties related to internet access, schools faced challenges in guiding families to act as mediators in their children’s tasks.
The curriculum turned out to be minimal; teachers were following the contents given by Media Center, and planning their work based on that, albeit with different resources, more than once. We progressed with baby steps. Can you imagine the craziness? […] Teachers had to follow the script, and we had to work together with them to see what could be adapted, what couldn’t, and what parents would understand and grasp what we’re saying. Because, like this: using pedagogical language with them was no effective. It had to be in a very simple language. […]

As far as assessments are concerned, they did not function to truly diagnose what students have learned or failed to learn in 2020/2021. That happened for several different reasons. One of them was the difficulty in convincing parents about the importance of not helping their children in their homework, because:

For parents and students alike, there is still the culture of chasing grades, which must be obtained by any means; whether though cheating, copying, or doing it with the help of an adult who may even solve the tests for their children. Why? Because all they want is the grade.

Similar concerns have been highlighted in studies made both in public and private schools (Ramos, Sarmento, Menegat, 2021; Santos, Marques, Moura, 2021;), indicating how deeply ingrained the culture of chasing grades remains among families, regardless of their socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. One of the participants of the focus group mentioned that the experience of the pandemic has led to a reevaluation of the meaning and format of assessments.

You know when you hand out a student an assignment, and you’re like “I hope he/she won’t just copy-paste it from the internet! (laughs). ‘Oh, well, we’re living in 2021! So, I guess it’s finally sinking in for these teachers what evaluation really mean. They had to stop and think about what school assessment is all about and what they want their students to take away from it. It’s like they have realized the need to a more formative approach of assessments.

The uncertainties surrounding evaluation processes led to questions and brought some new challenges for teaching professionals when it came to (re)defining criteria for student promotion or retention in such an exceptional context.

At the end of the year, our dilemma was like: ‘Okay, what should we do now? Let’s break it down by subject; how are we going to get these students promoted?’ So, honestly, we faced a massive setback in terms of knowledge, in terms of the current state of education, unfortunately!
When we began sharing, you know, during class council meetings, we tried to gather as much information as possible about each student: ‘Oh, this one did some activities just to one teacher’; so, we already counted him/her as someone who managed to access some lessons, somehow. If a parent picked up a lesson at school, we counted that student as if he/she hadn’t completely fallen off our radar. But the majority, like 70%, have no contact with us at all; they didn’t interact with teachers and had zero contact with the school.

On this specific matter, several articles (Laguna et al., 2021; Lunardi et al., 2021) have depicted similar situations across the country. A survey conducted by Rui Barbosa Institute (2020) with secretaries and technicians from 249 public education systems in Brazil revealed that the monitoring from central bodies was limited to the delivery of school activities without considering their completion and/or feedback to the teachers. Studies analyzed by Pimenta and Sousa (2021) highlighted the urgency of planning diagnostic assessments, rethinking what and how to evaluate, and, consequently, readjusting the focus of teachers’ continuing education.

Effects of inequalities in education: possible considerations

The impact of social and economic inequalities was substantial, causing varying degrees of difficulty for families, especially those of the most vulnerable segments of the population, which led to diverse effects in different school contexts. Even though Seduc-SP has prioritized students with limited access to remote education, the distribution of material and financial resources among schools considered other factors, such as the location and size of each school unit. This differentiation, unfortunately, has accentuated prior inequalities, reinforcing an uneven educational landscape, as smaller schools with less infrastructure faced more significant constraints in providing quality education.

These factors caused frustration and conflicts regarding professional roles between school principals and teachers who, despite their best efforts, found themselves powerless to provide more suitable activities for their students. Consequently, both became overwhelmed and demotivated in their work; besides, many experienced health issues, not only due to the pandemic itself but also due to damage to their physical and emotional well-being. Many other issues were raised in the focus group, which must serve as a warning about the limitations and risks of the intensive and indiscriminate use of Digital Information and Communication Technologies (DICTs) in education, as problems faced during the pandemic are far from being solved. The enthusiasm for the role technology is playing in education has been cautiously evaluated by some authors (Peruzzo; Ball; Grimaldi, 2022).
Final considerations

Through collective discussions in the focus group carried out in this investigation, it became clear that the impact of a pandemic on schools may be divided into at least three phases, each with distinct effects on school management and teaching practices. The initial phase was marked by schools’ closure, when the hope that everything would return promptly to normality still prevailed. During this period, of strict social isolation measures, educational professionals and the school community alike eagerly expected to come back to face-to-face learning. However, as time went on, it became evident that a much larger and complex situation was unfolding, leading to a chaotic scenario.

In the second phase, schools became targeted by countless resolutions aimed at reorganizing their routines and operations. Because of uncertainties over the sanitary crisis, the school year calendar, pedagogical matters, and the functioning of schools’ collective bodies meetings - such as APM, School Council, and Collective Pedagogical Work Classes – suffered successive changes. This period unveiled significant individual and voluntary actions from school managers and teaching staff with a view to responding to the community’s emerging needs, such as delivering meals to students and actively searching for their whereabouts. Besides, this phase was also marked by the implementation of telework and the centralization of remote education in a specialized sector, the CMSP, that has expanded considerably during pandemic. It seems, based on the focus group participants’ perception, that the Media Center played a key role in providing resources for the implementation of Emergency Remote Teaching (ERE) in the state’s schools. It was also in this period when teachers who previously had limited proficiency in using DICT tools improved their skills, which enabled them to use different online platforms for real-time lessons and work meetings.

Finally, a third phase of the pandemic unfolded, with the gradual return to face-to-face activities. This period posed a new set of challenges for schools: addressing learning delays and preventing school dropouts, which further exacerbated social disparities and widened the gap between students from private and public schools. It is still worth noting that the group’s expressions allowed us to grasp the atmosphere of distress among them, as well as the feeling of powerless in the face of emotional issues from students, their families, and/or guardians, as they did not feel prepared to deal with all problems brought about by such an unpredictable context. The statements also highlighted their wish to expand collaborative spaces within teaching units, which will be crucial to circumvent and/or at least mitigate the pandemic effects on teaching and learning processes. The work overload – which was a recurring theme in the
group – was intensified by the increased use of DICTs to implement ERE and to keep the schools functioning, involving families, guardians, and students. In addition to concerns with administrative and pedagogical (re)organization of schools – tasks typically related to school managers’ jobs – these professionals have had their daily work worsened by emotional issues.

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