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Reflections on early childhood education in the COVID-19 pandemic



The COVID-19 pandemic started in Wuhan, China, brought profound reflections and paradigm shifts in all social spheres, including the teaching of children in Early Childhood Education (Júnior et al., 2021; Ornell et al., 2020). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) reports that at least 100 million children worldwide will fall below the minimum level of reading proficiency as a result of this health crisis (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization - UNESCO, 2021). However, COVID-19 did not cause inequalities in the education of children and adolescents, it only widened them. It is known, for example, that before the pandemic, at least 250 million children in the world were out of school and nearly 800 million adults were illiterate (World Health Organization - WHO, 2020).

Although governments and educational institutions are concerned about offering content and support for teachers to guiding families to face the challenges of connectivity (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization - UNESCO, 2020), the preparation that these teachers are having is questioned, for the simple fact that, due to the exceptionality of the situation, there is not enough time to test technologies and improve frameworks. Dias and Pinto (2020) report that in the pandemic, schools are doing everything possible to ensure the use of digital tools, but without having the time to test them or train the teaching and technical-administrative staff to use them correctly.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that, in the case of developing countries such as Brazil, in the poorest states and in rural areas, these difficulties appear in the precarious conditions of public early childhood education, which are often pre-existing. Data from the report produced by the World Health Organization show that at least 1.6 billion students in more than 190 countries and all continents will be impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Closing schools and other learning spaces affected 94% of the world's student population, with up to 99% in low- and lower-middle-income countries (World Health Organization - WHO, 2020). According to information from the study 'School Exclusion in Brazil - an Alert on the Impacts of the Covid-19 Pandemic', there were at least 1.1 million children and adolescents in Brazil without access to school in 2019. This number soared to 5.1 million in 2020 (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization - UNESCO, 2020). Furthermore, data from the Centro Regional de Estudos para o Desenvolvimento da Sociedade da Informação - CETIC (2019), 43% of rural schools in Brazil do not have internet access and 52% of teachers have their own devices to develop activities.

In this way, if on the one hand, the classroom is being redesigned by technological evolution into a new virtual learning environment; on the other hand, teachers around the world are faced with multiple challenges such as – preparing/teaching remote classes; assessments in Distance Education format; and acquisition of information technology skills

in record time on formatting, designing and editing videos, texts or/and photos online (Dias & Pinto, 2020; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization - UNESCO, 2020; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization - UNESCO, 2021; Gonçalves Júnior et al., 2021).

Nonetheless, children also suffer because: (i) they have difficulty concentrating at home; (ii) parents cannot always provide adequate assistance in carrying out activities because they need to carry out household chores, be in a work-from-home setting or outside work; and (iii) lack of internet access or devices such as computers, cell phones or tablets (World Health Organization - WHO, 2020). This reality worsens depending on socio-economic and cultural variables in the country. Data from United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization - UNESCO (2020) reveal that 70% of out-of-school children were found in the most poor regions (North and Northeast) of Brazil and belonged to self-styled indigenous, black and/or brown families.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a complex and multifaceted event, and it is even argued that it should be seen as a syndemic and not a pandemic (Candido & Gonçalves, 2021). Its impacts will still be felt over the years and, perhaps, are irreparable in some aspects. It is essential to mobilize Governments, civil society and non-governmental organizations to outline measures to combat school dropout and social inclusion. For example: (a) active search for children and adolescents outside the classroom; (b) promotion of community communication campaigns focused on returning school enrollments; (c) guaranteeing universal and equal access to the internet, with special attention to the most vulnerable groups; (d) strengthen the mechanisms for promoting the fundamental social rights of children and adolescents - such as nutrition, protection, social security, leisure/sport to make them suitable for learning and staying in school.

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