COVID-19 pandemic - challenges and opportunities for education in Brazil

Pandemia da COVID-19 - desafios e oportunidades à educação no Brasil

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ABSTRACT
The COVID-19 pandemic has brought numerous impacts on the world population, with numerous consequences on the economy, jobs, health services and, especially, education. One of the main challenges of today refers to the reflections of the pandemic on the school community. This article will address the challenges and legacies that the pandemic has provided to the educational system in Brazil.

Keywords: Covid-19, Education, Impacts, Challenges, Brazil.

1 INTRODUCTION

A pneumonia outbreak was identified in Wuhan and first reported by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 31 December 2019.

On January 30, 2020 it was declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern.

On March 11, 2020, the WHO declared that such a situation would be characterized as a pandemic of the then called Coronavirus (COVID-19) and, to contain it, recommended three basic actions: isolation and treatment of identified cases, massive testing and social distancing.

In view of this, the Ministry of Health issued Ordinance No. 188, of February 3, 2020, published in the Federal Official Gazette (DOU), on February 4, 2020, declaring a Public Health Emergency of National Importance, due to human infection by the new Coronavirus (COVID-19).

States and municipalities have been issuing decrees and other legal and normative instruments to address the public health emergency, including the suspension of school activities.

The COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented in post-war world history.

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), millions of students are out of school with the total or partial closure of schools and universities in more than 150 countries due to the coronavirus pandemic.

In Brazil, face-to-face classes were suspended throughout the national territory, a situation that lasted until the end of 2021 in many States, with some opting for a gradual return, in a hybrid way, however, 18 (eighteen) States still maintained teaching only remotely - either by online platform, accessed by cell phone or computer, or even radio, television and printed handouts (UNESCO, 2021).

In this context, this article will address the main challenges of teaching in Brazil in times of pandemic and post-pandemic and what public policies have been adopted to recover and restructure education in Brazil.

2 METHODOLOGY TO BE EMPLOYED IN THE STUDY

Through a documentary survey, based on existing data and information, carried out on the World Wide Web, a qualitative research was developed, through a case study, mainly regarding the difficulties in teaching in Brazil during and after the pandemic, and the positive results verified.

3 CHALLENGES OF TEACHING IN BRAZIL IN TIMES OF PANDEMIC AND POST-PANDEMIC.

3.1 LACK OF DIGITAL ACCESS, EQUIPMENT AND TEACHER TRAINING.

Education is a social phenomenon, relating to the political, economic, scientific and cultural context of a given society (Dias & Pinto, 2019).

Thus, in addition to being a space of knowledge, the school has a reason for being, being social (Dias & Pinto, 2020).

With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, adaptations were necessary regarding the teaching model in schools, with two essential elements that are worked on in the school environment - interaction and socialization - being replaced by remote meetings, with the use of digital tools that were previously little used.

The first difficulties encountered were the lack of training for teachers to face this novelty, and each school, public or private, had to create strategies to deal with the unknown.

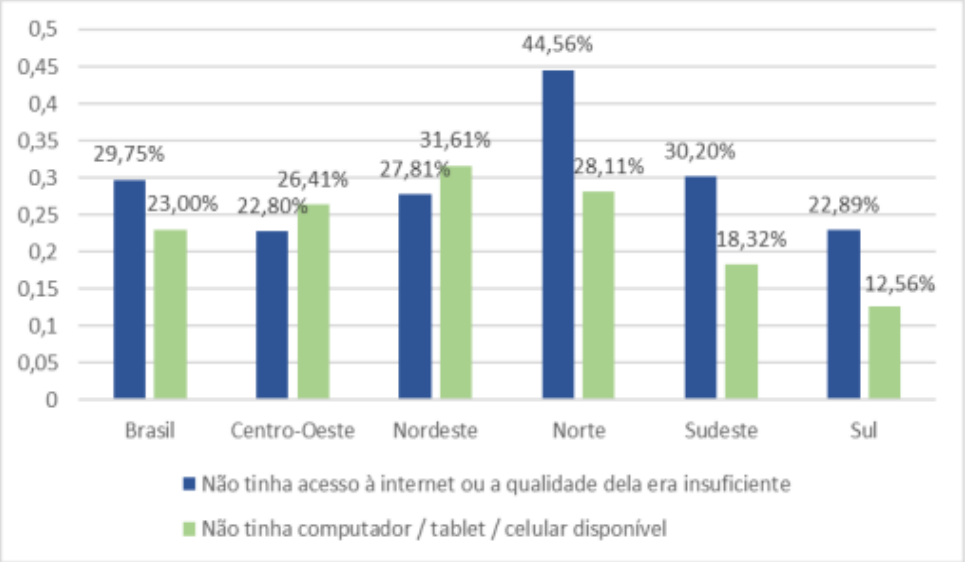
The lack of access to equipment and internet were other major problems for remote education, which accentuated socioeconomic inequalities in the country, highlighting that each Brazilian state has its reality, leading to disparities in education levels.

The use of online platforms requires a good internet connection, becoming a challenge to be overcome by the school community. The National Continuous Household Sample Survey - Information and Communication Technology (Pnad Contínua TIC) conducted in 2018 (IBGE, 2020) was recently released by IBGE, and the data showed that one in four Brazilians do not have access to the internet, totaling an average of 46 million people.

Based on these data it is possible to understand that distance learning has further increased the already existing social inequalities, which are partly leveled while face-to-face (Dias & Pinto, 2020).

The analysis of the graph below shows that the difficulty of accessing the Internet affected students more strongly (average of 29.65% among the regions), but the lack of equipment for this access was also relevant (average of 23.40% among the regions). In this analysis, the North stood out for the greatest difficulty in accessing the Internet by students (44.56%), followed by the Southeast (30.20%). Regarding the lack of equipment, the region that suffered the most was the Northeast (31.61%), followed by the North (28.11%). (TCU, 2021)

Chart 1 - Percentage of students aged 6 to 17 who did not carry out school activities in the week before last due to problems accessing the internet or technological equipment, November 2020



In Judgment 2620/2021 of the Plenary of the Federal Court of Accounts, which analyzed the report on compliance with the National Education Plan (PNE 2014-2024) (Process TC 040.033/2020-1 - Session: 03/11/2021), it was highlighted that:

> A study conducted in the United States by the McKinsey Institute in June 2020 to estimate the potential impact of the closure of basic education schools (Dorn et al, 2020) found that high school students' learning during school closures varies according to three factors: **the quality of access and provision of remote learning, home support and the degree of student engagement.** In addition, the research also pointed out that: only 60% of low-income students in the US were accessing online remote learning; black and Hispanic students may experience cognitive setbacks ranging from nine months to one year; there is an estimated 30% to 40% increase in high school dropout rates, based on studies of the effects of Hurricane Katrina on increased school dropout.
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> 34. In the Brazilian case, a study carried out by Interdisciplinarity and Evidence in the Educational Debate (Iede) in partnership with the Rui Barbosa Institute (IRB), also in June 2020, addressed several relevant data, in a sample formed by 249 municipal education networks from all regions of the country and seventeen state networks. The findings showed a great variety and diversification of education networks for their internal organization and provision of non-face-to-face pedagogical content and activities during the pandemic period, although most had offered pedagogical content during isolation until then (82% of municipal networks and all state networks surveyed).
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> 35. In addition, the study presented interesting results: the majority of the secretariats claimed to have good control of the students who have access to the content offered, however, the monitoring was limited to the receipt of activities and not to the verification of student achievement; one of the greatest difficulties concerns the training of teachers to deal with educational tools and technologies, and only 39% of the networks surveyed were offering training for non-face-to-face activities.

3.2 MEC PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT DEFICIENCIES DURING THE PANDEMIC

The Federal Court of Auditors (TCU) monitored the National Education Plan (PNE 2014-2024) to assess the development of the plan, the fulfillment of the obligations contained therein and the results achieved, especially in basic education.(TCU, 2021)

Regarding the MEC's performance as coordinator of subnational entities, the Court found that the actions were fragmented, untimely and without a specific focus on solving the problems arising from the pandemic. The problem pointed out, according to the TCU, is largely a consequence of the lack of adequate and timely monitoring of the situation of the entities, which can further aggravate educational inequalities, with setbacks in the goals of the PNE.

The rapporteur of the case, Minister Augusto Nardes, commented that "we do not have the capacity to articulate and predict in the face of a pandemic like this for education; it is necessary to have transversality in education". (TCU, 2021)

He also pondered that "these two years without face-to-face classes for students who did not have the opportunity to receive education are a tragedy for the country".

3.3 OTHER DIFFICULTIES GENERATED BY THE PANDEMIC IN BRAZILIAN EDUCATION

According to the MEC (2021), the following difficulties were noted:

- In-person replacement of all suspended classes at the end of the emergency period, with the commitment of the 2021 school calendar and, eventually, also the 2022 calendar;
- Setbacks in the educational process and learning for students subjected to a long period without regular educational activities, in view of the indefiniteness of the isolation time;
- Structural and social harms for low-income students and families, such as family stress and increased domestic violence for families in general; and school dropout and increased truancy;
- Special education - difficulty in serving special students. At this point, it is worth mentioning that a study on remote teaching with deaf students, carried out in the state of Paraná, highlighted several challenges faced: (shimazaki, menegassi & fellini, 2020)

- The preparation of the lesson by the teachers,
- Access to technology for less economically advantaged pupils,
- The lack of support at home,
- The difficulty in understanding the statements and the impact on linguistic and social development of isolation.

4 THE LEGACIES OF THE PANDEMIC TO EDUCATION IN BRAZIL - POSITIVE OUTCOMES

According to Santana and Sales (2020), the pandemic served as a mediator to exalt the weaknesses presented by the education system and that transformations are needed to keep up with global technological advances.

Public policies must address not only the educational challenges, but also the safety and nutrition needs of students.

According to the MEC (MEC, 2021), it is possible to highlight some actions that will minimize negative impacts and serve as a model for situations like these in the future, such as:

- The creation of regional platforms that offer courses or classes for different educational levels, in a return to the old telecurso, uniting the *internet* and television systems so that, in this way, it reaches a larger audience, since there is great difficulty for the population in accessing the internet.
- The distribution of books, audiovisual materials, small games or play resources can also be provided from the same systems that operate libraries or toy libraries. Other advances followed, and here it is worth highlighting the approval of two laws with the purpose of expanding and facilitating digital access to schools, namely:
- **Law 14.109, of 2020,** which establishes the application of resources from the Telecommunications Services Universalization Fund (FUST) to provide all Brazilian public schools, especially those located outside the urban area, with broadband internet access, at adequate speeds, by 2024.
- **Law 13.987, of 2020,** which establishes the distribution of school lunch food to the families of students who had classes suspended in the public basic education network due to the coronavirus pandemic.

- **Law 14.180, of 2021,** which instituted **the Connected Education Innovation Policy,** in line with strategy 7.15 of the National Education Plan, approved by Law No. 13.005, of June 25, 2014, with the objective of supporting the universalization of high-speed internet access and promoting the pedagogical use of digital technologies in basic education.

The **Connected Education Innovation Policy** will cover, under the terms to be defined in regulation, the following actions:

> **I** - technical support to schools and basic education networks for the preparation of diagnoses and local plans for the inclusion of innovation and technology in the pedagogical practice of schools;
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> **II** - technical or financial support, or both, to schools and basic education networks for:
> a) contracting an internet access service;
> b) implementation of infrastructure for internet signal distribution in schools;
> c) purchase or hiring of electronic devices; and
> d) acquisition of digital educational resources or their licenses;
>
> **III** - provision of training courses:
> a) teachers to use digital technologies in the classroom;
> b) of all education professionals, to support the implementation of the Policy;
>
> **IV** - publication of:
> a) parameters for contracting the internet access service;
> b) technical references on the internal infrastructure for the distribution of the internet signal in schools;
> c) parameters on electronic devices for the use of the internet to enable different types of pedagogical use of technology; and
> d) references for the pedagogical use of technology;
>
> **V** - availability of free digital teaching materials, preferably open and in the public domain and free license, which have the effective participation of education professionals in their preparation;
> **VI** - fostering the development and dissemination of digital teaching resources, preferably in open format.

- As an example of good practices, the Direct Money at School Program (PDDE Emergencial) transferred R$ 444.2 million to educational institutions during the months of November to December 2020, to serve almost 29 million basic education students.

The Direct Money at School Program (Emergency PDDE) was approved by Resolution-FNDE 16, of 7/10/2020, which provided for the criteria and forms of transfer of resources for the execution of the program, on an emergency basis, to assist public schools in the state, municipal and district networks, with

enrollment in basic education, in order to assist in the necessary adjustments according to the safety protocol for the return to face-to-face classes.

The Program aimed to contribute, on a supplementary basis, to meet the priority needs of educational establishments, due to the calamity caused by the pandemic, allocating resources to adapt structures and purchase materials necessary to follow the safety protocol, with a view to reorganizing the school calendar and resuming face-to-face classes (TCU, 2021).

- The Ministry of Education published, in the Official Gazette of 03/11/2021, Ordinance No. 855, which establishes technical chambers aimed at coordinating work to face the effects of the covid-19 pandemic.

According to Ordinance No. 855, four technical chambers will be created focused on early childhood education; elementary education; secondary education and youth and adult education.

Among the objectives of these technical chambers is to support the collection and analysis of data, as well as the preparation of reports related to the respective stages and modalities, "in order to subsidize the education networks and enable the sharing of reliable information, including for the evaluation of future impacts".

5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The pandemic represented a paradigm shift in global education.

In Brazil, social, regional and economic inequalities have been highlighted and the need to reduce them through public policies and financial investments.

From the point of view of the Public Power, measures related to better educational management in times of crisis should be taken, adopting the recommendations expressed by the Federal Court of Auditors in its opinion, with the implementation of structuring actions aimed at improving the quality of the education offered and recovering the contents that have lagged so far due to the suspension of face-to-face classes caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, considering the specificities of each region (section VI of the Vote);

In addition, the elaboration and use of a diagnosis of the situation of education networks in relation to the main difficulties resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic, either by publishing the data already collected in the Monitoring Panel of Brazilian Basic

Education in the Context of the Pandemic or another available tool or study (section VII of the Vow) (TCU, 2021);

It is important to highlight that the return to face-to-face school activities will require increased attention to students' mental health, especially situations of domestic violence and depression (Barrett, 2020).

Thus, despite the difficulties of Brazilian education in the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, it appears that much progress has been made in relation to the theme of education and digital access, and it is important that there is training and investment in education professionals, so that we have engaged and motivated students and we can create a situation of educational equality.

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