

## Teaching in Countryside Education in the context of COVID-19

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**ABSTRACT.** Education in the countryside is a result of historical fights for the rights of property, education, social justice, and labor. The COVID-19 Pandemic highlighted the existing vulnerabilities and precariousness, and alongside the social isolation came the need to cope with mental health issues and psychosocial support for countryside teachers. This paper aims to present an analysis on the implications of COVID-19 Pandemic in mental and psychosocial health of the countryside teachers. Five countryside education professionals were interviewed, one from each Brazilian region. Online semi-structured interviews were analysed by discourse analysis. The findings showed situations leading to psychological distress as well as critical protective processes, which promoted mental health in the pandemic context. Pedagogical practices from distance have turned the situation of countryside education and its educators even more precarious and vulnerable. The pandemic accelerated processes of depersonalisation and devaluation of countryside education.

**Keywords:** mental health, psychosocial care, countryside education, emancipation, covid-19.

## A Docência na Educação do Campo no contexto da COVID-19

**RESUMO.** A Educação no Campo se configura a partir de lutas históricas por direitos à educação, à terra, à justiça social e ao trabalho. Com o surgimento da Pandemia COVID-19, as vulnerabilidades e precarizações tornaram-se mais evidentes. A partir das adaptações que foram necessárias em função das medidas de isolamento social, emergiu a preocupação com a saúde mental e apoio psicossocial dos atores que tornam possível a continuidade da educação para as populações do campo: os(as) professores(as). Diante disso, o artigo tem como objetivo apresentar uma análise das implicações da Pandemia da COVID-19 na saúde mental e psicossocial dos professores da Educação do Campo. Foram realizadas entrevistas semiestruturadas por meio de plataformas de comunicação digital com cinco profissionais da Educação do Campo, um de cada uma das cinco regiões do Brasil. A partir da análise do discurso, foram identificadas situações geradoras de sofrimento psicológico bem como os processos críticos protetores que proviam suporte à saúde mental no contexto pandêmico. As práticas pedagógicas remotas tornaram a situação da Educação do Campo e de educadores do Campo ainda mais precária e vulnerável. A pandemia da COVID-19 também acelerou processos de despersonalização e desvalorização da Educação do Campo.

**Palavras-chave:** saúde mental, atenção psicossocial, educação do campo, emancipação, COVID-19.

## La enseñanza en la educación rural en el contexto de COVID-19

**RESUMEN.** La educación en el campo se forma a partir de las luchas históricas por los derechos a la educación, la tierra, la justicia social y el trabajo. Con la aparición de la pandemia COVID-19, las vulnerabilidades y la precariedad ya presentes en el pasado se hicieron más evidentes. De las adaptaciones que fueron necesarias debido a las medidas de aislamiento social, surgió la preocupación por la salud mental y el apoyo psicosocial de los actores que hacen posible la continuidad de la educación para las poblaciones del campo: los maestros. A partir de ello, tenemos el objetivo de presentar un análisis de las repercusiones de la pandemia COVID-19 en la salud mental y psicosocial de los maestros de la educación en el campo. Se realizaron entrevistas semiestructuradas a través de plataformas de comunicación digital con cinco profesionales de la educación en el campo, uno de cada una de las cinco regiones de Brasil. Utilizó el análisis del discurso para identificar situaciones que generaron sufrimiento psicológico y también los procesos críticos que son protectores de la salud mental en contextos pandémicos. Las prácticas pedagógicas remotas dejaron aún más precaria y vulnerable la situación de la Educación en el Campo y de los educadores en el Campo. La pandemia COVID-19 también aceleró la despersonalización y devaluación de la Educación en el campo.

**Palabras clave:** salud mental, atención psicosocial, educación en el campo, emancipación, covid-19.

## Introduction

Aware of the rapid advance in the number of confirmed cases and deaths due to COVID-19 in numerous countries at the same time, the World Health Organization started to characterize it as a pandemic on March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020). Regarding the Brazilian context, the schools began to close their doors in March 2020, both in urban and rural scenarios, which created the demand for developing all educational activities remotely. Sixteen months after the appearance of the first cases in Brazil, there were regions that still had no prevision for the return of face-to-face classes and others that, at the same time, were facing the rapid increase in the number of cases as one of the consequences for reopening the schools. In Manaus, for instance, classes were suspended in some schools two days after the reopening, due to the arise of new cases among the school community (Gomes, 2020). Countries like France and South Korea have also gone through the same situation (Coronavirus: as estratégias, 2020).

Extreme events which cause the interruption of classes are experiences that provide important evidence to be considered. On such occasions, the absence

of government measures tends to deepen the abyss of existing inequalities, intensified by the context of Emergency (Todos Pela Educação, 2020). This premise is aligned with the guidelines of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) for humanitarian emergencies, which state that the impacts of extreme situations can be mitigated through coordinated actions between governments and other non-governmental actors (IASC, 2007).

On September 17<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the President of Brazil affirmed that teachers were not working and that this situation was “enjoyable” to them (Bolsonaro, 2020). Such statement disregards the workload and psychological suffering of teachers, triggered by attempts to provide remote educational practices without proper support from government institutions. Among the existing challenges for teachers posed in this scenario, one can mention the abrupt pedagogical adaptation, and the need to share in the same environment their domestic lives and their work, resulting in a high rate of suffering (Gutiérrez et. al., 2020). Studies have indicated that part of the general population may experience psychological and social suffering as a result of the pandemic, which may be more serious

depending on the vulnerabilities to which people are exposed (IASC, 2020).

Education is considered an important mediation for the community to be able to cope and rebuild their lives after experiencing an extreme situation, such as a pandemic (IASC, 2007). However, social isolation, understood as the main biosafety measure, determined several challenges, especially those concerned to the adaptation to the modality of remote education combined with pre-existing vulnerabilities. In a survey carried out between April and May 2020, with the participation of 1,906 Brazilian teachers, it was identified that the situation of remote education has made the teaching job precarious and has frequently resulted in situations of illness and self-blame (Insfran et al., 2020). Furthermore, among Brazilian teachers' feelings and perceptions at different stages of the Pandemic, aspects such as concern for their own health and family members, lack of preparation for remote education and preoccupation for the living conditions of students had emerged (Sentimento e Percepção, 2020).

Considering the scenario imposed by the pandemic on Brazilian teachers, we sought to listen to Countryside Education teachers, which is a field that has important specificities. Countryside Education is based on the constant battle for rights,

being the right for Education itself the most relevant one, which relates and provides support to resistance, the right to land, social justice and work (Caldart, 2010). In this sense, Countryside Education is fundamental for breaking down barriers and guaranteeing access to knowledge, whereas helps people recognizing their own knowledge and potential, which strengthening them (Santos, 2012).

Regarding the material conditions and access to digital technologies that rural individuals have, compared to urban areas, we found that 50.8% of rural households do not have internet access, with the restriction reaching 66.9% in the Northern region of the country (Pesquisa Nacional, 2018). Even when the topic refers to more basic services such as electricity, there are still isolated territories without any provision whatsoever, as the Kalunga communities, in the State of Goiás, for instance (Comunidades Quilombolas, 2020; Oliveira, 2020). By looking at this socio-territorial reality, one must seek a holistic understanding of its particularities, and, from then on, elaborating strategies to address the diversities of the field.

The oscillation between the guarantee and the non-fulfillment of the right to education presents barriers to the consolidation of an emancipatory

perspective and produces lightened and precarious training processes, which disregard the singularities of the field, as well as the context in which professionals are inserted (Santos, 2012).

The trivialization of the destructiveness of the countryside educational process places teachers in a position of alienation in relation to their jobs. The impact, both psychological and social, triggered by these disruptions demonstrates that the pandemic amplifies and signalize that this conjunction is intersected with the existence of suffering and its relationship with the society. It is not about mapping “mental disorders” and individualizing issues that are related in social, political, and psychic dimensions (Rotelli et al., 2001), but understanding, from a psychosocial perspective, the nuances of Countryside Education in the context of COVID-19.

It is worthy mentioning that these processes are triggered by a structure that is based on the dismantlement of the Education Policy, such as the Constitutional Amendment n°. 95 of 2016, which establishes a spending cap on health and education expenditures for a 20-year period. This process is also engendered in a society based on the neoliberal economic model, where subjective formation is linked to the process of privatization of

policies, individual freedom and a logic of constant competitiveness (Junior, 2021).

The situation reported above and the need of abrupt adaptations to provide opportunities for the teaching-learning process due to the measures of social isolation, we raised concern with the mental health and psychosocial support of the stakeholders that make possible the continuity of education for rural populations: the teachers. Therefore, this paper aims to present an analysis of the implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the mental and psychosocial health of countryside education teachers in the five regions of Brazil, as well as intends to offer subsidies for reflections upon these implications.

## Methodology

In order to identify countryside education teachers from each region of the country to take part in this study, we contacted a group of experts from Federal Universities in Brazil who work with national representatives of Countryside Education.

Online meetings were held with four teachers and a school principal. Each one of these professionals is linked to a Countryside School in one of the Brazilian macro-regions, as follows: Manaus (North), Ipojuca (Northeast), Cavalcanti

(Midwest,) Uberaba (Southeast) and Gravataí (South). The criteria used in this selection were: being nominated by the group of experts and having the conditions and technological resources to participate. Each meeting with educators had the participation of two experts, in order to optimize the dialogue and, also, to ensure greater accuracy in the records.

The process itself of contacting them already showed the adversities and difficulties commonly found in their daily routine, since the interviews were carried out through digital communication platforms such as Google Meet and WhatsApp. At this stage, technological factors and time availability have already been configured as obstacles. It was possible to make contact through video calls with four educators, and for the fifth educator, the only viable tool in terms of technological accessibility was the exchange of text messages, and it was difficult to keep the dialogue fluid, despite synchronicity.

A semi-structured interview was applied with exploratory questions and objective points to be observed in all interviews. The themes addressed and analyzed were related to the following aspects: professional identity, self-perceived mental health, remote work and ambience, autonomy at the workplace,

return of face-to-face classes, work demand, family relationships, pedagogical methodologies, salary, and technologies.

Discourse analysis (Orlandi, 2020) was used to analyze the data. To apprehend the perceptions obtained from the research, it was necessary to start from a critical and non-individual look at the educational process, as well as the psychic suffering (Amarante, 2007). Education was understood to be related to health and work, as a social Policy that is not disconnected from the relationships of a society that historically highlights the inequalities inherent to the capitalist mode of production (Behring & Boschetti, 2011).

## Discussion

It was possible to identify that the impacts of COVID-19 on Countryside Education are exponential. There are some aspects that proved to directly affect relationships and trigger new psychosocial impacts: access to quality equipment, minimal working conditions for educators, and the ascending suffering process due to these conditions, biosafety measures that restrict access tools for students, and the limitations of work environments that crosses space family.

The adoption of new pedagogical methodologies was fundamental to minimally bypass these unleashed negative

aspects, as well as to mark the characteristic of resistance that is historically linked to Countryside Education. Communication, in its various forms, is an essential condition for mediating the construction of the knowledge processes (Cardoso & Rego, 2017; Carminatti & Del Pino, 2019). It is through classroom discussions that students are encouraged to reflect on the content presented to them, establish relationships between theory and practice, as well as identify and apply concepts and problems in their daily lives (Littig, Costa & Lorenzoni, 2020). Dialogue promotes mediations between teachers and students, being a fundamental instrument in the sharing knowledge (Henríquez & Oñate, 2017).

When there are obstacles for students and teachers to dialogue spontaneously and fluidly, as it so happens with remote pedagogical practices, part of the teaching function is invalidated. Specifically related to Countryside Education and to the individuals who were interviewed, the asynchronous activities overloaded teachers who are no longer able to separate the time dedicated to their professional to their personal lives, and they must seek to be in contact with their students at different times of the day. We find such situations, for example, during the testimony of the

school principal, who mentioned difficulties in reconciling household tasks with management and teaching duties. In the principal's speech, it was clear that there were no clear limits between her personal space and the time dedicated to school; both were merged, in which responsibilities and difficulties in time management are mixed.

Regarding the removal of teaching autonomy, a teacher mentioned two facts that the Secretary of Education in his state had articulated since before the pandemic and that have gained strength during COVID-19. The first is about the production and dissemination of booklets to be followed by all schools. The materials have been seen by teachers as facilitators in the planning and execution of classes and other activities. This opinion was mainly shared by those who did not have a degree in Countryside Education. The adoption of booklets that disregard the reality of Countryside Education paves the way for a process of homogenization of pedagogical practices in all schools in the state, disregarding political, social and cultural aspects.

The second fact, coming from the same Secretary of Education, was the introduction remote learning to high school students. Initiated in 2019, this measure reduces the quality of pedagogical



practices and contributes to the process of dismantling the teaching profession and Countryside Education itself. As explained by Silva and Oliveira (2021), the State gains more control of pedagogical elements and methodologies, as well as releases itself from providing adequate training to teaching in Countryside Education. In the current situation, with school activities carried out remotely, there is an even greater risk of strengthening and imposing Remote Learning in Countryside Education.

Countryside Education has a non-content-based formative specificity that is only contemplated face-to-face, in a collective experience. Remote pedagogical activities mischaracterize the teaching identity in Countryside Schools. Furthermore, we noticed a loss of teaching autonomy with reports of a closer management that, instead of collaborating with planning, acts imposing and even censoring educational proposals. Remote pedagogical practices promote a homogenization of pedagogical practices, depriving educators and students of their own experiences and subjectivities (Carvalho, 2020).

### ***Mental health***

Regarding self-perceived mental health, teachers pointed out the following

facts as suffering triggers: work invading their private lives; the concern with the return of face-to-face classes and the future of learning; concerns with the contamination by the new Coronavirus; the loss autonomy; intensification of demands and the abrupt cut of part of the remuneration. None of these points was unanimous, which shows that there is no homogeneity in identifying the challenges generated by COVID-19. But these factors demonstrate the impacts of the pandemic on the mental health of these educators and corroborates what is discussed in the study by Pereira, Santos and Manenti (2020):

The literature on the relationship between the work environment and the impacts on mental health emphasizes that the situation of exploitation and precariousness on working conditions have resulted in serious damages to the health of teachers and other education workers (Pereira, Santos & Manenti, 2020, p. 28).

In the light of the health-illness processes and their relationship with the precariousness at work, one can apply the notion of *protective and destructive critical processes*, concepts use by epidemiologists. In this approach, the notion of “process” imprints the dynamism, complexity and movement of reality and, consequently, of health. As Viapiana, Gomes and Albuquerque (2018,

p. 178) explain, based on Jaime Breilh's theory, "critical protective processes are those that favor defenses and supports and encourage a favorable orientation to human life. The 'destructive critical processes' generate deprivation or deterioration of life". These processes do not exist in an abstract way but are configured in a given concrete and historical reality. From this, we can indicate as critical protective processes mentioned by the teachers: individual or group psychological therapy, religiosity, articulation and sharing with other professionals with whom they work, with friends and family.

It is important to highlight the fact of being able to face up injustices and arbitrariness is an important coping strategy, not forgetting that more than just talking, it is important to be heard. In addition, there were teachers who manifested discomfort related to the change in relationships between students and others who adopt the maintenance of these relationships virtually as a strategy to minimize their suffering. This demonstrates how much the loss of the school as a face-to-face space for socialization and sharing has the potential to generate suffering. However, as demonstrated by Martins et al. (2021), there is also the possibility of maintaining these relationships even at a distance,

which is an important way to minimize these harmful consequences of remote learning.

Regarding the invasion of work into the domestic environment, which was carried out at school before the pandemic, the interviewees' reported on the difficulty of reconciling school activities with housekeeping. According to Antloga et al. (2020), gender inequality has been responsible, over the years, of attributing as feminine the characteristics of domestic and teaching work, as well as other occupations, therefore, it is expected from women to perform such tasks, causing work overload.

It is clear among women the physical, cognitive, affective, and financial sacrifices made in order to respond to family, professional and personal demands. Sacrifices that become more evident when the barrier of professional and intimate life is impaired by "home office" as a measure of social distancing to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, corroborating with Castro et al. (2020), in their reports on the reconciliation of women/teaching, domestic and personal life.

The task division between household members has been shown, over the months, as an alternative to attenuate the suffering triggered by this scenario, according to the interviewees.

Nevertheless, when the expected results are not achieved, the responsibility tends to fall over women's shoulders.

Changes in work routine, family reorganization and school shutdown as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic can impact mental health and psychological well-being (Ornell et al., 2020). It was observed that the support networks - or lack of them - arising from family or social relationships, have a great impact on remote work and on the mental health of the interviewees.

In addition to the challenge of handling family conflicts, the financial issue was identified as a barrier with regard to the interviewees' mental health. The need to adopt financial restrictions and explain the situation to the children caused suffering and concern. Economic insecurity grew throughout the pandemic and required people to reinvent themselves in creative actions to support their families (Ornell et al., 2020).

However, not all family consequences generated by the pandemic were negative, as exposed by Cluver et al. (2020) since the difficulty of the moment tends to create opportunities to build stronger bonds in the parent-child relationship. This positive consequence was observed in one of the interviewees describing that the relationship with their

children became stronger. It is noteworthy that this relationship was identified by a teacher as a support strategy for psychological well-being. Another strategy identified was communication with peers through digital means, generating a sense of belonging and acceptance.

### **Final remarks**

Throughout the research, it was made clear that the relationship between Countryside Education, health and work is inseparable. The analysis of the implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the mental and psychosocial health of teachers in the Countryside Education allowed us to observe the psychological suffering triggered by a work process that, even before the pandemic, lacked support. Despite this, after months immersed in an abrupt resignification of the education technologies, it became even more evident the worsening of an already feeble and sickening system, since the teachers do not receive technological training nor psychological support to develop these new strategies.

We also found that the investment and valorization of Countryside Education are undermined by the State's lack of interest in the needs of this population. The decisions taken made life more precarious and triggered suffering that was generated

not only by the lack of funding in an isolated policy, but by the neoliberal logic (Junior, 2021). The Constitutional Amendment nº. 95/2016 itself demonstrates the lack of interest in quality policies, with education being strongly affected, with more emphasis on Countryside Education.

In a country where one of the main causes of teacher illness is mental health (Diehl & Marin, 2016), the specific situation caused/intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences in the educational area needs to be investigated. In particular, it is necessary to look at the Countryside Education field, marked by a long process of battles to guarantee its existence and permanence and which, in the current context, finds a scarcity of resources of all kinds to guarantee educational practices of quality and that value and strengthen the Countryside and its people.

In this sense, it is essential to elaborate strategies to strengthen countryside social movement causes and establish a solid Education Policy, capable of providing subsidies and conditions to improve access to education and supporting teachers, in order to reduce suffering rates, as well as generating responses to mitigate the impacts raised or amplified by the pandemic.

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