

# School Psychology, educational policies, and the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic: considerations from a cultural-historical approach

Psicologia Escolar, políticas educacionais e os impactos da pandemia  
de Covid-19:  
reflexões a partir do enfoque histórico-cultural

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper discusses the public policies of education in Brazil and the role of school and educational psychology taking Cultural-Historical Psychology as a foundation in the context of the Covid-19 Pandemic. It briefly presents the great challenges of basic education based on the historical issues of exclusion *from* and *in* school and the processes of worsening social inequality with consequences for schooling. It suggests proposals for dealing with crisis situations through interdisciplinary, multi-professional and intersectoral actions, such as: a) to do a general diagnosis of the school situation, based on the possible data about the region, the families and the students, being able to carry out activities that make it possible to know more closely the difficulties and possibilities of access to knowledge and the social and economic needs presented; b) to rethink the spaces for interaction, the ways of establishing curricula, of encouraging the participation of all segments of the school; c) to enable collective projects, actions and strategies that have people as the

## **RESUMO**

Este artigo discute as políticas públicas de educação no Brasil e o papel da psicologia escolar e educacional tomando como fundamento a Psicologia Histórico-cultural no contexto da Pandemia de Covid-19. Apresenta brevemente os grandes desafios da educação básica centrados nas questões históricas de exclusão *da e na* escola e os processos de agravamento da desigualdade social com consequências para a escolarização. Sugere propostas para o enfrentamento em situações de crise por meio de ações que sejam interdisciplinares, multiprofissionais e intersectoriais, tais como: a) realizar um diagnóstico geral da situação escolar, baseando-se nos dados possíveis sobre a região, sobre as famílias e os estudantes, podendo realizar atividades que possibilitem conhecer mais de perto as dificuldades e possibilidades de acesso ao conhecimento e às necessidades sociais e econômicas apresentadas; b) repensar os espaços de convivência, as formas de estabelecer os currículos, de incentivar a participação de todos os segmentos da escola;

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protagonists of their stories, trajectories and pains that were the marks of this pandemic. It reaffirms, finally, the role that Cultural-Historical Theory has been playing in the process of discussion of central themes for basic education, considering the social, political, economic and cultural context as well as the processes of subjectification that constitute humanization.

**Keywords:** School Psychology. Primary Education. Public Policies.

c) viabilizar projetos coletivos, ações e estratégias que tenham as pessoas como protagonistas de suas histórias, trajetórias e dores que foram marcas dessa pandemia. Reafirma, por fim, o papel que vem desempenhando a Teoria Histórico-Cultural no processo de discussão de temáticas centrais para a educação básica, considerando o contexto social, político, econômico e cultural bem como os processos de subjetivação que constituem a humanização.

**Palavras-chave:** Psicologia Escolar. Educação Básica. Políticas Públicas.

## 1 Introduction

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared that we were facing a virus called SARS-CoV-2. The WHO stated that the virus's rapid and uncontrolled spread in numerous countries, as well as its high lethality rate, especially among those aged 60 and over, constituted a pandemic. Due to the lack of knowledge about the virus's etiology and therefore about control or treatment medications, restrictive measures were imposed that had never been experienced before, at least in the past 100 years. To reduce the spread of the lethal virus that causes Covid-19, social distancing was mandated, along with the interruption of in-person activities of any kind around the world, including the closure of schools, colleges, and universities. Each Brazilian state and municipality implemented its health measures to contain the virus's spread, with state capitals being the first to enact restrictive measures.

Brazil has experienced one of the worst impacts of the pandemic. The federal government, particularly the president and his health ministry, denied the severity of the situation. At no point was a committee or working group formed to address the pandemic in a country as large as Brazil. Such a country would require coordinated and organized measures to prevent the spread of the virus, reduce contagion, and avoid deaths and hospitalizations of seriously ill people. Instead, government sectors deliberately denied information about the virus's consequences

for people's health. They questioned social distancing measures and mask-wearing, delayed vaccine acquisition, accused governors and mayors of supporting health measures, and distributed medication kits consisting of hydroxychloroquine, chloroquine, azithromycin, and ivermectin as preventatives for SARS-CoV-2. These disastrous aspects have been widely reported in internationally renowned medical journals. These facts caused Brazil to reach second place in the number of worldwide deaths, reaching 616,000 by December 2021, in addition to 22.1 million SARS-CoV-2 infections and 64.4% of the population receiving two vaccine doses. Amidst this, a Parliamentary Inquiry Commission was established in the Federal Senate to investigate corruption and negligence by the federal government in addressing the disease. This deliberate process of denying the state's responsibility for the pandemic is partially documented in Bulletin No. 10, produced in January 2021 by Conectas Human Rights and the Faculty of Public Health at the University of São Paulo. The bulletin is entitled "*Rights in the Pandemic: Mapping and Analysis of Legal Responses to Covid-19 in Brazil.*"

This special issue analyzes documents from the Office of the President of the Republic in the form of ordinances, provisional measures, resolutions, normative instructions, laws, decisions, and decrees from the federal government, as well as a survey of public statements by the President of Brazil, which clearly reveal the existence of a genuine strategy to spread the virus in the country, contrary to what would be expected in a serious health situation such as the one we have been facing since the beginning of 2020. Another severe fact is that it is estimated that the Covid-19 pandemic has left 140,000 children in Brazil orphaned from their parents or guardians between the ages of 0 and 17 (The Lancet magazine, July 18, 2021).

## **2 The Pandemic and Schooling: Reflections and possibilities for coping based on School and Educational Psychology**

In the face of such a serious situation, we must ask ourselves: What impact does the pandemic have on Brazilian education? What challenges do educators, school administrators, and educational psychologists face?

To answer these questions, we must acknowledge that the challenges facing Brazilian education are numerous and not solely due to the pandemic. Ferraro & Ross (2017) analyze the contradictions in Brazilian basic education that have yet to be overcome: exclusion versus inclusion policies, equality versus social inequalities in the lives of families and students, regional inequalities, the right to education versus educational debt in vulnerable regions, and academic success versus failure, as evidenced by high rates of functional illiteracy among elementary and middle school students.

In this context, we must acknowledge that we have been fighting for decades to improve access to education, promote student retention, and ensure that schools provide a quality education. Although we have achieved significant progress, including a 90% literacy rate and 97% of students aged 6 to 17 in school, there are still unresolved issues in the Brazilian educational system. Some of these issues include the failure to eradicate illiteracy, the lack of access to school for 1.4 million children and adolescents (UNICEF, 2021), high rates of functional illiteracy (CEPAL, 2014, 2015), little investment in teacher training, difficult socioeconomic conditions for families (Costa & Souza, 2020), insufficient investment in school infrastructure, precarious teaching jobs, low student participation, and great difficulties in school life due to discriminatory and prejudiced actions against poor people, Black people, Indigenous people, and the LGBTQIA+ population (UFMT & FENPB, 2018). Other issues include the hierarchization of the implementation of educational policies and the disregard for teaching experience and knowledge in educational programs. Regarding investment in education, the approval of Constitutional Amendment 95 in 2016 was a severe blow. It limited public spending for 20 years and prevented the achievement of the National Education Plan's goal of investing up to 10% of the GDP in education over 10 years.

We add to this the curricular issue of the Secondary Education Reform, which has a neoliberal bias. This reform disregards all ongoing discussions and documents developed with broad participation from education sectors in the context of implementing the National Common Core Curriculum. The controversies are mainly advanced by reducing content related to humanities and

social sciences education (Branco et al., 2018). The reform also ends the mandatory teaching of subjects addressing the history of slavery in Brazil, a country where racism is structural (Souza, 2021).

The challenges facing Brazilian education were exacerbated by the difficulties outlined above and the urgency of decision-making in the absence of any previous experience to support the proposed solutions. In general, we identified the following impacts of the pandemic on basic education in the country: a) immediate closure of schools; b) introduction of information and communication technologies as the only alternative for teaching; c) insertion of the classroom at home; d) uncertainty regarding the duration of the restrictive measures; e) attempts to minimize inequalities with more vulnerable students; f) difficulties experienced by families working from home and loss of loved ones due to large-scale deaths; g) impossibility of implementing programs and curriculum proposals, especially for early grades and early childhood education; h) increase in cases of domestic violence; i) difficulty communicating with students, parents, or guardians.

This enormous difficulty leads us to revisit some of the principles that are dear to us in education, which can contribute to our collective reflection on this serious situation that will persist in our lives and teaching practice for a long time.

How can we work in a crisis? Where should we start? Reflections with teachers, administrators, and professionals in health, social work, and psychology have helped us consider basic parameters for dealing with this situation. Addressing a crisis requires consideration of the diversity of contexts and situations experienced by students, educators, administrators, school staff, and families. This enables the development of action strategies tailored to different audiences, age groups, and social classes. Proposals for addressing the challenges posed by the pandemic require interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and intersectional action.

To contribute to the discussion about how school and educational psychologists can take action, we present an important document produced by the World Health Organization for emergencies and disasters. The document

is entitled "Psychological First Aid: A Guide for Field Workers" (2015). This internationally recognized proposal has gained prominence in the context of the pandemic, appearing in numerous publications and being regarded as a valuable guideline in addressing this significant health crisis. The document is based on the idea that everyone can cope with life's challenges. However, some people are more vulnerable in crisis and may require additional support. These individuals may belong to groups experiencing poor living conditions or violence (p. 3). To this end, the document proposes three principles of action: observe, listen, and approach (p. 18). The First Psychological Care proposal consists of offering non-invasive practical support and care, assessing needs and concerns, helping people meet their basic needs, listening to people without pressuring them to talk, comforting people, helping them calm down, contributing to the search for information, services, and social support, and protecting against further harm (p. 3). The following interventions stand out: ensuring information and understanding of the facts, emphasizing protective factors, recognizing community resources, strengthening community structures, and involving the community as a partner in restoring the minimum conditions necessary for affected individuals to feel welcome and resume their work, studies, and care activities.

Based on the reflections and recommendations of professionals from various fields who have worked in emergencies, it can be concluded that school and educational psychologists' strategies must consider the specific conditions under which actions are carried out, particularly when adopting a historical-cultural approach as the primary reference for psychological practice (Beatón et al., 2018). Tanamachi and Meira (2008, p. 44) argue that educational institutions have their own specific characteristics that require professionals to understand at least three fundamental theoretical mediations: "the understanding of possible articulations between learning theories and educational practices, the critical analysis of the social space of the classroom, and the conception of knowledge as an instrument of becoming." We argue that critical action should be grounded in three pillars: ethical and political commitment to an accessible, democratic, secular school

system; establishment of theoretical and methodological references that address the complexities of schooling and action processes through interdisciplinary approaches and intersectoral policies (Checchia & Souza, 2003).

As we analyzed in a recent publication (TOURINHO & SOUZA, 2021),

[...] The possible challenge that School Psychology may face is understanding the intersectorality of public policies not only in the macrosocial context of capitalist production relations but also in the microsocioal context as a way of confronting power relations. This is especially important in a scenario that requires a critical approach to intersectorality and public policies guided by an ethical-political stance for the school psychologist who cuts across their work. This stance is both ethical and political. Ethically, it guides the reflection on the values that inform professional action (conceptions of humanity, nature, history, power, etc.). Politically, it informs the development of strategies in the democratic arena that address the interests and needs of the subordinate class (pp. 91-92).

Therefore, it is considered necessary to carry out a general diagnosis of the school situation based on available data on the region, families, and students. This will enable activities that provide a closer understanding of the difficulties and possibilities of accessing knowledge, as well as the social and economic needs presented. Access surveys and studies carried out by competent bodies, unions, teaching entities, and education councils that contribute to reorganizing and replanning actions to guarantee access to and permanence in school. In this regard, the research conducted by the National Youth Council (CONJUVE, 2021) with high school students is important. This study mapped the two years of the pandemic by interviewing thousands of young people across the country (34,000 in 2020 and 68,000 in 2021).

The pandemic frayed the social fabric in all dimensions and greatly hindered the formation of connections to school, the school community, educational routines, and educational processes that are integral to daily life and learning. It instilled fear of social interaction and contagion and made it difficult to believe that the paths of millions of students could be recovered or rebuilt. We must rebuild the broken or never-formed materials, forms of coexistence, and bonds. However, it is also time to rethink spaces for

coexistence, ways of establishing curricula, encouraging participation from all school segments, seeking those who have not returned, and creating proposals and projects that address difficult and painful situations. These projects should expand collective actions and youth engagement through student councils and community contact, reviving the solidarity that manifested strongly during periods of social distancing (Bulhão et al., 2018; Beaton, 2021).

The conditions we find ourselves in today, after two years of a pandemic and social distancing, require us to address two inseparable dimensions of schooling at this historical moment: welcoming and knowledge (Gabriel, 2020; Beato, 2011; Martins & Lavoura, 2017).

In times of losses of all kinds, with the most diverse experiences and needs, and with an increase in cases of domestic and social violence, schools have become increasingly important as territories for welcoming and as spaces for guaranteeing rights. From this perspective, actions during the transition back to in-person classes should focus on creating spaces of solidarity and active listening, supported by protection networks and multidisciplinary teams. In this sense, the participation of school psychologists, social workers, and social educators will be key in enabling collective projects, actions, and strategies that center people as the protagonists of their stories, trajectories, and experiences marked by this pandemic (FARIÑAS LEÓN, 2005; MARTÍNEZ, 2010). (Fariñas León, 2005; Martínez, 2010).

This is a privileged moment to integrate life and school by viewing situations with solidarity, establishing new meanings, and learning from the difficult experiences we have endured. There is an opportunity to strengthen social ties and promote democratic, emancipatory education. This will foster a stronger relationship between families and schools, forming a collaborative learning environment. Each person in this team has an educational role, shares responsibilities, and generates solutions (FARIÑAS LEON, 2018; SAVIANI, 2017).

Regarding school curricula and pedagogical activities, schools must implement the BNCC. However, the current situation of social distancing, remote teaching, and hybrid teaching requires us to consider the diversity of

situations that will arise in schools regarding the acquisition of educational content. As numerous reports have shown, a significant percentage of students did not have access to content due to various circumstances. This presents major challenges for school systems, especially public ones. Therefore, the meaning and importance of teaching content must be restored to understand the role of science and the knowledge accumulated by humanity in addressing the problems generated by the pandemic (Duarte, Massi & Teixeira, 2021; Asbah & Souza, 2014; Sartoro & ZIBETTI, 2016). Understanding the importance of the environment for a healthier world and the relevance of pesticide-free food is key to understanding what leads to a pandemic. It is important to understand the significance of social relations, the interdependence between nations and people, how viruses are transmitted, the importance of vaccines, and the role of the Unified Health System. In other words, schools can contribute scientific knowledge about the intense experiences of social isolation and non-participation in daily school life. This knowledge directly challenges the denialist view present in some sectors of civil society regarding the pandemic context.

A third important axis is expanding participation in schools. This involves returning to democratic principles and encouraging student organization, particularly through school councils (Bulhão et al., 2018), as well as participation in school boards. It is crucial for representative segments of professional categories to present their proposals and actions to promote democratization and school participation, particularly during neoliberalism and amid attacks on education, as mentioned at the beginning of this discussion. Therefore, it is time-sensitive to reaffirm that education is a right for all and a subjective right for which the state is responsible.

### **Final considerations**

The establishment and implementation of public policies in Brazil are fundamental to the constitution of the rule of law, ensuring that it fulfills its purposes from a democratic, participatory, and decentralized perspective. This

approach aims to promote equity, confront ethnic and racial prejudices and differences, address gender issues, include people with disabilities, eradicate illiteracy, and establish critical and emancipatory education.

Therefore, when school and educational psychology seek to understand the schooling process, they must necessarily be aware of the issues that constitute public education policies (Souza, 2010). The complexity of forces, interests, and political-ideological positions is significant, making it essential to clarify the national, state, and local contexts. This requires us professionals to be well organized in our support and reflection bases so that we do not act naively.

In Latin America, neoliberal policies have advanced significantly, reducing the state's participation in implementing public policies. These policies open public funds to private capital, outsource contracts, change social security systems, and impoverish various sectors of the population; especially those who are most discriminated against. These elements reveal major disputes within organized civil society and professional groups, such as psychologists, who are fighting for the rights enshrined in the 1988 Constitution and for the achievements and advances of public education in our country. The passage of Law 13.935/2019, which “provides for psychology and social work services in public basic education networks,” establishes school and educational psychology as a public policy for basic education, thereby improving education. The movement to implement this law at the state and municipal levels will occur amid unfavorable political and social circumstances, challenging the psychological profession and educational entities to develop shared pedagogical projects that will improve schooling, teaching, and the lives of students and their families.

Now is the time to join forces in defense of democracy, social rights, and participation. As Paulo Freire (1981, p. 79) taught us, "No one educates anyone else; no one educates themselves. People educate each other, mediated by the world." As school and educational psychologists, our role will be fundamental as we join forces with all progressive sectors of Brazilian society and develop actions based on perspectives that break with fatalistic worldviews searching for processes of awareness and liberation. It is important to reaffirm Historical-Cultural Theory's role in discussing central themes for basic education, considering the

social, political, economic, and cultural context as well as processes of subjectivation that constitute humanization. As school and educational psychologists, we have advanced the construction of knowledge about schooling, carrying out activities that improve school life and the understanding of the meaning and significance of schooling.

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