

The Reconfiguration of teaching work under the commodification of innovation: reflections from Elementary Education during the Covid-19 pandemic

*Mercadorização transvertida de inovação:
reflexões sobre o trabalho docente no Ensino Fundamental durante a pandemia Covid-19*

*La mercantilización transvertida de la innovación:
reflexiones sobre el Trabajo docente en la Educación Primaria durante la pandemia Covid-19*

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Abstract: This article presents a critical bibliographic review of teaching work in elementary education during the Covid-19 pandemic. Based on an analysis of studies published between 2020 and 2022, it focuses on the impacts of the adoption of remote learning, the transformations in pedagogical work, and the processes of precarization and intensification of teaching work. It discusses how emergency remote and hybrid teaching, implemented through new technologies, has accentuated inequalities, increased control over teaching, and made working conditions more precarious. The literature analyzed points to the intensification of teaching activities, increased individual accountability, and the shifting of costs to teachers. It concludes that the pandemic has functioned as a large laboratory for platform capitalism and industry 4.0 in education, with capital practices affecting the teaching profession and contributing to the advancement of the industrial and capitalist logic of commodity production in education.

Keywords: Teaching work; Job insecurity; Remote teaching; Emergency teaching; COVID-19.

Resumo: Este artigo apresenta um balanço bibliográfico crítico sobre o trabalho docente no Ensino Fundamental durante a pandemia de Covid-19. A partir da análise de estudos publicados entre 2020 e 2022, sobretudo, nos impactos da adoção do Ensino Remoto, nas transformações do Trabalho Pedagógico e nos processos de Precarização e Intensificação do Trabalho Docente. Discute-se como o ensino remoto e híbrido emergencial, implementado por meio novas tecnologias, acentuou desigualdades, ampliou o controle sobre o fazer docente e precarizou suas condições de trabalho. A literatura analisada aponta para a intensificação das atividades docentes, o aumento da responsabilização individual e o deslocamento de custos para os professores. Conclui-se que a pandemia funcionou como um grande laboratório do capitalismo de plataforma e da indústria 4.0

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na educação, com práticas do capital sobre a profissão docente e contribuindo para o avanço da lógica industrial e capitalista de produção de mercadorias na educação.

Palavras-chave: Trabalho docente; Precarização do trabalho; Ensino remoto; Ensino emergencial; COVID-19.

Resumen: Este artículo presenta un balance bibliográfico crítico sobre el trabajo docente en la Educación Primaria durante la pandemia de Covid-19. A partir del análisis de estudios publicados entre 2020 y 2022, se examinaron, especialmente, los impactos de la adopción de la Enseñanza Remota, las transformaciones del Trabajo Pedagógico y los procesos de Precarización e Intensificación del Trabajo Docente. Se discute cómo la enseñanza remota e híbrida de carácter de urgencia, implementada mediante nuevas tecnologías, acentuó las desigualdades, amplió los mecanismos de control sobre la labor docente y deterioró sus condiciones de trabajo. La literatura analizada señala la intensificación de las actividades docentes, el incremento de la responsabilización individual y el desplazamiento de costos hacia los profesores. Se concluye que la pandemia funcionó como un gran laboratorio del capitalismo de plataforma y de la industria 4.0 en el ámbito educativo, con prácticas del capital que inciden sobre la profesión docente y contribuyen al avance de la lógica industrial y capitalista de producción de mercancías en la educación.

Palabras clave: Trabajo docente; Precarización laboral; Enseñanza remota; Enseñanza emergente; COVID-19.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only caused circumstantial changes but has also intensified and highlighted structural transformations already underway in the school dynamics and teaching practices at all basic education levels, with an emphasis on elementary school. In this context, emergency remote teaching has acted as a catalyst for accelerating the restructuring of teaching work, linking it to the logic of commodification, rationalization, control, and individual accountability, characteristic of a bourgeois managerial culture that has been consolidating itself in the field of education.

Several scientific studies have focused on analyzing not only the changes in teaching and learning practices mediated by digital technologies, but above all, the effects of these transformations on the organization and intensification of teaching work.

Among the main themes addressed by this literature, the intensification of teaching activities, the precariousness of working conditions, and the increase in control over pedagogical practices stand out, elements that reveal a reconfiguration of the work of teachers, with the expansion of standardized, mechanized, and commodified forms of work amid the health crisis caused by COVID-19. These issues are relevant not only

because of the historical and current challenges faced by teachers, but also because of their implications for the quality of the teaching-learning relationship and the valorization of the teaching profession. In the words of Antunes (2023), the pandemic has become a great laboratory for remote work and the advancement of Industry 4.0 digital platforms, a trend that already existed before 2020 but which, given the need for social distancing, found the right conditions for its expansion.

Given this context, this article aims to identify, organize, and analyze the main studies published between 2020 and 2022 on teaching work in elementary school during the pandemic period. The analysis focuses, above all, on the impacts in adopting remote teaching, the transformations in pedagogical work, and the processes of precariousness in the teaching profession.

The guiding question that informs this investigation based on academic publications is: how has scientific research addressed the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on changes in schools, especially with regard to teaching work in elementary schools? Based on this question, we seek to understand how scientific literature has interpreted and problematized the new configurations of teaching work imposed or accelerated by the pandemic.

This literature review is part of the results of the research carried out in the master's thesis, integrating the chapter dedicated to the analysis of scientific production on the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the work of elementary school teachers in the public school system of Florianópolis (LAUREANO, 2024).

Methodology of the bibliographic review

The bibliographic review, also known as a literature review or academic production review, is characterized as exploratory, qualitative theoretical research, which occurs through a bibliographic survey of academic production on a given theme with a systematically structured search and selection process. To this end, we first carried out a screening using previously defined descriptors, followed by a second and third screening based on reading the abstracts and introductions of the pre-selects.

The first step in this review was to search for articles in SciELO and Google Scholar and three thematic dossiers found by random search in education journals. The keywords/descriptors used in our review were *teaching work*, *pandemic*, *school*, and *elementary school*, which were combined in different ways, according to the search strategies indicated in Table 1. The time frame was works published between 2020 and 2022. The languages

considered to compose the corpus of this research were Portuguese, English, and Spanish. After completing the literature review and screening by reading the titles, abstracts, and introductions, a total of 114 materials were mapped.

The searches were conducted in July 2022 and March 2023; however, there were no new publications (2023), which resulted in the same publications already found in the previous stage. Table 1 details the selection of texts from information sources (SciELO, Google Scholar), with a search engine where the strategy, results, and filters applied were identified.

The second stage consisted of reading (screening) titles and abstracts of the papers. We chose as inclusion criteria research in the field of education that deals with the work of elementary and middle school teachers without distinction, especially in public schools, in relation to the intensification, precariousness, and control of their work during the pandemic. The exclusion criteria were applied to texts from other areas such as health, social assistance, nutrition, linguistics, and other levels of education (higher, secondary, and early childhood education). We also excluded research unrelated to teaching, emergency education, and the Covid-19 pandemic.

Although the search focused on scientific articles, other types of publications were included (an-editorial, a final course paper, and three preprints), provided they met the previously established selection criteria. To expand the bibliographic survey, we also searched journals that have thematic dossiers related to the subject of study. In the dossier *“Educational management and pedagogical work in the context of a pandemic”* (Revista *Linhas Críticas*, 2021), two texts were selected. In the journal *Humanidades & Inovação*, we consulted the dossiers *“Education intimates of pandemic and other crisis scenarios”* (2021) and *“Teaching work in a new process of knowledge construction: what we learned in and from the pandemic”* (2022), from which two texts were selected from each.

Os The selection and exclusion criteria used in these dossiers were the same as those adopted for the analysis of the other materials, ensuring coherence and consistency in the process of constituting the research corpus.

Table 1 – Selection of texts for the research

Source of information	Search strategy	Results	Filtering and screening	Selected for full reading
SciELO	"Teaching work" [abstract field] AND pandemic [abstract field] AND school [any part of the text field]	04	Reading of title, abstract, and keywords, as well as exploratory reading of full texts, when relevant	01
SciELO	(ab:(*pandemic)) AND (ab:(teacher)) AND (elementary school)	12	Reading of title, abstract, and keywords, as well as exploratory reading of full texts, when relevant	01
SciELO	pandemic, AND teaching, AND "Elementary School"	15	Duplicate texts. Reading of title, abstract, and keywords, as well as exploratory reading of full texts, when relevant	05
Google Scholar ⁴	pandemic + "teaching work" + precariousness filter in advanced search for articles published in sciELO	83	Duplicate texts. Reading of title, abstract, and keywords, as well as exploratory reading of full texts, when relevant	08
Search for thematic dossier	Random search in education journals that had thematic dossiers on Covid-19	6	Not applicable	6
Total		114	Analyzed	21

Source: prepared by the author (2023).

After screening titles, abstracts, and introductions based on the criteria mentioned above, 21 papers were selected for reading and complete analysis (Table 2).

⁴ To conduct the searches, we used Google Scholar's "advanced search" feature, restricting the results to articles indexed in SciELO. This strategy was adopted to broaden the retrieval of studies related to the topic, since certain texts could not be found directly on the SciELO platform.

Table 2 – Research corpus

9	ANO	PERIÓDICO	AUTOR
<u>Schools amid the clashes of the pandemic</u>	2021	Education & Society	Raquel Goulart Barreto
<u>Training the working class in times of pandemic and capital crisis: the agenda of private hegemonic apparatuses</u>	2021	Work, Education, and Health	Mariléia Maria da Silva et al
<u>Remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic: what teachers in the Santa Catarina public school system are saying</u>	2021	UFSC Repository	Isabela tosta ferreira
<u>COVID-19 pandemic, remote teaching, and the exacerbation of educational inequalities</u>	2020	History, Sciences, Health	Rodrigo Cesar da S. Magalhães
<u>Sustaining Transfer in Remote Learning: teaching in times of pandemic</u>	2020	Education and Reality	Simone Bicca Charczuk
<u>Confining the school experience to a screen?</u>	2020	Education & Society	Lucínio Carlos Viana da Silva Lima
<u>Teacher professional development and basic education during the COVID-19 pandemic</u>	2022	SciELO Preprints	Camila Lopes da Silva David moisés Barreto Santos
<u>School, teaching, and learning processes in times of pandemic</u>	2021	Critical Perspectives	Carolina Picchetti Nascimento
<u>Teaching during the pandemic: an analysis of emergency remote teaching in basic education</u>	2021	Humanities & Innovation	Ana Maria Alves Saraiva et al
<u>Teaching and learning during the pandemic: challenges</u>	2021	Humanities & Innovation	Celestina souza et al
<u>(Re)organizing pedagogical work in times of COVID-19: on the threshold of the (im)possible</u>	2020	Analysis of teaching practice	Luane Costa Almeida Adilson Dalben
<u>Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on English classes</u>	2021	Ilha do Desterro	Didiê Ana Ceni Denardi et al
<u>Re(thinking) Critical Language Education with Children and Teacher Education During (and After) Pandemic Times Re(thinking) Critical Language Education with Children and Teacher Education During (and After) Pandemic Times</u>	2021	Brazilian Journal of Applied Linguistics	Claudia Jotto Kawachi-Furlan Juliana Reichert A. Tonelli
<u>Teaching in Basic Education During a Pandemic</u>	2021	Education & Reality	Flávia Marcele Cipriani et al
<u>Teaching mathematics in the pandemic reality: technological tools used in the final years of elementary school</u>	2022	SciELO Preprints	Susana Seidel Demartini Isabel Cristina M. de Lara
<u>Difficulties faced by elementary school teachers in relation to students with disabilities: an analysis in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic</u>	2021	SciELO Preprints	Anderson Claiton Ferraz et al
<u>New pedagogical mediations: perceptions of elementary school teachers in the context of the pandemic</u>	2021	Humanities & Innovation Journal	Robson Lima de Arruda Robéria Nádia Araújo Nascimento
<u>Teacher leadership in times of pandemic</u>	2021	Critical Perspectives	Joana Paulin Romanowski et al
https://revista.unitins.br/index.php/humanidadeseinovacao/article/view/4341	2022	Humanities & Innovation Journal	Juliana Brandão Machado et al
<u>Teaching work in basic education in Brazil under Industry 4.0</u>	2022	Katálysis Magazine	Fabiane Santana Previtali Cilson César Fagiani
<u>Reduction in family income of basic education teachers in Minas Gerais during the COVID-19 pandemic</u>	2021	Work, Education, and Health	Cássio de Almeida Lima et al

Source: prepared by the author (2023)

The third stage dealt with treatment of results, which consisted of analyzing 21 works found. The analysis was not restricted to the collection or description of texts dealing with remote teaching, but rather a critical analysis of the phenomenon studied, in its formulation, the historical, political, and material determinations of teaching work in the context of the pandemic. Hence, the movement between method and theory allows us to understand both what each production affirms, and what it expresses about the gaps, contradictions, as well as trends of the period analyzed. This articulation ensures that the literature review goes beyond the level of descriptive synthesis, guided by a historical-dialectical materialist perspective, which requires the apprehension of the concrete in its mediations and determinations.

Commodification, low-cost standardization, control, and disciplining of teaching activity

In terms of results, we highlight how these 21 articles addressed the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic in the school context, especially regarding to education in elementary school. With regard to Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT), implemented as a temporary solution to maintain the functioning of the educational system while the social isolation, it was characterized as an improvised transposition of teaching in person, advancing the logic of commodification in education, without adequate pedagogical planning with teachers, disregarding the real conditions of student access and the social inequalities typical of a society divided between opposing classes, according to Charczuk (2020), Barreto (2021), Ferreira (2021), and Saraiva *et al.* (2021).

According to Barreto (2021) and Ferreira (2021), the Covid-19 pandemic period was marked by improvisation and omission, a view that converges with that of Arruda and Nascimento (2021), since for them the remote teaching model was implemented to ensure the appearance of supposed efficiency in public management processes. Stuck with work efficiency related to technology and low-cost standardized remote teaching, education systems and networks advanced in the expansion of platform-based teaching. Through the need for *online* teaching systems, city halls, states, and federal governments purchased educational technology packages from *EdTechs*, transferring resources directly from the public to the private sector, accompanied by greater standardization, control, and exploitation of teaching work, consolidating the logic of commodification within schools. This trend continued and deepened after the pandemic in all public education networks in Brazil.

Nascimento (2021) points out that these decisions were made by governments with the aim of maintaining the school calendar, promoting the simplification of teaching and learning processes, and automating teaching work. Similarly, Arruda and Nascimento (2021) highlight that the model adopted contributed to the transmission of impoverished content and the exclusion of comprehensive education.

The use of Digital Information and Communication Technologies (DICTs) became central to the ERT, but access to them was unequal. According to data from the TIC Domicílios survey (apud Nascimento, 2021), 29% of Brazilian households do not have internet access and 41% do not have a computer. This reveals the precarious conditions for access to educational platforms and resources.

Denardi *et al.* (2021) emphasize that interactions in the virtual environment do not guarantee the mediation necessary for learning, especially in language teaching, and that the absence of physical expressions and nonverbal cues compromises pedagogical quality.

Silva e Santos (2022) reinforce that teachers were subjected to emotional, affective, and structural pressures, facing the challenge of teaching in an unprecedented context lacking adequate conditions.

In capitalist society, technology is a commodity presented as a universal solution to guarantee the right to education and, at the same time, its use is structured on the material inequality of access to the means of digital production. In other words, what could expand human education appears to be subordinated to economic determinations that limit and hierarchize who can learn and teach. In addition, the expansion of remote education occurs concurrently with the standardization of low-cost pedagogical activity, allowing the transmission of ready-made content in a synthetic form to the largest possible number of connected students. The promise of democratizing learning through the use of technology is therefore confronted with the reproduction of social inequalities, revealing that technology, in the capitalist context, is not neutral, but works according to the conditions and interests of the commodities logic that are expanding in the service sector, with a special emphasis on education.

During the ERT period, there was an accelerated movement to incorporate private platforms and technological services into everyday school life. Authors such as Souza (2021) and Cunha (2021) highlight that educational technology companies began to offer service packages, ready-made content, and learning management systems, often financed or recommended by exogenous public policies without the direct participation of teachers.

This process reinforces the trend toward the commodification of education, in which human development is converted into a product and the educational process becomes guided

by performance metrics and adherence to platforms (Silva & Lima, 2022). At the same time, public institutions, pressured by budget cuts and demands for continuity, have adopted these systems as an immediate solution.

Therefore, while the official discourse claims that these platforms expand access and modernize teaching, their adoption places schools in a logic that subordinates teaching work to market interests. Teachers cease to be producers of knowledge, increasingly assuming the role of executors of pre-formatted content. In other words, what is presented as support for teaching work results, in practice, in a reduction of their autonomy and intensified control over their activity. a interatividade e experiências estimulantes, os “*edutainment*”, trazem interesse por parte de seus consumidores.

All the interactivity and stimulating experiences, or “edutainment,” attract interest from consumers. However, in market-driven education systems such as Brazil's, the pandemic has seen the rise of companies offering a catalog of digital technology resources as a product. Nascimento (2021) warns of two fallacies constructed by the entire capitalist apparatus on fertile ground to expand the commodification of basic education. The first fallacy is that the failure of distance learning during the pandemic was due to poor teacher training and gaps in their technological training. The second is that educational problems have immediate solutions.

As a result, educational conglomerates and *EdTech* compa⁵nies began offering their products free of charge to school systems, claiming that these resources would be able to solve the problems faced by schools. After a period of use, however, these companies consolidated the sale of their educational products to public school systems, converting the initial offer into permanent contracts and services. Silva *et al.* (2021) draw attention to the fact that both professional and basic public education were being targeted as potential areas for commodification and privatization even before the health crisis, since “[...] the digitization of school education was considered a lesser evil by many of us and, by others, an opportunity with a future. Thus, for (Lima, 2020, p. 2), the intense articulations between the National Union of Municipal Education Directors, the National Council of Education Secretaries, and the Ministry of Education were the “window of opportunity” for capital to advance toward the commodification of basic education as the “commodity of the moment.”

⁵ Edtech is short for education technology, referring to companies that produce educational products ranging from apps for students to complex data management systems for administrators of educational institutions educational institutions.

In this sense, we realize that this situation was already a trend before the pandemic and found in social isolation a favorable circumstance that transformed the period into a great laboratory for Industry 4.0, with the expansion of remote work and teaching, platforms, Artificial Intelligence, and the deepening of precariousness and uberization in the world of work

This contradiction expresses the dispute between an emancipatory educational project and an educational project subordinated to capitalist logic. By depending on private services, public education reinforces the separation between those who own the means of pedagogical production (platforms, content, systems) and those who do the teaching work. Thus, the ERT not only made visible the commodification that was already underway has accelerated processes that assign those who privately own technology the role of reorganizing educational work in favor of bourgeois logic.

Emergency Remote Teaching has significantly intensified the work of teachers, requiring the reorganization of pedagogical practices, the accelerated mastery of digital tools, and constant availability to meet the demands of students and families (Oliveira, 2021). In addition, many teachers used their own resources, such as computers, internet connections, and mobile devices, bearing costs that should have been the responsibility of the state (Carvalho & Mendes, 2022).

The fact that teachers were individually blamed for the ERT shifted structural responsibilities beyond their role to workers, as education networks encouraged teacher leadership and methodological innovation precisely to exempt themselves from management responsibilities. In reality, teachers had to individually solve problems of access to the internet, networks, computers, and content in order to try to ensure greater attention and learning for their students. As a result, many teachers became a kind of "YouTuber," that is, video producers during the pandemic, with a focus on the technique and performance of their classes to entertain students. (CONDE, 2024; CONDE ET AL, 2025).

This pandemic situation has had a profound impact on teaching work in elementary schools, highlighting and deepening processes of precariousness, intensification, and control, as well as contributing to teachers' ill health. In addition, the studies analyzed point to movements that strain the meaning of teaching, indicating trends toward the emptying of its pedagogical duties, especially intellectual ones. Teaching work is becoming more technical, standardized, cheap, controlled, and de-intellectualized.

Final considerations

We understand that the changes affecting teachers' work with the expanded use of technology applied to hybrid and remote teaching methods have increased the process of precariousness, intensification, standardization, and control over their work, directing teaching work toward the subsumption of capital and, therefore, the logic of commodities.

Even with advance information about the pandemic, maintaining school activities was not something planned by the Brazilian Federal Government. In other words, there was a lot of improvisation and omission, as well as disbelief in science, leading to greater precariousness, vulnerability, and exploitation of teaching work.

Objective working conditions were attacked and made precarious, the right to career progression was frozen, and there were threats of meal voucher cuts. For temporary state and municipal workers, contracts were terminated, while for private school workers, there were salary reductions and mass layoffs. Thus, the pandemic intensified the precariousness of work and made a large portion of the teaching profession ill. Teachers were constantly attacked while working in isolation in their homes, as difficulties in mobilizing and organizing collectively weakened their struggles and capacity for resistance during this period.

Some authors believe that much can be done by filling the gap in teachers' technology training, as if the great difficulty of remote teaching were the technical training of teachers itself. For this group, investing in public policies for training and stimulating creativity, resilience, *maker* culture, and an open, flexible, and collaborative attitude would solve many of the problems. They disregard the deepening of precariousness, control, and intensification of teaching work through new technologies.

The production of lessons recorded transforms the living work of teachers, their vital energy and knowledge, into the private property of *EdTechs*, effectively subsuming teaching work to capital, just as machinery did with the European working class during the Industrial Revolution. Face-to-face teaching work in schools still has a strong manufacturing characteristic, with the teacher (even if salaried) dominating all stages of the process. Thus, formal subsumption becomes increasingly real, and the teaching worker is expropriated of their own knowledge, deepening their alienation. (CONDE, 2024; CONDE ET AL, 2025).

It is interesting to note that, for a group of authors, the specific activities of teachers using digital tools ended up reinforcing traditional practices with children and adolescents,

that is, reinvention through tools did not serve to improve classes, but rather to improvise content. Some authors have raised in their work the possibility of tutors replacing the role of teachers in basic education or conceiving of teachers as mere deliverers of activities to students. These movements regarding their work directly contribute to their deprofessionalization, subsumption, and alienation. Thus, the ERA model contributes to the intensification and precariousness of their labor.

The pandemic has enabled experimental laboratories that are being further developed in the Elementary education is pressuring teachers to take on roles such as tutor, educational YouTuber, or even activity delivery person. In other words, various possibilities, within the logic of commodification and with the deepening of the subsumption of teachers to capital, are being tested in pursuit of profit for the bourgeoisie and precarious education for the working class. pandemia possibilitou laboratórios de experimento que estão sendo aprofundados no Ensino Fundamental pressionando professores a assumir funções como: tutor, youtuber educacional ou, ainda, entregador de atividades, ou seja, várias possibilidades, dentro da lógica da mercadoria e com aprofundamento da subsumção docente ao capital, estão sendo testadas em busca de lucro para a classe burguesa e formação precária para a classe operária.

Finally, we consider that the metamorphoses of teaching work and their implications for the teaching-learning process still require more in-depth critical studies, especially in the context of elementary education. Even so, it is possible to conclude that digital technologies in schools, which became widespread after the COVID-19 pandemic, have contributed to the expansion of the logic of commodification in education, with greater standardization, control, discipline, and, therefore, the actual subsumption of teaching work to capital. inalmente, consideramos que as metamorfoses do trabalho docente e suas implicações no processo de ensino-aprendizagem ainda demandam estudos críticos mais aprofundados, especialmente no contexto do Ensino Fundamental. Mesmo assim, é possível concluir que as tecnologias digitais nas escolas, generalizadas após a Pandemia Covid-19, têm contribuído para a expansão da lógica da mercadoria na educação, com maior padronização, controle, disciplinamento e, portanto, subsumção real do trabalho docente ao capital.

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