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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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## BETWEEN CONFINEMENT AND REMOTE CLASSES: EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN BRAZIL IN COVID-19 TIMES

\*Ana Carolina Carius

Petropolis Catholic University

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#### \*Corresponding author:

Ana Carolina Carius

### ABSTRACT

From the unprecedented period of closing of schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper focuses on the issue of Early Childhood Education in times of social distance. Therefore, this article has as its object of study the implementation of remote classes in Early Childhood Education, the pedagogical practices during the period of social distancing and its consequences for the target audience: children aged from zero to five years and eleven months. Under the clipping of an official document of the state of Rio de Janeiro, Deliberation No. 376 of the State Council of Education of the state, it was analyzed determinations that would be of possible implementation for children of kindergarten and the primordial role of families in the process of maintenance of these in school activities, plus Decree No. 090, of April 28, 2021 of the town of Petropolis, which described the return to face-to-face school activities in the town. In line with this analysis, a literature review was carried out, considering Brazilian articles with the theme "Child Education and the COVID-19 pandemic", in which similar discussions were identified regarding the topic and its specificities. Through the chosen research methodology, it was possible to conclude that it is necessary to discuss the pedagogical practices involved in this period of pandemic for Early Childhood Education from the difficulties listed by families, teachers, and managers, in order to consolidate the contribution of all, to minimize the effects of children's lack of socialization.

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## INTRODUCTION

March 13, 2020 represents a milestone for education worldwide. Despite the closing of schools on several other occasions, it was the first time that schools in more than 170 countries closed at the same time (CHOI et al., 2020). Another novelty was the uncertainty about the time needed for closing. In many locations, schools have not reopened, even though the COVID-19 pandemic has started 15 months to date. For more details about the remote education, in a general way, in Brazilian public schools, see the work of Rodrigues and Carius (2020). Technological advances experienced by society in recent years make us reflect on the classroom format of the school as we know it until March 2020. Edméa Santos (2014) defines online education as 'the set of teaching-learning actions, or curriculum acts mediated by digital interfaces that enhance interactive, hypertextual and mobile communicational practices' (Santos, 2014). Although the use of technologies in education has been around since the 1980s, their use in a context of total closure of schools is unprecedented.

The fact is that we currently experience a process of school virtualization, in its most simplistic sense: the existence of this environment in cyberspace, without the physical presence of those involved in school and academic activities, that is, virtual as opposed to real. It is therefore necessary to define what cyberspace is. For Santaella (2003), cyberspace is the informational space of networks, made up of bits and bytes, of zeros and ones, so that from the interior of computers to screens, it reaches us in the form of known languages. Therefore, cyberspace is nothing but a metaphorical way of naming the internet, the network of networks. Pierre Lévy (2017) exemplifies the virtualization of a company that traditionally would work in buildings and departments with employees distributed in their homes, through the home office, as a change from the traditional paradigm of the company's operation, with well-defined space and time, to a 'coordination process that always redistributes the spatiotemporal coordinates of the work collective and of each of its members differently according to different requirements' (Lévy, 2017). The reflection brought by Lévy (2017) for the business environment translates a similar dilemma for the process of virtualization of the school environment.

The new school dynamics always differently redistribute the spatiotemporal coordinates of schoolwork, ‘detritorializing’ the school for different environments, with emphasis on the family environment. However, coordinating these activities from a distance is not an easy task. Carius (2020) describes such difficulties in a rural school located in the town of Petrópolis.

Manuel Castells (2019) defends a new paradigm for information technology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The author describes five characteristics for the new paradigm that is taking shape. The first characteristic refers to the fact that information is raw material. Technologies act on information. The second feature concerns the penetrability of the effects of new technologies. All our processes of individual and collective existence are shaped by new technologies. The school is certainly in this group. The third characteristic refers to the logic of networks in any system or set of relationships, using new information technologies. Again, the school's participation in this process can be seen. The fourth feature is flexibility. Organizations and institutions can be modified and even altered by reorganizing their components. Therefore, given the closing of schools, the physical school was reorganized and the roles of the main actors: teachers, students, managers and families were reorganized in this process, in a network. Finally, the fifth feature is the increasing convergence of specific technologies into a highly integrated system, in which old technological trajectories are literally impossible to distinguish separately. In this sense, it is observed that several changes arising from the closing period of schools will certainly be absorbed in the practices of both teachers, managers, students, and families, so that the old and the new will work in sync, it is not possible to distinguish that there was of what will be.

Considering the paradigm shift for information technology proposed by Castells (2019), the research object of this work is Early Childhood Education, in line with cyberculture, in times of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the research question that this work intends to answer is: How to think about Early Childhood Education without social interactions between children due to social distancing? To answer the research's guiding question, the general objective of this work is to evaluate, in official documents, how pedagogical practices for Early Childhood Education were designed in public policies for education during the period of social withdrawal. As specific objectives, it is intended to analyze the concept of Early Childhood Education in an adverse scenario, in which the absence of interaction between the actors involved substantially compromises the children enrolled in this stage of the educational process. In addition, it is intended to evaluate measures taken in different scenarios for the maintenance of Early Childhood Education, considering the real need to use remote activities for this age group.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research was carried out on an exploratory basis, from the perspective of Antônio Carlos Gil (1999), delineated as bibliographical and documentary research. After the sudden closure of Brazilian schools, on March 13, 2020, provisionally for 15 days, there was, in principle, no directive either from the Ministry of Education or from the state and municipal education secretariats. Considering the cutout for the state of Rio de Janeiro, the first guideline that was made public was Opinion no. 376, of March 23, 2020, of the State Council of Education of Rio de Janeiro. In this opinion, the State Council of Education broadly states how remote activities can occur. It is important to emphasize that the opinion describes the activities carried out at home as “special household arrangements”. The document does not refer to the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for the maintenance of school activities, a fact that gave space to a variety of possibilities for maintaining activities, both in state and municipal public networks and in the private network. The only part of the document that makes reference to Early Childhood Education is

In Kindergarten, for pre-school, institutions must replace classes only in person, so that each student is able to meet a minimum of

60% of attendance of the 200 school days, as determined by art. 31, item IV, the LGB – Law of Guidelines and Bases (RIO DE JANEIRO, 2020).

It is possible to observe, from the previous excerpt, that there was, in March 2020, an expectation of returning to classroom classes for Early Childhood Education still in 2020 and in such a way that it would be possible to fulfill 60% of the workload of 200 school days.

The municipality of Petrópolis, located in the state of Rio de Janeiro, was one of the Brazilian municipalities that kept schools completely closed for the longest time. Decree No. 090, of April 28, 2021, listed the guidelines for returning to classroom classes in the town as of May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2021. According to the guidelines of this decree, Early Childhood Education could start the individual adaptation of children on May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2021 and group adaptations on June 24<sup>th</sup>, 2021, provided that there was none, during the period of May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2021 until the dates described, any suspicion of contamination by COVID-19 in open schools. Considering the two previous deliberations, the state and the municipal and the reality that took place in the town of Petrópolis, it is possible to observe:

- The municipal CECs (Child Education Centers), intended for children aged zero to five years and 11 months, have not yet been opened, not even in a hybrid form, until July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2021, disregarding the municipal opening schedule and return.
- Still in 2020, several daycare centers and private preschools started to operate irregularly to meet the demands of parents and guardians who were working in person and had no way of monitoring their children's education or even providing the proper care for the children.
- Collaboration networks of family members, neighbors and friends, especially in the poorest communities, were formed to assist families who have been working face-to-face for months and who are unable to pay a babysitter service for their children and depend on the municipal CECs to their care and school monitoring.
- From May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2021, therefore, the operation of private day care centers and pre-schools began, on a hybrid rotation regime, serving, therefore, only those families who can pay for the care and training of their children.

Based on the observation, in the municipality of Petrópolis, of the lack of support for families who have children aged zero to five years and eleven months regarding the opening of Early Childhood Education Centers for care and attention to their children, the product is a total of 15 months and 19 days until the present date of total closing of the public institutions that serve the municipal Early Childhood Education. This fact corroborates the difficulties for families with children in their homes described by Quadros and Cordeiro (2020) and with the attempt to virtualize the school described by Carius (2021). Regarding the school activities developed for this audience, the town of Petrópolis has provided, since April 2020, the “Homeschool” platform, with activities to be carried out by family members with children from kindergarten. It is observed, however, that families with children enrolled in the municipal CECs continue to work in person or are experiencing financial difficulties inherent to the pandemic itself. Therefore, parents and guardians are not the best people to carry out activities with their children, simply to maintain a bond with the school, as they are not trained to act as educators in Early Childhood Education. Added to this scenario is the exposure of many of these children to situations of violence and abuse or lack of adequate food. It is noteworthy that the town of Petrópolis has contributed with a lunch card worth because of not maintaining regular meals in municipal schools and CECs. In short: Early Childhood Education is one of the groups most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the lack of social contact with other children and teachers in the face of the necessary social distancing to face the pandemic or the absence of public policies specifically aimed at this audience to mitigate the problems arising from the pandemic.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Considering the cut made for the municipal education system of Petrópolis, in Early Childhood Education, a literature review was carried out on the theme Early Childhood Education and the COVID-19 pandemic. After searching the Google Scholar platform, four articles were chosen from the Special Dossier 'Child Education in Times of Pandemic', from the journal 'Zero-a-seis' of the Federal University of Santa Catarina. To choose the texts, the keywords 'Child Education', 'COVID-19' and 'Remote Education' were used.

### Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Early Childhood Education in São Gonçalo/RJ

TAVARES, Maria Tereza Goudard; PESSANHA, Fabiana Nery de Lima and MACEDO, Nayara Alves.

The authors discuss the situation of children from the popular classes in the city of São Gonçalo/RJ in view of the closing of day care centers and preschools. São Gonçalo is a municipality with one of the largest concentrations of communities in the state of Rio de Janeiro. Due to this dramatic situation, the lack of basic sanitation is a negative highlight factor, contributing to the spread of several diseases, including COVID-19 itself. Furthermore, vulnerability to violence and the occurrence of women as heads of households are also characteristics of the population chosen for the analysis. The authors highlight the alternative resources for caring for young children by closing day care centers and preschools for working mothers. This fact is like the situation described for the municipality of Petrópolis. Tavares et al. (2021) also highlight that the closing of small private day care centers and preschools leads them to bankruptcy and reinforces the functioning of non-formal care for children in this support network formed so that women could return to face-to-face work.

### Early childhood education and digital technologies: reflections in times of pandemic

ANGELS, Cleriston Izidro and FRANCISCO, Deise Juliana.

The authors chose to carry out a documental analysis in several documents that govern Early Childhood Education immediately before the COVID-19 pandemic, to observe how the technology was inserted in official documents related to Early Childhood Education. With this survey, the authors problematized the recommendation for the use of ICTs in Early Childhood Education in the context of the pandemic.

The authors conclude that there was already an appeal for the use of technologies at a time before the COVID-19 pandemic, without, however, prioritizing this tool in the pedagogical practices of this age group. The authors also highlight digital exclusion because of social exclusion, the result of persistent social inequalities in Brazil. The authors defend the need to maintain early childhood education in person, so that children experience the world around them in their daily lives. They also highlight the Opinion No. 5 of April 28, 2020 of the National Education Council and its indication for the distribution of playful material, games and games to adults who deal with children from zero to five years and eleven months, not being recommended remote teaching for children.

### Public policies for Early Childhood Education in the context of the pandemic: considerations based on the reality of Brazil and Italy

SANTOS, Joedson Brito dos and CORREIA, Maria Aparecida Antero.

The authors carried out, through documental analysis, a comparison of how Brazil and Italy thought about Early Childhood Education, regarding public policies, the closing time of day care centers and

preschools and forms of support for family members, teachers, and children during the closing period. The authors defend not maintaining activities remotely, but rather alternative ways of maintaining the link between day care centers and preschools, without the obligation of remote teaching. Again, Opinion No. 5, of April 28, 2020, of the National Education Council is cited, reinforcing the proposal by the opinion to transfer responsibility for school activities from schools to parents, who do not have training to do so. In this sense, the authors are against the conception of the text by Siqueira (2020), which indicates activities for parents to carry out with their children during the period of social distancing. Santos and Correia (2021) highlight the importance of defending Early Childhood Education, as it seems that the closing of schools causes a return to children being cared for at home or by neighbors and friends, without the necessary training, characterizing a setback for Early Childhood Education.

As for Italy, the authors point out that there was no national articulation for maintaining the activities of day care centers and preschools in the Distance Education format and report that parents, managers and teachers gathered the experience of dealing with Early Childhood Education in EaD format, presenting it to the authorities in order to discuss the positive and negative points of the experience.

### Confined childhood: liturgies of schooling and privatization of Early Childhood Education

CAMPOS, Roselane Fátima and DURLI, Zenilde.

The authors describe the priority given to private educational institutions, in partnership with the National Education Council, in Opinion No. 5 of April 28, 2020, along the lines given to Early Childhood Education in times of the COVID-19 pandemic. To support the hypothesis, the authors list the following observations:

- The CNCB (Common National Curriculum Base) has been the main device used by the Council to regulate the teaching work and non-presential teaching activities.
- Early Childhood Education is treated from the perspective of preparing for future school trajectories.
- The dialogue with organizations and business networks was privileged, to the detriment of associations or representative bodies of professors and researchers. Acting slowly and in tune with business interests, the NEC (National Education Council) collaborates to deepen the ongoing privatization of public education. The authors close the text with a worrying concern regarding hybrid teaching

The approval of this Opinion reported by the Millennium Institute on 7/28/2020, in an article entitled: "ADOPTION OF HYBRID EDUCATION: NEXT NODE OF EDUCATION IN TIMES OF PANDEMIA", demonstrates the approval of the National Council of Education to this model when providing for the offer part of the classes in person at school, and another, inhome. And, as everything is "emergency", the NAHBE (National Association of Hybrid Basic Education) has already been created, chaired by Maria Inês Fini, president of INEP for the period 2016-2019. A debate/training agenda is already planned for the months of October to December; among the themes it was included: "Is hybrid teaching possible in Early Childhood Education?" (Campos and Durli, 2021)

### Final Considerations

The present work presented an overview of the situation of Early Childhood Education in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, under the scope of the municipality of Petrópolis/RJ. Considering the Opinion No. 376 of the CEE of Rio de Janeiro, the Decree No. 090 of the town of Petrópolis and the Opinion No. 5 of the CNE, which was cited in all the articles of the literature review, it was analyzed how Early Childhood Education occurred in 2020. It can be observed, from the four articles of the literature review and the documents chosen, that Early Childhood Education cannot be carried out in its

primary objectives without social interaction, and, for this reason, it was the most affected sector in the educational area. The lack of ability on the part of public administrators to deal with a complex problem such as maintaining social distance in Early Childhood Education has promoted misleading and market interpretations of the real role of Early Childhood Education in the training and care of children aged zero to five years and eleven months. What was seen, in several cases, was the growth of non-formal care for children by family members, friends and neighbors, considering that many parents and guardians returned to face-to-face work and day care centers and preschools remained closed. With this reality, a weakening of Early Childhood Education as a public policy is visible, an achievement that took decades to be achieved and that still needs a lot of attention by municipal, state and federal managers and its universalization. The question that this paper raises, in line with Campos and Durli (2021), is the emergence of hybrid education as an alternative for lowering costs (and why not scrapping?) Basic Education in the post-pandemic moment. It is suggested that, even after the drop in circulation restrictions and pandemic control through mass vaccination, hybrid education will remain in Brazilian public Basic Education, lacking access to ICTs and training for their use both by teachers and by students. In this scenario, where will Early Childhood Education be? Will it be possible to include it's in this clumsy and premature movement? Is it possible to think about Early Childhood Education without social interaction completely? In our view, no. Cyberspace and its numerous virtual experiences still do not fill the space of the "real" in the daily experience of children in kindergarten.

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