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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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PERCEPTION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS ABOUT THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL DISTANCING DURING THE PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

The application of intervention programs provokes reflections, when developing prevention strategies in order to reduce risk factors and vulnerabilities, increasing the protective factors present or inciting new protective behaviors. The ACT Raising Safe Kids Program - is one of such interventions that teaches non-aggressive behavior to educate children in safe environments. This research aims to verify the feasibility of the ACT program for early childhood education teachers. Six teachers from a CMEI (Municipal Center of Early Childhood Education) of Curitiba participated in the application of the program, with the duration of eight sessions, in which the programmatic content of the ACT and the pre and post-test questionnaires were applied, all duly adapted to the target audience of the research. There was also an interview with the director of the institution and an online follow-up focus group with the participants after one year. As a result, there has been an increase in the answers considered appropriate by 75 questions between the beginning and the end of the application of the program. The participants of the follow up focus group said they enjoyed the experience, learned about the contents and changes made, which contributes to the expansion of knowledge about violence prevention and encourages the replication of the intervention in order to confirm its applicability.

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INTRODUCTION

The year 2020 will forever be marked as an atypical year that has modified the way people live and highlighted psychosocial problems in different contexts. This is mainly due to the SARS-CoV2 pandemic, popularly known as "New Coronavirus", which affected/affects thousands of people around the world, including Brazil, leading to large numbers of confirmed cases (such as approximately 35 16.984.218) and deaths in the country (474.414 dead by the end of the afternoon of June 08th, 2021). In this context, Brazilians were forced to face adversities of high unemployment and poverty rates, as well as grief. The financial situation of the population during the pandemic period was a cause for concern given that only essential services remained functioning normally. However, about 61.2% of workers in the country are currently allocated to informal activities as they have suffered significant deficits due to the pandemic. Such adults in situations of unemployment or deprived of the possibility to work in their original jobs, are often fathers and mothers who are facing, in addition to financial adversities, a new challenging reality: having their children at home full time (Lara, 2020). Among the adaptations made due to this disease, such as the use of protective masks, hand sanitizers, more diligent hygiene habits,

and social distancing, there was also the need for social isolation, adjusting the most part of face-to-face activities considered not fundamental to the online modality, among them the educational system. In the field of education, especially early childhood education, which is the focus of this paper – that reality presented major issues to be addressed, such as social, economic, and socialization issues (the latter one being one of the most important aspects developed in early childhood). All of those issues make up one of the main dimensions through which the schooling system is viewed: the idea of an institution responsible for the reproduction of knowledge and culture, with a socialization role in the context of education, responsible for the protection of students and the development of their human, scientific, social, cultural, and educational background, in accordance with Brazilian Law no. 9.394 of December 20, 1996:

Art. 12. The educational establishments, respecting the common norms and those of their education system, will have the task of IX - promoting awareness, prevention, and debate measures against all types of violence, especially systematic intimidation (bullying) within the schools (included by Law N.13.663, 2018); X - establishing actions aimed at promoting a culture of peace in schools and XI - promoting a safe school environment, adopting

strategies to prevent and confront drug use or dependence (Law N. 9.394, 1996). This illustrates how the relationship between school and childhood has changed over the years, currently assuming an exchange in which the child is considered subject to rights, desires and duties (Silva, Lima & 24 Jabur, 2011).

However, the current situation has exposed a reality in which families do not have the necessary means to keep up with the education of their children at home. With no access to the Internet, no sufficient electronic means for all children to attend classes at home, absence of adult supervision among other problems that are magnified in families in situations of social vulnerability (Castro, Vasconcelos & Alves, 2020). According to the same authors, the use of electronic means was necessary for more than recreation during this period. It was through the use of electronic devices that families had access to school information, thus requiring an appropriate control of their use by children. In addition to adjusting to the remote teaching model, adults also had to deal with their children's free time at home, handling their energy, the absence of other children to relate to, the excessive use of electronic means and the creation of a routine that worked for children who were indoors the all day, everyday. Also, there was the need for playtime and interaction in a way that stimulates children's healthy development beyond the screens; one of the great difficulties encountered by parents in this period. The adaptations made in the educational field did not only affect the students but also the performance of teachers who kept working from their homes with their families, without the appropriate materials, sharing their electronic devices with other members of the household, adjusting their entire practice to a reality never experienced before, without the proper preparation for the use of the new platforms, lack of Internet connection quality and infrastructure. They had to deal with the interaction with other members of their households using the time and space that usually pertained to moments of relaxation and recreation, breaking down the boundaries between the personal and the professional life during the period of isolation (Lara, 2020; Oliveira, Gomes, & Barcellos, 2020; Paludo, 2020). They were also challenged to maintain their primary responsibilities and roles as strong communicators, to pass on their knowledge in an organized way, with the development of the student's cognitive, social and emotional skills, upholding the same quality and delivery as in the traditional face-to-face system (Oliveira, Gomes, & Barcellos, 2020). Those professionals were also required to consider their role as potential multipliers, and to provide assistance on institutional issues influencing the development of consciousness and responsibility in their students (Costa & Faria, 2013). Moreover, these professionals have direct contact with children and their parents; and the greater their knowledge about the subject of violence, the greater their contribution in this relationship (Pontes, 2020).

All these changes lead to the aggravation of many psychological issues such as stress and anxiety, which can even lead to more serious disorders such as Burnout Syndrome, panic attacks, among others. Worsening is described because one cannot ignore the fact that these professionals already dealt with some of these difficulties even before the beginning of the pandemic, such as excessive workload, low pay and scarce working conditions and tools, which intensified the new challenges in the period of social isolation (Paludo, 2020). Paludo's (2020) work regarding the situation of teachers during the pandemic contacted 9,557 teachers of public and private schools from all over the country, mostly women. Of those, 28% rated their emotional health as very bad or bad and 30% as reasonable, considering issues such as fear of contamination, doubts about the future, lack of recognition of their work, increased dedication to work and exhausting days with accumulation of functions. Other reasons were the sudden and unplanned change in the execution of their work, the uncertainty of the impacts caused by this change, the concern with their student's learning or with their integrity at home (Oliveira, Gomes & Barcellos, 2020). Although it is known that the recurrence of adversities in teacher practices already existed even before the pandemic, especially in the public education system, one cannot ignore the severity of these new phenomena, and also the importance of follow-up for these professionals through intervention programs,

the recognition of their efforts, the psychological and practical preparation for this new model, among others (Lara, 2020). There will be no quality education without the teacher's training to execute their jobs in the best possible way (Paludo, 2020). Thus, an adequate training program may allow educators to realize that violence is not within the child, but often in the environment which they are part of; only properly trained teachers will be able to effectively combat these patterns, either through assertive attitudes of identification and denunciation, or through strategies to deal with child victims within the school environment (Brino & Souza, 2016). In addition, professionals prepared to deal with mental health situations can contribute to the reduction of coercive and abusive practices in relation to children (Howe, Knox, Altafim, Linhares & Nishizawa, 2017).

The ACT program is one of the programs that focuses on these objectives. It is considered to be the most suitable due to its low cost, the limited number of sessions for the application, and because it can be adapted to different contexts, with different caregivers, in addition to dealing with the specific issue of violence. Also, it has been validated in Brazil by means of randomized controlled trials (Altafim & Linhares, 2019), established in the year 2001 by the American Psychological Association (APA), with the aim of reducing the risk factors of violence for children by means of training non-violent behavior for teachers (Smith, Sterne & Anderson, 2002). It is currently considered as "promising evidence" by the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare (2017) and has been listed by the World Health Organization as one of the seven best existing evidence-based intervention proposals (WHO, 2018). ACT is considered a universal program of direct, flexible, and accessible application, with emphasis on the social-cognitive approach (Altafim & Linhares, 2019) with the goal of training qualified multipliers in its premise of preventing child maltreatment (Howe et al., 2017). The premise of the program is that adults should model and teach the behaviors expected of children, who in turn, learn the skills considered necessary to deal non-aggressively in certain situations by imitation.

Objectives: Evaluate teachers' perception of the impact of social distancing during the pandemic.

Material: A semi-structured interview of 12 open and closed questions was applied to the participants in an online follow up focus group (due to the pandemic), as well as a questionnaire via Google Form, containing 13 open questions which were answered by the director of the CMEI.

METHOD

Participants: Five teachers of Early Childhood Education of the Public Education Network of the city of Curitiba, with an average age of 43 years, graduated in pedagogy and the director of the institution participated in this research.

Application: After one year since the teachers had participated in person in the application of the ACT-Program to educate children in safe environments a follow-up focus group was applied. The interview was conducted via Google Meet, in order to evaluate what the teachers still remembered about the application of the program, to verify if the learning had fostered new practices with the children, and also if the content had been useful in the period of social isolation, intertwining issues about violence, health, nutrition, adequate housing and other concerns of the teachers with their students. The duration of the meeting was approximately one and a half hours. In the same period, a questionnaire was applied to the director of the CMEI via Google Forms. The goal was to verify the current reality of teachers and children, considering the application of the ACT Program, the pandemic situation and the changes observed by this professional.

Data analysis: For the data analysis, we used the content analysis of Bardin (1977), which considers the interview as a specific research

method and aims to manipulate messages to confirm the indicators that inform about another reality than that of the message. The pre-analysis phase was carried out, followed by the exploration of the material and the treatment of the results, in which the data was encoded, identifying registration units embedded in categories (groups of certain elements that have common characteristics). The 45 categories created for this analysis were: applicability of the ACT Program, Violence and Child Development. Finally, the interpretation of the data was carried out. It consisted in crossing the information and performing a descriptive analysis of the answers given by the director, considering the questionnaire answered one year after the application of the program to the teachers of the CMEI.

RESULTS

To identify the teachers' perception of the impact of social isolation during the pandemic, a categorization was performed in two parts: Violence, which obtained 15 sentences for analysis; and Child Development, with only 6 sentences for analysis. It was noticed that in this moment of social isolation, the greatest concern of the teachers was related to the category Violence. The answers point out that they often have questions about how to identify and notify these situations, in addition to the intensification resulting from the pandemic and social isolation, since they no longer have contact with the children. Other concerns cited regard sexual abuse: "I think the rate of violence has increased, especially sexual violence because they stay longer at home."(sic.); "Violence has only increased, both sexual and verbal and in the aspect of nutrition as well."(sic.). Concerns about the children staying on the streets rather than staying at home were also pointed out since the students were no longer going to school: "they are more exposed and less safe."(sic.); "Now they are on the streets, and parents usually do not take this vigilance too seriously. Not all but most of them."(sic.). The concern of the participants is a reality considering parents as the greatest perpetrators of violence and neglect towards their children (Garbin et al., 2016). The second category, Child Development, was the category with the least responses in the categorization process. However, it is also of fundamental importance for the interpretation of this work's data. In this regard, it is possible to observe the lack of management by teachers of issues such as: concerns with children's hygiene as well as with their health and safety inside the home, and also with the space and time of study in addition to other conditions necessary to a satisfactory teaching environment. In other words, the role of the teacher goes beyond teaching and learning academic contents.

The disposition of the director of the CMEI was essential for the application and understanding of the answers sought in the objective of this research. Her interest in offering the contents of the ACT Program to the teachers is in accordance with the knowledge and concern regarding violence around the institution. This causes her to create mechanisms that ensure that caregivers take their children to school. She states that only when the children attend the CMEI, it is possible for her to guarantee their safety and protection because she knows that teachers will be in line with this ideal. The interview with the director contained questions about her concerns and difficulties, the competences of her team and the protective network, her opinions on the application of the ACT and finally, on the reality of the CMEI and the families during the pandemic. Right in the first question, she states that one of her biggest concerns in the work environment is the recurrent violence and also the importance of inserting newly arrived teachers in this context. When asked about the competences of teachers when dealing with issues of violence and mistreatment, she states that after the application of the ACT program, they are 65 more prepared. The interviewee also states that the experience was very productive and she wishes that the other employees have the same opportunity, because the theoretical knowledge is valid when it is well directed and applied. About the changes in the behavior of the participants, she cites "a different regard towards the child, patience, being able to channel energy into pedagogical work". Regarding the new interventions aimed at Child Development, the director declares that those are actions with families and caregivers, in addition to

teachers, democratizing the ACT Program. She states "families need support, but they need to understand how to work with the child without violence". This would be made possible either through the integral application of the content, as it has already happened in the CMEI in 2018, or with small courses addressing specific themes as acting within the community as a whole will make the change reflect in the children. Still on the family dimension, the director believes that the pandemic and isolation in the year 2020 contributed to the increase in situations of child abuse, because family issues were accentuated by the lack of employment.

DISCUSSION

Regarding the Violence category, the responses demonstrate that the concern of teachers is often directed to the safety of children in relation to exposure to the virus, but mainly to issues related to nutrition, hygiene and exposure to violence in non-school environments, which corroborates the data of Pontes (2020) on the relationship between these professionals and the children and also with parents. The responses signal a concern regarding sexual abuse that children may be subjected to at home. The concern of the participants is a reality considering parents are the greatest perpetrators of violence and neglect with their children (Garbin et al., 2016). A good alternative would be that programs as the one that was applied in this research be part of the continuing education of the teachers category, even becoming a public policy, which would assure quality information for all in a democratic and egalitarian way, guaranteeing this knowledge for all teachers, at least from the municipality. The ACT Program as a public policy is already a reality in its version for parents in the municipality of Pelotas / RS since 2018; and is part of the Pelotas Pela Paz Project (Soares, 2019). Another important topic raised in the interview with the director was the importance of a support network from institutions such as the Posto de Saúde (public health clinics), the Child Protection Committee, the Foundation for Social Welfare (FAS), the Reference Centre for Social Assistance (CRAS), and many others needed. The research by Werner de Oliveira and Wesley (and 2020) also evidences the need for these and other agencies such as the Ministério Público, the Specialized Reference Centre for Social Welfare (CREAS), the Municipal Board of Education and the Judiciary to be partners, as all of them have similar goals regarding the protection and the guarantee of the rights of children and adolescents. Therefore, working with teachers is indispensable, since they are considered the gateway to child protection and can acquire or increase knowledge on the subject of child abuse in the school context and consequently decrease vulnerability and increase protective factors for their students.

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