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Ancient vocation, new reality: experiences of teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic

Antiga vocação, nova realidade: vivências de professoras de ensino fundamental durante a pandemia da COVID-19

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Abstract

Objective

The COVID-19 pandemic led to social isolation and school closures as measures to contain its spread. Based on phenomenology, the present study aimed to know and understand the senses and meanings that 10 Elementary School teachers attributed to their work in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Method

Dialogical meetings were held with each participant generating Comprehensive Narratives.

Results

The results were organized into five significant elements: (a) fulfillment of a childhood dream arising from the influence of significant people; (b) teaching as an act of love and social transformation; (c) continuous search for space and social recognition, (d) pandemic as an imbalance of life and profession and (e) digital teachers as a new reality.

Conclusion

The reiteration of the teachers' commitment and motivation in the face of the imposed challenges, the need for adaptation and resilience and a change in perspective in the self-image and perception of social appreciation in relation to teaching work stand out.

Keywords: Elementary school; Qualitative research; Teaching; Working conditions; Work-life balance.

Resumo

Objetivo

A pandemia da COVID-19 acarretou isolamento social e fechamento das escolas como medidas para conter sua propagação. Fundamentado na fenomenologia, o presente estudo objetivou conhecer e compreender os sentidos e significados que 10 professoras, de Ensino Fundamental, atribuíram ao seu trabalho em meio à pandemia da COVID-19.

Método

Encontros dialógicos foram realizados com cada participante, gerando Narrativas Compreensivas.

Resultados

Os resultados foram organizados em cinco elementos significativos: (a) realização de um sonho de infância decorrente da influência de pessoas significativas; (b) docência como um ato de amor e de transformação social; (c) busca contínua por espaço e reconhecimento social, (d) pandemia como desequilíbrio de vida e profissão e (e) professores digitais como uma nova realidade.

Conclusão

Destaca-se a reiteração do compromisso, e a motivação das professoras, frente aos desafios impostos e as necessidades de adaptação e resiliência, assim como uma mudança de perspectiva na autoimagem e percepção da valorização social em relação ao trabalho docente.

Palavras-chave: *Ensino fundamental; Pesquisa qualitativa; Ensino; Condições de trabalho; Equilíbrio trabalho-vida.*

As basic education plays an essential role in the process of social formation, it is necessary to reflect on the teaching work, contemplating the perception of teachers regarding themselves and their work, in addition to their teaching skills and knowledge (Nova, 2011). The senses and meanings of the work in this context is an important issue, one that has been approached from various perspectives based on their argumentative emphasis and conceptual or methodological affiliation. The definition of the Meaning of Work group stands out, conceives it as a set of beliefs, definitions and values attributed by people (Caballero-Lozada & Adarve-Sayin, 2015). There are also approaches that are more closely tied to Human Resource models, others that take a critical view of the capitalist system that causes the hollowing out of work, and a wide variety of popular literature ranging from philosophy to self-help (Bendassolli & Tateo, 2018).

Sense of Work is traditionally understood as a subjective dimension that is more connected to an individual's perceptions and affections about their work. Furthermore, the Meaning of Work would be based on socially shared conceptions and, as such, would be more stable than the senses, although it would still be subject to historical change. A third element referred to by Bendassolli and Gondim (2014) is the psychological function of work, which is thought to serve as a mediator between the other two elements, providing more objectivity to one's personal history (senses), as well as greater personality toward collective identity (meaning).

As time passes and changes occur in the world of work, individuals may perceive work and the academic profession differently because of a change in perception of senses and meanings. Typically, the changes are generated by the influence of the social, political, economic, or organizational context, as well as through the interaction with the activity itself (Caraballo, 2017). Thus, the teaching work undergoes a kind of metamorphosis, enhancing previously known aspects of the educational task, which were later modified, such as the location, the environment, and the workload, as well as the relationships and feelings of satisfaction and motivation towards it (Caraballo, 2016).

Hanna et al. (2019) identified that the teacher's identity is a multidimensional concept developed through teaching practice and that includes six components: (a) the teacher's self-image, (b) the motivation to practice teaching, (c) the teacher's commitment and dedication to the profession, (d) his self-efficacy in performing his duties, (e) an understanding of his responsibilities, and (f) his job satisfaction. Lavy and Naama-Ghanayim (2020) found that teachers' genuine interest in their students is related to the development of their self-esteem and their bond with the school. The sense of work would be emphasized in this kind of teaching care.

Since the Meaning of Work is understood as a socio-historical phenomenon of an objective nature, it is intrinsically linked to the personal meaning that the individual attributes from his experiences, built through the appropriation of social meanings associated with the reasons that lead him to the execution of his activities. Work is a social activity in which man seeks to modify his reality to meet his needs (Pessoa & Leonardo, 2017; Petri et al., 2018;). These processes occur in a historical, social environment and, in the case of this study, within the context of a pandemic that has imposed very peculiar circumstances.

Since the beginning of 2020, humanity has faced a major public health challenge in dealing with a disease that has spread rapidly around the world and is caused by a new type of coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, called COVID-19 (Anand et al., 2020). This situation forged important changes in the social, economic, and labor structure and configuration (Demenech et al., 2020), as well as the adoption of measures to contain the spread of the virus, such as social isolation and mandatory population confinement (Turrini et al., 2020).

Therefore, adapting to teaching work has been a significant challenge in dealing with uncertainty (Gates et al., 2020). In addition to the breakdown in the educational system, teaching practice itself was abruptly impacted, ranging from the academic and emotional support of students (Ramos-Huenteo et al., 2020) to the development of skills related to technologies and digital platforms to maintain contact and proximity with students and instruct them remotely (Sandoval, 2020). A teacher's ability to reassess situations of adversity is directly related to resilience (Clarà, 2017), which indicates the importance of understanding the meaning of work.

Due to the recent changes in the work environment resulting from the COVID-19 epidemic, it is highly relevant to gain a global understanding of people's lives within the context in which the phenomenon of this study is generated (Fernández, 2017). As described by Kim and Asbury (2020), Elementary School teachers experienced a sudden loss of references and searched for alternatives to move forward consequently. The purpose of this study was to understand the senses Elementary School teachers attributed to their work during the COVID-19 pandemic. The reasons for choosing this profession were its strong association with the role of caring exercised by women, the sudden and abrupt changes caused by the pandemic, and the arrangement of being the lowest-paid category of teachers.

Method

Based on the descriptive phenomenological method, this study examined the experiences Elementary School teachers attributed to their work during and after the COVID-19 pandemic due to social distancing. In phenomenological research, the purpose is to provide a detailed description and subjective understanding of lived experiences, and to assume that knowledge emerges from immersion in intersubjectivity (Brisola et al., 2017).

The researchers are personally involved in the process, in the search for patterns and meanings based on their own experiences with the studied phenomenon, following a six-phase process: (a) initial engagement: motivation for understanding the knowledge of the phenomenon to be studied (b) immersion: comprises immersion in one's own experience and in the experience of the participants, (c) incubation: moving away from the theme to increase the tacit dimension as a way for researchers to access new meanings, (d) enlightenment: a moment in which knowledge and tacit intuition bring something new that was beyond consciousness, (e) explanation: search for the uniqueness of each experience and, (f) creative synthesis: final stage of the method

in which researchers carry out a comprehensive expression of the studied phenomenon (Brisola & Cury, 2016).

Participants

The study was carried out with ten Elementary School teachers, aged between 32 and 62 years ($M = 44.9$), experience time between 3 and 35 years ($M = 15.5$), married (80%), with children (70%), who worked in public and private schools in the states of São Paulo (60%) and Minas Gerais (40%). As three of them worked in more than one school, the experiences included seventeen contexts, ten referring to the public school (59%) and seven to the private school (41%). In addition to graduation, the majority (90%) had 1 to 3 postgraduate courses and had an average weekly workload of 26 hours. The number of students per teacher ranged from 13 to 1000 ($M = 143$). However the average was significantly impacted due to the experience of two participants (Skye and Guerreira), who taught physical education and dance respectively, and had a high number of students, according to Table 1.

Researchers identified participants through their contact networks and by using the snowball method (Biernack & Waldorf, 1981), in the first half of July 2020. Of the sixteen participants contacted, ten were included because they met the inclusion criteria: (a) minimum experience of three years in teaching and (b) be working as an Elementary School teacher at the time of the research.

Table 1
Participants' characteristics

Pseudonym	Age	School types	n^*	State	Experience**	Students
Thankful	57	Public	1	SP	27	32
Warrior	32	Private	1	SP	4,5	196
Skye	38	Public and Private	6	SP	11	1000
Kiara	57	Public	1	MG	27	45
Lucy	48	Private	1	SP	16	34
Love	62	Private	1	MG	35	13
Butterfly	42	Public	1	SP	10	23
Velma	43	Private	2	MG	14	38
Hope	34	Public	1	SP	8	32
Unexpected	36	Public and Private	2	SP	3	16

Note: *Number of schools; **Teaching experience in years.

Instruments

The methodological resource used in the present study was Comprehensive Narratives. The resource comprises a dialogical encounter between researcher and participant, based on a guiding question, permeated by an atmosphere of empathy and openness. The encounters are purposely not recorded. Immediately after each meeting, individual narratives are elaborated, whose focus is to capture the experiences and meanings attributed to the study phenomenon. The immediate impressions, feelings and thoughts that emerged from the encounter are written (Brisola et al., 2017). It is the experiences and their meanings that are of primary importance, because when writing them, the researcher responsible for the meetings intentionally seeks to approach the participant's world and their lived experience (Brisola & Cury, 2016).

As the process of constructing narratives is solitary, reading is recommended for a select and respectful group, which functions as a validity check and as a listening channel for impressions of the dialogical encounter between participant and researcher experienced (Brisola & Cury, 2016). It is through this process that significant elements of the participants' experiences are identified and a Synthesis Narrative is elaborated, forming the essential structure of the phenomenon (Bezerra & Cury, 2020). This synthesis seeks to apprehend the common experiences of the group. The final stage of the investigation encompasses the discussion in light of other studies.

This study modified the CoreQ protocol to meet the recommendations of the protocol (Tong et al., 2007), which increased the stage at which each participant's individual narrative was presented to each participant, enabling them to read and validate the information contained in the written narratives about themselves. This strategy does not aim at a mere rational checking of data, but is based on the concept that meaning is co-created in the intersubjective relationship. Therefore, the goal is to give the participant an even greater sense of involvement in the process, completely distancing themselves from the concept of being a research subject.

Procedures

Following approval by the Ethics Committee at Pontifical Catholic University of Campinas for human research (CAAE 24707019.5.0000.5481, protocol 4.035.124), the researchers contacted sixteen potential participants via email or WhatsApp, six of whom did not fully meet the eligibility criteria and were excluded from the study. The initial orientations and signing of the Free and Informed Consent Form were conducted virtually, followed by video conferences held through meeting platforms.

The dialogic encounters were held between July and August 2020, with an average duration of one hour and twenty-five minutes. The guiding question was, "What is the meaning of work to you?" as part of a research project that aims to investigate the senses and meanings of work in various contexts. As participants shared their experiences, new questions were asked in order to gain a deeper understanding of these experiences in the context of the pandemic. In conclusion, the participants were asked to define their pseudonym, "something or someone that represents you in relation to this topic", as well as explore the meaning of their choice.

Immediately following each encounter, the researcher elaborated a comprehensive narrative, translating the experiences of the participants and inserting representative phrases of those experiences. Upon completion of the dialogical encounters in August 2020, the individual narratives were discussed with the research group, clarifying key elements of participants' experiences and providing a basis for the Synthesis Narrative, containing the essential structure of the phenomenon.

After approximately one month of holding the dialogical encounter with the participants, in September 2020, the validation stage of the comprehensive narratives was carried out, synchronously or asynchronously, with nine participants (90%). Synchronous meetings (seven participants) lasted an average of 30 minutes. After reading her elaborate narrative, each teacher confirmed, adjusted or complemented any aspect she considered necessary. It was possible to observe the non-verbal reactions to each passage, expressed in voice modulation, emotion and specific comments, which were added to the Narrative Synthesis, that guided the discussion of the results.

Two teachers participated asynchronously, using WhatsApp, and one of them was unable to attend. A total of three comprehensive narratives were fully validated by the participants, and

the remaining were revised based on details such as the name of the platform for classes, the number of days on duty, some character in the narrative, or the inclusion of a comment regarding the changes to the school's context.

The researcher provided feedback on the main findings of the study during synchronous meetings. It was presented as an opportunity for the asynchronous validations, but there were no participants available. After the feedback phase, the narrative synthesis, composed of the ten narratives about the meaning of the work attributed to fundamental education teachers, was discussed in light of other research results.

Results

During the course of this study, five key axes of the meaning of work phenomenon were identified, which formed the basis for the study's structure: (a) fulfillment of a childhood dream resulting from the influence of significant people; (b) teaching as an act of love and social transformation; (c) continuous search for space and of social recognition; (d) pandemic as an imbalance in life and profession; and (e) digital teachers as a new reality. The mottos that represent the experiences of the participants provide a global view of the phenomenon (Table 2), and they will be discussed next, along with the axes outlined above.

Table 2
Participants' mottos

Pseudonym	Motto
Thankful	A story of overcoming
Warrior	Resistance and struggle in the construction of teaching
Skye	If you never try, you'll never know
Kiara	Nobody gets left behind
Lucy	Every change generates anxiety, but also adaptation
Love	Everything I do is body and soul
Butterfly	A story of discovery
Velma	Where are the families?
Hope	A tireless quest
Unexpected	A chance to meet and learn

Fulfillment of a childhood dream resulting from the influence of significant people

Teaching represents the realization of a childhood dream, influenced by living with family members or significant others who already exercised the profession or who considered education as a relevant value for life. Experiences were expressed in which they perceived themselves as natural teachers, remote memories of playing as teachers and admiration and/or affection for their schools or masters.

Since she was a child, she played being a teacher, making charcoal drawings on the walls of her house. His admiration for the school and for the teaching career dates back to his childhood, having his mother as the main influence. She remembers that, when she returned from her job as a house cleaner, she brought books so that her seven children would develop an interest in reading. (Grateful) Love remembers that her professional choice goes back to her childhood, when she was approximately seven years old. When living with her paternal cousin, a teacher she admired for her competence

and beauty, she was enchanted. She has understood herself as a teacher since the beginning of her life: I think I was born a teacher. (Love)

(...) work is very important in my life! It has great meaning... I surrender and it guides my life. She recalls that her interest in being a teacher dates back to her childhood, when she played at teaching her cousins. (Butterfly)

Act of love and social transformation

Participants view their profession as a life mission. There was a sense of love, pride, and ethical duty related to work. They believe that children's transformation and the context in which they live are affected by their work, constituting one of the factors that contribute to awareness, responsibility, and motivation for work. Various motivation factors include receiving affection and recognition from students, monitoring their development across different stages of life, influencing and transforming the context and various actors, such as management, peers, parents, and children.

It is beautiful to follow how she (the child) enters and leaves! Priceless!. (Kiara)

The main value is to accompany the child's transformation and be able to contribute to this process (...) the child's transformation is magical! It is a daily achievement to see the literacy process, awaken the child's interest and know that I could contribute to this transformation. (Unexpected)

(...) work is very important in my life! It has great meaning... I surrender and it guides my life... I am fulfilling a desire to transform the social stereotype of public schools. (Butterfly)

Continuous search for space and of social recognition

Work, as a factor in the constitution of identity and low social recognition, emerged as a central element, either symbolically (social appreciation) or concretely (remuneration and reward). Despite the understanding and pride of the importance of the profession as a trainer of other professions, it is not balanced by the perception of recognition and reward for the profession. Being a teacher is experienced as a continuous search (or struggle) for less stressful work, of greater value and respect as a professional category, which allows freedom of expression and expanded participation opportunities.

It is a profession that prepares other professions and that should be recognized and adequately remunerated. (Love)

(...) an act of resistance (...) there is disrespect for teaching. It is discredited. There is a patrol of parents and the view that teachers work in this profession because they had no choice, no other option... I would like (teachers) to be valued in the same way as health professionals, especially those on the front line. (Warrior)

Every beginning of the year she 'needs to prove her worth' to parents. (Velma)

Pandemic as an imbalance of life and profession

The teachers reported experiences of anxiety, anguish, guilt, fear and depression, interspersed with tiredness and stress. The new reality began to contemplate a higher workload, as it included planning classes or guided activities, remote monitoring of students, recording classes and audios, and contact with students and family members, when possible. Some teachers were fully available to the students, systematically looking at their cell phones. Fatigue and stress manifested

themselves as a result of long working hours, insufficient work resources, need to adapt to digital tools and lack of social contact with students.

Hope keeps an eye on her cell phone continuously and wonders what the limit is. Thinking about her students, she does and redoes her activities to have the best reach to the students. (Hope)

(...) 'I'm working twice as hard!'... Sometimes she deals with different directives from the schools, sometimes with their absence: it's a nobody's land. (Sky)

Unexpectedly experiences mixed feelings. At the same time that she feels debited to the students', she understands that it is also a learning moment... she would like to give more, to do more. This reality was not designed for online classes. I take the children's hand to help write, do the cursive, but how am I going to do it from a distance?. (Unexpected)

(...) faced some situations such as internet outages, slow access and processing, and incompatible equipment to the new demand: 'do you know those colored ice cubes that we buy? I had to put them upon my laptop because the equipment got hot'. (Lucy)

Feelings of anxiety, anguish, guilt, fear and depression were triggered as a result of the fear of contamination, low control over one's own work, the impotence to fully exercise the role of teacher, the increasing evasion and lack of information about students, or even the perception of carelessness of other teachers regarding the care and educational process.

(...) as long as there is no control there is no way back! They're small kids! How am I going to be able to separate them? How am I going to get distancing? I have a student who shares a room with five people and who doesn't have hygiene habits... We will have to do two years in one! I try to do my best and do everything in my power. (Kiara)

(...) where is the family? I feel sadness for the child who has no structure. People say that this only happens in public schools, but it is not true!. (Velma)

(...) 'I was emotionally sick. I do psychotherapy, acupuncture. I have a family, grandchildren... it scares me so much! It is very distressing'. She feels depressed and finds it more harrowing to go back to face-to-face work than to stay at home. (Grateful)

The implications of the professional role can be observed in addition to the implications in other aspects of the participants' lives. They were all women, most of whom were married and had children of school age. This double mother-teacher reality implied a reorganization of the routine and the adoption of new strategies to deal with the double journey, such as adapting the environment with digital resources for work and help from relatives or other teachers for educational monitoring of their own children. The absence of division of domestic and parental responsibilities was present, including a report of divorce in the period.

The daily overload and low support of the spouse was accentuated in this context, implying their separation: if I have to take care of everything alone, I prefer to be alone. Why is his profession more important?. (Sky)

To manage her remote work situation, in which she shares space and time with her husband and son, she hired her cousin to accompany her son while she was working, as well as her husband. (Unexpected)

Because of the lack of adequate resources and some demands from parents, he decided to buy new equipment, with his own resources. In addition, he needed to invest in a second laptop to provide study conditions for his daughters, aged 9 and 16. (Lucy)

Additionally, it was possible to understand the anguish facing the dilemma experienced in relation to the roles. As teachers, if there were a definition of returning to classes in person, they would comply with the recommendations, however, as mothers they would choose to leave their respective children at home.

Digital teachers as a new reality

With the pandemic, teachers began to experience a new reality resulting from the massive use of digital resources. Planning of guided activities, conducting synchronous classes through digital platforms, recording classes and audios, monitoring students or even contacting parents remotely, have become routine.

Acting through digital resources was experienced as a stressful factor for part of the participants, due to the absence and/or difficulty in using technological resources, the age group of the children, and the lack of equipment for the students or even evasion, generating overload and emotional wear. On the other hand, part of the participants discovered that technology can be an ally in the teaching-learning process and decided to keep it when returning face-to-face.

She prepares activities, audios, recordings and study guides to be sent to the School Administration, responsible for the interface between parents, students and teachers. She feels overwhelmed by the increased volume of activities and the difficulty of dealing with technology (...) 'I'm learning to record videos. I take a long time to record the classes and think of something different and fun for the students'. (Grateful)

From the initial feeling of not having anything to do, she began to discover many possibilities (...) she has discovered countless possibilities and advantages, which she intends to maintain when in-person classes return. By appreciating learning and self-development, she took the opportunity to invest her time (and in some cases money, when possible) in improvement courses, something she considers essential for professional practice. (Butterfly)

With the need for social distancing and redirection to remote classes, the structural and social differences between public and private schools have become exponential in terms of their ability and agility to adapt to the moment, mobilization of strategies and resources to make remote classes viable, guidance and partnership with parents, students, teachers and the effective feasibility of remote teaching.

Discussion

The purpose of this study is to understand the meanings that fundamental education teachers attribute to their work amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The results were able to demonstrate that, for these teachers, it meant realizing a childhood dream, a calling, vocation, or mission in their life, involving love, joy, pride, and ethical commitment. These teachers, it meant realizing a childhood dream, a calling, vocation, or mission in their life, involving love, joy, pride, and ethical commitment to student development and context. Furthermore, it is a form of subsistence or act of resistance in the face of challenging working conditions and lack of recognition on the part of society. These elements indicate the psychological function that work has and that acts as a mediator between personal senses and social meanings, according to Bendassolli and Gondim (2014), in addition to the concrete and contextual aspects of career and professional performance.

Work is an activity that requires different perceptions to be explained, as it represents different meanings, depending on the activity carried out and the interactions it generates. Taking into account the social aspect to which it refers and determining how individuals structure their lives, it plays an important function in the understanding of organizational life and how people make it meaningful from their work context. The association between work and the benefits it brings reinforces the study of its meaning (Petri et al., 2018).

For the teaching activity, the meaning of work is rewarding and it was found that this profession is seen as a service that the teacher provides to his students uninterruptedly, in a dedication of 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Even so, it was found that the evaluation of work experience is positive, coinciding with a common tendency in the literature on the subject, according to studies by the Meaning of Work initiative (Caballero-Lozada & Adarve-Sayin, 2015).

The meaning of work undergoes multiple transformations, from the point of view of production (in the case of the present study, monitoring students) and the use of information and communication technologies. Studying it, in the midst of the pandemic, allowed us to understand how working conditions became more precarious, despite its importance in social terms. Such tensions, which represent a specific area of knowledge due to its multidisciplinary character and the different perspectives for its approach, are perceptible in the mottos of the participants, which refer to resilience in the form of overcoming and resistance, according to Clarà (2017).

The support for students and families, expressed in the concerns of Velma, Love, Hope and Kiara, is also evident and consistent with Ramos-Huenteo et al. (2020). The mottos of Skye, Lucy, Butterfly and Unexpected are aligned with the findings of Gates et al. (2020) and Sandoval (2020) especially regarding of anguish facing the unknown and the need for new learning.

In accordance with the studies by Pessoa and Leonardo (2017), the teaching activity is simultaneously experienced as pleasurable, arduous and emotionally draining. Because it is eminently social, the suppression of face-to-face relationships with students, peers, family members in the midst of the pandemic brought anguish and concern to teachers, as observed in the study by Kim and Asbury (2020). Although the sense of subsistence of the profession was relevant to the participants, it was not a priority. The child's development and transformation of their context, transformation of the teacher's social identity or even the public school were the points of view most recurrently mentioned.

It is difficult to escape speculation about COVID-19's impact, because this global pandemic has been configured as a crisis that has affected people across different organizational areas, including the school. The pandemic triggered a situation that threatened social, economic and health systems at a global level and, in this scenario, information and false news proliferated that increased uncertainty in the world of work as a whole (García-Marín, 2020).

During times of pandemic, teachers' work activities have generated psychosocial risk factors, in part due to new socio-historical conditions that place teaching as one of the most stressful careers on the planet. The main problems in the educational sector are linked to work overload, deficient material resources, new pedagogical demands generated by telework, overload and increased imbalance between professional and personal life. Studies on working conditions in basic education that analyze psychosocial risk factors in "normal" times have been more focused on teacher stress and burnout.

Considering this new reality, it is imperative to observe the individual context of teachers, from the perspective of prevention and promotion of physical and mental health (Vialart, 2020). The study carried out by Gates et al. (2020), reflects on how to cope with pain and restrictions during COVID-19, and explores how teachers' sense of belonging has been affected by stay-at-home guidelines. For this reason, alternatives such as building a community with other educators have been sought, which could represent a strategy to reduce the feeling of isolation that basic education teachers may be experiencing.

The change in the interaction between professors and students has evidenced the contingent need regarding the change in the technological infrastructure and in the training of

professors for distance work. As a result, teacher preparation for good technology management, social ties and emotional management are essential (Ramos-Huenteo et al., 2020).

Just as in the study by Kim and Asbury (2020), there was a strong perception that the pandemic gave greater visibility to broad, complex problems that have always existed, even if often hidden. The pandemic highlighted the concern for students in a situation of social vulnerability, which generated intense anxiety and sadness in teachers. The effort to find children at any cost, keep them active, provide emotional support and avoid evasion were relevant findings in this study. This kind of attitude is evident in Kiara's motto: "no one is left behind".

The social differences experienced by public and private school teachers have become extreme in the face of the advent of the pandemic, especially regarding access to technological resources, family support and the role of the school in the child's life and educational process. Consistent with the data presented by Lavy and Naama-Ghanayim (2020), all participants had concerns about not only the learning process, but also especially regarding the emotional state of children.

In times of COVID-19, it becomes even more necessary to identify how changes in emotional coping are perceived to help teachers maintain their physical and psychological well-being, maintain their autonomy and affinity with the work competence that teaching work requires. In this context, therefore, intervention proposals must be directed towards intentional activities adequate to satisfy basic psychological needs, such as autonomy, competence and affinity with tasks, taking into account the life restrictions adopted before the crisis (Cantarero et al., 2021 2020).

The drastic change in format highlighted gaps in teachers' digital skills and experience in using digital tools. If the pandemic brought adaptation challenges, on the other hand it also provided discoveries. In accordance with the findings of Kim and Asbury (2020), after the initial shock, most participants discovered positive points regarding the possibilities that technology can provide, both in interaction with students and parents, and in the teaching-learning process. Without any prior preparation, teachers had to divest themselves of the usual face-to-face format and reinvent themselves in the virtual sphere (Dvir & Schatz-Oppenheimer, 2020).

Likewise, the social recognition of the profession in the midst of the pandemic has taken on a new dimension. The much-desired appreciation became more present in the form of recognition from parents, children and the media in general. It was possible to find evidence of building a stronger level of trust between parents and teachers, as observed by Kim and Asbury (2020). The change in the social image expressed by Warrior, who states that they started to be seen as "fairies instead of witches", clearly reflects the transformation experienced by Elementary School teachers.

The results found in the present study can be analyzed from the characteristics described by Hanna et al. (2019). As a result, the teacher's self-image may have changed or be in the process of changing, depending on the perception of the community regarding the importance of their teaching. When suddenly having to take on a much broader role in relation to the education, care and attention of their own children, families seem to have rethought their points of view. This dynamic is also consistent with that described by Caraballo (2017).

Thus, faced with the need to react to an imposed reality and transform adversity, according to Pessoa and Leonardo (2017), teachers needed to reinvent themselves and find new ways of acting. Even though the pandemic amplified the level of tension and strain, the motivation of the participants was evident, arising from their commitment to work. The sense of self-efficacy was put to the test, as well as the understanding of one's own tasks and roles (Hanna et al., 2019).

Nandy et al. (2021) consider the need for educational institutions to identify the challenges they face during the pandemic, to predict what challenges will follow, to face the socio-psychological damage caused in this period, as well as to generate post-COVID-19 teaching practices. This proactive action will make it easier for educational organizations in general and teachers in particular to design the resilient strategy that will allow them to adapt to the so-called “new normal”.

Studies by Prado-Gascó et al. (2020) who analyzed the psychosocial risk factors of teachers in schools in Spain and Mexico indicated different results depending on the time of data collection. The coronavirus crisis was at its peak in Spain, while in Mexico, it was at an early stage. The encounters, in the case of this study, took place at a time of severe restrictions, closer to the Spanish reality.

Final Considerations

It was possible to verify that traditional elements observed in the literature about the meaning of teaching work remained present, such as the vocational aspect, the search for social transformation through Education and professional recognition. However, the COVID-19 pandemic brought new challenges with regard to the operational factors of the profession, especially taking into account the profile of students, children and families. This sudden change in routine also aggravated the fragile balance between these teachers' personal and professional lives.

Field data for this research were produced in Brazil, during the peak period of the first wave of the disease. As no significant changes were found in the sense of work for teachers in the midst of the pandemic, but relevant experiences regarding psychosocial risk factors, it is suggested that studies be carried out as a way of greater understanding and intervention in health, preventing the triggering of burnout and possible associated repercussions.

This study has, as a limitation, the focus on the southeast region of Brazil and, therefore, it is suggested to investigate the reality of other locations and their specificities. Among the main potentialities, the aim of the project focuses on analyzing aspects inherent to the senses identified by basic education teachers, in addition to utilizing a methodology that gives voice to the aforementioned teachers, especially in times of isolation, so that their subjectivity cannot be silenced.

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Contributors

J. C. C. MESSIAS contributed to the conception and design of this study, text writing, analysis and approving the final version of the article. M. O. ROCHA was responsible for the field data, text writing, analysis and approving the final version of the article. N. P. C. ZAZUETA contributed to text writing, analysis and approving the final version of the article.