

Challenges of Families in Adapting Early Childhood Education During the Covid-19 Pandemic: Experience Report

Desafios das Famílias na Adaptação da Educação Infantil a Distância Durante a Pandemia de Covid-19: Relato de Experiência

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Abstract

The work aims to describe the challenges of families in adapting Remote Education to early childhood education during the initial context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Methodology: Reflective experience report based on national education laws and Viktor Frankl's philosophical and existentialist bias. For discussion, three categories were configured: 1) Difficulties presented in the first remote classes; 2) Questioning children's learning through Remote Education and 3) Prioritizing mental health during isolation. Conclusion: Future models of distance education should consider the socioeconomic and family context of the population, develop better tools that include a playful and appropriate education for each age group, ensure that teachers are updated on technological models on a permanent basis. It is suggested to conduct research on the level of learning of children in the Remote Education modality and to know the experiences of teachers in the professional adaptation of this model.

Keywords: Distance education. Educational politics. Child education. Social isolation. COVID-19 pandemic.



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Desafios das Famílias na Adaptação da Educação Infantil a Distância Durante a Pandemia de Covid-19: Relato de Experiência

Resumo

O estudo objetiva descrever a experiência e desafios de famílias na adaptação do Ensino Remoto para a educação infantil no contexto inicial da pandemia de COVID-19. Metodologia: Relato de experiência reflexivo fundamentado nas leis nacionais de educação e no viés filosófico e existencialista de Viktor Frankl. Para discussão se configuraram três categorias: 1) Dificuldades apresentadas nas primeiras aulas remotas; 2) Questionando o aprendizado das crianças através do Ensino Remoto e 3) Priorizando a saúde mental durante o isolamento. Conclusão: Os futuros modelos de educação a distância devem considerar o contexto socioeconômico e familiar da população, desenvolver melhores ferramentas que incluam um ensino lúdico e adequado para cada faixa etária e garantir que os professores sejam atualizados nos modelos tecnológicos de forma permanente. Sugere-se a realização de pesquisas sobre o nível de aprendizagem das crianças na modalidade Ensino Remoto e conhecer as experiências dos professores na adaptação profissional deste modelo.

Palavras-chave: Educação a distância. Política educacional. Educação Infantil. Isolamento social. Pandemia de COVID-19.

1. Introduction

Social isolation, chosen in most countries in the world as a way to combat the COVID-19 pandemic¹, has had unfavorable repercussions for health, economics, politics and education of these nations. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), most governments have temporarily closed educational institutions, impacting more than 90% of the world's student population, and are supporting countries to facilitate continuing education for all, through distance education (UNESCO, 2020a).

In Brazil, as a result of social isolation, classes have been suspended, and there is uncertainty about when students will return to school. The Ministry of Education (*Ministério da Educação - MEC*), through Ordinance No. 343 (BRAZIL, 2020a), provided for the replacement of in-class learning with digital media classes for the duration of the new coronavirus pandemic situation, initially for a period of thirty days, extendable, depending on the guidance of the Ministry of Health and state, municipal and district health agencies.

On March 31, 2020, MEC published on its official page a list of questions and answers related to classes of public and private educational institutions as a way to clarify the main doubts, among which the first question is: The public and private basic education schools can continue with classes and activities at a distance? The answer given by MEC states that yes, they can take classes through Distance Education (*Educação à Distância - EaD*) and also specifies the modules that make up the groups of students who can participate: elementary school; high school, high school with technical vocational education; education for youth and adults, and special education, but not including early childhood education (BRASIL, 2020b).

¹ It is a type of coronavirus, which had not been identified in humans. Coronaviruses are the second leading cause of common cold after rhinovirus. The World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020, declared that COVID-19 was considered a pandemic (Medeiros, et al, 2020; PAHO, 2020). (Our translation)

In turn, the National Union of Municipal Education Directors (*União Nacional dos Dirigentes Municipais de Educação - UNDIME*), released a public note on the use of distance education, in which it clarifies the need to guarantee the right to life and public education, expresses the concern of how some education councils education are standardizing and reorganizing the school calendar using the distance learning modality, in many cases, without taking into account the reality of municipal education networks in the country (UNDIME, 2020).

In the same note, UNDIME mentions some characteristics that must be taken into account when planning distance education offerings, as a complementary or substitutive activity to in-class education: “the absence of a physical Internet network and equipment; the socioeconomic situation of the students’ families and the lack of training of professional educators in the use of these technologies”, in addition to “considering that not all students have enough autonomy in their studies that the use of distance education requires, especially the younger children”. With regard to Early Childhood Education (Preschool) and the first two years of elementary education, another type of approach to learning is necessary, since it takes place in an interactional way (UNDIME, 2020).

In order to contribute to distance education, UNESCO (2020b) published on its website a list of applications, platforms and educational resources, mostly free of charge, aiming to help parents, teachers, schools and school administrators to facilitate student learning due to the wide reach, strong user base and evidence of impact of these solutions.

Among the collaboration platforms that support live video communication is the Zoom application, which has a simple online platform for audio and video conferences, chat, and web seminars, which can be used on all mobile devices, desktop, telephone and room systems (ZOOM, 2020). It was from this tool that many schools in the city of Niterói, RJ, in April 2020 started to conduct live classes.

2. Methodology

It is a reflective experience report on the perception and personal experience in the adaptation of Distance Education for families in two classes of early childhood education and their common challenges in the initial context of the new coronavirus pandemic. The experience covered the period from March 14 to April 31, 2020 and was based on statements shared in the WhatsApp group by mothers of children from two classes at a private school in the city of Niterói, RJ, Brazil. The reflection bias of this study includes national education laws and Viktor Frankl’s philosophical and existentialist approach (FRANKL, 2015).

The testimonies described in this study received the proper authorization for disclosure by signing the Informed Consent Form (ICF), from those involved, according to the ethical premises that fit in research with human beings, as provided in Resolution 466/12 and 510/16 of the National Health Council (*Conselho Nacional de Saúde - CNS*) (BRASIL, 2012, 2016)

It is noteworthy that the experience report allows the researcher to present their experiences that can contribute with relevance to academia, science and area of activity (GIL, 2008).

3. Description of experience:

The World Health Organization (WHO), on March 11, 2020, declared that COVID-19 was considered a pandemic (PAHO, 2020). In the state of Rio de Janeiro, on Friday, March 13, 2020, public events were suspended and school holidays were decreed, as of the subsequent working day².

In this context, the experience is reported by a married mother of three children under the age of 5 (two of whom are enrolled in early childhood education), who is currently an undergraduate student, of average socioeconomic level (middle class), living in an apartment, in a residential neighborhood in the city of Niterói, Rio de Janeiro, who was unaware of the real impact that the pandemic situation would have and believed in the easy adaptation of the Distance Education modality for children during the pandemic.

During the first ten days of “holiday” in the home, in a context of social isolation, the tension due to the situation of not leaving the house began to be visible in the children’s behavior, which was susceptible to the most frequent crying and irritability, particularly the two who were already attending school. This situation was also being common for other mothers who reported different behavior in their children.

In an attempt to deal with the situation and keep the children occupied, minimizing tensions, an intensified search for various recreational activities on the internet, such as educational videos on YouTube, in addition to promoting a series of games that included cooking, washing toys, playing with play dough, having picnic in the middle of the living room, singing songs, jumping on the mattress on the floor, exercising, making huts, having movie sessions and fashion show, creating stories, reading story books, setting up a porch pool, playing “hide and seek”, jumping hand drawn hopscotch on the floor, among others. Some of these activities were filmed and shared in a group of mothers as a way to encourage them to do the same with their children, in addition to encouraging interaction with classmates.

The effort to keep children busy at home, in addition to the other daily activities of a home, such as cooking and cleaning, proved to be very draining physically and emotionally for parents. In addition to all the stress and concern that the pandemic situation was causing, the fear of leaving home, the boredom of isolation, the fear of contamination, the strictness of the “decontamination” process when arriving home, as children could not embrace their father until he was “decontaminated”, they could not see their grandparents; in short, many restrictions that were suddenly imposed.

In the week of March 23, the father’s company became more demanding, with telecommuting, scheduling daily meetings, charging time for internet connection, having to sublet at home to comply with the obligations, causing greater burden for the mother. This week, the school started sending tasks and collecting activities available on the institution’s platform.

The beginning of remote classes came in a still very uncertain context of the pandemic, causing a general concern for parents, not only being the psychological pressure, weariness and tiredness, added the feeling of taking the role of teacher at home and still paying school fees.

For parents, with restricted activities and routines having to allocate the afternoon to the activities of two children from different classes and still fully meeting the needs of a two-year-old child, it proved to be very stressful. This same situation was being experienced by families with more than two children.

In the first week of April, the school started live classes. This type of teaching was not new to the family, as the parents already had this experience and knew about the challenges of connectivity, time and an airy and quiet place for this purpose.

² Witzel suspende eventos públicos no RJ e decreta férias em escolas. (Source available in: <https://noticias.uol.com.br/cotidiano/ultimas-noticias/2020/03/13/witzel-suspende-eventos-publicos-no-rj-e-decreta-ferias-em-escolas.htm>. Access in 24 Apr. 2020)

So, this form of education for children seemed to be a form of innovation and, at the same time, a feeling that the school was at the technological level that was expected for this moment. A temporal description of the process of implementing remote education and the reactions of families are described in Figure 1.

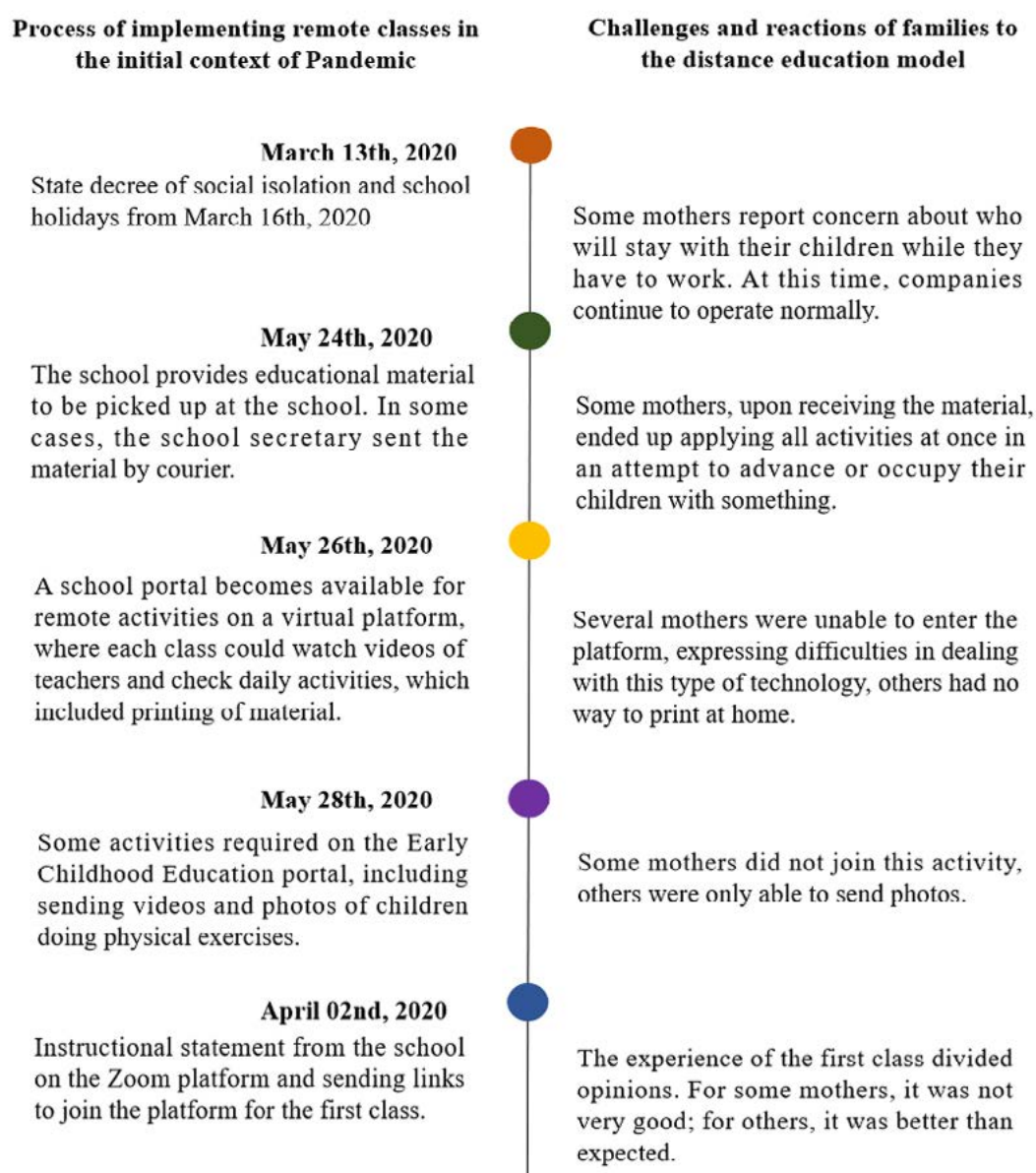


Figure 1: Timeline of the implementation of distance education activities by a private school in the city of Niterói, RJ, during the beginning of the pandemic of COVID-19 and the reactions of families to this modality

Source: The authors

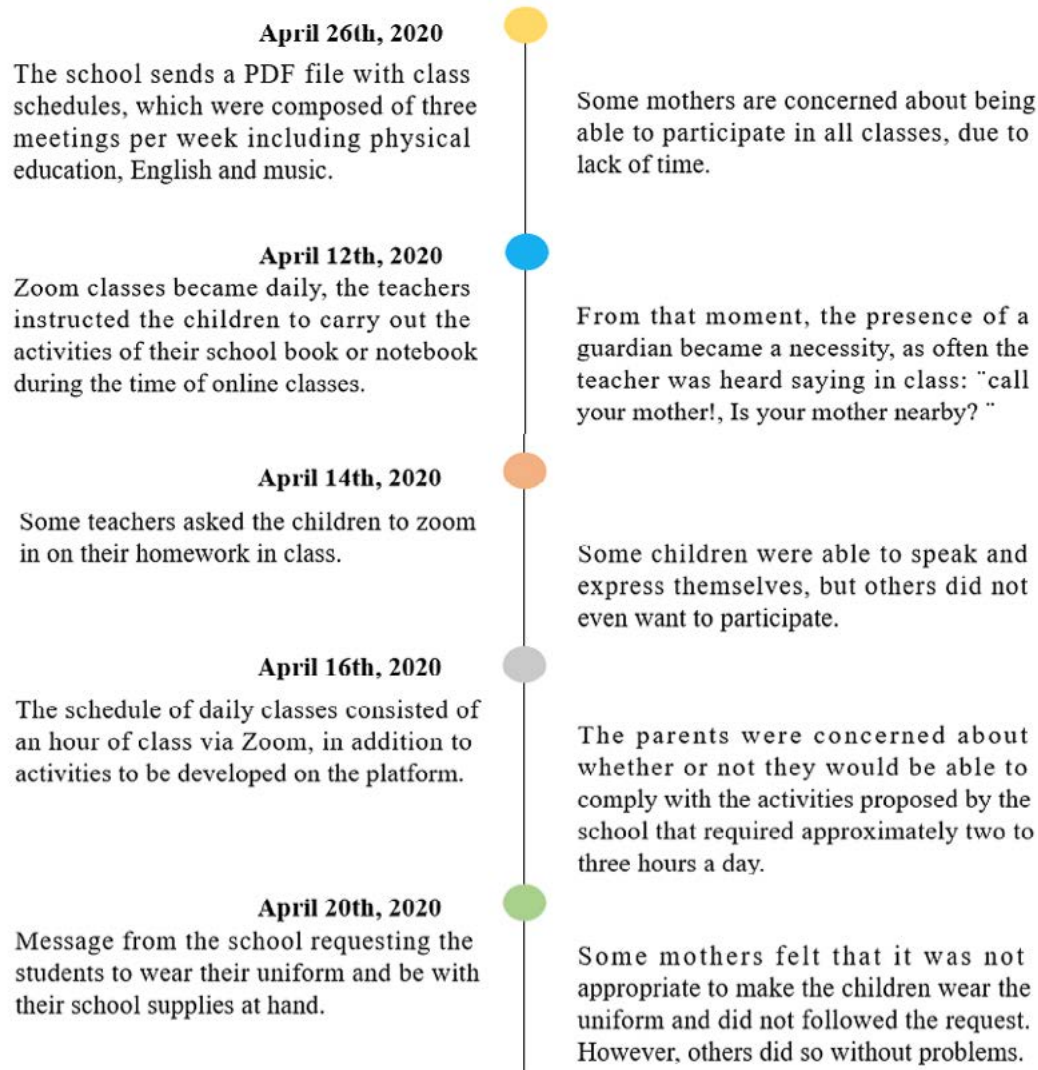
Process of implementing remote classes in the initial context of Pandemic**Challenges and reactions of families to the distance education model**

Figure 1 (Continuation): Timeline of the implementation of distance education activities by a private school in the city of Niterói, RJ, during the beginning of the pandemic of COVID-19 and the reactions of families to this modality

Source: The authors

The first live class was a stressful experience, as it deconstructed the idea that children would behave like adults: quiet, attentive, participatory and alone. The reality was different, all the audios were open, the noise was so great that it was not possible to hear the teacher, some children were shouting, while others were crying, and the concern increased when the children said they didn't want to continue in front of the computer.

Physical fatigue and psychological exhaustion to deal with the situation began to be evident, a fact that was more comprehensive since it was not limited to a specific family. The various comments in the WhatsApp group made by the mothers showed that it was a common problem. The reactions of families to this initial experience are described in Chart 1.

Chart 1: Coments of mothers via WhatsApp about the first few live classes

Situation	Mother or guardian
Difficulties to attend live class	<p><i>"The internet is the problem here"</i></p> <p><i>"Guys, today we only have one device I will have to connect only one of my children the other will miss it"</i></p> <p><i>"Guys today we have a single device at home, my daughter will not be able to attend"</i></p> <p><i>"Girls I don't know how I'm going to do today, I have two children and both will have classes at the same time ... very complicated"</i></p> <p><i>"My husband will be in a meeting at this time and he will need to use the computer, we will not be able to connect"</i></p> <p><i>"People I mixed up the time and missed the class"</i></p> <p><i>"Guys I'm out of the house, I don't even know if I can connect my daughter today"</i></p> <p><i>"Teacher today we cannot connect"</i></p> <p><i>"Sorry, my battery is dead"</i></p> <p><i>"People there is no class today, it is 03:15 pm and I'm waiting and nothing ... (another mother replies: "Girl the class was at 2:00 pm"</i></p>
About the Zoom platform	<p><i>"Guys is it the id that we use to get in"</i></p> <p><i>"People what to you hear in class, it seems that the host has left"</i></p> <p><i>"GUYS I'm not getting in, I'm using the id and it won't... It says there is another meeting"</i></p>
About the first class via Zoom	<p><i>"We are not listening";</i></p> <p><i>"The teacher's sound is off";</i></p> <p><i>"You can't hear the teacher, just everyone's noise";</i></p> <p><i>"My daughter lost interest, she doesn't want to participate, we're leaving"</i></p> <p><i>"My camera does not work";</i></p> <p><i>"My son liked it a lot and is excited for the next one"</i></p>

Source: The authors

This type of teaching was also challenging for children, who, when they realized the new way of studying, expressed their doubts and feelings about the modality, some of the comments are described in Chart 2.

Chart 2: Children's comments * on day-to-day on remote classes

Situation	Children's comments
Studying via computer	<p><i>"Mom, why do I have to stay in front of the computer",</i></p> <p><i>"I don't like to use the earbuds, mom",</i></p> <p><i>"Mom, I am not listening",</i></p> <p><i>"Mom, it is very noisy",</i></p>
Interactions with others	<p><i>"The teacher is not listening to me",</i></p> <p><i>"Why isn't the teacher speaking louder?",</i></p> <p><i>"Do my classmate see me?",</i></p> <p><i>"I do not understand",</i></p> <p><i>"I am not seeing my favorite classmate",</i></p> <p><i>"Where is my photo on the screen",</i></p> <p><i>"Mom, why do I have to do my homework now?"</i></p>
The wishes of children during class	<p><i>"Mom, can I have juice now?",</i></p> <p><i>"Mom, can I go and play?",</i></p> <p><i>"Mom, is it done yet?",</i></p> <p><i>"I don't want to be here"</i></p>

*Children of the experience reporter, age: 4 years and 11 months.

Source: The authors

On the other side was the teacher, who had to try and get around the situation and make it work, often interrupting the class to say *"Call your mother"; "Is your mother nearby?"*; which demonstrated that not all children were being supervised during classes by an adult.

In the interactions in the WhatsApp group, the parents' doubts were constant and the teacher even answered: *"Dear parents and guardians, it can take a while for me to answer some messages, because I have to record the videos, post activity on the portal, have meetings with the coordinator, participate of Zoom groups for my own children and I am still adapting to all of this"*, showing how difficult this situation was for everyone.

From the frustrations and feelings expressed by the mothers, it was possible to unveil the importance of family, physical and mental health, which parents need to maintain, as a way of helping themselves and their children.

It is noteworthy that the exchange of messages in the WhatsApp group became an emotional support bond for mothers who reported the challenges with technology, with the lack of adherence on the part of the children, the difficulty to participate together with the child in the class time and talked about the wear and tear that this model represented in the context of isolation. This virtual interaction meant that mothers did not feel alone and understood that they were not the only ones to go through this situation.

In this sense, mothers who were able to adhere to the new modality sought to support and encourage other mothers not to give up classes. Teachers have always shown themselves to be understanding and attentive in helping mothers, in addition to, on several occasions, sending messages to students with expressions of affection and longing.

From this experience report, three categories were configured to be discussed: 1) Difficulties presented in the first remote classes; 2) Questioning children's learning through Distance Education and 3) Prioritizing mental health during isolation.

4. Discussion

4.1. Difficulties presented in the first remote classes

Despite the great technological diffusion of the present day and most of the parents in this report, young adults who, in theory, would have more contact with these tools, not all were familiar with the communication systems made available by the school.

Among the difficulties presented in the adaptation process of the first classes. there are, mostly: difficulties related to technological components, such as internet failure and the absence of a technological device with a functioning camera and good sound equipment used exclusively for each child's classes. Some families with more than one child studying reported difficulty supplying devices for each child.

As a technical difficulty, there is also the lack of knowledge about the Zoom application and its resources. Prior training with parents would have prevented several problems.

Among the non-technical difficulties, there are the various intra-family situations that arose on a daily basis and prevented the child from being online during class time, the child's restless reaction to the computer and how easily they get distracted during classes.

For families with a only one child or more than two dedicated adults to help at the time of class, the experience was working, according to WhatsApp testimonials, these mothers reported that their children were able to participate and enjoy the activities carried out by the teachers via Zoom. However, even in these cases, there was a complaint related to the child's propensity to distraction, such as the case of a mother who, when questioning her child about what she learned immediately after class, got a "I forgot" as the answer.

The mothers' concern about learning was evident. One of the mothers expressed her despair when she saw her son wanting to play instead of paying attention to the class, making this mother think that her son was the problem, culminating in the child being scolded. Therefore, there is a need to understand the form of learning for this age group and the child's potential to learn better when the environment and method are appropriate. This topic will be discussed in the following topic.

4.2. Questioning children's learning through Distance Education

The Law of Directives and Bases of National Education, Law 9.394, section II (*Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação Nacional, Lei no 9.394, seção II*) considers Early Childhood Education as the stage of basic education aimed at the integral development of children up to 5 (five) years of age, in their physical, psychological, intellectual and social aspects, complementing the action of family and community (BRASIL, 1996).

According to Shudo and Sallum (2016), entering school before the 1st year of age has a positive effect on school performance, leading to significant results (p.8). For this, the Common National Curricular Base (*Base Nacional Comum Curricular - BNCC*) defines the organic set and progressive learning essential that all students must develop throughout the stages and modalities of Early Childhood Education, states that early childhood education must ensure six rights of learning and development, namely:

- **Coexist:** Enable situations in which children can play and interact with classmates, in order to learn the rules and norms of coexistence in a group.
- **Play:** In different spaces and times, with different partners (children and adults), expanding and diversifying their knowledge, their imagination, their creativity, their emotional, bodily, sensory, expressive, cognitive, social and relational experiences.
- **Participate:** Actively with children and adults through activities proposed by the educator and activities of daily life, including allowing the children themselves to participate in decisions that concern themselves and that organize the collective daily life.
- **Explore:** movements, gestures, sounds, shapes, textures, colors, words, emotions, transformations, relationships, stories, etc., through different ways, such as the arts, writing, science and technology.
- **Express:** "Express, as a dialogical, creative and sensitive subject, your needs, emotions, feelings, doubts, hypotheses, discoveries, opinions". (BRASIL, 2018 p.25; NOVA ESCOLA, 2020) (Our translation)³.

There is a need for concern about how to ensure these rights amid social isolation and through distance education. Even though children are introduced to digital technologies more and more at an earlier stage, their purpose, in general, seeks entertainment and playing (ARAUJO & RESZKA, 2016).

In this perspective, in June 2020, MEC recommended for institutions that offer distance education for Early Childhood Education, that they consider a virtual approach between teachers and families, to strengthen bonds and to try and make activities a fun task, so that children develop themselves while playing. Possible challenges of remote classes were also highlighted: that educators need to create playful and diverse environments, so that children can get involved with classes and can really learn in the time they are connected⁴.

3 "Expressar, como sujeito dialógico, criativo e sensível, suas necessidades, emoções, sentimentos, dúvidas, hipóteses, descobertas, opiniões". (BRASIL, 2018 p.25; NOVA ESCOLA, 2020)

4 Notícias/Educação e Pesquisa/2020/06/MEC orienta instituições sobre ensino durante pandemia. (Source available from: <https://www.gov.br/pt-br/noticias/educacao-e-pesquisa/2020/06/mec-orienta-instituicoes-sobre-ensino-durante-pandemia#:~:text=Para%20a%20educa%C3%A7%C3%A3o%20infantil%2C%20as,crian%C3%A7as%20pequenas%20e%20desenvolvam%20brincando>. Access in 18 Aug. 2020)

The relationship between technology and learning, after a pandemic, will possibly be different from the reality that was at the beginning of the isolation, since, according to the children's statements in this report, it presented itself as something boring and meaningless.

It warns about the importance of meeting the child's real needs, listening to them and respecting their thoughts and concerns about this form of learning, often forced and imposed, remembering that the effective learning methodology for this age group is mainly living together socially and in person. In this perspective, the following topic highlights the importance of caring for the family's mental health.

4.3. Prioritizing mental health during isolation

In the midst of a pandemic health situation, the general population suffers from anguish and concerns. It is estimated that a third of half of the exposed population may suffer some psychopathological manifestation, depending on the magnitude of the impact and the degree of vulnerability (MEDEIROS et al. 2020).

According to Santos (2020), with the pandemic many activities were interrupted, especially those involving human relations, forcing adaptations for which many people were not prepared. States of social isolation prolonged by a pandemic can bring negative psychological repercussions such as anger, confusion, post-traumatic stress, fear of infection, frustration, including particular situations due to lack of basic supplies, insufficient information, financial problems, among others.

As seen in this report, some families may go through several conflicts over the state of confinement, such as decrease in family income, uncertainty about the fulfillment of education services and payment of monthly fees, work overload mainly for mothers, altered behavior of children for confined at home and continuous distractions and apparent disinterest, in some cases, in relation to online classes, are all triggers for symptoms of psychological problems such as anxiety, stress and depression.

As a contribution to the care of children's mental health, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2020) offered the following recommendations:

1. Identify the way children may be manifesting stress, such as reactions to sleeping difficulties, enuresis (bed wetting), stomach or headaches, anxiety, isolation, lack or fear of being left alone.
2. Welcome these reactions by giving them emotional support, explaining that these reactions are normal in exceptional situations.
3. Allow the child to express their emotions and help in a patient and understanding way to learn other ways of expressing themselves.
4. Create opportunities for the child to play and relax, family activities are important.
5. Create new daily routines that include times to study, play, relax, eat and sleep depending on the age group.

As a contribution to the care of the parents' mental health, a philosopher and psychiatrist renowned in the psychology field is Dr. Viktor Frankl (1905-1997), who experienced himself a type of mandatory social isolation, being a prisoner in Nazi concentration camps during World War II. After being released, Frankl described the three psychological phases that people in isolation go through (FRANKL, 2015; MEDEIROS *et al* 2020):

- **The shock phase:** which includes desires and thoughts about the situation experienced as something that will pass quickly and will not cause any harm.
- **The Apathy and adaptation phase:** includes feelings of indifference, psychological changes, such as stress, anxiety and depression and the questioning of the value of things.

- **The phase after being released:** may bring difficulties for readaptation for some people.

Frankl said that the key to overcoming the horrors of the camps and maintaining his mental health in favorable conditions to endure each day, was to find meaning in life despite suffering, to transcend despite challenges and face difficulties positively.

Viktor Frankl said that: “one should not expect what life will offer us, but what each of us is capable of giving for life, for the world, for others and so will life itself that will question about the meaning of life” (FRANKL, 2015, p.106) (our translation). For Frankl, the meaning of life works as an engine for human existence and serves as an inner resource for coping with difficult situations, provides better psychological adjustments and brings psychological well-being and spiritual well-being (FRANKL, 2015; MEDEIROS *et al* 2020).

In this perspective, it is essential that families in isolation reflect on the meaning of life and what really matters to them, taking the opportunity to be closer, improving relationships with each other, contributing to overcoming the situation in a healthier way, especially for children.

Therefore, it is important for parents, guardians and school authorities to understand that, in fact, there are psychological processes to be overcome in social isolation, to understand that children go through one in the stage of unique development, and the parental example in the family environment is fundamental for the learning and education and that taking care of parents’ mental health, guarantees better mental health for children.

Regarding the education modality suggested by most schools in the current pandemic, it can work for many, but for others it cannot and this fact should not be a reason for despair and loss of meaning in life, learning expectations cannot exceed those of face-to-face classes, because in reality the context is different. Therefore, it is important to offer dynamic alternatives that include the family’s routine for learning the basic content, always aiming at the child’s psychological well-being.

Limitations of this study: The present report is limited to the perceptual and experiential experience of a family of average socioeconomic level (middle class) and the common challenges shared in the WhatsApp group of mothers of children from two classes in a private school in the city of Niterói, RJ, without comparisons with families of other schools or other socioeconomic realities.

Contributions of the Study to Education: This study can serve as an example for understanding what may come across families of middle class socioeconomic level in the implementation of the Distance Education modality in Brazil, in emergency situations, taking into account that if families in this context had difficulties, let alone families with incompatible income for the acquisition of technological devices and Internet access.

5. Conclusion

Future modalities of distance education should consider the socioeconomic and family context of the population, develop better tools that include a playful and appropriate education for each age group, ensure that teachers are trained and updated in technological models on a permanent basis. The good intention of the institution and the speed with which it adapted the online system is highlighted, opting for videoconferencing platforms in an attempt to continue education. It is also worth mentioning the efforts of teachers, who despite personal challenges, overcame the barriers of technology: recording videos, posting activities on the portal and providing support and reception via WhatsApp for parents.

There is no doubt about the challenges presented with Distance Education in the Remote Teaching for Early Childhood Education in the current social isolation. It is suggested to conduct research on the level of

learning of children in this modality and to know the experiences of teachers in the professional adaptation of this model. Finally, it is highlighted that prioritizing mental health in times of pandemic through the search for the meaning of life and family values, contributes to better psychological adjustments to overcome the challenges of the current situation and future emergency situations.

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