

Reformulation of Distance Education in Pandemic Times: the experience of the Special and Inclusive Education course of the CECIERJ Foundation

Reformulação da Educação a Distância em Tempos de Pandemia: a experiência do curso de Educação Especial e Inclusiva da Fundação CECIERJ

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Abstract

This article aimed to analyze the necessary changes in the extension course of Special and Inclusive Education experienced by the students and team, in the modality of e-learning, of the Foundation Center of Sciences and Education of the State of Rio de Janeiro, through new referrals, particularly in times of pandemic, through practices that rescue the relevance of the continuous training process, permeated by synchronous and asynchronous activities. As a methodology, this research was conducted by the qualitative method, through collaborative research. The data collection instrument used was a semi-structured online questionnaire developed in Google Forms and the data were processed through Content Analysis, using Bardin's categorization method. The results showed that in pandemic times of mandatory social distancing, a virtual approximation becomes the right choice for the educational process in distance. Stimulating contact between all those involved is essential to increase confidence and further motivate learning. In this sense, reflecting on a dynamic online education, without ties to structured and predictable models is predominant for the quality of the courses and especially for the adequacy to the profile and needs of the students, considering that the individual's formation is directly associated with the affective and social stimuli to which they are submitted.

Keywords: Distance education. Continuing education. Inclusion. Pandemic. Redesign.



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Resumo

AO presente artigo tem como objetivo analisar as mudanças necessárias no curso de extensão de Educação Especial e Inclusiva vivenciados pelos cursistas e equipe, na modalidade EaD, da Fundação Centro de Ciências e Educação do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, mediante novos encaminhamentos, em específico em tempos de pandemia, por meio de práticas que resgatem a relevância do processo de formação continuada, permeado por atividades síncronas e assíncronas. Como metodologia, esta pesquisa foi conduzida pelo método qualitativo, por meio da pesquisa colaborativa. O instrumento de coleta de dados utilizado foi um questionário online semiestruturado elaborado no Google Forms e os dados foram tratados através da Análise de Conteúdo, pelo método de categorização de Bardin. Os resultados apontaram que em tempos pandêmicos de distanciamento social obrigatório, a aproximação virtual passa a ser uma escolha acertada para o processo educativo em EaD. O estímulo ao contato entre todos os envolvidos é essencial para ampliar a confiança e motivar ainda mais a aprendizagem. Nesse sentido, refletir sobre uma EaD dinâmica, sem amarras a modelos estruturados e previsíveis, é preponderante para a qualidade dos cursos e principalmente para a adequação ao perfil e as necessidades dos cursistas, considerando que a formação do indivíduo está diretamente associada aos estímulos afetivos e sociais a que são submetidos.

Palavras-chave: *Educação a distância. Formação continuada. Inclusão. Pandemia. Replanejamento.*

1. Introduction

The present work aims to analyze the necessary changes in the Special and Inclusive Education extension course, through Distance Education (DE), offered by the Science and Education Center Foundation of the State of Rio de Janeiro - CECIERJ, in view of the new challenges experienced by the course participants, during the period of social distancing. In times of Coronavirus pandemic, the team responsible for the course considered it necessary to adopt a new teaching methodology, permeated by synchronous and asynchronous activities, which highlighted the relevance of the continuing education process. This measure was motivated by the low access of students to activities at the beginning of the pandemic, justified by the excess work that remote teaching required from them, since the course consisted of in-service teachers.

The CECIERJ Foundation, created under Complementary Law No. 103 of March 18, 2002, which transforms the Science Center of the State of Rio de Janeiro into the Foundation Center for Science and Higher Education at a distance of the State of Rio de Janeiro – CECIERJ Foundation, contributes to free higher education through the CEDERJ consortium, offers training/improvement courses for teachers in the DE modality, organizes science fairs and promotes scientific dissemination to the Rio de Janeiro community (RIO DE JANEIRO, 2002). What makes it relevant to verify the changes in pandemic times in order to maintain the quality and participation of course participants in this moment of remote teaching and social distance.

Throughout the entire investigative process, we are concerned with the training of teachers who will work in remote care for their students with disabilities, while we face the pandemic. Thus, this study un-

derstands knowledge from the constructivist view of Piaget (apud BECKER, 2012, p. 44), where “the essential point of our theory is that knowledge results from interactions between the subject and the object that are richer than what objects can provide for them”.

Thus, in view of this proposition, the question that guides this research follows: What changes were necessary in times of pandemic, in the Special and Inclusive Education Extension Course, in DE modality, of the CECIERJ Foundation and in what did they affect the course?

Therefore, in addition to analyzing the changes needed in times of pandemic in the aforementioned course, we focused on identifying the difficulties and facilities in the monitoring process during this period; list the changes made in relation to synchronous and asynchronous activities; highlight the use of Digital Information and Communication Technologies (DICT) as another mediating tool in teaching and learning processes; point out the contributions of the use of digital social networks in distance education.

Faced with this new context, DICT have provided new possibilities for DE, as they allow to enhance the construction of knowledge through the association of different technological tools. Also because we understand that the use of these technologies in the teaching and learning process have become tools that broadened and enhanced skills, favoring the (re)construction of knowledge in the most diverse areas of knowledge (SCHLÜNZEN *et al.*, 2003, p. 8). On the other hand, social networks, which are formed through these new technologies, and are part of the daily lives of students, due to their popularity and ease, should no longer be overlooked, especially with regard to sharing information, knowledge and common interests. Its flexibility can promote the free creation process.

For meaningful learning to take place in times of pandemic, it is essential that there is an articulation of the conception of the DE reformulation process, consistent with teaching and with the new reality, taking into account the platform, the distance and the current particular specificities of each course participant, can promote evasion and an adverse use of them in relation to the course.

For this reason, it is crucial to carry out a more elaborate reflection on the topic in question, taking into account that we are living in a time of change and, why not say, of great opportunities, not only for students but for the entire educational system in force. There is no reference in the pedagogical literature for pandemics of this magnitude and distance education, as an educational modality, presents itself today as an essential path for Education. Therefore, it involves reformulating, re-planning, textualizing, inferring and revising, seeking a more elaborate reflection on the topic under analysis.

The process of change in education is neither uniform nor easy. We will be changing little by little, at all levels and educational modalities. There is great economic inequality, access, maturity and motivation of people. Some are prepared for change, some are not. It is difficult to change acquired patterns (managerial, attitudinal) of organizations, governments, professionals and society. And most do not have access to these technological resources, which can democratize access to information. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to allow everyone access to technologies, to meaningful information and to the mediation of teachers who are effectively prepared for their innovative use. (MORAN, 2003, p. 8).

We ratify how essential it is to provide opportunities for improvement courses that are based on the theory-practice binomial, in order to promote greater reflection and criticality on the topic in question. A critical-reflective education can contribute so that learning, in the distance mode, is significant and collaborates towards an emancipatory practice in the classroom, seeking the collective and the common good, as

there is no teaching without research and research without teaching. These what-to-dos are in each other's bodies. As continuous teaching seeking, seeking. I teach because I seek, because I asked, because I ask and I ask myself. Research to verify, noticing, intervening, intervening, educating and educating myself. I search to know what I don't know yet and communicate or announce the news. (FREIRE, 2002, p. 14).

In addition to the issue of Teacher Training, it is worth emphasizing the awareness of training in favor of the theme of Special and Inclusive Education. Kassar (2014) highlights that this field is currently facing some challenges, after all, the diversity found in classrooms leads to a constant rethinking movement. School inclusion is no longer an educational option and becomes an unavoidable and indispensable component. Also, according to the author, inclusion is a bilateral process, where the school community as a whole must be involved in favor of quality education and equity.

The search for courses in the area of Special and Inclusive Education in Brazil draws the attention of researchers. In this sense, we need proposals that aim to meet the demands of the process of implementing this policy, which requires the restructuring of pedagogical practices in education. A restructuring that definitively breaks with the clinical and welfare approach and institutionalizes the planned offer, which requires a continuing education process from professionals that promotes the construction of knowledge and the accumulation of experiences, in addition to providing teachers who will work in Specialized Educational Service (SES), with students with Special Educational Needs (SEN), knowing the resources, services and accessibility strategies, as well as developing and developing adapted and adequate curricula, aimed at eliminating barriers in the schooling process.

Thus, the changes made in the Special and Inclusive Education course were intended to promote learning that involves the search and construction of knowledge, autonomy, initiative, creativity, cooperation, so that teachers act as agents of transformation of everyday school life.

Continuing education for teachers can be an interesting proposition to reflect their practices in the light of specialized technical assistance, since initial education, when it covers subjects of this nature, is still incipient. (CIANTELLI; LEITE, 2016, p. 425).

In this scenario, the improvement courses offered by higher education institutions need to follow a path, within a certain training perspective that minimizes the difficulties encountered by teachers with the information and communication technologies that were imposed on our practice in times of pandemic.

Alonso and Silva (2018, p. 501), taking advantage of this, emphasize the emerging possibilities that Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) engender in training processes. They point out that, in recent years, there has been a vertiginous expansion of the offer of distance education, with intensified use of Virtual Learning Environments (VLE). They also highlight that, in recent times, social networks have been effectively involved in learning processes or in the constitution of universes of digital cultural practices in the school's space-time and that it is from these events that it emerges in proportions that are not yet well known, a promising field of research.

Regarding the continuing education process in Special and Inclusive Education, it is important to highlight that the demand of teachers for these courses is constantly growing (BRASIL, 2014), whether in the distance education modality or in the presential modality. We also noticed this demand in our course, which is already in its third version and in all of them it had a high number of subscribers.

Chart 1: Number of applicants for the extension course in Special and Inclusive Education and number of places available.

	Number of applicants	Number of places available
2018	6896	1000
2019	1033	662
2020	6602	800

Source: Designed by the authors.

Despite experiencing the experiences of an DE course with the onset of the pandemic, it was also necessary to stop, reflect and reformulate the proposal, based on demands and peculiarities that had not been taken into account before. Finally, changes were essential in this new reality that the pandemic brought us and we sought, above all, to highlight the reformulation suffered by the aforementioned course offered by this renowned institution, the CECIERJ foundation.

2. Methodology

The analysis proposed in this research was conducted based on the qualitative method, through collaborative research. Based on Costa and Costa (2009), we understand the qualitative method as a complex data collection and analysis, aiming at general conclusions about the studied phenomenon. Collaborative research is carried out through joint action, the researcher/investigator with the researcher, through reflection and questioning of training and practice, developing the "capacities related to critical-reflective training" (HORIKAWA, 2008, p. 24). Also, according to Zanette (2017, p. 159):

The use of the qualitative method has generated several contributions to the advancement of knowledge in the dynamics of the educational process and in its structure as a whole: it reconfigures the understanding of learning, of internal and external relations in institutional instances, of the historical-cultural understanding of the requirements of an education more dignified for all and the understanding of the importance of the school institution in the humanization process.

The methodological procedure was carried out in different phases. First, we got in touch with the CECIERJ Foundation in order to obtain the authorization term for conducting the research. In possession of this authorization, we made contact by e-mail with 392 course participants of the Special and Inclusive Education course for science and agreement to participate in the research, explaining the objectives of the work through the Free and Informed Consent Term (FICT). Once this was done, the 155 course participants who readily agreed to participate responded to a semi-structured online questionnaire prepared in Google Forms, thus closing the data collection stage.

The semi-structured questionnaire, on the other hand, contained 18 open and closed questions, related to 1- the profile of the student (age, gender, segment that works and professional training), 2- questions related to the current moment experienced (difficulties, facilities and changes caused by the pandemic), 3- questions specifically related to the extension course (changes and adjustments to the course with the arrival of the pandemic).

Regarding the collected data, they were transferred to an Excel® 2010 spreadsheet, filtered and later categorized through Content Analysis, according to Bardin (2011), by the categorization method.

The term content analysis designates: a set of communication analysis techniques aimed at obtaining, by systematic procedures and objectives of description of the content of messages, indicators (quantitative or not) that allow the inference of knowledge related to production/reception conditions (inferred variables) from these messages. (BARDIN, 2011, p. 47).

The categorization process can refer to a classificatory operation of elements that constitute a group by differentiation and, later, by regrouping according to the semantics (BARDIN, 2011).

3. Results and Discussion

The course for Improvement in Special and Inclusive Education offered by the extension directorate of Fundação CECIERJ, with a workload of 180 hours in the DE modality, has its menu divided into three large blocks: 1- Introduction and Aspects of Special and Inclusive Education, 2- School Inclusion of Students with Disabilities, High Abilities and Learning Difficulties/Disorders, and 3- Course Conclusion Work. These three blocks are subdivided by weeks, which are held and open on Tuesdays.

Right at the beginning of the pandemic, we noticed that access to the classroom was reduced and, consequently, activities were not carried out as usual. As DE prioritizes in relation to the reception and mediator/student relationship, we made a more direct contact with the students through e-mail messages and the answers were always the same, all very busy with the new demands of remote learning, since most of the course participants were active professors. Concerned and certain that changes were needed, the team promptly rethought and re-planned the course, bringing more diversified activities, reducing the amount of required readings and increasing suggested readings, making the deadlines for activities more flexible, exchanging more personal and individual messages of incentives and for the first time, carrying out synchronous activities.

After re-planning, we then decided to find out from the course participants if the changes made to the course were positive. The subject was addressed in the three synchronous meetings held, but to reach the total number of course participants, we decided to send a questionnaire by email to the 392 active course participants, as synchronous meetings were not mandatory, adherence was expressive, but not full.

For discussion of the scope of this work, the 155 questionnaires filled out in August by the course participants of the 3rd edition of the Special and Inclusive Education Course were considered, which made it possible to verify the perception and considerations about the new strategies implemented as a result of the installed scenario after the COVID-19 pandemic. The changes made in the course directly affected the strategies used in the presentation of the contents, the adequacy of the activities proposed in the context of social distancing, the flexibility of deadlines, among other aspects that will be discussed below.

Regarding the profile of our sample, the study was mostly composed of women, between 30 and 50 years old, who have a specialization course and act as regent teachers in public schools, most of them elementary school, in the State of Rio de Janeiro.

The course participants positively evaluated all the changes made (146), highlighting two of them: the extension of deadlines for the delivery of activities (45) and the adoption of new didactic strategies such as lives, web conferences, videos and podcasts (24), such as we can see in the following speeches:

"I had Covid-19 and the flexibility with the delivery deadline for the activities made me stay on the course, as it was impossible to carry out the activities at the time I was infected".

"I was able to complete the pending activities".

"In this chaotic scenario, family problems [...] I would not remain on course without these changes, especially flexibility".

"I certainly wouldn't have participated in face-to-face activities at that time and managed to participate in lives/conferences on two occasions".

"All this pandemic situation and working remotely, changed the routine, mental health and time available for study".

Many course participants reported that the changes, in addition to offering different teaching strategies, generated *"humanization in the course approach", "adaptation to the current reality", "welcoming, understanding, support, encouragement, empathy" and "adaptation to the new family routine"*.

It is necessary to understand that we live in a social context in which connectivity and collaboration are part of people's lives from an early age. However, a change in the individual's routine, in which his or her life and that of their families are put at risk, exposes a set of weaknesses that even affects their cognitive process. This becomes clear when the participants in our research report cases of depression and panic syndrome due to social distancing, as well as illnesses that emerged due to social restrictions, family distancing, losses due to death, generating incalculable fear. This is a reality that, unfortunately, became evident in the pandemic period; after all, according to Salas (2020, s/p),

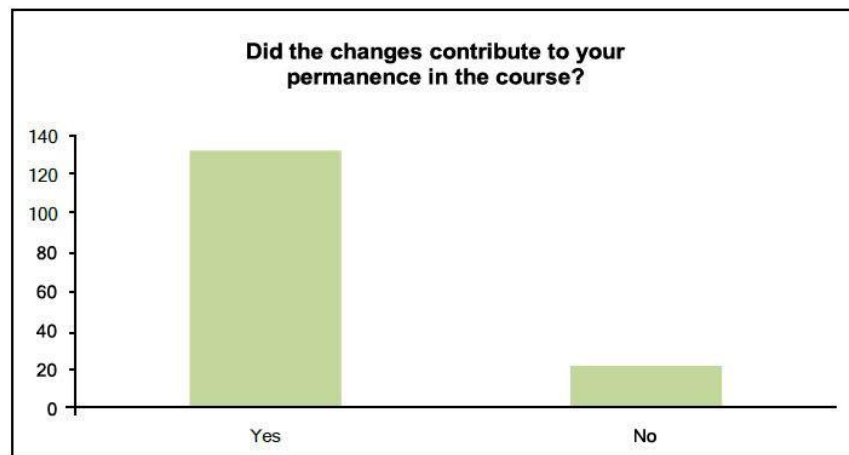
Mental health is not a challenge unique to a world in social isolation. Throughout life, it is not possible to completely escape stressful moments. However, it is possible to change the way we deal with them. Investing in self-knowledge, reflecting and rationalizing problems, and thinking about possible solutions to deal with each situation [...]. The development of socio-emotional skills is a way to have resources and strategies available to help deal with problems and difficult situations - such as the covid-19 pandemic - throughout life.

Bernardes (2020, p. 3) corroborates the matter, stating that:

For emotionally intelligent citizens to be formed, emotionally intelligent teachers are needed. In times of Coronavirus pandemic in which teachers are working in the home office, with technologies that were forced to adapt, intensifying their work, they present symptoms, fatigue, exhaustion, exhaustion, suffering and disenchantment.

Such adjustments/adjustments promoted by the changes and new strategies thought, were of great importance for them to remain active and respond to challenges in a more dynamic way, as we can see in Figure 1:

Figure 1: Question from the online questionnaire about changes made to the course – “Did the changes contribute to your permanence in the course?”



Source: Designed by the authors.

Synchronous activities, not very frequent in DE courses, seem to have offered course participants an interactivity not experienced in previous versions of this same course, and may be an indication that the balance between synchronous and asynchronous activities should be revised in courses offered at a distance. Even in distance education, it is possible to diversify learning experiences, which can even support a “positive routine” (TODOS PELA EDUCAÇÃO, 2020, p. 11).

On the other hand, they managed to remain in a training process also due to support, understanding, real-time contact with their trainers (mediators and teachers), that is, the adaptations made in the course. The sensitization of the team of mediators was a major factor, as well as affective listening, which opened a welcoming channel and strengthened not only the relational dynamics between course participants and mediators, but also adherence to the course. Freire (1979, p. 15) makes it clear that “there is no education without love [...] Those who do not love, do not understand others, do not respect them”, which justifies the search for inclusion through affection, respect and empathy in adaptations in times of social distance caused by the Coronavirus pandemic.

Corroborating with Freire, Almeida (2010, p. 70), cites that “it is essential to rescue the meaning of the human in the exercise of the teaching profession, which becomes human in praxis”, in order to provide that the interaction between teachers and students is the main factor in the teaching and learning process.

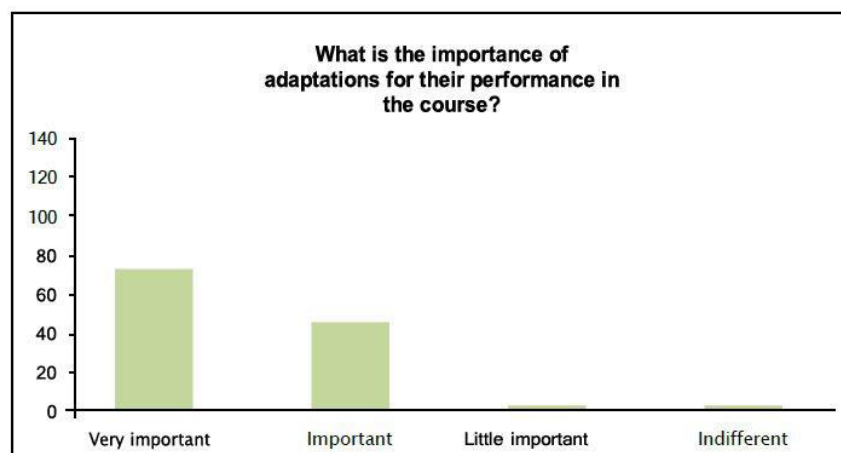
Asked about the difficulties presented during it, the answers indicated factors related to the break of routine, lack of time and change of habits in the work, social and family spheres.

“As I was taking the course during the pandemic and quarantine period, I had difficulties in reconciling study hours with all the other activities that became online as well.”.

“I’ve thought several times about quitting the course due to lack of time for me, I only continue because the course is good and I learn a lot from it”.

Finally, through a simple likert1, which took its options from “very important” to “indifferent”, we asked about the importance of the adaptations caused by the changes made in the course and obtained the following answers, shown in Figure 2:

Figure 2: Question from the online questionnaire on the importance of adaptations for the student's performance - "What is the importance of adaptations for their performance in the course?"



Source: Designed by the authors.

Observing the figure, the importance of the changes made in the course for the performance of course participants is evidenced, which leads us to think that this is one of the reasons for the higher number of passers since the first version offered in 2018 (Table 2).

Chart 2: Data on access, permanence and completion of all versions of the Special and Inclusive Education Course with the respective percentages.

	2018	2019	2020
Applicants	6896	1033	6602
Selected	1000 (100%)	662 (100%)	800 (100%)
Approved	170 (17%)	84 (13%)	289 (36%)
Failed	137 (14%)	254 (38%)	166 (21%)
Dropout	29 (3%)	21 (3%)	18 (2%)
Abandonments	664 (66%)	303 (46%)	327 (41%)

Source: Designed by the authors.

We emphasize how complicated it is to compare results between previous versions, after all, each group that took the course has different realities, at different times, but we emphasize that, according to the discourse of those surveyed, if the changes had not happened in this pandemic period, the accesses, the permanence and completions of this version could be lower. In addition, it is possible to see through the data in Table 2, that the number of those approved is higher in the latest version, as well as the number of dropouts, lower. Regarding failure, the 2020 course has a lower number than the previous one.

Finally, a new look at a previously structured DE course revealed that it is necessary to contemplate new and exceptional demands, such as the emotional welcome of students and education professionals, reinforced and synchronous communication and, at times, closer monitoring of students in the carrying out the tasks, offering support in multiple dimensions (TODOS PELA EDUCAÇÃO, 2020, p. 8).

4. Conclusion

During the course, we were guided by a general question: "What changes were necessary in times of pandemic, in the Special and Inclusive Education Extension Course, in the Distance Education modality, of the CECIERJ Foundation and in what did they affect the course?".

We went through a process that led us to answers, even if not definitive, to our research questions, where regular course participants of this teaching modality, soon adapted to the predicted physical and temporal distance, highlighted the importance of real-time approximation (in lives and web conferences), for the formation of social and affective bonds promoted by these activities, generating acceptance and understanding of different demands arising from the current pandemic situation, such as adaptations/adjustments appropriate to the current moment. The use of media tools to promote synchronous meetings, in different formats, encouraging empathy and belonging to the group, were also listed as significant changes introduced in the course, which corroborates our idea of the need to reformulate distance education. In the same way, we emphasize, through the reports of the course participants, that the flexibility in the delivery of activities, the encouragement of mediators with personalized individual messages and the diversified activities were motivating factors for the continuity of the course.

In pandemic times of mandatory social distancing, the virtual approach becomes a choice for the educational process in DE. Encouraging contact between everyone involved (mediators, course participants and teachers) is essential to increase trust and further motivate learning. In this sense, reflecting on a dynamic distance education, without ties to structured and predictable models, is preponderant for the quality of the courses and especially for the adequacy to the profile and needs of the course participants, considering that the individual's education is directly associated with affective and social stimuli to which they are submitted.

Furthermore, we believe that the research that took place from the collective contextualization triggered cultural assets that stimulated the development of the remaking and rethinking of our course offering. We believe that students were able to become familiar with new "strategies" for the development of efficient practices for the current moment, which they can make use of in their lives.

It is noteworthy here that the speed with which everything happens, nowadays, generates the need to rethink and reassess, at all times, a new educational and inclusive process. Therefore, the professional who works with education, directly or indirectly, cannot lose sight of two fundamental aspects: one, the need to face learning as a process of constant transformation; another, the obligation to be aware of the role that the educator plays in this context, and must not lose sight of their responsibility towards the formation of individuals who are at different moments of learning and constantly subject to profound changes, changes that should provoke significant reflections on what, how, for whom and for what to teach.

The simple transmission of information is not enough to enable the learner to deal with the significant changes that occur more and more quickly in our world. Education must, preponderantly, be able to develop concerns that lead not only to the desire to acquire new knowledge, but also to the ability to problematize these with which it is confronted.

Through the research results, it was possible to verify the relevance of the changes made to meet the demands of the current reality, a pandemic reality that had the need for empathy and social-emotional understanding. Using these actions, we understand that such procedures facilitated the continuity of the course participants, highlighting that contributions like these promote the clarification of the true role that education plays in our lives, showing that the pedagogical practice must be rethought and re-planned in a contextualized way, and that in times of remote learning, even distance education needed to reinvent itself.

The study developed in this article, far from seeking to dispel questions that reference the current conceptions of pedagogical acting and doing, seeks to elucidate how much learning, in EaD, from new times and organizational spaces, needs to address issues that go beyond teaching. Here we made inferences, elaborated hypotheses, could check, or not, our predictions and reflect on possible contributions of technologies, expanding the communication channels with our students, based on empathy and affection, seeking to understand the difficulties and anxieties faced in this moment of pandemic and considering each student as an individual, integral and collective being.

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