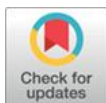


## Pandemic and Social inequality: impacts on the educational process in a rural school



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### Abstract

This article discusses the impacts of Covid-19 pandemic and social inequality on the schooling of elementary school students in a rural school located in a municipality in the state of Ceará, based on the theoretical and methodological assumptions of socio-historical psychology. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with teachers who had teaching experiences during the pandemic. Their statements were analyzed based on the procedure of nuclei of meaning, which resulted in a nucleus called rural education: social inequality and its impacts on the pandemic, consisting of three indicators, namely: social inequality and impacts on the school reality; educational challenges: shortages, support, and training needs in rural education; and the school as a space for confronting the social inequality experienced by students.

### Keywords

democratization of education; right to education; rural education; popular education; educational equality.

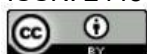
### Pandemia e desigualdade social: impactos no processo educativo em uma escola do campo

### Resumo

O artigo discute os impactos da pandemia da Covid-19 e da desigualdade social na escolarização de estudantes do ensino fundamental de uma escola do campo, situada em um município do estado do Ceará, tendo por base os pressupostos teórico-metodológicos da psicologia sócio-histórica. Os dados foram apreendidos por meio de sessões de conversação com professores que passaram por experiências docentes na pandemia. Suas falas foram analisadas com base no procedimento dos núcleos de significação, o que resultou em um núcleo denominado Educação do campo: desigualdade social e seus impactos na pandemia, constituído de três indicadores, a saber: desigualdade social e impactos na realidade escolar; desafios educacionais: carências, suporte e necessidades de formação na educação do campo; e a escola como espaço de enfrentamento a desigualdade social vivida pelos alunos.

### Palavras-chave

democratização da educação; direito à educação; educação do campo; educação popular; igualdade educacional.



## Pandemia y desigualdad social: impactos en el proceso educativo en una escuela rural

### Resumen

El artículo analiza los impactos de la pandemia de Covid-19 y la desigualdad social en la escolarización de estudiantes de educación primaria en una escuela rural, ubicada en un municipio del estado de Ceará. La investigación se basa en los presupuestos teóricos y metodológicos de la psicología sociohistórica. Se recogieron los datos a través de sesiones de conversación con docentes que vivieron la experiencia de enseñanza durante la pandemia. Sus discursos fueron analizados a partir del procedimiento de núcleos de significado, del que resultó un núcleo denominado educación rural: desigualdad social y sus impactos en la pandemia, compuesto por tres indicadores, a saber: desigualdad social y impactos en la realidad escolar; desafíos educativos: necesidades de apoyo y formación en educación rural; y la escuela como espacio para enfrentar la desigualdad social que viven los estudiantes.

### Palabras clave

democratización de la educación; derecho a la educación; educación rural; educación popular; igualdad educativa.

## 1 Introduction

This article aims to understand the meanings constructed by elementary school teachers about the impacts of Covid-19 pandemic and social inequality on the schooling process of students in a rural school. The data originate from a master's thesis in Education, based on the theoretical and methodological assumptions of socio-historical psychology (Aguiar, 2018; Bock *et al.*, 201; González Rey, 2005; Vigotski, 2001; among others).

We begin the article by explaining the possible relationships between Covid-19 pandemic, social inequality, and rural education. Next, we discuss the theoretical and methodological aspects of the research. In the third part, we develop the analysis. Finally, we offer some concluding reflections on the knowledge produced about the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic and social inequality on the educational process of students in a rural school.

Covid-19 pandemic, officially defined as lasting from March 11, 2020, to May 5, 2023, was a serious event that affected human life in many different ways. Although the term “pandemic” refers to the spread of a disease on global scale, the effects of the

circulation of the SARS-CoV-2 virus were not limited to cases of illness and hospitalization of patients, as we might immediately imagine.

As in so many other areas of human activity, public education has been severely affected by the pandemic, given the health measures adopted by schools and government agencies, especially during social isolation, when education systems, anchored in Ordinance No. 343 of the Ministry of Education of March 17, 2020, had to replace face-to-face classes with digital classes (Brazil, 2020).

Although necessary, this social isolation measure had a major impact on the schooling process. As pointed out by Miolo and Leão (2024, p. 13), “[...] with the onset of Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, social distancing changed everyone’s lives, including those of our students.” In other words, according to Nunes and Zancanaro (2024, p. 2), this means that “[...] schools needed to adapt to continue classes through remote learning.”

With the suspension of face-to-face classes, the aim was to prevent or mitigate the spread of the virus, while ensuring, in theory, the schooling process for students. To this end, teachers had to reinvent themselves professionally, seeking to study “[...] strategies that would enable them to meet the demands imposed by this period” (Nunes; Zancanaro, 2024, p. 2).

The negative impacts of the measure to suspend face-to-face classes were not simple. Considering some of the legal provisions at the time, the pedagogical concern focused on the automatic approval of students by suggesting “[...] the adoption of a curricular *continuum* for the years 2020-2021” (Brazil, 2022, p. 19). There was no pedagogical plan to mitigate the effects of this measure on the teaching and learning process.

Drawing attention to the fact that the pandemic caused changes in habits and that, in this context, children, adolescents, and young people were forced to study remotely, Gatti (2020) points out that not all students had good conditions, such as access to the internet, a computer, *tablet*, or cell phone, to be able to adapt to the new pedagogical forms of class.

To this scenario of social exclusion and educational disadvantage must also be added, according to Gatti (2020, p. 32), “[...] the large contingent of students who could not count on more effective support from their parents due to their educational level, or

because they worked in priority sectors during isolation, or for other reasons.” What emerges from the issues addressed by Gatti (2020) is a picture of a reality that goes beyond the pandemic situation, as the lack of technological devices or parental support in carrying out school activities encompasses situations that are not directly related to the pandemic, even though they were much more prominent and challenging during the health crisis.

In view of these questions, it should be noted that, although we have stated above that public education has been severely affected by Covid-19 pandemic, this impact can only be fully understood if we also consider the social and historical mediations that shape the reality of exclusion and inequality experienced by individuals in their social relationships.

According to Alessi *et al.* (2021, p. 15), although the SARS-CoV virus was not selective, its impacts on the population's lives occurred in different ways, “[...] as a result of the inequalities produced in society by social classes and their divisions, linked to race, ethnicity, and gender.” It is amid these inequalities, therefore, that the pandemic will spread with much greater intensity in Brazil.

This brings us closer to a historical issue that is constitutive of our reality, which is social inequality (Bock *et al.*, 2016; Sawaia, 2009), understood in this study not only from an economic perspective (income inequality), but also in its true multidimensionality. As such, it encompasses “[...] the various human needs for survival” (Silva; Gurjão; Gonçalves, 2022, p. 144), such as health, education, public transportation, housing, leisure, public safety, the environment, and food security. As a historical structural production of society, inequality naturalizes exclusion, denies human dignity, and restricts access to basic and fundamental rights of life, whether for an individual or a group. According to Moraes, Santiago, and Faria (2024, p. 1,458):

In Brazil, the naturalization of exclusion and social inequalities has been nurtured throughout history, followed by a movement of alienation that has been reinforced by practices developed in the school context. As a result, children from the lower classes are stigmatized and segregated at school.

Returning our gaze to public education during the pandemic, considering social inequality as a theoretical-methodological category of socio-historical psychology (Bock *et al.*, 2016; Sawaia, 2009), it is possible to understand that schooling processes in Brazil

were impacted not only by the pandemic, but above all by it. Among the most impacted groups were mainly students whose socioeconomic conditions have historically been more vulnerable, as already pointed out by Alessi *et al.* (2021), Gatti (2020), among other researchers. However, taking a closer look at this reality, it is still worth asking: how were rural schools, located in a context of social inequality, impacted in/by the pandemic? How might inequality, as a problem of social exclusion, have accentuated the impact of the pandemic on the schooling process of students?

In this study, based on the framework of socio-historical psychology, we highlight a crucial aspect of inequality, which is its subjective dimension. According to Bock, Perdigão, and Kulnig (2022, p. 57), “[...] social inequality is within us, internalized and formulated as certainty, as meaning.” Thus, social inequality is not limited to the external world, to what is merely empirical, but, dialectically, also configures what is subjective, that is, everything that is experienced and signified by the individual in relation to society and culture. For this reason, we point to the subjective dimension of social inequality (Bock *et al.*, 2016; Bock; Kulnig; Fumes, 2020; Silva; Gurjão; Gonçalves, 2022) as a fundamental theoretical category in explaining the strategies used to face the challenges experienced in rural education during the pandemic period.

Although rural education should not be confused with a social practice always marked by social inequality, it is true that many rural contexts face this problem of exclusion. For this reason, the Operational Guidelines for Basic Education in Rural Schools (Brazil, 2002) show a marked similarity with actions to address this issue, as can be seen in Caldart (2008, p. 71):

Rural Education was born as a mobilization/pressure from social movements for an educational policy for peasant communities: it arose from the combination of the struggles of the landless for the establishment of public schools in areas of agrarian reform with the resistance struggles of countless peasant organizations and communities to not lose their schools, their educational experiences, their communities, their territory, and their identity.

This is the social and political context of inequality, but also of struggle, in which rural education was established as a pedagogical movement for peasant training in order to value their identity. According to Cerqueira and Mendes (2024, p. 2), “[...] the importance of Rural Education in educational training lies in its ability to empower individuals, allowing them to understand and actively participate in the world.” That said,

Arroyo (2006, p. 104) points out that “[...] it is urgent to research the historical inequalities suffered by rural peoples. Economic and social inequalities and, for us, educational and school inequalities.”

In the next section, we discuss the methodological aspects, emphasizing the field of research, the teachers who participated in it, and the instruments used in the process of data production and analysis.

## 2 Methodology

Based on a socio-historical perspective (Aguiar, 2018; Bock *et al.*, 2016; Vigotski, 2001; among others), the research is not satisfied with the apparent aspects of reality, since no human phenomenon occurs in isolation or detached from historicity. As a result, it is imperative that the theoretical-methodological contribution allows us to understand the social and historical mediations that constitute the phenomenon.

From this perspective, knowledge of the phenomenon involves understanding reality. Therefore, we believe it is important to begin by emphasizing, contextually, that the research was conducted in a public rural school in the interior of the state of Ceará. The institution offers Early Childhood Education, Elementary School (1st to 9th grade), and Youth and Adult Education, serving students from seven neighboring communities. Its staff consists of a school principal, 12 teachers (only four of whom are permanent) and a school support team.

In accordance with the research objective, the participants are teachers who underwent the experience of emergency remote teaching, instituted in March 2020, as determined by Ordinance No. 343/2020, of the Ministry of Education (Brazil, 2020), and returned “[...] to face-to-face teaching and learning activities,” according to Resolution No. 2/2021, of the National Education Council (Brazil, 2021). These are professionals who were able to monitor and, in some way, also assess the relationship between students and the demands of school life before Covid-19 pandemic, during the period of emergency remote teaching, as well as after the return to face-to-face activities.

The data were collected in semi-structured interviews (Bock *et al.*, 2016; González Rey, 2005) with two teachers who experienced the replacement of face-to-face

classes with remote classes during the pandemic and the resumption of face-to-face activities at the same school. In accordance with ethical considerations, the two teachers who agreed to participate in the research signed the Free and Informed Consent Form (FICF), ensuring their right to confidentiality through the use of the code names Justiça and Luta, reimbursement for any expenses incurred by collaborating with the project, and respect for their decision to withdraw from the study, should this occur for any reason.

Based on socio-historical psychology, we understand that, more than just interviewees, the teachers were involved in a dialogical process of implications and questions about significant areas of their professional experiences—in this case, experiences mediated by a reality that carries objective and subjective marks related to the pandemic and social inequality.

The statements produced by the teachers (Justice and Struggle) in the semi-structured interviews were organized and analyzed with the support of the analytical procedure of nuclei of meaning, whose epistemological basis is socio-historical psychology (Aguiar; Godinho Aranha; Soares, 2021; Aguiar; Ozella, 2013; Vigotski, 2001). In the next section, we develop the process of analyzing the meanings constituted by the research participants.

### 3. Results and Discussion

With the analytical procedure of meaning nuclei, the aim is to understand not the isolated discourse of teachers, but, according to Vigotski (2001), their meanings (unity of sense and meaning) constituted in subjective experiences with concrete reality, that is, in relation to society and history.

The core meaning analyzed in this article, called "Rural education: social inequality and its impacts on the pandemic," is the result of the articulation of three indicators: social inequality and impacts on school reality; educational challenges: shortages, support, and training needs in rural education; and school as a space for confronting the social inequality experienced by students. We begin the analysis of this core meaning with the indicator "social inequality and impacts on the school reality," which denotes the unequal reality experienced by students in their schooling processes.

The meanings constituted by teacher Luta (2024) reveal the fragility and precariousness that characterize life in the spectrum of social inequality. Thus, he points out that “[...] *the reality of students [...], for the most part, is that they do not have a family structure and come to school to eat, because they do not have enough at home.*” The teacher’s statement refers not only to the historical process of exclusion of the most socially vulnerable students, but also to the non-compliance with the current Law of Guidelines and Bases for National Education (LDBEN), Law No. 9,394/1996, whose Article 3 ensures, in its first principle, “[...] equal conditions for access to and permanence in school” (Brazil, 2022, p. 9).

When asked what he meant by a lack of “family structure,” Professor Luta (2024) pointed out that it refers to difficult structural conditions for survival, or even the absence of such conditions:

*When I refer to the lack of family structure, it is because a large part of them do not have their parents present, some are raised only by their father or only by their mother, some are raised by their aunts, by their grandparents, so we realize that this interferes with their upbringing and with school.*

School seems ambivalent to students, according to Luta (2024). On the one hand, it is seen as a space that provides learning. On the other hand, he reports that there are students who consider it a space to minimize suffering and precariousness, such as a lack of positive references and affection at home (Marques; Carvalho, 2018) or even a lack of food. This issue is expressed in Luta’s (2024) statement when he says, for example, that many of the students “[...] *do not have a family structure and come to school to eat because they do not have enough at home.*”

We also refer to the statement by Professor Justiça (2024), who highlights the deprivation that many students experience when they arrive at school: “*We have students who don’t have pants to wear to school [...]. I have had cases of students who have become ill due to hunger and feel ashamed to say that they are hungry.*”

Professor Justiça’s (2024) account expresses a meaning of school that tacitly assumes the role of welcoming socially vulnerable students. Thinking about this perspective of school, we turn to Libâneo (2012, p. 23) to reflect on the pedagogical function of this educational institution in class society:

The school that was left for the poor, characterized by its welfare and welcoming missions (included in the expression inclusive education), becomes a caricature of social inclusion. Policies aimed at universalizing access end up undermining the quality of education because, while school access rates are touted, social inequalities in access to knowledge are exacerbated, even within schools, due to the impact of interschool factors on learning. There is a reversal of the functions of the school: the right to knowledge and learning is replaced by minimal learning for survival.

From an educational point of view, the pedagogical function of the school is not the same as that of a philanthropic or charitable entity, but it ends up becoming a place of refuge in the face of so many precarious situations, whether to meet needs such as clothing, food, and school supplies, or to intervene in emotional issues that students bring to the institution. When this happens, the primary political function of the school, which is to take care of the students' educational process, especially with regard to the full right to "exercise citizenship" and progress in their studies, as determined by Article 22 of the LDBEN (Brazil, 2022), is reversed.

Libâneo (2012) helps us understand that social inequalities in access to knowledge are aggravated by multiple precarious conditions that constitute the trajectory of students' lives, which implies a change in the school's priorities, that is, the right to learning is replaced by the pursuit of only the basic knowledge necessary for a simple life, marginalized by survival.

Highlighting some of the precarious conditions of life, Professor Justiça (2024) points out that school is both a learning environment and a place of survival, as it is where many students find the basic sustenance and shelter that they cannot have at home. He explains:

*When we go to visit students' homes, I get sick, really sick. I feel like I don't even want to go anymore. We find students sleeping on the floor, boys sleeping on mattresses on the floor, trash in the middle of the house, an inhumane situation; they don't have a proper place to cook food (Justiça, 2024).*

Professor Justiça's (2024) statement shows that the obstacles faced by students, especially in relation to learning conditions and school retention, are issues that cannot be separated from their life trajectories, which are almost always marked by circumstances of exclusion and suffering, which were accentuated during the pandemic, especially during the period of remote learning. In any case, it is very important to be

aware of the danger of naturalizing schooling problems, since the blame tends to be attributed only to poverty, the family, and the individual themselves, while the school is exempt from these issues. Consequently, Moraes, Santiago, and Faria (2024, p. 1,463) emphasize:

Even though some educators recognize the weaknesses of the school, explanations still focus mostly on the individual, their financial conditions, lack of family structure, lack of interest, emotional and psychological problems, consolidating 'subtle exclusion'.

At the same time, within the classroom itself, it is possible to encounter situations that differ from this reality, in which some students find themselves in a socially differentiated position, as described below:

*Some students who are a little better off feel superior, better, within the school itself, so they form little groups and end up excluding those who are less fortunate. I see this (exclusion by some students) and realize how much it affects some students. Some are often left without prospects, thinking that it will always be that way, and this also affects their performance in the classroom (Justiça, 2024).*

Situations like this experienced by students can breed feelings of inferiority not only in relation to other students, but to the world. The feeling of exclusion affects life as a whole. In the case of students, this feeling can be expressed, for instance, in their academic performance, often leaving them with no prospect of changing that reality. For Bock (2017, p. 198),

[...] the psychological health of individuals lies precisely in their ability to face the world on a daily basis, to interfere in it, building solutions to difficulties and problems that arise. The fragility of the individual is expressed in difficulties in coping with this task.

Considering the social conditions of vulnerability experienced by these students, the ground for the construction of feelings of inferiority becomes increasingly fertile, which also contributes to the formation of feelings of exclusion. This perception can weaken not only the individual but also the group, by naturalizing and individualizing the social challenges they face, as we can see in the following excerpt from Professor Justiça (2024): *"I see this (exclusion by some students) [...]. Some are often left without prospects, [...] and this also affects their performance in the classroom."*

In order to advance the analysis of meanings, we will move on to the second indicator, called “Educational challenges: deficiencies, support, and training needs in rural education.” This indicator is based on structural issues related to the functioning of the school where the research was conducted. And one of the issues that stands out, according to Professor Luta (2024), is the state of deprivation of the school and the lack of attention to ensure that it functions properly – it is worth remembering that this is a school that operates in the rural education modality. Therefore, he emphasizes:

*Here, everything arrives late or, often, doesn't arrive at all. There aren't enough books for everyone. Sometimes, you have to pair up or form groups to be able to do the activity. I also believe that government officials need to make more of an effort to offer public policies aimed at this population, so that they can have better living conditions (Luta, 2024).*

Professor Luta's (2024) statement has a mixed tone of anguish and denunciation, which amounts to a criticism of the unequal attention given to schools in rural areas, a fact that is revealed in at least two situations: when he refers to the delay in the delivery of supplies for the school to function, and when he addresses the insufficient number of textbooks for students.

Luta (2024) points out that these situations express the fragility or even the lack of public policies for the population living in rural areas. When addressing the insufficient number of textbooks and the lack of other teaching materials, the teacher is referring, albeit indirectly, to the conditions for studying, which, from a socio-historical perspective, is the main activity in the development of school-age children. On this issue, Serconek, Lizzi, and Assumpção (2024, p. 76) explain:

Upon entering school, students assume a new social role, becoming protagonists in a socially valued activity, study, through which they acquire the culture produced by humankind and systematized in the different sciences [...]. A challenge that arises in the classroom, therefore, is to organize teaching that engages students in study by awakening in them the need and motivation to acquire certain knowledge.

In addition to the structural condition of the school, especially with regard to the pedagogical role of the institution in the development of study activities, Professor Luta (2024) also addresses the fact that the relationship between the community and the school is a challenge, in the sense that there is no effective partnership with social entities in the community:

*I didn't notice that [partnerships in the community], I noticed the partnerships that were made with the municipality itself, which weren't many, but there were some with agencies that help the municipality, but locally I didn't notice any, especially because people are kind of in the same boat, in the same conditions; and those who could help, I think, in a way, such as community associations, churches, pastoral groups, I didn't see that help.*

Although it is an important school for the locality where it is located, Professor Luta (2024) points out that the institution's partnerships with residents and agencies in the community itself are fragile. He justifies the lack of local partnership by pointing out the fact that “[...] *people are kind of in the same boat, in the same conditions.*” At the same time, he makes the following criticism of the lack of help from the community: “[...] *those who could help, [...] such as community associations, churches, pastoral groups, I did not see this help.*”

For Professor Luta (2024), there is no partnership with residents because they also live in precarious conditions, exclusion, and suffering. Professor 's criticism is a sign of indignation, that is, a sign that he is breaking with passivity and, thus, taking a stand on transforming reality. In view of these issues, we turn to Sawaia (2009, p. 366) to explain that: “Revolutionary actions are ineffective if they do not unlock the repressed forces of subjectivity toward the joy of living, which, in turn, is the basis of freedom. Men submit to servitude because they are sad, fearful, and superstitious.”

From a socio-historical perspective, it is methodologically necessary to overcome the dichotomy between affect and cognition, as well as objectivity and subjectivity, in order to explain the individual in their historical totality. Therefore, the teacher's statement denotes not only knowledge of a reality, but also a feeling of indignation at the situations of vulnerability he has witnessed. This affection experienced in a professional context does not fail to constitute him pedagogically as a teacher.

Faced with the challenges and tensions of professional practice, Professor Justiça (2024) reveals that there are social projects to combat the social vulnerability of children, but that they do not achieve the expected results, which is why he emphasizes that his desire is to see such projects come to fruition.

*My desire is that there be more projects aimed at these children, [but] that they actually happen. Not projects on paper, of which there are already many. Projects that really go into the home, that seek to understand the situations, that there are*

*resources to help these families too, to get them out of these situations, to get these children out of the drug environment they find at home.*

When addressing the precarious living conditions that students face in their environment, especially in relation to *the “[...] drug environment they encounter at home,”* Professor Justiça (2024) raises social issues that transcend the barriers of his pedagogical competence in school. He points out that there are social projects aimed at helping children in vulnerable situations, but, according to the teacher, these projects show no signs of having an effect on the problem, or at least of alleviating the precarious situation that constitutes the students' lives and schooling process.

Although the professor points out that social projects have no effect on transforming reality, it is important to consider that the act of inclusion is not limited to isolated actions. In an unequal society, where relations between the disadvantaged and the powerful are always naturalized, the pedagogical function of inclusion, according to the socio-historical perspective (Bock *et al.*, 2016; Sawaia, 2009), must be elevated to the possibility of social transformation through the strengthening of public policies and collective actions in various spaces, including educational ones.

This field of discussion also includes the relationship between schools and society, so it is important to understand, according to Bock and Aguiar (2003, p. 145), that “[...] education always has a social purpose. Whenever we are involved in educational practice, we will, whether we like it or not, be promoting a certain society and a certain type of citizen.”

Entitled "The school as a space for tackling social inequality experienced by students," the third indicator understands that the school only constitutes a truly educational environment when it faces the challenges of human development, especially with regard to social inequality.

“School as a space for tackling social inequality” is, in fact, an institution that knows and recognizes its role in society, but in the case under study, this challenge goes beyond the institutional dimension. At the same time, this responsibility is directed at education professionals, who sympathize with the situation experienced at school, as is evident in the statements by teachers Luta (2024) and Justiça (2024), respectively:

*There are donations of some materials. I think the school staff themselves donated some. I did that myself. I donated food, tried to donate clothes. Could that help? Yes, it could, because we didn't know what their (the students') situation was like at home. So, without food or clothes, they won't want to study either.*

*We have students who need us to give them notebooks. This year, we already had to buy notebooks to give to students. I already bought notebooks to give to students. Our coordinator already bought some.*

The above statements indicate that the school is attempting to develop strategies to address the vulnerable situations experienced by students, as explained in the following excerpt: *"We have students who we need to give notebooks to. This year, we have already had to buy notebooks to give to students. I have already bought notebooks to give to students"* (Justiça, 2024).

In order to alleviate the situation of vulnerability, school professionals seek to help their students and families with small resources, donating clothes, shoes, school supplies, among other aids. Still composing this indicator, teacher Justiça (2024) narrates:

*We have cases of students who asked to stay at school all day so they could have lunch at school because they don't have anything to eat at home. To try to get him to stay, we put him in a remedial class so he could stay at school for both shifts. In the morning, he stayed in the remedial class, and in the afternoon, he attended regular classes.*

In addition to its pedagogical function of teaching and learning, the school has been seen as a space that can welcome students, even in a limited way, in order to protect them from the social vulnerability they experience at home. This act of welcoming students into the school may be imbued with compassion, humanity, and solidarity, but in the strict sense of the educational process, it is not exactly revolutionary, since it does not imply a transformation of reality.

Thus, according to Sawaia (2009, p. 364), "[...] behind social inequality, there is suffering, fear, humiliation, but there is also the extraordinary human miracle of the will to be happy and to start over where all hope seems dead." In other words, welcoming students to school is important and necessary, but it is not sufficiently pedagogical if the educational action is not configured, according to Freire (1996, 2016), as an intentionally liberating act. Only by understanding that the disadvantaged are not content with merely

being alive can we collaborate with “[...] the improvement of social policies, avoiding mechanisms of perverse social inclusion” (Sawaia, 2009, p. 364).

Professor Justiça's (2024) reflections highlight the importance of helping the most vulnerable students during the pandemic, but recognize the inadequacy of the actions taken to mitigate the problem: *"What we did was not enough, far from it! But we tried, we didn't stop insisting, using what we had to help. I believe that if we had done nothing, everything would be much worse. We keep trying."*

According to Professor Justiça (2024), what the school has done during the pandemic and continues to do is not enough to solve the problem of social vulnerability and school e of some students. In any case, he emphasizes that if the school had not acted, the situation would have been worse. After all, how should the school's action be configured, pedagogically, in a democratic (or less unequal) society?

When addressing the notion of curricular justice, Ponce and Araújo (2019, p. 1061) explain that “[...] care as a dimension of social justice is the comprehensive attention given to the subjects involved in the educational process [...]. Care is the zeal for citizen formation.” It is this care that helps to confront “[...] the mechanisms of perverse inclusion,” so that the child's educational process is not reduced to school attendance, but rather a guarantee that their education, through the process of knowledge acquisition, contributes to their psychological development and civic education. According to Zanelato and Sá (2022, p. 3):

In order for knowledge to be acquired in a way that promotes psychological development, teaching practices are needed that encourage students to engage in mental activities such as thinking, analyzing, justifying, and interpreting the concepts being studied.

Bock *et al.* (2016, p. 246) explain that “[...] everyday school experiences are decisive factors in shaping future plans.” The authors suggest that school experiences play a crucial role in shaping future plans, whether they are experiences that hinder or enhance young people's plans.

## 5 Final considerations

It is important to note that the pandemic was not an isolated event, limited to the biological and destructive power of a virus. Studies cited in this article point out that its impact on the population varied depending on several factors, including social situations, economic conditions, and cultural aspects. Therefore, we undeniably had a pandemic, but we also had a society in which access to some basic goods and services was (and still is) notoriously marked by inequality.

Similar to what occurs in various segments of society and various fields of human activity, school education is also marked by acute factors of inequality. These factors, according to the data revealed in the research, were further accentuated during the pandemic.

The core theme "Rural education: social inequality and its impacts on the pandemic" does not answer all questions, but it does bring into discussion what teachers Justiça (2024) and Luta (2024) think, based on their experiences, about the context of rural education during the pandemic and, above all, in the midst of a situation of social inequality.

Teachers Justice and Struggle report their experiences, but they are not isolated subjects in the world. There is no world exclusive to them. Hence, based on their experiences and meanings, they reveal a world lived in a unique way by countless other people, but one that bears the marks of society. That is, a world of profound social inequalities, marked by stories of suffering and abuse, which requires the intervention of fair and inclusive social policies, especially with regard to school education.

Finally, Justice and Struggle reveal hope in the transformative role of school, especially in rural communities. However, by bringing to light the difficulties experienced by students and their families, they sometimes recognize that these are caused by negative feelings of school inadequacy, and sometimes reveal that they are also mediated by the desire to continue persevering, as they believe that only school actions have the potential to enhance students' life projects.

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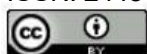
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**Chief Editor:** Lia Machado Fiuza Fialho

**Ad hoc reviewers:** Maria do Socorro Xavier Batista and Allan da Silva Coelho

**Translated by:** Thiago Alves Moreira

#### How to cite this article (ABNT):

SOARES, Júlio Ribeiro; SILVA, Maria Socorro; SOUZA, Allan Solano. Pandemia e desigualdade social: impactos no processo educativo em uma escola do campo.

*Educação & Formação*, Fortaleza, v. 10, e15987, 2025. Available at:

<https://revistas.uece.br/index.php/redufor/article/view/e15987>



Received on July 25<sup>th</sup>, 2025.

Accepted on October 13<sup>th</sup>, 2025.

Published on October 22<sup>th</sup>, 2025.

