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A PANDEMIA E SUAS JANELAS ABERTAS OU FECHADAS PARA AS INFÂNCIAS
THE PANDEMIC AND ITS OPEN OR CLOSED WINDOWS FOR CHILDREN
GISELLE CERISE GERSON, GISELLE ARTEIRO NIELSEN AZEVEDO, PAULO AFONSO RHEINGANTZ

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Giselle Cerise Gerson is an Architect and Urbanist. She holds a master's degree in Urban Development, and is a Ph.D. candidate at the Graduate Program in Architecture - PROARQ, at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. She is a collaborating researcher in the research groups Environment Education group - GAE, and Places and Landscapes group - ProLUGAR. She studies public open spaces, walkability, schools architecture, educational territories, post-occupancy evaluation, and the quality of the place. gisellecerise@gmail.com
http://lattes.cnpq.br/2838041954355913

Giselle Arteiro Nielsen Azevedo is an Architect and Urbanist, has a master's degree in Architecture, and a doctorate in Production Engineering. She is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, in the Graduate Program in Architecture - PROARQ, and coordinates the Environment-Education Group - GAE. She studies schools' architecture, educational territories, post-occupation assessment, quality of the place, and environmental perception. gisellearteiro15@gmail.com
http://lattes.cnpq.br/0625817989520541

Paulo Afonso Rheingantz is an Architect and Urban Planner with a specialization in Educational Research Methodology, a master degree in Architecture and a PhD in Production Engineering. He is professor of the Graduate Program in Architecture at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (PROARQ - FAU - UFRJ). He studies post-occupation evaluation and quality of the place from the view of Science, Technology and Society studies (CTS) and leads the research group Places and Landscapes (ProLUGAR). parheingantz@gmail.com
http://lattes.cnpq.br/7765118835668681br>

Abstract

This article proposes a reflection on the restrictions and challenges faced by children and public education in Brazil during the COVID-19 pandemic, considering the suspension of physical access to the school environment, the digital divide, and their implications for increasing socioeconomic inequalities in the country. It aims to discuss the roles of school and public open spaces in the return to regular classes and in the need to reinvent themselves from the (new and old) demands of

children, teachers and parents. Based on the sociology of childhood, with Sarmento (2005, 2008, 2020) and Qvortrup (2014), we recognize children as active individuals who interpret and act in the world, who need to be stimulated to develop their protagonism in society, at public open spaces and school. In addition, knowledge from other areas like urbanism, legal sociology and urban pedagogy aid to obtain a transdisciplinary view on the changes in social and environmental appropriations of the city and the possibilities to build inclusive and healthy environments for children.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, Educational territories, Social inequality, Childhood and the city

1   Introduction

A global pandemic tends to intensify the multiple and complex social, economic and environmental problems in "areas of invisibility" (Santos, 2020) with historical inequalities such as in Brazil and so many countries in Latin America and Africa. The effects of the pandemic have potentialized the proliferation of misery and poverty in countries immersed in political sceneries grounded on neoliberalism, with strong expressions of racism, colonialism, and paternalism. It is a context of injustice and uncertainty that excludes children and makes them invisible and vulnerable, above all those who live in urban peripheries with scarce resources, infrastructure, and opportunities. With the COVID-19 pandemic and the difficulty to access digital media making remote classes impossible for most children, such problems become even more serious. The lack of incentive and investment to ensure large access to culture and combat social exclusion shows remnants of an elitist and excluding process in public education in Brazil, as Anísio Teixeira (1989) has criticized for decades. This process structures teaching and disregards its character as a promoter of universal inclusion.

Thereby, it is crucial to reflect about other roles, besides education, school has revealed during the global crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic: from assistance, providing food[1], and shelter for children when parents are at work, to recreation, culture, and community organization. Such social importance became more visible with the adaptations of school facilities – underused due to the suspension of classroom lessons – to function as shelter for people living in the streets, exposed to the virus or support precarious health facilities[2]. It is expected that both during and after the pandemic there will be initiatives to expand investment in public policies to improve basic education, for there is also need for adaptations regarding health protocols in order to resume the regular classes.

When classroom lessons were suspended, the population, in general, acknowledged the importance of school as a place of interaction for children. Now isolated at their homes or open spaces in their neighborhoods, children miss peer contacts, playing, socializing, and collective learning in educational territories close to their houses. That should be the precise sense of school, that means, "children miss school a lot, not teachers nor classrooms, but their classmates. School was the space where children could meet other children" (Tonucci, 2020a, para. 3, our translation).

With the pandemic, school as an environment of encounters and collective learning is replaced by the "windows"[3] of remote learning. Children, now removed from "horizontal socialization", tend to lose their motivation. Thus, we understand the importance to enlarge this debate and its link to the proposal of the topic "We have never been so digital" of this issue of V!RUS journal, focused on the COVID-19 pandemic and digital media. Next, we will explore some of our concerns. For the sections' titles, we used popular sayings[4], with an intention to incorporate popular knowledge to academic knowledge. Although there were losses and dramatic changes caused by COVID-19 in our daily lives, it is still possible to be as optimistic as children, searching for their healthy and transgressive way of playing in open spaces at squares and schools; or as peaceful as the elderly, remembering that "everything passes".

2   "Quem pariu Mateus, que o embale" ["Whoever gave birth to Matthew, nurse him"]: a discussion on the role of school and responsibility for childcare in the pandemic

There is pressure and disagreement about the gradual return of adults to work and the return of children to classrooms, which brings up an important question: who is responsible for childcare during and after the COVID-19 pandemic? In neighborhoods where low-income populations live, part of the heads of many households and parents work informally, outside their houses and must leave their children without any direct care[5]. This way, they have more contact with other children in public space and a bigger risk of contamination. In addition to that, it is likely that infected asymptomatic children who stay with grandparents become vehicles of transmission to the elderly. It is worth considering that, in these neighborhoods, small houses without adequate living conditions, in areas with insufficient basic sanitation, along with the lack of private open spaces, make it difficult to isolate in a healthy way. This sanitary concern has an impact over the families' health and provokes a debate about children's autonomy[6] in public spaces nowadays.

However, we also find children in situations of overprotection, which result in more restrictions to their autonomy in public open spaces. It is believed that, in this case, the "privatization of childhood", that existed before the pandemic, as discussed by Sarmento (2005; 2008) and Qvortrup (2014), went from selective – in which families chose to protect children in houses and institutional spaces, keeping them away from possible dangers from the streets, like urban violence, criminality and traffic accidents – to compulsory due to the need for quarantine. The tendency adults have to overprotect children is a cultural problem in our society and it worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Tonucci (2020a, para. 3, our translation),

> Children want to go out and they can only do that along with an adult. Thus, it is important that children go out again, in and out of coronavirus [*sic*]. Staying at home is a new condition, not being autonomous is not. I hope children can show us, with the power of this confinement, that they need more autonomy and freedom.

In another interview, to the newspaper El País, Tonucci (2020b, para. 4) speaks about the underestimation of children by adults, who consider them as not being able to deal with living outside with health measures. He calls to trust children and let them show their creativity dealing with this urban matter.

> Today's children, do not doubt it, will know how to create new solutions, new games, even wearing masks, even not being able to have contact. When this is all over, children will have taught us something. Let them go out, let us trust them and learn from their playing.

Although Tonucci (2020a) makes an effort to deconstruct the parents' fear of the contact of children with public spaces, it is important to stress that the contexts experienced by children in developed countries are quite different from those in countries with socioeconomic inequalities like Brazil. Here, the pandemic lasts longer, mortality levels increase and consequently, psychosocial sequels will be more extensive.

The "familiarization" and the "institutionalization of childhood" jeopardize children's interaction as they restrict, or even eliminate, their possibility to (re) learn together, developing their social, affective and expressive competences. In addition to that, the decrease of the number of children using public space is also harmful to urbanity – herein understood as the quality of the relations produced in urban environment –, making the city less democratic and inclusive, as it reduces coexistence among different generations (Jacobs, 2011; Tonucci, 1996; 2020a). The contact with relatives and other children or adults is important for the children's psychosocial development and to build empathy and citizenship bonds.

3   "O seguro morreu de velho" ["He who played safe, died old"]: domestic violence and conflicts accentuated by the quarantine

Quarantine has also reinforced a serious social problem to several families: domestic violence. Sarmento (2020, para. 7, our translation) warns about the need for initiatives by the public power to welcome and support vulnerable people.

> Facing the predictable increase of the number of children victimized by negligence, mistreatment and exposure to domestic violence, it becomes crucial to strengthen and qualify the family care, adoption, and homecare institutions, as well as to reinforce all the existing devices and measures for protection and promotion of positive parenting and support to families.

The United Nations in Brazil (Organização das Nações Unidas, 2020, para. 1, our translation) also approaches the severity of this problem:

> With the new coronavirus pandemic and the necessary measures of social isolation and home confinement, children and teenagers are at a greater risk of suffering physical, sexual and psychological violence. When domestic violence already occurs, vulnerabilities increase dramatically.

4   "Antes só do que mal acompanhado" ["Better alone than badly accompanied"]: the idiosyncrasies of a virtual classroom

Bullying[7], as systematic, physical, or psychological intimidation, is also a reflection of the difficulties of coexistence and is present in schools and public recreation environments among children and young. With the limitations imposed by social isolation, cyberbullying[8] grows due to the increase in the use of mobile phones and social media websites, stimulated by remote teaching and activities. That shows that physical space itself is not the only interaction arena, for there is also the virtual space. Within this context, the expansion of the access to digital media (especially to the Internet) becomes a potential catalyst of important changes for childhood. It works not as replacing one kind of environment with another, but as a complement, if consciously monitored. The use of communication and information technologies in the teaching-learning

process may bring positive gains in an after-pandemic scenario, since there is a dissolution of the borders of activities that may be interconnected, such as classes, leisure and social life.

It is useless to try to keep children away from devices that allow access to the web in order to protect them from possible aggressions within the virtual environment. At the moment, this would still be one of the healthy ways to interact with others without being exposed to contamination. Neither is it worthy to redirect children to outdoor recreation as if these activities were the only way to have fun, interact and be with other children. It is necessary to talk to them and look for options, both in the physical environment and in the expansion of experiences within virtual environments.

A polemic case with an apparent impact on the relation between children and cities was the global phenomenon related to the expansive use of *Pokémon GO*, an app for smartphones developed in 2016. This augmented reality app, connected to the Global Positioning System (GPS), informs some curiosities about the place and stimulates users to interact and compete amongst themselves[9]. Huge numbers of children and adults have wandered about places they have not explored before, in different hours of the day. Despite the increase in the use of public open spaces – that could be seen as an improvement of urban quality according to Gehl (2013) and Jacobs (2011) –, many users limit their interaction with others to the duration of the game.

The use of digital technologies for educational purposes could become a strategy for the post-pandemic scenario. It could be way to stimulate students and teachers for returning to classroom lessons, incorporating outdoor activities and improving the dynamics of traditional teaching. On the other hand, there is an increase in the digital divide as a huge number of children do not have access to the Internet. They carry the condition of digital excluded as they are unable to access classes, remote activities and pedagogical materials shared through social media. This way, those who were already on the sidelines remain even more distant from social inclusion. Would that kind of exclusion be another reason for cyberbullying or bullying when classroom lessons return?

5   "Quem pode, pode; quem não pode, se sacode" ["Those who can, can; those who can't, get by"]: the increase of urban poverty and social inequalities in the country

In addition to domestic violence, the problem of urban poverty gets worse, as "the pandemic, beyond human losses, is causing an impoverishment of the country, increasing unemployment and increasing unattended basic needs among a relatively large population strata" (Sarmento, 2020, para. 1, our translation). Along with the sanitary emergency issues, nutrition emergency becomes more serious with the suspension of classes and thousands of children unable to eat at public schools, which play an important role in fighting children hunger – one of the most perverse effects of poverty:

> It must be highlighted that, for those who live in poor peripheries around the world, the current sanitary emergency adds up to many other emergencies. […] It is also the case of nutrition emergency, for there is hunger in neighborhoods and the community ways of overcoming (popular canteens, school feeding) have collapsed with the dramatic increase of people searching. If schools close, school feeding that ensured the children's survival ends (Santos, 2020, p. 19, our translation).

That is another evidence of the discrimination process related to the attention to populations who were vulnerable since before the pandemic and that are still neglected by part of the public power. Relating this vulnerability to actions and thoughts of the elites that control politics, Santos (2020) considers that we are experiencing some kind of "social Darwinism". It is also important to acknowledge and protect the people who are in a situation of "quarantine within the quarantine", for they already live in isolation, with little or no contact with the urban environment. This is the case of elderly living in shelters, people with special needs, or those who live in the margins of society[10], like the homeless, the informal workers, and periphery residents.

> When an outbreak occurs, vulnerability increases because they are more exposed to the propagation of the virus and situated in areas where healthcare never arrives: slums and poor peripheries of the city, remote villages, refugee camps, prisons, etc. They perform tasks that involve more risks, either because they work in conditions that do not allow them to protect themselves, or because they are caregivers for those who can afford protection. Finally, in emergency situations, the prevention or restraining policies are never universal. On the opposite hand, they are selective (Santos, 2020, p. 27, our translation).

The pandemic also produces some other negative reverberations in children's life, like grief for relatives, losing the school year, torments, and psychological crisis due to restrictions and also possible difficulties to reestablish social relationships in public spaces. It is worth emphasizing that, for children who live in shelters or cannot count on attention from parents or other responsible adults, quarantine may be even harder, especially with the suspension of classroom lessons. The lack of stimulation for these children to return to

their studies, which are often already belated due to learning difficulties, may contribute to some susceptibilities, such as the risk of teenage pregnancy and other social problems[11].

6 "Tapar o sol com a peneira" ["To cover the sun with a sieve"]: social inequality accentuated by the "window" of remote education

The search for solutions to continue with classes for children remotely, amidst an epidemiologic and economic crisis, homogenizes the profile of students and reveals an elitist view on access to teaching. If, on one hand, virtual lessons have shown that school goes beyond the physical institutional environment, through the teachers' efforts[12] and readiness to make this strategy possible, on the other hand, in practice, they have evidenced flaws in the teaching system, like the disregard of public managers for the social inequalities among students of a very same school.

Digital divide is experienced by most students and teachers of public schools in the country and the survey Information and Communication Technologies – Education[13] (CGI.BR, 2019) periodically presents diagnoses that show that to competent bodies. The last census carried out by the institution in 2018 pointed out that, in urban areas, almost 40% of the students of public schools did not have a computer or tablet at home and only 33% of teachers have had some kind of continuous training to use computers and the Internet. When it comes to data from rural areas, numbers become even worse.

It is also important to highlight that in public school, several situations disfavor the use of the environments of informatics labs for educational research and activities, for instance: overcrowding and thus insufficient equipment for students, poor maintenance, or even the complete lack of Internet access. So, how do intend students have a good performance in remote lessons if before the pandemic their contact with digital resources was so under-stimulated? At school, it is worthy to consider the possibility of more adequate conditions that allow the democratic coexistence of students in the classroom, including similar furniture, books, and support from teachers[14] . But at their homes, this exercise of democratic coexistence does not happen the same way. Families do not have the same equipment available, nor access to the Internet or a convenient environment for studying. This inequality was also pointed out by Tonucci:

> How is it possible that children stay at home using schoolbooks and doing homework? Many families only have one table at their home. Imagine that on this table the mother works, the father cooks, two children have a single computer. Then imagine the houses with no Internet connection! If schools are committed to education, they will think about it! (Tonucci, 2020b, para. 9, our translation).

The process of turning homes into schools, with the adaptation of the residential environment and family dynamics to pedagogical activities, requires more attention to children with their school tasks and entertainment, which used to be a shared responsibility with schools. During the pandemic, families acquired an overload of responsibilities regarding the protection and education of children that were added to their schooling and healthcare. Another warning brought by Tonucci (2020a) concerns the continuity of the same traditional school models. Even with remote lessons, there is still a teacher exposing contents to students, often occult or passive in this process. The author defends that, if the world is going through radical changes, school should also reinvent itself and not reproduce, at home, the same attitudes of traditional teaching.

> The only concern has been that school continues, virtually. In Italy, for example, the great concern is to show that they continue just like before, despite the new conditions, that means, to make them not even perceive the difference, sitting like they used to be at school, facing a board, having lessons and homework. Many have not noticed that school did not work before and, in this situation, it becomes notable it didn't. Children are tired of lessons and it is helpful for their families because they are kept busy (Tonucci, 2020a, para. 5, our translation).

Amidst those dilemmas brought up by the pandemic, Correa and Cássio (2020) discuss the situation of public school in Brazil taking into consideration the narratives of teachers of basic school that face the challenges of remote teaching. Among the main problems mentioned by the teachers, authors highlight: the lack of awareness of public managers about the socioeconomic vulnerability situation of families and the disregard for the opinion of the school community about the obstacles to make a new teaching system possible.

> When a teacher says that her "heart breaks" and another tells about how she printed activities for the students at home, using her own resources, just to be supportive regarding the material limitations of the children's families, we get to the inevitable conclusion that the education system lacks precisely what teachers have the most: sensitivity and responsibility (Correa and Cassio, 2020, para. 15, our translation).

So, the impositions from municipal education departments to teachers regarding their fulltime communication and extension of work hours "ignore the knowledge of the teachers and the specificities of children education" (Correa and Cassio, 2020, para. 18, our translation). The work overload and tension are also discussed by

Coutinho and Côco (2020), who are worried about how the solution of remote teaching was thoughtlessly adopted by public power, pushing homes to turn into schools overnight. Altogether, the students' lack of motivation, as they do not count on the school environment to support their development and the absence of their coexistence with classmates makes collective learning impossible and impairs their performance. Hooks (2013, p. 17, our translation) argues that inside the classroom "our ability to generate enthusiasm is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing each other's voices, in acknowledging the presence of one another''.

Facing those incompatibilities, would the act of hiding in a virtual classroom be a form of resistance to remote teaching? Would the closed "windows", hidden – that means, those in which participants are present (online) but do not show themselves –, be an attitude of indiscipline or a way of expressing dissatisfaction with a way of teaching that sets apart classmates, teachers, and the learning environment? Would the act of turning the camera on during classes and having to show their precarious or even improper home environment be a demotivation for children? These are some questions that must be reviewed and considered by public power. With this pandemic, the inequalities in childhood become more evident, which makes it impossible to keep trying to "cover the sun with a sieve" (like in the Brazilian proverb) and indicates the need to make this moment into a great learning opportunity for new and more inclusive attitudes.

7   As for final considerations: "Não há mal que sempre dure, nem bem que nunca se acabe" [There is no ill that lasts forever, nor any boon that never ends]

When we think about the distance that we, Brazilians, are from full democratic exercise of the right to the city (Lefèbvre, 2008) and to citizenship, it becomes necessary to search for measures to fight digital divide to remodel the 21st century education and respond to the demands of information society (Castells, 1999). It is also necessary to broaden the discussion about the escalation and precarity of the ways of being and living of childhood in the city caused by the pandemic. Now, it is up to us to think which strategies need to be designed to overcome the current situation, trying not to destroy the possibilities of producing minimum conditions to ensure that both childhood and the city are healthy indeed.

It is desirable that these reclusions, adaptations and privations of school environments allow school communities to assess and rethink about the sense of schooling itself, to be able to promote an engagement of the whole society. Then, it is necessary to significantly increase investments when it comes to improve facilities and infrastructure of public schools and promote the necessary changes to meet the needs of children education and public health protocols. Most of all, the problems of public schools must be observed, as they often suffer from: overcrowded classrooms; conditions that do not comply with the minimum requirements per student; few strategies to improve natural ventilation; undersized bathrooms; insufficient amount of open spaces for common use.

In addition to that, at this moment of returning to school activities after the pandemic, we wish for an incorporation and valorization of open spaces beyond schools – squares, streets, sports fields and public parks (Azevedo; Tângari and Rheingantz, 2016). The centralization of activities in closed environments again would mean not only the increase in possibilities of contamination, but also the continuation of a flawed traditional system that is self-centered and does not dialogue with the city. We believe that, more than never, we need to make sense of the existing educational territory in order to give school a new meaning. It is worth investigating how school communities feel urban dynamics changed with the pandemic and how the difficulties in education environments can be overcome. This means the collaborative development of strategies for a healthy and inclusive return to schools, squares, and streets, while considering their demands, fears, and expectations.

In this opportunity of transformations for schools, it is necessary to consider the existence of several childhoods and, consequently, several levels of inequality and precarity in which each of them is exposed to. School needs to (re)connect with the reality of students and neighborhoods (Gadotti, 2006) to overcome the challenges it is currently facing and be understood and taken as an essential place for children to be together.

The panorama we presented herein searched to show the importance of looking at the challenges of childhood beyond the pandemic, understanding children as subjects who have rights and that way contributing for this necessary issue of V!RUS. We hope that these pages add to the deepening of the reflections and dialogues, so that instead of closing the "windows", these are opened to include children in the decisions about the desired return to classroom lessons and general face-to-face activities.

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1 The National School Feeding Program (PNAE), created in 1955, ensures nutrition for students of basic education at public schools. Due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the bill n. 786/2020, turned into Ordinary Law n. 13987/2020, regulates the distribution of food from school feeding to the families of the students whose classes were suspended, from kindergarten to high school.

2 We refer to the case of Manaus, the capital of Amazonas state, as reported by Gomes and Figueiredo (2020).

3 We refer to windows in a figurative meaning, as the space of interaction in digital platforms.

4 In order to keep the effect we searched for using popular sayings, we have chosen to keep them in the original, in Portuguese. We added literal translations for better comprehension, although proverbs not always have equivalences nor make sense in different cultures and languages.

5 According to ethnographic works by Jacobs (2011), Mello and Vogel (2017) on urban dynamics in public spaces, indirect care exists in the neighborhoods, as a practice of shared responsibility for children care which stimulates children's autonomy in the use of public spaces, to hang out and recreate.

6 Autonomy is understood as "one's capacity to conduct themselves and make decisions, considering rules, values, personal views, as well as the other's perspective" (Brasil, 1998, our translation). We also consider the thoughts of Freire (1996, p. 67, our translation), according to whom the citizen subject "is constituted in the experience of several, numerous decisions that are made." When we refer to children's autonomy in the city, we address Tonucci (1996) about the way children deal with paradigms that involve facing urban insecurities (such as conflicts on traffic and criminality, for instance).

7 Since 2015, in Brazil, the Federal Law n. 13185 establishes a National Program to Fight Systematic Intimidation (Bullying).

8 Cyberbullying is a kind of aggression related to sharing texts, photos or videos aiming to vilify classmates or even unknown people.

9 It is worth mentioning that the interest in using the app was so intense that it attracted, in Brazil, about 50 million people in less than 20 days (Rosário, 2016). Some cultural spaces even interdicted the entrance of visitors, fearing an invasion of players. In some cities, there were several accidents and mugging involving users due to the lack of perception of environments (physical and virtual) caused by the technology of augmented reality.

10 We consider herein the expression "in the margins of" as the situation of people who, even being citizens and having rights written in laws, actually cannot obtain minimum conditions of social dignity – well-being and quality of life.

11 Misinformation about the risks of teenage pregnancy is a serious problem that must be addressed more often at school, as well as themes related to sexuality, drugs, and others. It is believed that the lack of face-to-face school activities during the pandemic may have held back the efforts made by teachers and supervisors to fight these social problems.

12 During the pandemic, teachers had an increase of workload and had to go through an adaptation process to use technologies and prepare virtual lessons, without any salary increase and any psychological support that corresponded to such overload and change of routine.

13 Research developed every year since 2010 by the Brazilian Internet Steering Committee (CGI.br) in cooperation with the Regional Center of Studies for the Development of the Information Society (Cetic.br), it works like a census to evaluate digital inclusion in Brazilian schools.

14 The modes of commuting to school, food, and home care, as well as the social, cultural, and economic structure of the family, could be considered here as external factors that, nevertheless, are essential for good school performance.