

HOW MUCH TIME DOES TIME HAVE? THE DAILY LIVES OF CHILDREN DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

QUANTO TEMPO O TEMPO TEM? O COTIDIANO DAS CRIANÇAS DURANTE A PANDEMIA DA COVID-19

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ABSTRACT: Articulating the Social Studies of Childhood and a contemporary approach in Developmental Psychology, this study aimed to investigate the experience of children from Salvador, Brazil, and its metropolitan region, concerning their organization of time during Covid-19 pandemic; particularly, how children organize their days, how they perceive the passage of time, and how they have been managing free and institutionalized time within the domestic space. Results show a significant increase in the time spent with electronic devices and screens, a reduction in physical activities, and the feeling of boredom by some children. This feeling was preceded by the reorganization of their weeks with the main activities they usually did before the pandemic – school, extracurricular, and leisure activities – in the remote system.

Keywords: Children. Pandemic. Time. Development.

RESUMO: A partir dos Estudos Sociais da Infância e da Psicologia do Desenvolvimento, o presente estudo teve como objetivo investigar a experiência das crianças de Salvador e região metropolitana no que diz respeito à organização do cotidiano durante a pandemia da Covid-19, considerando como percebem a passagem do tempo e como têm administrado o tempo livre e institucionalizado dentro do espaço doméstico. Os resultados apontam para um aumento significativo no tempo gasto em telas e/ou dispositivos eletrônicos, a diminuição de atividades físicas e a sensação de tédio por parte de algumas crianças. Essa sensação precedeu a reorganização de suas rotinas com as principais atividades que exerciam antes da pandemia – atividades escolares, extracurriculares e de lazer –, majoritariamente em formato remoto.

Palavras-chave: Crianças. Pandemia. Tempo. Desenvolvimento.

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Introduction

Childhood is a generational group especially affected by the coronavirus pandemic, not only due to the risks of contamination itself, but especially with regard to the need for reorganization of lifestyles, mainly due to the closure of schools. Considering that the school has become, in modern society, one of the privileged spaces for children to experience the dimension of play (TSCHOKE; RECHIA, 2012) and, more than that, it has become the main environment for socialization and development of this age group, it is possible to formulate some questions from the social distance imposed by the pandemic, the consequent suspension of classes and extracurricular and leisure activities outside the home.

This article presents part of the results of the research “Childhood in pandemic times: The experience of children from different contexts,” which was idealized and started in the city of Belo Horizonte (Brazil) and its metropolitan region by the Center for Studies and Research on Childhood and Early Childhood Education (NEPEI) of the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG). This research continued in the state of Bahia, specifically in the city of Salvador and its metropolitan region, and was then linked to the Interdisciplinary Study Group on Childhood, Children and Contexts of the Federal University of Bahia (GEIC/UFBA). The purpose of the research was to understand, from the children’s perspective, how they experience the Covid-19 pandemic in Brazil through the analysis of routines, social relationships and lived experiences, focusing on emotions and feelings provoked.

For this article, the data referring to the organization of the children’s daily lives will be analyzed, highlighting how they perceive the passage of time and how they have managed the free time and the institutionalized time within the domestic space. The choice of this analytical dimension derives from the recognition of the importance of time in the understanding of the child’s development and in the composition of the symbolic administration of childhood (SARMENTO, 2005).

Childhood and Occupation of Time

Previous research with children has pointed to the perception of homework and school routines as activities close to a type of work—in that they systematically occupy children’s days and are seen as obligations. This is related to reflections of the social studies of childhood, which understand the school child as the new working child (QVORTRUP, 1987; 2001). Besides school, extracurricular activities have occupied a good part of children’s weekly routines—particularly those attending the private schools.

When we dedicate ourselves to research on children’s time occupation, a scarcity of studies on the theme is noted. In a recent review (BRANDÃO; LORDELO, 2017), we noticed that the studies found in the Brazilian context have pointed out the importance of extracurricular activities to occupy children’s free time, i.e., the shift when they are not at school. Among the population of greater socioeconomic vulnerability, a predominance of the use of free time in unstructured activities was found, and this type of activity would not promote protection and safety for the children and especially the adolescents studied, but rather produce vulnerabilities such as risk behaviors, drug use and violence (SARRIERA et al., 2007).

Human Development and Temporality

We start, in the first place, from the sociological assumption that childhood is a social group with its own voice, which requires, according to Montandon (2001), that we see children not as beings in maturation

or progressive development, but with a kind of phenomenological look that is interested in the experience of children themselves and their role as actors. If these typical claims of the social studies of childhood have already opposed the theoretical principles of the more classical approaches of developmental psychology (for having seen children as maturing beings, for example),¹ it becomes necessary to articulate the contributions of the two theoretical fields. To value the notion of time in the processes of human development becomes, thus, a strategy of theoretical and methodological articulation when studying children.

Semiotically oriented Cultural Psychology is a contemporary approach to psychology that has as its main purpose to understand how we human beings construct ourselves and the world around us—we do not simply act or react to something; we produce meanings. As Valsiner (2014), a leading theorist in the field, states, we are compulsive producers of meaning. Therefore, theorists in this field do not give up the study of human subjectivity.

In particular, a basic imperative of Semiotic Cultural Psychology is that development is the property of open systems to undergo qualitative transformations, in constant relation to the environment, over an irreversible time (ZITTOUN et al., 2013, p. 12). Note the basic assumption that everything develops over time. The key, then, is to understand how people develop and transform themselves, how their life trajectories become what they are. There is, however, no presupposition of increase, progress, or developmental goals. It is important to understand how people experience the world and their subjective lives, since what differentiates humans from other living species is precisely a mediating condition: the semiotic function that mediates everything from our personal experiences to collective culture through social communication.

Human development is also guided by the constant overcoming of uncertainties between literal and imagined meanings, as well as uncertainties between the past and the present and between the present and the future—our ability to project and imagine scenarios that are to come also influences how we act in the present moment (ABBEY; VALSINER, 2005). Through imagined futures, one builds a bridge between the here-and-now and the unknown, smoothing the discontinuity of this transition and preparing for what is to come. These suggestions, of course, reflect the social and cultural contexts of each person; in the case of this research, each child. Add to this the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, which provoked a profound restructuring of imaginative processes by setting up a scenario full of uncertainty about the near and distant futures. For Abbey and Valsiner (2006), experience is always changing, which makes it an irreversible process. It is not only true that we cannot “go back in time,” but also that we live in an eternal border zone between a small here-and-now and an uncertain future. We live on a frontier. It is not only children who are continuously developing; adults also find themselves in this condition. Linked to the importance of the notion of temporality is that of the experience of time, that is, how we experience its passage and what meaning we give to it. In the case of children in the pandemic, we wonder how they understand the abrupt interruption in their usual routines—attending school and extracurricular activities, experiencing free time inside and outside the home environment, going to places for entertainment, meeting peers, etc.

Methodology

The data presented in this article are fruits of the research “Childhood in times of pandemic: The experience of children from different contexts”—specifically data collected in Salvador and cities of the Metropolitan Region (MRS). The MRS is composed of the municipalities of Pojuca, Camaçari, Candeias, Madre de Deus, São Francisco do Conde, São Sebastião do Passé, Itaparica, Simões Filho, Lauro de Freitas, Mata de São João, Vera Cruz, and Dias D’Ávila, which constitutes a total of thirteen cities.

The primary focus of the research was to understand the experiences of children in the Covid-19 pandemic emergency situation. The data presented here were produced from the application of electronic questionnaires between December 15, 2020 and February 15, 2021.

The electronic questionnaire, composed of 25 closed and open questions, was made available on the research website, on the social networks of partner entities, in the local media, in direct contact with actors that make up the child care network, and with the personal contacts of the research team. Access to the participants was facilitated by the use of distance communication tools, especially cell phones and WhatsApp application, as these resources are widely used by the population from different social strata. These strategies were initially developed by the NEPEI research group, based on international research with children about the effects of social isolation during the pandemic, among them the one carried out by University of Huelva, Spain.²

For the purposes of this article, the three questions of the instrument that address the activities performed by children will be analyzed. These encompass seventeen items that evaluate the weekly frequency of development of several activities, being evaluated on a scale of intensity composed of the options: no days; a few days; every day; and every day, several times a day.

In addition to the data from the questionnaires, data from interviews conducted with some of the children who agreed to participate in the second stage of the research will be presented. The interviews took place between April and May 2021. To understand how children perceive the passage of time, two specific questions were added to the interview script, and the children's answers will be used in this article as a way to illustrate the questionnaire data and support the theoretical and analytical arguments presented.

Participants

The survey included 1,059 children between 8 and 12 years old, 547 (51.6%) girls, 506 (47.8%) boys, and six (0.6%) who chose the option "others." Regarding race/color, 746 (71%) of the participants declared themselves dark-skinned—485 (46%) brown and 261 (25%) black; 215 (20%) declared themselves white; 22 (2%) indigenous; 19 (1.7%) yellow; 24 (2.2%) marked "other;" and 33 (3.1%) said they did not know or did not want to answer. The participants are, in their majority, residents of the city of Salvador (54.7%), with Camaçari and Lauro de Freitas being the municipalities of the MRS that registered the highest participation. These three municipalities together make up 79% of the sample.

Of the study participants, 593 (56.3%) attended private schools, 457 (43%) attended public schools, and 7 (0.7%) said they were not enrolled in school. It is worth noting that in Salvador, of the 579 children who answered the questionnaire, 437 (75%) study in private schools. The municipalities that also had a predominance of children in private schools were Lauro de Freitas, with 49 (80%), and Simões Filho, with 29 (88%). The municipalities with a predominance of children from public schools were Camaçari, with 171 children (87%), and Pojuca, with 63 (95%).

Ethical Considerations

The research was submitted and approved by the UFMG Research Ethics Committee, since it was initiated by NEPEI/UFMG. The insertion of the Bahian context in the research required a new submission to the Research Ethics Committee of the team responsible for the research in Salvador and in the MRS.

In the questionnaire, there was an item for the authorization of parents and/or guardians of the children and another in which the child was invited to participate in the study and agreed to participate being aware of the objectives of the study and its ethical principles.

Results

The data obtained from the questionnaire is about how often the children performed several daily activities during the pandemic and allows us to understand, to some extent, how the children's daily lives were structured. However, the instrument would not allow the analysis of how the children perceived the passage of time and the organization of their routines. In this sense, the data from the semistructured interview carried out with some participants was included in the analysis. The results are organized in a way to integrate the data from the questionnaires and the interviews seeking to constitute a more integrated analytical framework about the temporal dimension. Furthermore, we chose to refer the type of school attended by the children only in the results in which significant differences were found between the contexts, which is justified by the fact that, among all the socio-demographic variables analyzed (race/color, gender, type of school, age, city), only the type of school attended presented significant differences in some of the dimensions analyzed.

One set of questions deals with the use of electronic devices for leisure and the interaction of children during the process of social withdrawal. In general, it is observed a high frequency of screen use during this period. Regarding the frequency with which the children played on the computer, cell phone or tablet alone or with friends, it was found that 62% of the children played every day, among which 18% played several times a day. It is important to highlight that 22% of the children who attended public schools said they did not use these instruments on any or a few days, as opposed to 16% of children in private schools. Another important aspect refers to the discrepancy between students from the private (14%) and public school systems (3%) who said they played every day and several times a day.

Regarding watching cartoons, movies, or series, 71% of the children watched them every day, and 14% did so several times a day. Regarding interaction with adults through WhatsApp or computer, 69% of the children marked no days (23%) and few days (46%). On the other hand, interaction with other children through these devices was more frequent; 52% said they interacted every day and 11% several times a day. It can be seen that the lack of access to electronic devices produces a difference in the interaction of children in the public school system (4%), compared to those in private schools (11%).

When talking about their routines, the children pointed out that they spent a lot of time using electronic devices, and it was interesting to note that, for them, these activities helped to deal with boredom, but, at the same time, because they were done so often and without interaction with other children or adults, they had the opposite effect, producing boredom. In the words of Magali³ (12 years old, black, private school): "I felt bored, I had nothing to do, I would lie on the sofa, and to pass the boredom I watched TV series [...]" Cebolinha (11 years old, brown, private school) stated that by staying at home just "watching TV, I felt bored!" It is possible to note a certain ambiguity regarding electronic devices, perhaps because of the centrality they have assumed in children's lives.

The pandemic period undoubtedly brought to many of them a substantial increase in the use of screens, since both school and extracurricular activities began to be mediated by these devices. The same has occurred in the interactions and relationships with friends and family members, which began to occur mainly through video calls via cell phones and computers. It is certain that the new worsening of the pandemic

in Brazil and the prolonged use of electronic devices and screens by children can bring damage to their development (cognitive, linguistic, socioemotional), as Stefenon (2021) warns. However, it is undeniable that, in this context, screens have become “a way to strengthen ties, learn from each other and share values” (INFANCY..., 2020).

The fact of not going to school was perceived by the children as something that interferes with the perception of the speed of the passage of time, since the school context used to occupy a large part of their days. “Because when we went to school, we spent several hours there and the day goes by faster than when I’m at home” (Mafalda, 9 years old, brown, public school).

The time elapsed in virtual activities and classes seems to pass very slowly for children, probably as a result of the displeasure they feel in these activities. There is an explicit relationship between emotions and the perception of the passage of time, and negative emotions, such as sadness and boredom, produce a slowdown in the way the passage of time is perceived (DROIT-VOLET; MECK, 2007).

It can be stated that, for the group of children who had access to the remote learning system, there was the maintenance of school activities or activities related to the teaching content, but also an important loss of interactions with friends and teachers, as well as of time for playing, playing games and physical activities that school itself usually allows. In the virtual environment, there is not much space for children’s interaction and break time is perceived as quite reduced, as Marina (12 years old, white, private school) states, “School break is too short now.”

It can be observed, then, that in parallel with the increase in the use of screens, there is a decrease in physical activities during the pandemic. We can see that 78% of the children stated that they did not do this type of practice on any day (29%) or did it on a few days (49%).

The pandemic imposed a limitation on movement and physical activity, which caused a greater sedentary lifestyle among children and adolescents who had a routine of physical activities at school. The Fernandes Figueira Institute points out that the need to resume physical activities should give preference to movements done outdoors, in open and ventilated spaces; individual sports practices such as running, cycling, and swimming are especially recommended (BARROS, 2020 apud Covid-19..., 2021).

Another activity little performed during the Covid-19 pandemic refers to the practice of reading books or magazines that are not mandatory for school: 81% of children responded that they do not read during any day (29%) or for a few days (59%). It is necessary to investigate the reasons for the little practice of reading among children, as this may result from the nonavailability of books or magazines, but it may also mean the decrease of this practice among them as a result of the excess of screens and electronic devices. According to a survey conducted by the Instituto Pró-Livro (Pro-Book Institute), 44% of Brazilians over 5 years old are not readers, which means they have not read any book in the last three months (TOKARNIA, 2020).

Schools, through virtual classes or activities sent home, continue to occupy a significant part of the children’s routine. It was found that school activities were performed by 70% of the children every day, and for 10% of them, several times a day. Here, the differences between children from public and private schools are more subtle, but still present: of the 70% who performed school activities daily, 41% are from private schools while 29% are from public schools. The children also stated that not going to school in person helped in the perception of the slowness of time, because by going to school, there was better organization of time and routine.

For Felipe (10 years old, white, private school), there is no longer, in pandemic, a difference between the week and the weekend: “the only difference is that there is no class.” This statement suggests that in the absence of activities outside the house, when public or external space is taken out of the picture, there is a

certain indistinction between weekdays and weekends—this distinction is central in the organization and perception of time by children.

One of the children interviewed left school because his parents considered that the institution was not prepared for the remote system and opted to leave the child at home with private tutoring and extracurricular activities in person. The institutionalization of time in the child's routine makes him perceive a great speed in the passage of time. "It's too fast for me. It's been going by too fast! In the morning I wake up early to go to tutoring classes and then I have afternoon class and then I have basketball and judo, Friday and Wednesday, Monday and Wednesday actually" (Chico Bento, 11 years old, brown, private school).

It is interesting to note that for some children, playing alone, playing games, and watching videos are not considered play. Perhaps this explains the low frequency with which playing was presented in the questionnaires. Regarding playing with toys or inventing games, 60% of the children played on either a few days (41%) or not at all (19%). Regarding playing at home (in the backyard, on the slab, or on the porch), 60% of the children said they either played very few days (34%) or not at all (26%). The children who said they played not at all (63%) and a few days (23%) in the apartment (condominium, playground) totaled 81%. It is not possible to say if this data is due to the little space in the apartment for playing or if we have an unequal division of participants who live in houses and apartments, since this question was not contemplated in the questionnaire. The same can be said about the data referring to the home environment.

Regarding playing outside the space of the house, 89% of children said they used this space either not at all (53%) or few days (36%). These data corroborate the studies that show the little use of public space by children due to the belief of danger and the inadequacy of this space for this age group (WENETZ, 2013; DIAS; FERREIRA, 2015). Such data may be enhanced by the context of the pandemic. Regarding going to friends' houses during the pandemic, children reported doing it on no days (61%) and few days (33%), totaling 94%.

These data show that the children continued to seek playful activities to do throughout their days, having the most diverse partners for this: "I play with my sister in my toyland, I play with the dog, I play with my dolls, I play with the whole house" (Marina, white, 12 years old, private school). However, the absence of playmates was also registered by the children, who made reference to loneliness in moments of social separation: "Since I'm alone, I don't play, right? I stay at home and there's no one to play with, so I stay at home playing videogame or playing with my toys" (Chico Bento, 11 years old, brown, private school). Other strategies used by the children to get over their boredom involve other activities. Magali (12 years old, black, private school) said that she "drew, talked with my friends, with my family."

Many children pointed out that one shift of the day was reserved for remote classes and that the other shift was occupied by schoolwork, drawing, playing games, extracurricular activities, listening to music, and playing electronic games, with an emphasis on television. Many children reported watching series and movies, referring to "binge-watching series." Besides these activities, writing in journals, therapy, and reading books were also mentioned by some children.

On the other hand, the activities of helping with domestic chores (making the bed, setting the table, cleaning, cooking, etc.) were relatively little contemplated: 57% of the children did not do them on any day (14%) or do them a few days (43%), and 5% did them several times a day. There was no discrepancy in the fulfillment of these activities neither with regard to gender nor the type of school attended by the child. However, it should be noted that the question asked in the questionnaire does not allow an understanding of the time spent on these activities, nor the level of involvement and responsibility of the children in them.

However, in a very incipient way, the performance of domestic activities in collaboration with the family appears in the routine of some children. One child says that, with the pandemic, it was not possible to count on external help to perform domestic activities and the tasks were distributed among the family members: “during the pandemic, we started to do each one of us one thing, so that no one would be burdened. One day I sweep the house, my dad does the dishes, my mom does the laundry or the other way around” (Cascão, 11 years old, white, private school).

The data also reveal some differences in the children’s routines. Children whose families have better financial conditions point out remote extracurricular activities and also the practice of physical activities at home, as appears in the following account: “I started doing physical activity at home, because we have kind of a gym, a treadmill. I started to walk more, because now we can’t leave home to do physical education” (Cascão, 11 years old, white, private school).

The reference to grandparents appears in the answers, whether considering their distance due to the risks of contamination or the intensification of the interaction between generations when they are in the same house or when this contact has been possible. This appears in the speech of Jurema (12 years old, indigenous, public school), who pointed as a weekend activity to visit her grandmother and talk to her to hear the stories of when her grandmother was younger.

The availability of economic and material resources does not prevent children from feeling bored in the context of social distance. “I’ve been bored, it’s boring to stay quiet at home just watching TV shows” (Magali, 12 years old, black, private school). Apparently, at times when the shops close and the participants spend more time at home, they reinforce the idea of monotony: “When I didn’t leave the house and just watched, then I got bored” (Cebolinha, 11 years old, brown, private school).

One of the children interviewed identifies the similarity of the conditions imposed on everyone: “My life, like everyone else’s in the world, was to stay at home” (Carminha, 11 years old, brown, private school). However, we know that this home is absolutely distinct in terms of structural and economic conditions. This is expressed in the children’s speech when asked about the magic they would do if they could. A 12-year-old girl, living in a settlement area, says that her magic spell would be “for all the people to have a brick house because people had houses made of tarpaulin and cardboard” (Mônica, 12 years old, black, out of school). On the other hand, a 12-year-old girl from an economically favored class wishes: “If I could make a magic spell, I would bring back my favorite horse and the little foal, I really like horses, my mare gave birth in the pandemic” (Marina, 12 years old, white, private school). The disparity of these statements reflects the profound differences not only in the material conditions in which each child lives, but also in how the participants rely on these conditions for their imagination exercises; so that they can, amidst the uncertainties imposed by the present, imagine and, in a way, wish to produce their futures (ABBEY; VALSINER, 2005). The poetic movement of each child, besides being unique, seems marked by very concrete and subjective conditions.

Concluding Remarks

The pandemic radically changed the organization of the children’s times, especially during the times of greater commercial closures, restricted movement of people and, above all, with the closing of schools, which required a reorganization of children and families in the management of daily life. The longer exposure time to screens, either watching classes or videos, or playing games, was a reality for most children. If, on the one hand, it is not possible to judge families for not being able to restrict this use, on the other hand, it

is necessary to highlight that the harm of overexposure has already been registered in the literature. As with the other dimensions of the questionnaire, which involved questions about the perception of the pandemic, the respect for care protocols, such as social withdrawal and isolation, and the experience with possible illness from Covid-19, the questions that asked the children about the organization of their routine and the perception of time are definitely influenced by economic and social factors. Despite the influence of such factors, we highlight two general aspects: first, the lack or decrease of physical activities by the children; second, their low adherence or dedication to household chores.

Moreover, in the profound reorganization demanded to everyone by the pandemic (the “life of everyone in the world,” in Carminha’s words), it can be observed that, especially for the families of more favored socioeconomic level, a restructuring of the children’s routines happened relatively quickly, so that they occupied their days and produced the differentiation between weekdays and weekends. Thus, gradually, many children started to distinguish, in their pandemic daily routine, the time for school activities, for extracurricular activities (usually in the remote system), as well as the time for leisure activities. This reorganization of children’s time by their parents or caretakers reiterates the understanding of the twenty-first century child as the new working child, brought by Qvortrup (1987; 2001). Allowing children to be idle or to have too much free time becomes a sign of carelessness about their education, their future, and their development in general. For this reason, we must listen very carefully when children talk to us ambivalently about the passage of time and how they deal with boredom.

If we are compulsive sense producers (VALSINER, 2014), what senses do children produce about time? We are living a pandemic. The metaphor of the frontier, used by Cultural Semiotic Psychology, fits well to the situation we are in. The pandemic is a temporal and spatial frontier, which can produce uncertainties about lives, about human relations, and diminish future horizons—also for children. While reorganizing our days and those of our children is a healthy attitude, disregarding the uncertainties and temporal voids caused by pandemic constraints is also a risk. Thus, we reaffirm the importance of valuing temporality in the development processes of children—people who become, people who already are.

Authors’ Contribution

Conceptualization: Santana JP, Lordelo LR, Férriz AFP; **Methodology:** Santana JP, Lordelo LR, Férriz AFP; **Research:** Santana JP, Lordelo LR, Férriz AFP; **Writing – First version:** Santana JP, Lordelo LR, Férriz AFP; **Writing – Revision & Editing:** Santana JP, Lordelo LR, Férriz AFP; **Acquisition of Financing:** Santana JP, Lordelo LR.

Availability of Research Data

Data will be provided upon request.

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Notes

1. When we mention such classical approaches, we can refer to two major traditions (DIXON; LERNER, 1999). On the one hand, the organicist tradition theories, which conceive development in a teleological way, that is, occurring toward an expected goal socially, sexually and cognitively, with stages that undergo qualitative changes, as exemplified by theories apparently distinct from each other, such as Jean Piaget (1896–1980) and Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). At the other extreme, the mechanistic tradition theories, such as learning theories, represented by authors like Watson (1878–1958), Bandura (1925–2021), Bijou (1908–2009), and Baer (1931–2002), who see development as resulting more from environmental forces than from intrinsic causes, understanding human change in a quantitative, continuous, and additive way.
2. For more information on the national survey, see <https://www.infanciaemtemposdepandeemia.com.br>. For the Spanish survey and the report, see <https://infanciaconfinada.com/>.
3. The names are fictitious and were inspired by children's characters.

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