

## ARTICLE

# Early childhood education and covid-19 pandemic: actions of middle-level bureaucrats in the Baixada Fluminense

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### ABSTRACT

The current article is a research clipping aimed at mapping actions associated with early childhood education that were taken by ten municipalities in Baixada Fluminense during the covid-19 pandemic, based on conversations with mid-level bureaucrats accounting for managing municipal education institutions. The adopted methodology comprised virtual meetings and questionnaire application. Remote teaching was adopted by these municipalities as temporary alternative to maintain the school year running, although there were many contradictions about the adopted pedagogical approach. This option has disregarded the fact that many children lived in social vulnerability contexts and that their families were concerned with material issues associated with subsistence, as well as with poor access to technological devices and services. Results have pointed towards disarticulation among federated entities, a fact that has hindered coordinators' actions. Thus, it is essential thinking about the place of these professionals in State's bureaucracy.

### KEYWORDS

covid-19 pandemic; remote teaching; mid-level bureaucrat.

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## ***EDUCAÇÃO INFANTIL E PANDEMIA DA COVID-19: AÇÕES DOS BUROCRATAS DE MÉDIO ESCALÃO NA BAIXADA FLUMINENSE***

### **RESUMO**

Este artigo é um recorte de pesquisa que objetivou mapear as ações de dez municípios da Baixada Fluminense para a educação infantil no período da pandemia da covid-19, por meio do diálogo com os burocratas de médio escalão, profissionais responsáveis pela gestão municipal das creches e pré-escolas. A metodologia envolveu encontros virtuais e aplicação de questionário. O ensino remoto foi uma alternativa temporária e uma aposta para a continuidade do ano letivo com muitas contradições em relação ao trabalho pedagógico na educação infantil. Essa opção desconsiderou que muitas crianças estavam em contextos de fragilidade social, em que suas famílias estavam preocupadas com questões materiais de subsistência e com pouco acesso a artefatos e serviços tecnológicos. Os resultados apontam para a desarticulação entre os entes federados, o que dificultou as ações locais dos coordenadores de educação infantil. Assim, é importante pensar o lugar desses profissionais na burocracia estatal.

### **PALAVRAS-CHAVE**

pandemia da covid-19; ensino remoto; burocrata de médio escalão.

## ***EDUCACIÓN INFANTIL Y PANDEMIA COVID-19: ACCIONES DE BURÓCRATAS DE NIVEL MEDIO EN LA BAIXADA FLUMINENSE***

### **RESUMEN**

Este artículo es un recorte de una investigación que tuvo como objetivo mapear las acciones de diez municipios de la Baixada Fluminense para la Educación Infantil durante la pandemia de covid-19, mediante el diálogo con burócratas de nivel medio, profesionales responsables de la gestión municipal de las instituciones de Educación Infantil. La metodología implicó reuniones virtuales y aplicación de un cuestionario. La enseñanza a distancia fue una alternativa temporal y una apuesta para la continuidad del ciclo escolar con contradicciones con relación al trabajo pedagógico de la Educación Infantil. Esta opción desconoció que muchos niños se encuentran en contextos de fragilidad social, en que sus familias se encontraban preocupadas por cuestiones materiales de subsistencia y con poco acceso a artefactos y servicios tecnológicos. Los resultados apuntan para la desarticulación entre las entidades federativas, lo que dificultó la actuación de los coordinadores. Por eso, es importante pensar en el lugar de estos profesionales en la burocracia estatal.

### **PALABRAS CLAVE**

pandemia de covid-19; enseñanza remota; burócrata de nivel medio.

*It is true that the history of humankind is beautiful  
and it is a pity that [the history] of men is so sad.  
(Simone de Beauvoir, 2019, p. 57)*

The epigraph opening this article is an excerpt from the book *The woman destroyed (La femme rompue)*, which was originally published by Simone de Beauvoir in 1960. In this essay, she addresses concepts such as anguish, freedom and accountability, by exploring existential dilemma related to gender issues linked to individual action and political engagement.

Five decades have passed and her writings still inspire the desire to describe our dilemma in face of the potentials, precariousness and provisional aspects of the human condition. This statement is observed in one of the most stressing chapters of humankind's recent history: the sanitary crisis caused by the new coronavirus, which has started in China, in December 2019, and spread all over the planet from 2020 onwards. Accordingly, the aim of the present article is to compose, along with so many other academic productions from the herein addressed period-of-time, a fragment of narratives about experiences acquired from the impact of the pandemic. Our focus heads to teaching systems in Baixada Fluminense,<sup>1</sup> a region that houses 3.7 million people (IBGE, 2020), in other words, 23% of Rio de Janeiro state's population, as well as to the challenges linked to actions taken by middle echelon bureaucrats in their first attempts to fulfill child education demands during the pandemic.

Middle echelon bureaucrats are herein understood as those integrating the public bureaucracy sphere and who have straight contact either with members of the high bureaucracy sphere or with street-level bureaucrats who are associated with public-policy beneficiaries (Oliveira and Abrucio, 2018; Pires, 2018). Lotta, Pires and Oliveira (2014) understand middle echelon bureaucrats as those who have intermediate management and direction functions, and who occupy management, direction, coordination or inspection positions. As for the present investigation, coordinators, also named child education managers, from ten of the 13 municipalities in *baixada fluminense* were selected as study subjects.

Research construction was unique, since it was never, ever, tried before by the present researchers — as they were at home and supported by digital instruments. The group of researchers from two public universities<sup>2</sup> comprised women-professors

1 According to the Secretaria de Estado de Desenvolvimento da Baixada Fluminense e Região Metropolitana (SEDEBREM, 2005), Baixada Fluminense is a geographic region of Rio de Janeiro State comprising 13 municipalities that form the great metropolitan region of Rio de Janeiro city: Belford Roxo, Duque de Caxias, Guapimirim, Itaguaí, Japeri, Magé, Mesquita, Nilópolis, Nova Iguaçu, Paracambi, Queimados, São João de Meriti, Seropédica.

2 Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro and Education School of Baixada Fluminense at University of Rio de Janeiro State.

who were used to meetings and who became teachers from their action in classrooms, formation courses and meetings with their peers. Thus, the current study brings along the pursuit of self-understanding during a time of difficulties, losses and changes caused by the pandemic.

The study started on May 2020, after some virtual meetings carried out in Zoom app.<sup>3</sup> We started to reason about the outcomes from policies designed and put at place in the territory where we act in as professionals and researchers, given the experiences lived by members of our research group with remote teaching (RT) demands and the need of going on with studies developed by this same group. We got interested in understanding political arrangements in municipalities composing this region, which also houses two of the universities participating in the present study. Accordingly, and based on the pandemic scenario, we also aimed at understanding the continuity of an offered social right, namely: the right to education (Brasil, 1988), in our case, to child education.

States and municipalities canceled face-to-face activities in schools on March 13, 2020, due to the adoption of social distancing measures taken as strategy to stop virus outspread; such a canceling lasted for the whole school year. We followed-up the initiatives to go on with school activities in a remote way and to establish RT during the first weeks of the social distancing period. The RT experience had already been implemented in other countries due to the same sanitary requirements. This complex scenario added to social inequalities that, under normal conditions, were already haunting a large amount of the population in the country, a population that already lived under precarious survival conditions and who did not see the effective application of their social rights. A significant fraction of the population in these municipalities, which is the very target of the current study, shares the aforementioned profile.

After the public-health emergency decree was issued, states and municipalities started reorganizing their educational activities. The pandemic demanded fast responses and the conduction of local solutions, since there was no official positioning from the National Education Council (Conselho Nacional de Educação — CNE).<sup>4</sup> Given such omission scenario, states and municipalities issued opinions and resolutions countrywide and they were based on different perspectives. Then, on April 24, 2020, CNE, in its Opinion n. 5/2020 (Brasil, 2020c), regulated the school calendar reorganization and the set of remote activities focused on fulfilling the annual workload established for the school year. The opinion recommended the possibility of developing activities through digital means, and through radio and television means, as well as the distribution of printed materials and orientation to activities based on didactic materials.

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3 This platform allows attending meetings through videoconference; its number of users grew fast in 2020 given the need of holding on-line meetings.

4 The National Education Council is a collegiate bureau integrating the Brazilian Education Ministry structure; it acts in the formulation and evaluation of National Education Policies.

CNE also highlighted school reorganization, given the long canceling of face-to-face educational activities; it recommended networks to observe students' reality and limits, given the new arrangements and the need of adopting inclusive strategies to avoid school dropouts. With respect to younger children, Opinion n. 5/2020 (Brasil, 2020c) did not make remote teaching mandatory for child education and encouraged institutions to send the activities to students; it also pointed out the need of having adults mediating and helping children in their assignments. The 200 school days predicted in the Lei de Diretrizes e Bases (LDB 9.394/96 — Brasil, 1996) were revisited, as well as the workload, which used to be mandatory, in the past. This opinion also provided on sending guidelines about eating and hygiene to families, since children were not getting the school meals.

Campos and Vieira (2021) wrote an article about aspects of covid-19 impact on caregiving and assistance in early childhood; they reported the impoverishment frame felt by the Brazilian population in the last years, including cuts in income transfer programs, such as Bolsa Família. This situation led to a food insecurity scenario, which was worsened by schools' closing, since many children have school as the place where they have their main meals. Accordingly, education institutions were told to organize strategies to distribute food or resources for enrolled-children families.

When it comes to the food topic, within the pandemic context, it is important highlighting that Law n. 13.987 (Brasil, 2020a) was enacted on April 7, 2020. It authorized, exceptionally, the immediate distribution of food acquired by the National School Food Program (PNAE) among students' parents or guardians. Yet, on April 9, 2020, the Education Ministry (MEC) and the National Fund for Education Development issued Resolution n. 2 (Brasil, 2020b), which provided on the right to food and on the State's accountability for implementing policies and actions to ensure food and nutritional security to children, as well as presented the standards for PNAE conduction during the pandemic.

How can one adjust the system in order to meet propositions in Opinion n. 5/2020 (Brasil, 2020c) and the new demands resulting from the pandemic, such as food distribution in schools? How can one make sure about children's right to education within this context? These enquires were moving the researchers on, since they are also teachers and managers in child education institutions, in different municipalities, in the herein assessed region. The exchange of experiences in the group's meetings helped observing that, in an isolated way, there was a pattern among interventions made in different municipalities to meet CNE's opinion. At that time, it seemed that we should take the public university's challenge of answering to demands of its community and to act in articulating these interventions. Thus, this process gave birth to the research aimed at mapping the actions taken by municipalities at Baixada Fluminense focused on child education during the pandemic. This investigation allowed us to seek ways to answer the following questions: what were the strategies used by the networks to make the right to education effective for children during the pandemic? What is the role played by middle echelon bureaucrats within this context? What were their motivations? What were the communication channels established to contact schools, children,

their families and child education professionals? What were the greatest challenges faced during this process?

The choice made for selecting coordinators as interlocution subjects resulted from the groups' tradition in following-up child education policies, with emphasis on actors involved in their implementation. Organization and orientation for carrying out the new arrangements in educational policies within the pandemic context was a task of the education secretaries; it took place through conversations with coordination groups, also known as teacher managers. Child education coordinators play an important role inside public policy bureaucracy, since they directly manage institutions' principals and create mechanisms to indirectly manage teachers; furthermore, they have vast knowledge about networks and schools' reality, they define the priorities and incentives for policy conduction, as well as are in charge of making trainings and of improving the communication between institutions' employees. These actors also help implementing policies when they make sure that their subordinates are committed to and identify themselves with both the organization and the policy they are involved with (Gassner and Gofen, 2018).

Pires (2018) points out that high echelon bureaucrats, as well as the street-level ones, get great attention from academic productions over the years; actors in bureaucracy's middle echelon, in their turn — just as the knowledge and study types they have developed —, were left aside, without a clear conceptual identity and a defined place in studies about governmental organizations and public policy production. With respect to these bureaucrats' features, the middle echelon is highlighted by Pires (2018) as the most instable fraction of bureaucracy, with the highest turn-over rates, because it is subjected to either electoral instability or to intense internal turn-over.

These are the core agents in our study, since mid-echelon bureaucrats mainly focus on promoting links between public needs — which are met by street-level bureaucrats — and priorities established by the high-echelon bureaucracy — which formulates the policies' guidelines. Studies by these authors have proven that such an intermediate bureaucracy has no power to set general public-policy guidelines; therefore, they do not set what would be the services to be provided. On the other hand, these bureaucrats are also in straight contact with public-policy's target publics (Oliveira and Abrucio, 2018). These subjects have privileged knowledge about policies regarding the children's lives context, as well as about that of both institutions and their professionals. We herein suggest a contribution to the debate about such a public agent, by putting the discussion on political arrangements made by child education coordinators from the ten mentioned selected municipalities during the pandemic context in the very core of it.

## **“THE HISTORY OF HUMANKIND IS BEAUTIFUL”: RESEARCH AT TIMES OF PANDEMIC**

The research group took two paths to build the research methodology in order to map municipalities' actions towards child education: virtual meetings with

child education coordinators and application of a questionnaire. Fieldwork was carried out between May and November 2020. It is important highlighting the coordinators' receptiveness to the proposition: in total, ten of the 13 municipalities invited to join the research adhered to it.

The first virtual meeting was carried out in June, and it aimed at introducing the research to the coordinators and at providing a space for exchanging, hearing and meeting, a place to expose the meanings we, as researchers, were giving to each other, in the group, given the challenge set by the pandemic. During this meeting, coordinators reported the challenges they were facing due to the canceling of face-to-face activities and to the new social demands they had to deal with, such as the need of mobilizing collaborative networks to get in contact with the families of children enrolled in the institutions and of articulating with other sectors, like public health and social work, so it would be possible implementing the actions suggested by the municipal education secretariats.

We started from the first information set gotten during the meeting with the child education coordinators in order to deepen our knowledge about actions taken by the secretariats, based on CNE propositions for the pandemic time and on policies set for child education — we also assembled a questionnaire to do so. We chose the questionnaire as research instrument because, besides being an instrument often used for academic investigations, it allows interviewees to introduce a series of information, as well as to answer to it on-line, given the peculiarity of the moment we were facing. Similar to how Richardson (2015) describes the questionnaire, we are also interested in this instrument mainly because it works as structured interview that enables describing the features and measurements taken of certain variables. Thus, the mentioned author points out six advantages for its use and that substantiate our option:

1. the possibility of getting a large number of data, simultaneously;
2. geographic coverage;
3. uniformity of data to support the analysis;
4. the questionnaire preserves respondents' identity;
5. the time to answer to the questionnaire when it is sent out in advance; and
6. data tabulation can be easily done (Richardson, 2015).

The herein used questionnaire was organized at Google Forms,<sup>5</sup> which is a tool that favors virtual recordings and dispatching. The questionnaire has 37 questions, both open and close, distributed among six sections. The first section aimed at featuring the secretariats. The second one sought information about the secretariats' actions given the canceling of face-to-face activities in education facilities focused on child education. The third one aimed at

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<sup>5</sup> Google Forms is a free-access service available at Google; it allows creating simple handing and sharing on-line forms.

gathering data on the adoption of an educative platform, since it was the strategy suggested in the face-to-face meeting to maintain the work developed with the children. The fourth section sought to observe secretariats' behavior towards school units, teachers and students' families. The fifth one aimed at designing the actions discussed based on the return of post-pandemic school activities. Finally, the sixth one saved free room for comments. We got 10 questionnaires back.

## WRITING THE "HISTORY OF HUMANKIND": ACTIONS IN CHILD EDUCATION DURING THE PANDEMIC

The number of returned questionnaires has evidenced that, given the canceling of face-to-face activities in the institutions, coordinators were summoned to make decisions based on three dimensions: pedagogical, social and managerial.

All coordinators have pointed out that the first action taken by the secretariat regarded setting meetings with the teams in order to design a plan for the referred time. It is important highlighting that such an initiative, at secretariat scope, was taken prior to the publication of CNE's Resolution (Brasil, 2020b), which, later on, took such an action as reference. It is also essential pointing out that, both the president of the Republic and the ministry of Education took public position against orientations by the World Health Organization (WHO). Schools' closing was a measure taken by the states, in compliance with the Ministry of Health.

The Federal Government plays the role of inducing policies, guidelines and orientations to other federative entities in a collaborative regime. However, the agenda, the formulation and the implementation of policies during the pandemic had to happen in an emergency manner and they should be articulated among federative entities, as well as among the involved sectors. That is not what we have experienced in Brazil; therefore, although municipalities had given fast responses to the problem, lack of national coordination, and its outcomes, made schools act before the secretariats. Thus, while coordination groups were getting organized in five of the ten municipalities, schools took a step ahead and made contact with both the children and their families. Two schools were producing videos, sending out links with stories, songs or assignments selected by the professionals in the internet, through the institutions' WhatsApp<sup>6</sup> or Facebook,<sup>7</sup> while the secretariat team was preparing pedagogical activities to be sent to schools or to be posted on the internet. Coordinators from these two

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6 WhatsApp is an application for instantaneous messages and calls for mobile phones; users can send out text messages, images and documents, as well as make voice and video calls with other participants through internet connection.

7 Facebook is a private virtual social network that enables its users to apply to a website and to interact with other users through posts and chatting.

municipalities stated that the activities sent out by the school did not follow the same theoretical references adopted for the ones elaborated by the secretariat teams; thus, there were two simultaneous perspectives of remote activity in these two networks.

It was essential establishing a communication and interaction channel among child education coordination team, education units and school community in order to coordinate, monitor and guide what was being done. With respect to communication between education secretariats and institutions, one can observe the following communication means: e-mail and WhatsApp. Contact with both children and their families was a task set for the schools; secretariats would get the necessary information whenever it was requested. Half of secretariats screened students' family conditions during the quarantine based on information gathered by education units.

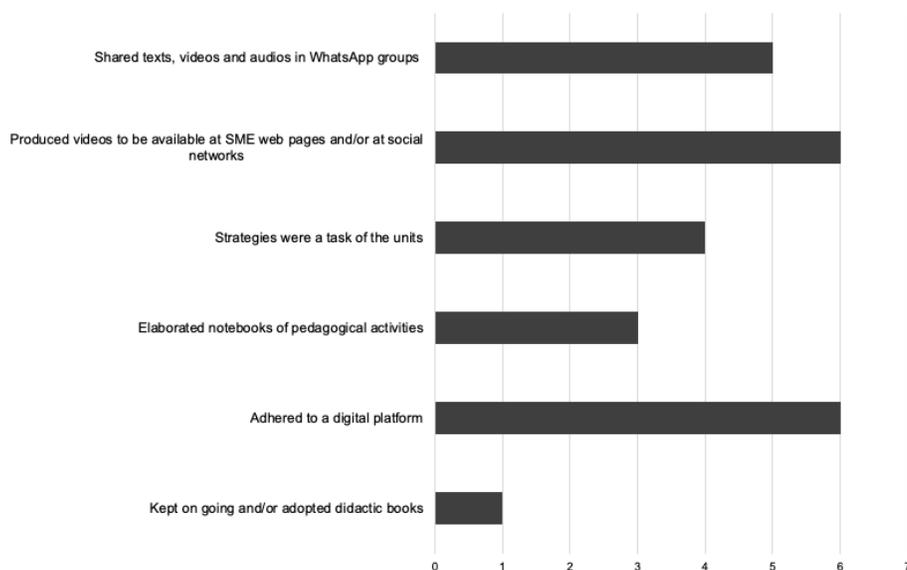
Communication with both the children and their families mainly happened with the aid of social networks. More than one social network was mentioned by some secretariats, and WhatsApp was the most often recommended one — it was used by 90% of school units. Mobile phone was the most often used device for communication purposes and to access the materials. Some factors can explain it, such as its wide use and low cost in comparison to other digital devices. The use of the mentioned networks is justified by the way to access the internet, since the cheapest plans to access pre-paid internet networks allow unlimited use of these applications, which does not happen in other electronic sites.

Accordingly, different readings of data produced during the research and to the present article were made; they were explored in the following items:

- pedagogical strategy;
- bond; and
- post-pandemic return.

#### PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES DURING THE PANDEMIC: WHAT IS THE PLACE OF BOTH THE CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES IN THE ASSESSED PROPOSITIONS?

This item introduces the pedagogical strategies used by municipalities participating in the research during the pandemic, i.e., reflection about resources adopted to develop a pedagogical work with/to children while face-to-face activities are canceled in daycare units and in preschools. Uneasiness was quite common during this process, given the following questions: how can one set a relationship without the children's presence in the institutional space? What would be the efficient technologies? How can one respect the rights of children in remote teaching? What is the place of children in propositions elaborated during the pandemic? Have they been heard? Have children been having opportunities to tell their experiences? How can one make sure about children's participation and authorship in knowledge construction? These enquiries allow one to critically think about paths taken by these municipalities, listed in Graph 1.



**Graph 1 – Pedagogical strategies.**

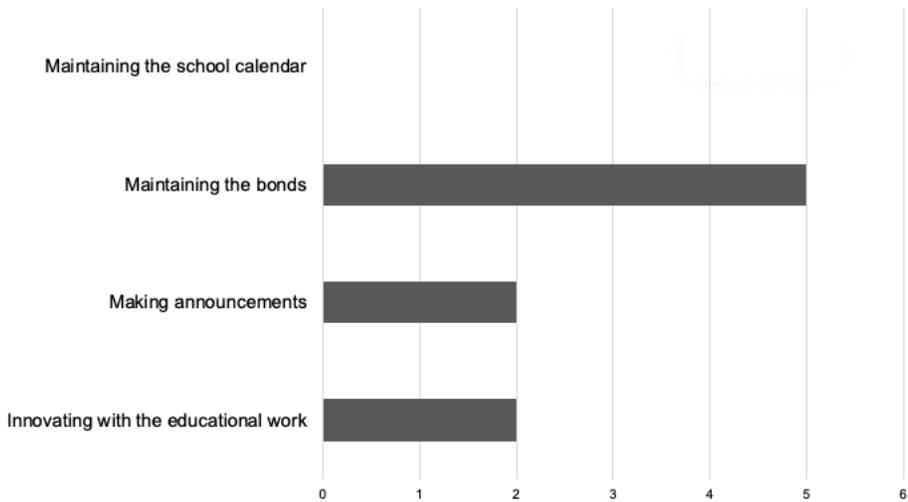
SME: Secretaria Municipal de Educação.

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

As already mentioned, contact with students’ families was made through social networks and/or WhatsApp. After the communication channels were set between secretariats and institutions, and, afterwards, between these institutions and students’ families, it was possible going ahead with actions focused on the children. Thus, with respect to the pedagogical dimensions, the main strategy adopted by education secretariats lied on setting on-line activities on their educational platforms, web pages and electronic portals. Digital materials and suggestions for activities in assignment notebooks were made available in social networks, mainly on WhatsApp. These actions took into account the specificities of this stage; therefore, it counted on the voluntary actions taken by teachers to keep contact with the children. Another strategy, which differed from the other ones, concerned the option made by one of the secretariats to keep on using the didactic books adopted for child education before the pandemic. According to coordinators who had managed this proposition, teachers were supposed to recommend the book pages to be worked on by the families.

The CNE document suggests the child education must keep synchronous or asynchronous contact through digital means. Five municipalities declared to have adopted educational platforms that were mostly selected by education secretariats. According to data collected from the questionnaires, the five municipalities that have opted for using the platform listed the answers seen in Graph 2 when they were asked about criteria substantiating its use.

### CRITERIA FOR ADOPTING THE PLATFORM



**Graph 2 – Criteria for the adoption of the platform.**

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

With respect to teachers' qualification to use the platform, only three municipalities have declared to have made qualification available for management teams and teachers during virtual meetings. Besides the particularities of child education's main age group, teachers also faced a hard time accessing the internet, because they did not know how to use it and the potential of digital platforms, not mentioning the digital literacy level and the limitations to access the mandatory technological artifacts. These factors are known by child education coordinators, but they did not care much about it, given the choices they have made, as it was reported to us.

From the *window sociologia* perspective (Lima, 2019), a policy must be analyzed from its complexity, with emphasis on interaction between policy beneficiary and the agent implementing it; in other words, "[...] how can the actions by the agents implementing it produce, reduce or broaden social inequalities [...]" (Lima, 2019, p. 87, our translation). Accordingly, the study enquired: how do pedagogical strategies affect children's lives? Can we say that these actions have allowed the approximation between children and their families, or have they denied social rights due to the privileged use of digital technologies? The Graph 2 also enables arguing whether the actions by middle echelon bureaucrats, child education managers in the assessed municipalities, are not in compliance with the propositions created by street-level bureaucrats; in other words, school professionals. At this point, lack of articulation refers to the likelihood of having propositions competing with each other — either when it comes to their format or content, a fact that can evidence the commitment to middle echelon bureaucrats' function (who account for coordinating teachers' qualification and activities).

Another point observed in the questionnaire aimed at getting to know the authorship of the produced materials sent by secretariats to the units or posted on

social networks. In total, 60% of coordinators have declared not to have consulted teachers, or the accountable ones, or the children, for their elaboration. Three participants of the first virtual meeting have mentioned to have used their expertise as mothers with children at pre-school age as reference for the elaboration of propositions to add to the secretariat's inventory available for the schools. Two coordinators who participated in the second virtual meeting have said to be getting the activities from the schools, and they select the one they see as more adequate — they are sent for publication on the platforms adopted by the secretariats.

Secretariat team centrality points towards a scenario of teachers' distancing from their planning and mediation activities, a fact that reduces them to individuals accounting for forwarding the available materials and videos. CNE Opinion n. 5/2020 (Brasil, 2020c) recommends teachers' approximation to the children and to their guardians in virtual environment as the way to tie bonds and to guide the dispatch of activities. However, in face of so many barriers to communication and for choices that should be prioritized, it seems that such an action was much more complex to be put in place within the observed scenario than the expected. Thus, rather than a process to discuss and negotiate the propositions, it seems that an authoritarian logic has prevailed, and it had little or no interference from schools. The ones in charge of child education (middle echelon bureaucrats) did not embody a role of link, of mediating the contact between high-echelon (municipal education secretaries) and street-level bureaucrats (teachers). This process likely helps implementing policies that do not meet the demands of both the children and their families at times of great social vulnerability.

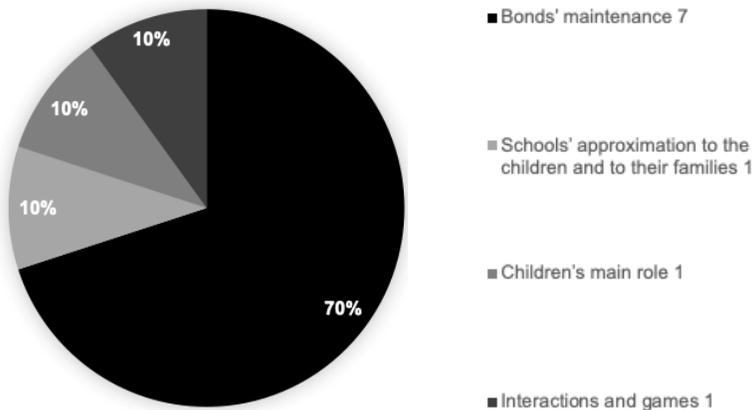
As for the activities, themselves, seven municipalities have declared to have posted the activities on social networks; six municipalities have elaborated printed materials that were distributed among the schools or sent to the children in their homes — all these possibilities were suggested in CNE's opinion that also recommends using MEC materials for their development. Regarding the evaluation of the produced material, six municipalities have created evaluation strategies, among them, one finds reports for school supervision, remote meetings to deal with evaluation, and evaluation forms. However, enquires about the prioritized criteria in this follow-up process remain, such as the case of the quality of children's experience with remote teaching.

## BONDS DURING THE PANDEMIC: WHAT IS THE QUALITY OF THE RELATIONSHIPS SET BASED ON THE ASSESSED PROPOSITIONS?

Field research in child education and legal documents stated to understand children as subjects of rights who experience the world, build knowledge and express themselves, who interact and express their desires in quite peculiar ways. The National Discipline Matrix Guidelines for Child Education (Brasil, 2009) has presented the basic principles for the pedagogical work in daycare centers and pre-schools, with emphasis on discussing interactions and games as structuring elements of the child culture, which cannot be reduced to teaching and learning strategies. Interactions and games are the possibility of subjective constitution

to produce feelings, to invent the world. Thus, it is understood as the function of child education, including the exceptional time experienced during the pandemic, which favors new ways of socialization and subjectivities committed to playfulness, to the other, to the planet, to democracy, to diversity. From this perspective, the research has reasoned about the quality of relationships with children and with their families, which were produced from propositions implemented by the herein assessed municipalities.

After being asked about the goal of strategies adopted for child education, most secretariats have stated to wish to keep the bonds with the children, as shown in Graph 3.



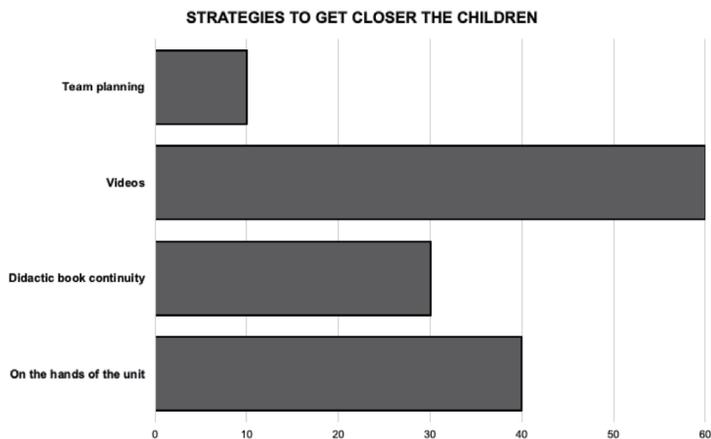
**Graph 3 – Goals of the strategies.**

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

In total, 70% of coordinators from the participant municipalities have declared to aim strategies adopted to keep the bonds with the children and with their families. The word ‘bond’ was also used in CNE/CP Opinion n. 5/2020 (Brasil, 2020c, p. 9, our translation). Child education was recommended to have daycare centers and preschools seeking “[...] a virtual bond between teachers and students’ families, in order to set close bonds and to make suggestions about activities to the children and to parents or guardians.”. Although we acknowledge that secretariats aimed at acting based on an unprecedented need, without having a federal standard to rely on, despite the peculiar difficulties to social distancing times, we cannot stop reasoning about the choices made for the pedagogical dimension during the pandemic, as well as about the concepts of child education observed in it. These concepts were available even before the pandemic and they triggered different outcomes during it. Thus, one can ask: is the dispatch of activities, itself, capable of keeping the bonds between the children and the schools? How is such bond understood?

It is important highlighting that, either CNE and secretariats — who have joined the research — understand the concept of maintenance or the process to get close bonds between school and children is linked to sending out pedagogical activities. CNE opinion justifies it by stating that the proposition focused on remote pedagogical activities aims at avoiding setbacks in learning and at not losing bonds

with the school “[...] in the sense of contributing to minimize eventual losses by children [...]” (Brasil, 2020c, 2020, p. 9, our translation). Therefore, one can observe a production logic subsidizing the pedagogical propositions, and it shines light over the strong preparatory-culture observed in child education. Each network reordered its own discipline matrix program and sought to provide educational activities that were organized as Graph 4.



**Graph 4 – Approximation strategies.**

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

There is another issue that rises from the goal of maintaining the bonds with the children and with their families, and it is linked to approximation strategies and regards the possibility of achieving them, given the hard time faced by several families to access the virtual environment and to keep up with pedagogical affection and convenience relationships during the pandemic. This matter is brought up because CNE recommended virtual approximation to keep the bonds and, consequently, to contribute with suggestions and activities, so families could thrive along with the children. The strategy of sending out activities was a relevant bet in the maintenance of bonds; it was suggested in the national document. We herein point out that only one of the five platforms used by the municipalities had enough resources to achieve children/teachers interaction.

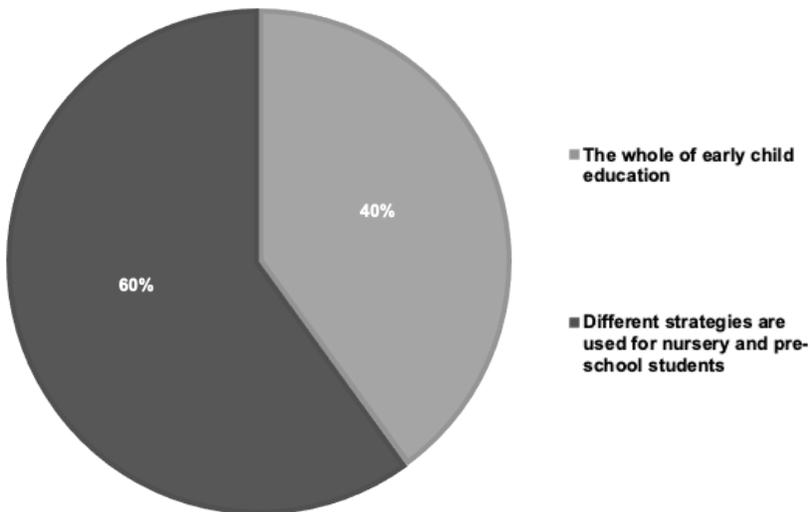
According to Winnicott (2011), bond is a fundamental category of human existence. Guimarães (2011a, p. 50, our translation) discussed the relevance of children’s manifestations to build pedagogical practices and associated bond to listening. According to her, bond with adults and with the space is reinforced, as long one listens to “[...] ideas that children bring up, by their own choice [...]”. Based on this process, “[...] at the same time [the child is] heard, the child will embody the challenge of listening [...]”. Thus, the concept of ‘bond’ is operated either by CNE or by secretariats, although it seems that the relational perspective has been disregarded.

Secretariats mainly point out the Common National Discipline Matrix Basis, also known as BNCC (Brasil, 2017), as well as the municipality’s discipline matrix

proposition as reference source for the construction of materials and activities to be sent to children. At this point, it seems timely to reason about child education and childhood concepts emerging from discipline matrix propositions, and about what are the propositions and contradictions of official documents.

We have asked whether the provided activities were thought for all child education stages or whether differentiated strategies were developed for daycare centers and pre-schools; Graph 5 was developed from the collected answers.

#### THE STRATEGIES ARE ADOPTED FOR:



**Graph 5 – Activities based on groupings.**

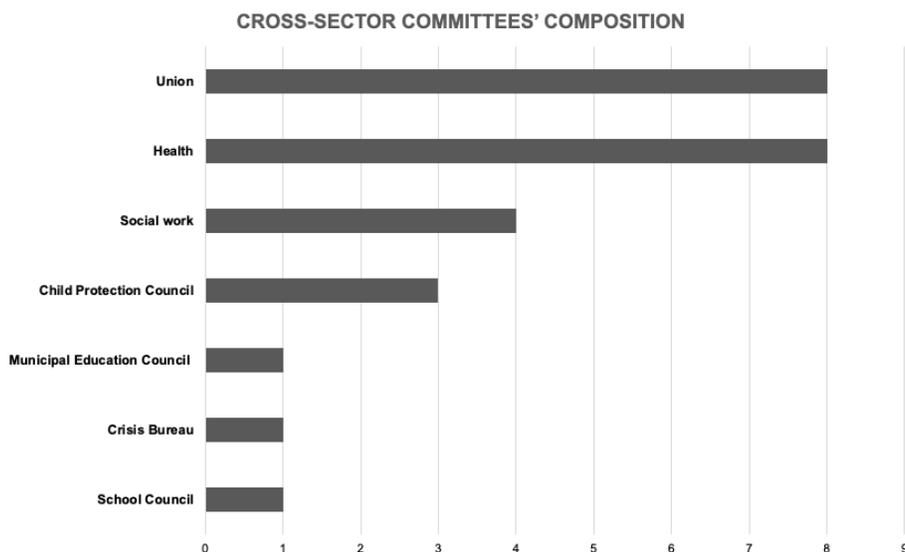
Source: Elaborated by the authors.

As it was possible observing, the vast majority, or 60%, of secretariats, did not distinguish activities for daycare centers from those for pre-schools. If, on the one hand, there are elements of child-culture that cross the whole child education field, on the other hand, the reference document of most secretariats shines light over pedagogical work specificities for babies and early-age children, by taking into account age group differences forming this schooling stage. Previous research (Guimarães, 2011b; Matos, 2018) have pointed out the relevance of ensuring education-work specificities for daycare centers based on the visibility of babies' potentials expressed by their non-verbal channels, their playfulness, mimicking, babbling, body moves, and that likely express their knowledge about the world and about cultures, as well as about relationships.

#### POST-PANDEMIC: WHAT IS THE PLACE OF CHILDREN AND OF THEIR FAMILIES IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF RETURN TO FACE-TO-FACE ACTIVITIES?

With respect to strategies developed to the return to face-to-face activities, coordinators have been anxious about dealing with the sanitary weak-

nesses of school facilities, such as lack of resources to buy hygiene supplies and the impossibility of defining a date for such a return due to the pandemic — which lasted longer than the expected. Based on CNE’s orientations, nine municipalities have declared to have a cross-sector committee to think about the return to these activities. These committees’ formation took into account the fact that more than one element may have been chosen to join them, as we can see in Graph 6.

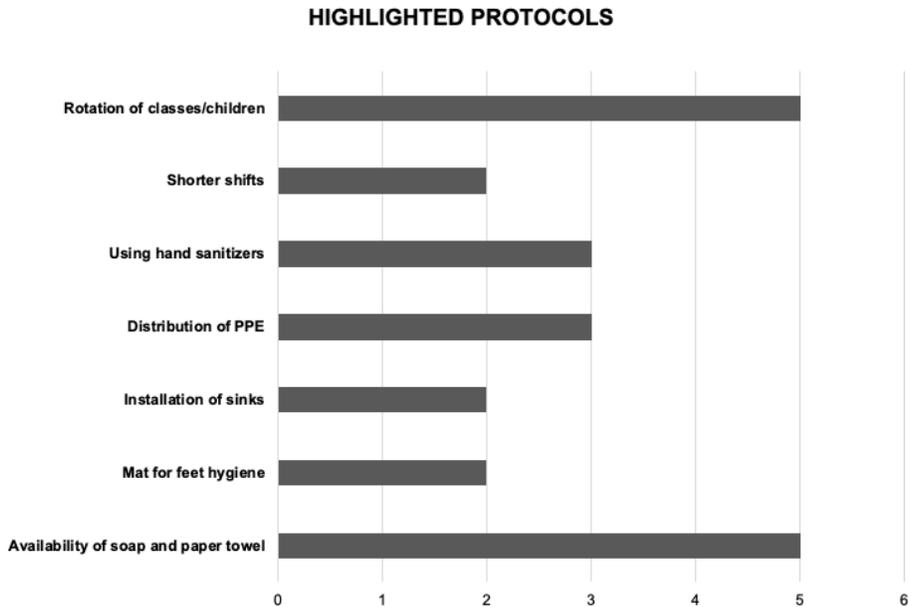


**Graph 6 – Cross-sector committees.**  
Source: Elaborated by the authors.

When it comes to listening to the school community, half of municipalities have declared to have taken such an action based on sending the questionnaires to teachers and students’ families. However, we must highlight that there was no return to face-to-face activities in child education in any of the assessed municipalities that have joined the research in 2020.

The present article was written right when the vaccination program was starting to cover health professionals and the elderly population; although the vaccination cycle remains incomplete, the networks have announced their return to face-to-face activities. In our opinion, it is important introducing the concrete actions thought by the municipalities about returning to face-to-face activities. Each municipality could have given more than one answer, and the most often cited ones are in Graph 7.

Given the herein introduced strategies, it is essential thinking about the different conditions experienced by institutions forming public networks in Baixada Fluminense. Some institutions were recently built and some others are much older. There are institutions that were built by taking into consideration child education assistance specificities and those that were adjusted for such an assistance; there are



**Graph 7 – Return protocol.**

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

old houses that housed community institutions or buildings that were added to the network without any adjustments. Thus, there are institutions that lack windows, that do not have enough restrooms, that lack a larger number of sinks to support systematic ‘hand washing’, for example. There are several challenges to be overcome in order to fulfill all hygiene requirements and to make school environment feasible for the likely return to face-to-face activities before complete mass vaccination.

Finally, at the end of the questionnaire, there was a blank spot for comments; eight of the ten coordinators made some points. We disclosed one in this text, since it represents part of the anguish and uncertainty felt during the herein assessed period-of-time:

The watchword is “minimizing damages”. We are facing an unthinkable scenario in education. From this perspective, we always sought the best to our target public, the children. And it was by thinking about them and about their subjectivity that we also reasoned about these materials. Perhaps, it is not the best option for early-age children, and, maybe, many of them do not have access to them, but we cannot seat and wait [...]. It would not be fair just to cross our arms and do nothing given the complexity of this moment. (Excerpt from an answer to the questionnaire elaborated by the authors)

“Given the complexity of this moment”, coordinators had to take social actions linked to schools, to articulate their teams and to deal with MEC’s omission about how to guide the child education work. These aspects made them stressed in face of the possibility of crossing their arms or of doing something, even knowing

that such “something” could lead to contradictory actions or yet to the possibility of not reaching their aim. It is also important thinking about what is the place professionals in charge of child education occupy in State bureaucracy. What are the limits of actions by these managers? Do middle echelon bureaucrats take part in the definition of guidelines for their action sector and of quality criteria applied to material provide to children? The history of child education shows how policies developed for early-age children are marked by dispute for different interests, since this field remains under construction and is marked by a weak identity.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The end of this article summarizes the actions by middle echelon bureaucrats for child education in Baixada Fluminense municipalities during the pandemic; it happens while we register the said number of more than 600,000 lost human lives, only in Brazil. Thus, as a conclusion, we highlight that the sanitary crisis in the country took place along with a political crisis marked by strong lack of articulation between federative entities. Such a fact has impaired the work by child education coordinators; firstly, due to delay in getting guidelines from the Federal Government; secondly, due to lack of specific proposition for the child education stage in these guidelines.

Policies developed for the pandemic time, oftentimes, disregarded local specificities. The life conditions of a large fraction of the population are in conflict with the homogeneous policies thought for single subjects. Remote teaching was a temporary alternative and a bet on the continuity of the school year. It was a homogeneous response to heterogeneous contexts. Children are living in different scenarios and under different conditions. A large fraction of these children is inserted in great social vulnerability contexts, where families are concerned with material subsistence issues during the pandemic and where these families have a hard time accessing technological devices and services.

Inequalities that so deeply mark the country got worse during the pandemic. According to Campos and Vieira (2021), social and economic inequalities reflect different life conditions, either when it comes to access to digital devices and services, or to the materiality of life. The poorest Brazilian families mostly live in neighborhoods without sewage system, in small spaces shared with many families, lacking an appropriate place for studying and playing. As for Baixada Fluminense, the region where the present research was carried out, the pandemic looked like an earthquake in a land that was already devastated by a tsunami. Social issues were already in place, inequality and exclusion were part of adults and children's daily life in this region, whose human development index in some of its municipalities stands out among the lowest ones in Rio de Janeiro state. Among the 92 cities forming Rio de Janeiro State, Japeri, Queimados and Belford Roxo (Baixada Fluminense municipalities) rank the 83<sup>rd</sup>, 73<sup>rd</sup> and 70<sup>th</sup> position in the state index ranking, respectively. Such aspects have been challenging the network for a long time and had strong impact on our investigation, since they added new challenges to it, a fact that led to actions in new fronts and articulations. In case these bu-

reaucrats had already occupied the most unstable fraction of bureaucracy (Pires, 2018), the pandemic exposed them even more. In total, 10 of the 13 municipalities forming Baixada Fluminense answered to the questionnaire, and all the ones in charge of the collected data — middle echelon bureaucrats — presented some position towards the pandemic when it comes to implementing actions proposed by education secretariats.

Simultaneously, it was experienced by people who feared a disease, so far unknown, and who were seeking to adjust to changes imposed by the pandemic, such as the quarantine. Everybody's routines were affected: children, guardians and teachers. When it comes to child education, we can think in its full mischaracterization. How could a stage substantiated by encountering, by presence, interactions and games, be reorganized?

All sectors in society gave some answer to the singularity of this moment and the educational networks did not stay behind it. Baixada Fluminense city halls aimed at taking the paths signaled by other experiences and, later on, by legal guidelines. They implemented virtual communication channels, requested actions by their networks and, accordingly, they announced to be following the continuity of the activities. At this point, some municipalities opted for adhering to a digital platform; others have made the option for elaborating printed or digital pedagogical notebooks; the secretariats, overall, encouraged contact with the children and with their families on WhatsApp. In managerial terms, the collected data have pointed out lack of articulation among secretariats, schools and teachers, a fact that echoes on sometimes contradictory pedagogical actions. As for the social scope, families received basic food and hygiene supplies, as well as financial resources through the schools, which embodied functions that exceed their pedagogical role.

Reasoning about the lived and narrated experiences concerned the implemented model, its possibilities and impairments. Emergency remote teaching for child education faced several discrepancies and contradictions in their effectiveness in contrast to the documents and concepts of this schooling stage. The present study showed traces of a rushed policy, that lacked articulation, that was poorly thought for different contexts and traces of how it still needs attention and systematic reformulation, even after its implementation. Propositions set for remote child education brought along traces of how municipal secretariats know the children and early-age child education, as well as its likely post-pandemic outcomes. The herein assessed municipalities presented initiatives to maintain bonds, but they were translated into sending out training activities to assuringly fulfill content losses, since children were not attending school facilities. Thus, based on such a scenario, the role played by teachers can be summarized as mere replicator of contents and videos; they had little or no qualification for the new RT demands.

Another aspect that deserves attention lies on how policies must be linked to social indicators in order to avoid inequalities' deepening. Municipal networks will face a huge challenge during the time to return to face-to-face activities after the pandemic, such as children's reinsertion. They have to avoid school drop-outs and to develop a welcoming procedure in compliance with children's distancing for such a long period-of-time from education institutions. Proximity to the Community

School Council (CEC) is an alternative introduced to us and it focused on the post-pandemic period; it can reduce the weight that is nowadays over actions by secretariats, which are represented by child education coordinators.

Given the expectation of returning to face-to-face activities, most municipalities agree with standards that point out the formation of cross-sectoral committees to discuss the development of protocols to such a return. Among strategies introduced as possibilities to it, one finds class/children rotation and reduced number of children in the classroom; shorter school shifts; availability of hand sanitizer, soap, paper towel and masks. Criteria developed to select the groups of children for the rotation system were not indicated, as well as the sources of resources used to purchase the necessary products for having children back to the school environment.

Finally, we underline the need of future studies developed in context similar to the one we have assessed, that follow the plans set to the return process, as well as that analyze other actors within this process, because this is the only way to write a history that goes beyond the death cases and sadness recorded during this time, and that meets the beauty of the history of humankind proposed by Beauvoir in the epigraph at the beginning of this article.

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