

## SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: EXPLORING POSSIBILITIES

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### ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic reinforced the need to rethink the role played by school psychologists in the face of the challenges posed by remote education. This experience report intends to present the activities performed by school psychology interns at a public school in the countryside of the state of Bahia. The activities included the production and distribution of virtual information materials, the writing of therapeutic letters, and the dissemination of information on digital platforms, and online hosting for specific cases. The use of information and communication technologies was a powerful strategy for action with adolescents, but it also raised the issue of remote access to education for students from public schools, which became more serious during the pandemic.

**Keywords:** school psychology; pandemic; public school.

### Psicología Escolar en la Pandemia por Covid-19: explorando posibilidades

#### RESUMEN

El período de pandemia debido a la Covid-19 reforzó la necesidad de repensarse el papel del psicólogo escolar delante de los desafíos que la enseñanza remota impone. Este relato de experiencia busca revelar las actividades desempeñadas por las psicólogas escolar en formación en una escuela pública del interior de Bahía. Las actividades incluyeron construcción y distribución de materiales informativos virtuales, proyecto de cartas terapéuticas, divulgación de información en plataformas digitales, además de acogimiento online de casos específicos. El uso de las tecnologías de información y comunicación se mostró como una estrategia potencial para acción junto al público adolescente, pero también dejó claro las dificultades de acceso a la educación de modo remoto para los alumnos de escuelas públicas, que fueron acerradas durante la pandemia.

**Palabras clave:** psicología escolar; pandemia; escuela pública.

### Psicologia Escolar na pandemia por covid-19: explorando possibilidades

#### RESUMO

O período de pandemia devido à Covid-19 reforçou a necessidade de repensar o papel do psicólogo escolar diante dos desafios que o ensino remoto impõe. Este relato de experiência busca revelar as atividades desempenhadas pelas estagiárias de psicologia escolar em uma escola pública do interior da Bahia. As atividades incluíram construção e distribuição de materiais informativos virtuais, projeto de cartas terapêuticas, divulgação de informação em plataformas digitais, além de acolhimento online de casos específicos. O uso das tecnologias de informação e comunicação revelou-se como uma estratégia potencial para ação junto ao público adolescente, mas também escancarou as dificuldades de acesso à educação de modo remoto para os alunos de escolas públicas, que foram acirradas durante a pandemia.

**Palavras-chave:** psicología escolar; pandemia; escola pública.

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the precepts of professional practice in School Psychology is an educational project that promotes quality formation practices for everyone; that stands up to the processes of medicalization and judicialization of educators and students; that fights for an appreciation of the work of teachers and for public policies that are conducive to the development of all professionals; and that establishes democratic school relations that lead to an overcoming of the processes of exclusion and social stigmatization (Conselho Federal de Psicologia, 2013). However, the identity of the psychologist in the school environment is still the target of questionings and in a process of consolidation (Senna & Almeida, 2015). The pandemic period, during which schools needed to be closed down, reinforced the necessity to rethink the role played by these professionals in educational spaces.

This article describes an internship report in school psychology during the academic year of 2020, which took place in an unusual way because of the Sars-Cov-2 pandemic. The internship was realized at an institution that provided high school curricula as well as vocational courses in a municipality in the countryside of Bahia and the team of interns was made up of five students from the psychology course. The referred institution has 1429 students enrolled in six technical courses: Agriculture and Cattle Raising, Computer Science, Agrobusiness, Logistics, and Commerce and Administration. The courses are offered during three periods of the day, depending on the students' needs.

At the first moment of the practice, still in its on-site mode, a survey was realized with the students and teachers with the objective to identify what demands were present concerning the internship in School Psychology, so that the community would be able to express their expectations and we could draw a critical work plan regarding those issues.

In order to get access to such demands, record files were produced containing a list of themes such as self-mutilation, sexuality, gender, self-esteem, depression, anxiety, difficulties to study, and difficulties in the teacher-student relationship, which deserved attention depending on how much interest was shown so that they could be the target of an intervention in the School Psychology internship. The files did not provide space for data concerning the participants' identification, such as name and age, and were distributed to all classes in the morning and afternoon shift. In the teachers' room, a ballot box was placed in order to receive the filled out files. A total number of 597 students filled out the files, which was equivalent to 55.3% of the total number of students enrolled in the school. The teachers files never got to be collected due to the sudden suspension of classes in March of 2020, because of the COVID-19 pandemic - a disease caused by a virus named SARS-

CoV-2, which presents a clinical spectrum that ranges from asymptomatic infections to serious conditions, which might lead to death. Transmission happens by means of contact with an infected person, and the virus is carried by microscopic drops saliva or nasal fluids (Pan American Health Organization [PAHO], 2020).

The suspension of classes in the state education system of Bahia took place by decree number 19.529, of March 16th 2020, with the objective to avoid widespread contamination at schools, which are environments where there is a large number of people getting together. This decree also affected the universities, with an impact on the meetings for internship supervision. The Ministry of Education, by means of a series of decrees (Decree number 343, from March 17th 2020; Decree number nº 345, from March 19th 2020; Decree number 395, from April 15th 2020 and Decree number 473, from May 12 2020), deliberated that the internships were suspended until June, when the rules were more flexible for realization (Decree number 544, from June 16th 2020). According to the guidelines of the Ministry of Education, our group decided to keep the meetings by means of virtual conferences to develop theoretical studies on School Psychology. During these conferences, we came up with the idea of creating guideline booklets for the school community as a tool to cope with the psychological impact of the pandemic.

## BOOKLETS

The booklets were developed by the interns with the support of the internship supervisor, who took into consideration guidelines by national and international entities, such as the FIOCRUZ and the World Health Organization – WHS, in addition to studies in the area of Emergency and Disaster Psychology (Danzmann, Silva, & Guazina, 2020). The objective was to provide the school community with strategies to face the impact of the pandemic on mental health and to offer scientific content in language that was accessible to the great public.

In the booklet project we selected, the most relevant themes were identified in the first on-site contact where the students were provided clear and objective guidelines on how to deal with such issues in the middle of a pandemic. Thus, we deliberated that the first theme to be approached in the booklets needed to include ways to deal with anxiety, since approximately 75% of the students mentioned this theme on the question sheet handed out by the interns.

A total number of four virtual booklets were produced with an average of 13 pages each one. They presented recommendations on how to deal with anxiety and other emotional reactions, resolution of family conflicts, guidelines on how to identify and face situations of sexual abuse and domestic violence, and learning strategies for the pandemic. After their

conclusion, the materials were shared once a week in the WhatsApp groups of the teachers, of the students, and of other professionals in the school.

Besides anxiety, the first booklet approached the most frequent and expected emotional reactions during a pandemic, such as fear of falling ill, of dying, of transmitting the virus to another person, or losing a beloved one. In addition, the discussions included strategies for psychological care in such situations and when to look for help. In the second one, there were guidelines on how to avoid conflict, and how to solve it in a positive way. The third booklet had a psychological educational approach on the risk factors for violence against children, adolescents, and women, in addition to emergency phone lines for contact. At last, the last produced material approached practical strategies to study during the pandemic.

After sending the booklets, we realized an opinion survey by means of the Google forms platform with the objective to receive some feedback by the school community regarding the quality and relevance of the approached themes, while considering the impact of the information for each one of the groups (teachers, staff, and students). We observed that the group that had the most access the booklets was the students, and most of them were enrolled in daytime shifts and that the theme considered the most relevant one was "Strategies to Study During the Pandemic", while the teachers distributed their choices equally between Anxiety and Study Strategies.

#### **CONTACTS IN THE VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT: THERAPEUTIC LETTERS PROJECT, INSTAGRAM, AND VIRTUAL ASSISTANCE**

Unlike other observed models in some Brazilian States and cities, the public school where the internship was developed was not provided with policies for the distribution of digital technologies, such as equipment and Internet access networks. Considering such limitation and the necessity to keep social distance, a second project was started. It was named Therapeutic Letters, and an Instagram account was created to facilitate synchronous communication among students, teachers and interns. The Letter Project had the objective to listen and embrace the students and the whole school team by means of writing production. An email was created for sending the letters.

The Instagram was considered a practical tool, and its popularity among the students was the reason why it was chosen as the platform for facilitating the advertising of information among students. Thus, we created an Instagram profile and started following the page of the school. Since then, the school profile has been sharing our postings. The posted materials included a summary of the booklets and discussed

themes by the internship supervision.

Along the school year, the interns also listened to students and provided guidelines for specific cases by means of the recommendations of resolution number 011/2018 of the CFP for online assistance.

#### **FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Social isolation and the necessity to fight the coronavirus pandemic have led to new ways of working, studying, and interacting and has caused huge impact on learning institutions, students, and their families.

The production of booklets with diverse themes and the use of digital information technology were valuable in the innovation process for interns in school psychology, since the pandemic made it impossible to keep close personal contact with the school community, which made normal interchange in this type of internship very difficult. On the other hand, the feedback provided regarding the produced material for the booklets suggests that at least part of the school community benefited from the guidelines present in the material.

In addition, the difficulty to keep a more intensive contact by means of virtual platforms has produced an effect on the challenges faced by the students from public schools during the pandemic. Inequality in access to education became deeper, according to the observations by Facci, Silva and Souza (2020). While a good part of the students from private schools and with more elevated socio-economic level just kept studying by means of virtual classes and other strategies, the students at public schools, especially due to the lack of access to quality Internet, were mostly deprived of this right, even though some pedagogical remote activities were realized.

The production of the booklets did not intend to overcome this difficulty or put the blame on individuals for not learning in this context. Rather, the objective was to help students use the available tools. The preference for the booklet that approached the theme of studying strategies in the pandemic suggests that the students are concerned with their own learning, but they lack access to equal opportunities.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, we explored the available alternatives to keep contact with the school community and also learned a thing or two about the limitations for the practice of psychology professionals. Law number 3.935/2020, which regulates psychology and social services in the public systems of basic education, and that still awaits validation by the federal government, consists of an essential strategy for embracing the school community since it seeks to minimize negative effects on mental health and promote learning, especially after the return of on-site classes.

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