

The Reggio Emilia Approach and Teacher Training During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic, which started in Brazil in 2020, caused changes in the teaching and learning processes, establishing social isolation, and making the school enter the students' homes. It is possible to infer that teacher's digital skills and teacher training also had its configuration changed in the period of remote teaching. That said, a question that guide this research was: how digital technology helped teachers to adapt their pedagogical practice and maintain the child protagonist during the pandemic? To answer this question, a bibliographic survey was carried out on the Reggio Emilia approach, pedagogical practices in the pandemic, teacher training and early childhood education. The study is aimed to identify how the continuing education of Early Childhood teachers, who teach in Brazilian schools inspired by the Italian approach of Reggio Emilia, took place during the pandemic. The relevance lies in addressing a current and fundamental issue to understand the training of teachers working in Reggio-inspired schools in the pandemic context. The research combined a bibliographic survey and a field study, with the application of semi-structured interviews for teachers and administrators. The data analysis technique was content analysis. The study identified the role of digital technology in pedagogical practice and the strategies that were used by Brazilian schools to provide the teacher training during the pandemic. Several apps and platforms served to communicate, to interact, minimizing the physical distance and they contributed to promote media education for teachers, children, and their families.

Keywords: Reggio Emilia approach, teacher training, pandemic COVID-19, education and technology.

Реджио-подход и подготовка учителей во время пандемии COVID-19

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Аннотация

Пандемия COVID-19, начавшаяся в Бразилии в 2020 году, вызвала изменения в процессе преподавания и обучения, стала причиной социальной изоляции, перенесла школьное обучение в дома обучающихся. Цифровые навыки учителей и их профессиональная подготовка также претерпели изменения в период дистанционного обучения. Всё вышеуказанное определяет исследовательский вопрос: каким образом цифровые технологии помогли педагогам адаптироваться к условиям пандемии и сохранить ведущую роль ребенка в обучении? Для ответа на этот вопрос был проведен библиографический обзор по проблемам использования реджио-подхода и других педагогических практик в период пандемии, по вопросам подготовки учителей и дошкольного образования. Цель исследования – выявить, как во время пандемии проходило непрерывное образование педагогов, работающих в дошкольных образовательных организациях Бразилии и использующих в практике реджио-подход. Актуальность темы заключается во всестороннем анализе подготовки педагогов, ориентированных на реджио-подход и работающих в образовательных организациях в условиях пандемии. Данная работа содержит как библиографический анализ, так и полевое исследование с использованием полуструктурированных интервью, где в качестве испытуемых выступили педагоги и администрация образовательных организаций. Методом анализа данных выступил контент-анализ. В ходе исследования была выявлена роль в педагогической практике и стратегии цифровых технологий, применявшихся бразильскими образовательными учреждениями для организации труда педагогов в условиях пандемии. Установлено, как различные приложения и платформы использовались для коммуникации, взаимодействия и минимизации физической дистанции между участниками образовательного процесса, насколько они способствовали медиаобразованию педагогов и обучающихся, как влияли на членов их семей.

Ключевые слова: реджио-подход, подготовка учителей, пандемия COVID-19, образование и технологии.

Introduction

Children build knowledge from the interaction with the each other and with the elements that surround them, in processes of discovery and understanding. In Brazil, according to the National Common Curricular Base (BNCC), in Early Childhood Education, these processes are associated with six learning rights that must be guaranteed, namely, to participate, to play, to live together, to explore, to express and to get to know each other (Brasil. Ministério da Educação, 2018). This normative document highlights the educational intentionality in the pedagogical practices of early childhood educators, so that teachers provide students with experiences that enable them to gain knowledge of themselves and the other. This process allows relationships to be established with culture, nature, and scientific production, as well as in personal care practices, playing games,

experimenting with different materials, getting close to literature, and socializing with other people. About teaching work, the BNCC shows that reflecting, organizing, selecting, planning, and mediating a set of practices and interactions is part of the teacher's role, as is monitoring these practices, observing the learning and trajectory of each child (Brasil. Ministério da Educação, 2018).

Through recording and observation, the teacher gathers elements to help organize the times and spaces in Early Childhood Education. Since March 16, 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, children have been away from school. The learning space became the student's own home. As a result, technological resources were needed to meet the students' learning rights, according to the BNCC (participate, play, live together, explore, express, and get to know each other), as well as continuing the teaching and learning process.

The Italian approach of Reggio Emilia values the symbolic representation of the environment in teaching and learning. Therefore, the spaces reflect the students' culture and are organized to be pleasant, playful, and educative places. In this way, it is possible for the child to explore their potential in the affective, cognitive, and social scope, discovering languages from music, painting, art, and research, being the protagonist of their learning and developing the conquest of new languages (Marafon & Menezes, 2017).

Such an approach has specific characteristics that, in Brazil, occur mostly in face-to-face teaching at private schools. The present study arose from the desire to get to know schools that are inspired by the Italian approach of Reggio Emilia and how teachers have developed their work and their continuing education in the pandemic caused by COVID-19.

In Reggio Emilia, teaching and learning are based on projects that aim to help students extract complex and profound meanings from their environment and experiences. Thus, the projects developed in the studio and in other areas of the school encourage children to make their own decisions and make their own choices. In this approach, the teacher must be a listener and an observer, in addition to being responsible for creating the moments in which children's discoveries occur. Interventions are minimal, allowing the child to look for teacher when he needs help (Marafon & Menezes, 2017). Based on Edwards et al.'s study (2011), the teacher's role is centred on provoking discoveries and opportunities, by encouraging dialogue, joint and co-construction of the child's knowledge.

As mentioned earlier, the art studio is the space where most of the discoveries in the Reggio Emilia approach take place. With the pandemic, the school's physical space was transferred to homes and became part of the students' homes. Therefore, students had a media experience, since remote classes took place through the internet, with the use of computers, cell phones or tablets.

Based on the idea that the art studio is one of the places for children's discoveries in the Reggio Emilia approach, this space was modified during the pandemic's remote classes, since the children were unable to attend the physical space of the schools. This situation generated a set of questions that make up the problematic of this research: what was the implication of the pandemic on pedagogical practices in schools inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach? How did teachers react to the pandemic? How was continuing education in remote teaching? From this problem, the guiding question of the research was chosen: How has digital technology helped teachers to adapt their pedagogical practice and maintain child protagonism during the pandemic? The general objective was then defined as: to identify how teacher training took place during the pandemic, in terms of the duration of training meetings, content and frequency of meetings, in schools inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach.

The Reggio Emilia Approach

Six days after the end of World War II, in 1945, residents of Villa Cellae, a village near Reggio Emilia, Italy, decided to build a new school, from the rubble of the old one, which had been bombed. This new school should educate in a different way, since after fascism, they understood the importance of a school that promoted critical development and autonomy, without passive obedience. For this endeavour, residents and local families obtained the support of pedagogue Loris Malaguzzi, who, inspired by these ideals, would later contribute to the beginning of the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education (García, 2021).

Malaguzzi stated that the child is endowed with a hundred languages to communicate, but formal education eliminates ninety-nine. Therefore, in the Reggio Emilia approach, all the languages and ways that the child finds to communicate are recognized (García, 2021).

In this way, education in Reggio Emilia is seen as a spiral, because children are not rushed from one activity to another, but encouraged to repeat the same proposal several times, reobserving and reconsidering, building new perspectives and discoveries (Edwards et al., 2011).

When describing how a school should be, Malaguzzi (2011) believed that it should have a welcoming environment, which allows interaction, organization of work and the environment, since its objective is to create a space where students, families and teachers can be comfortable.

A scholar who studies the approach, Costa (2019) conceives environments as spaces that are not only thought of as pleasant places, but also spaces for documenting the activities carried out by the child, so that the walls record stories. Against this perspective, Malaguzzi (2011) perceives the school walls as exhibition sites – fixed or temporary – of works created by children and teachers.

Regarding teaching work, Malaguzzi (2011) comments that teachers work in pairs for mutual assistance and carry out planning together with families and other teaching colleagues. Thus, the school team meets weekly for training and discussions, together with the pedagogue, a professional whose function is similar to that of the school coordinator. Regarding family participation, it is seen that schools hold individual or group meetings with families and teachers. Furthermore, families integrate a board of counselors to discuss actions and ideas (Malaguzzi, 2011).

The initiative culminates in a cooperative network, established between the family, students, and teachers, generating a sense of belonging.

Pedagogical practices in Brazilian Early Childhood Education during the COVID-19 pandemic

As of March 2020, the pandemic scenario caused by COVID-19, popularly known as the Coronavirus, claimed several lives and changed the course of the economy. Changes in education were also present. In this way, the physical space has become virtual and what was previously face-to-face has become remote. According to Peraça and Côrrea (2021), the physical space was no longer part of everyday life and the perception of the other, through the computer, occurred from the torso upwards.

As for the six learning rights established by the BNCC, Guimarães et al. (2021) argue that they must be guaranteed in order for children to develop and learn. In this way, children build knowledge through interaction with others and with the elements that surround them. In addition, Guimarães et al. (2021) question if early childhood education before the pandemic contemplated this learning, enabling children to move around guided by their desires and curiosities.

David et al. (2021) observes the need for reflection in research that portrays remote teaching in Early Childhood Education, since Brazil does not contain legal protections in distance educational processes, mediated by digital technologies involving children. Thus, the situations caused by the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on all educational levels, including Early Childhood Education. Teachers needed to adapt their teaching procedures in the face of remote classes, paying attention to maintaining the bond between children and school (David et al., 2021).

The pedagogical practice, in turn, has subjects, intentions and contents that can be understood both in the school environment and outside it. This practice can be directed to different processes and relationships, and therefore, it is part of social practice, being influenced by internal and external determinants, and linked to a conception of education and society (Souza, 2016).

The National Council of Education, Opinion No. 05/2020 provided guidance on restructuring remote pedagogical activities and the school calendar derived from the COVID-19 pandemic and recommended the preparation of explanatory materials for the families of students, involving playful activities, which could be carried out by the child with the support of family members, while the emergency period was in effect (CNE/CEB, 2020).

Guimarães et al. (2021) noted that despite using virtual activities with the aim of ensuring the continuity of the school year, homeschooling may have produced more inequalities, since not all students had access to technologies and the internet.

Methodology

In 2022, a bibliographic survey on the status of the study question was carried out, in relation to pedagogical practices inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach during the pandemic. It was found that three articles were close to the theme of this research. Vieira and Silva (2021) addressed the teaching record based on activities carried out by daycare students during the period of social distancing. The first article, by Vieira and Silva (2021), talks about the teaching record based on activities carried out by nursery school students during the period of social distancing. The second paper, by Inan (2021), sought to find out what teachers' difficulties were during the pandemic. To do so, it examined the perceptions and experiences of early childhood educators inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach in Turkey. Based on the difficulties that the teachers experienced, she tried to develop suggestions for the training of educators in this respect. In the third article, Koca and Balkan (2022) reflected on the importance of research that portrays school spaces during the pandemic, since they found no evidence of studies on COVID-19 associated with pre-school spaces inspired by Reggio Emilia.

As no article directly associated with the objective of this research was found, we realized that a study on the technological resources used in Brazilian schools of Early Childhood Education inspired by Reggio Emilia was necessary. The gap in knowledge explains the study relevance, which lies in the reflection of resources used in the teaching and learning process amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

With the intention of choosing participants of this research, three criteria were adopted. The first inclusion criterion was the school stage. The study involved teachers who worked in the first or second stage of Early Childhood Education (pre-school education), whose students were between four and six years. The age group in question was chosen because four- or six-year-old children fall into the preoperational phase of development according to Piaget (1975), manifesting their actions through representation, construction of a mental image and drawing. The second inclusion criterion was to select the teachers who had been working for the longest, considering that these teachers had been working

before and during the pandemic. The last inclusion criterion was the participation of at least one member of the administration of the participating schools, to get to know the schools from the manager's point of view, as well as the functioning of the school unit and the moments of teacher training.

The criteria for selection of institutions included: a) schools in the state of São Paulo, mainly in the countryside; b) schools that were in operation in the years 2020 and 2021; c) schools that are inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach to Early Childhood Education.

To carry out the field study, an e-mail was sent to the directors of the schools guided by the Reggio Emilia approach, giving information about the research, clarifying the interest in interviewing teachers and managers, and informing the objectives of the study. The data were collected following approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Sorocaba, under ethics approval number 5.297.616. From this, professors and managers were invited to participate through WhatsApp and in person. The semi-structured interviews were then scheduled and took place face-to-face or remotely. Three interviews were conducted in person by the research team (Aléxia Roche and Maria Alzira Pimenta). One interview was conducted online by Google Meet. During the interviews, voice recording equipment was used, with the consent of the participants, and notes were taken on paper. These, together with the transcription of the recordings, made up the set of data analyzed.

When preparing the guiding questions for the interview, the specific objectives to be addressed in each of the questions were listed, according to the analysis matrix presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Analysis matrix of free questions, used in the Interviews

<i>What do you want to know? (Questions)</i>	<i>Why know? (Aims)</i>
How did continuing education help you adapt pedagogical practices to remote education?	Identify how the formative moments contributed to the adaptation of pedagogical practices to remote teaching.
How were the training moments for the teacher in the pandemic in relation to: a) time; b) strategies, c) content?	Describe how the continuing education of teachers in remote teaching took place regarding the content and duration of the meetings, as well as the frequency with which the training moments took place.
What has changed in pedagogical practice, specifically considering the hundred languages in remote teaching?	Identify the extent to which the pandemic has impacted pedagogical practice.

The audio recording of the conducted interviews amounted to 313 minutes, with an average of 30 minutes each. As recommended by Bardin (2016), the transcription text of the interviews was cut and classified into thematic categories. The reports of teachers and administrators were read several times. From the second reading, the analytical process began, so it was possible to extract the core of each response and categorize the main themes, which, in turn, resulted in the grouping of elements. The clipping and analysis of the collected material intended to answer the question: What and how were technological resources used to maintain pedagogical practices in schools inspired by Reggio Emilia during the pandemic?

All nine interviewees have a degree in Pedagogy and more than five years' experience in the field of Education. In some institutions, the number of participants was smaller due to the unavailability of time to give the interview. In total, the research had nine

participants, from four different schools. The internal space of the institutions is not described in this work, since the physical space of face-to-face teaching is not part of the proposal under study, despite this, institutions A and B presented the school to the research team, showing all the learning spaces, while institution C received the interviewers in the administration room. Of the four participating institutions, three are private and one public, and all are located in the state of São Paulo.

In line with a qualitative methodological approach to research, the analytical and interpretative stage took place in three steps: (1) summary of the responses of the teachers and managers interviewed, in which the core of the responses was described as the Record Unit (RU); (2) the reduction of descriptions, related to Record Units (RU) that have coherence and meaning for the researcher, and, finally, grouped in terms of their context and reduced into Context Units (UC); and (3) combining into probable Categories (C). The interpretation was carried out based on the Categories created by the UC. These procedures are in line with the Content Analysis technique, according to Bardin (2016), the analysis method chosen for this research.

The Record Units were removed from the core of each response of the interviews carried out with 5 managers and 4 professors from institutions A, B, C and D. The reductions in Record Units (UR) and the joining in Context Units (CU) were affected from the descriptions.

The definition of context units, resulting from the grouping of Record Units, is an intermediate step of the categorization process and enables the understanding of the meaning of Record Units and responses (Bardin, 2016). Thus, the Categories (C) are the central nucleus of the interviews, and the main part of the analysis and understanding of the research problems.

Results

To conduct the study, thirty invitations were extended to institutions to assess their interest in participating in the research. However, only four early childhood education schools inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach, all located in the interior of the state of São Paulo, collaborated in the development of the study. That is, a 13.33% participation rate based on the invitations sent, which was not a limitation, as the study followed a qualitative approach.

It is important to emphasize that the objective was not to determine the exact number of schools adopting the Reggio Emilia approach in the state of São Paulo. The identification of schools in the metropolitan region of Sorocaba/São Paulo was carried out through internet searches.

The registration units raised in the question *“How were the training moments for the teacher in the pandemic?”* showed that the teachers and managers took classes with specialists on playing, playfulness, gender and sexuality in childhood, the early childhood education curriculum, pedagogical documentation, and ethnic-racial issues, in addition to remote meetings on the use of applications for recording and editing of classes and training in mathematics. These themes were raised by the management based on the indications that the professors made about the themes they would like to delve into.

The frequency of training meetings in most participating institutions was twice a week, as can be seen in UR6: We had individual meetings with coordination once a week, (...) weekly group meetings (...) the duration was between 1 and 2 hours. When questioning how continuing education helped adapt pedagogical practices during remote teaching, responses such as *“It helped a lot. There was training on how to approach the family, how to propose proposals”, “It was very useful. We had online training during the pandemic, on how to work with parents, with children... it added a lot of knowledge”,*

“It was very important. In addition to helping with the emotional part”, among others that highlighted the importance and usefulness, they were highlighted in all the registration units generated from the question.

At last question “What has changed in pedagogical practice, specifically considering the hundred languages in remote teaching?”, the teachers highlighted the UR104 “looking at attentive listening, which is not with the ear, but with the whole body, listening to what it does not say, even the inaudible” and in UR108 “Listening, we had the opportunity to listen, even online, learning to use the microphone, taking turns listening and speaking. The teacher noticed the subtleties more, the sensitivity came in”.

From the reports of the teachers and managers interviewed, it was possible to group the testimonies that dealt with the continuing education of teachers during the pandemic and its usefulness for the development of pedagogical practices for remote education. All institutions had at least one formative meeting. Continuing education can be understood as that which follows initial training (teaching at a higher level, degree, or bachelor's degree), after entering professional life (Fusari, 1997).

In the institutions where the interviews took place, the duration and frequency of training meetings were different, as well as the content and training strategies. At institution A, training meetings took place at least once a week, for study and another time for announcements and administrative issues. The duration of the training meeting was two hours, plus debate. As for the themes, there were several, among them: playing, playfulness, gender and sexuality in childhood, the curriculum in early childhood education, pedagogical documentation, the look at ethnic-racial issues. The specialists, invited by the school principal, discussed different themes during the training meetings, through Google Meet.

At institution B, the online meetings were unsuccessful and, therefore, were suspended, however, the teachers kept in touch through WhatsApp to exchange experiences and ideas. At the beginning of the pandemic, the school provided training with a nurse, to clarify the team's doubts about the transmission of COVID-19. Meanwhile, at Institution C, meetings took place twice a week and the agenda were based on needs, from feedback to management on activities, to assembling kits of activities and project development. On the other hand, Institution D held individual weekly meetings to address the specific difficulties of each class and group meetings to resolve doubts about the content and use of applications, in addition to meetings with specialists in applications. Regarding the help of these formative meetings for the development of pedagogical practices, three interviewees considered that the moments were useful, as they added knowledge.

Discussions

In the previous section, the results show that the figure of the school administrator is important for teacher training, since in the four participating institutions, continuing training was mobilized by this professional. According to Garrido (2000), the pedagogical coordinator is a fundamental professional in the process of continuing education, as they encourage the teaching staff and stimulate them to overcome problems, making them the authors of their own pedagogical practices.

About teacher training, Imbernón (2010) states that various aspects should be considered in teacher training processes, but only three stand out. The first is the perspective that to train teachers it is necessary to pass on knowledge, the second emphasizes collective teamwork and the third, the importance of training being based on reality and the school community. In this sense, it can be said that the continuing training in institutions A, B, C and D covered the aspects listed by Imbernón (2010), since different types of knowledge were transmitted (meetings with specialists and exchanges

of ideas with professional colleagues); collective work was made possible (assembly of activity kits) and the training was based on reality (remote teaching, changes and needs brought about by the pandemic).

The pandemic has also involved listening to others. This listening involves more than listening with the ears, which is why it can be related to the pedagogy of listening. According to Rinaldi (2021), the pedagogy of listening is not just for school, but for life since it can be more than just a tool. For the author, listening must be sensitive, open and recognize the different languages used in communication, and listening can also be internal, when we listen to ourselves. It is important to emphasize that listening is generated by curiosity, uncertainty, desire or doubt, because it produces questions, not answers, and for this reason it can take time, since when someone really listens, they enter the time of internal reflection and dialogue, which is made up of the present, past and future, a time of silences far removed from chronological time (Rinaldi, 2021).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, remote teaching has been a challenge for various education professionals, especially teachers and managers. In relation to teachers who are inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach, because its characteristics are focused on interaction, communication and playfulness, the changes and difficulties caused by distancing have been intense. After analysing and interpreting the interviewees' responses, it is possible to list three sets of the most relevant actions, aimed at: the family, the child and the pedagogical practice used in schools. With regard to the family and the children (students), the schools welcomed the families and the children, who were bereaved at losing their loved ones and afraid of the new context; they created strategies to interact through screens, to make up for the lack of daily contact, characteristic of Early Childhood Education, which involves physical closeness and hugs; and they maintained communication in the way that was possible in each case. In relation to the children, specifically, they maintained the affective bond; – Putting the pedagogy of listening into practice, even at a distance; and creating pedagogical strategies to transpose the studio and its symbolic experimentation and learning into the homes. And finally, as far as the teachers are concerned, most of them have managed to keep up their continuing training and have learned to use new technologies.

Conclusion

With the support of the theoretical framework, the analysis and interpretation of the reports of the participating professionals, it is possible to highlight the most relevant aspects to understand the work of teachers in the state of São Paulo, who are inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach, during remote teaching: aspects relating to continuing education and changes.

Continuing education proved to be essential for most teachers, since it was through it that the teaching team had the ideas to compose pedagogical practices, develop activities that promoted autonomy, in addition to reflections on welcoming families. Despite this, holding training meetings was challenging during the pandemic period.

The changes, in turn, were present throughout remote teaching. The new teaching configuration brought challenges for families and students, the communication between the teaching team and the families underwent changes and it was only through technology that the teaching and learning processes occurred. Finally, the changes reported by teachers and managers in schools proved to be necessary for acquiring knowledge, sharing ideas, and facing reality.

The teacher training, especially in institutions embracing the Reggio Emilia approach, which emphasizes interaction, communication, and play, supported the adaptation and evolution of pedagogical practices. Simultaneously, teachers enhanced their media,

digital, and pedagogical skills, demonstrating resilience and innovation. In sum, the teacher training was crucial for meeting the challenges posed by the pandemic and consolidating educational practices attuned to the specific demands of early childhood education during this crisis.

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