

Impactos da pandemia de covid-19 na educação básica: a questão do fracasso escolar

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Covid-19 pandemic impacts on basic education: the issue of school failure

Impactos de la pandemia de covid-19 en la educación básica: la cuestión del fracaso escolar

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Recebido em 21 de setembro de 2023

Aprovado em 17 de novembro de 2023

Publicado em 07 de dezembro de 2023

RESUMO

Os dois primeiros anos da pandemia de covid-19, que correspondem a 2020 e 2021, foram os mais difíceis e desafiadores para toda a sociedade, o que inclui a educação escolar, que passou a funcionar sob o regime do ensino remoto emergencial, cujas aulas, mediadas por recursos tecnológicos, poderiam ser ministradas ao vivo ou gravadas e disponibilizadas aos estudantes. Outra medida adotada por todas as esferas de governo diz respeito ao sistema de progressão automática, tendo por finalidade evitar o abandono escolar e a retenção dos estudantes, pelo baixo desempenho acadêmico nos estudos. Assim, com o objetivo de compreender os impactos da pandemia da covid-19 na produção do fracasso escolar na educação básica no Brasil, foi realizada uma pesquisa documental no Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira (Inep), com foco nos resultados

de avaliação da educação básica, compreendendo o período de 2018 a 2021, isto é, os primeiros dois anos da pandemia, e dois anos antes, para efeito de comparação com a realidade pandêmica. Para complementar algumas informações, outras fontes documentais, além do Inep, também foram consultadas, a exemplo do Fundo das Nações Unidas para a Infância (Unicef) e do Conselho Nacional de Educação (CNE). Os dados da pesquisa nem sempre são suficientemente claros, mas a análise articulada das várias fontes denotam impactos substanciais da pandemia na educação básica. Por fim, mesmo que indicadores de fracasso escolar, como reprovação, abandono e distorção idade-série, não estejam quantitativamente definidos de forma confiável, o Inep e os demais organismos consultados apontam impactos imensuráveis na educação, o que exige urgência de planejamento, ação e políticas públicas para reverter a situação.

Palavras-chave: Reprovação; Abandono escolar; Distorção idade-série.

ABSTRACT

The first two years of the covid-19 pandemic, which included 2020 and 2021, were the most difficult and challenging for society as a whole, which includes school education, which began operating under the regime of emergency remote teaching, whose classes, mediated by technological resources, could be taught live or made available to students. Another measure adopted by government concerns the automatic progression system, with the purpose of preventing school dropout and student retention due to poor academic performance in studies. Thus, aiming to understand the impacts of the pandemic on the production of school failure in basic education in Brazil, a documentary research was carried out at National Institute of Educational Studies and Research Anísio Teixeira (INEP), focusing on the evaluation results of basic education, covering the period from 2018 to 2021, that is, the first two years of the pandemic, and two years before, for comparison with the pandemic reality. To complement some information, other documentary sources, in addition to INEP, were also consulted, such as United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef) and National Education Council (CNE). The survey data are not always clear enough, but an articulated analysis of the various sources reveals substantial impacts of the pandemic on basic education. Finally, even if the indicators of school failure, such as failure, abandonment and age-grade, are not quantitatively defined in a reliable way, INEP and the other consulted organizations point to immeasurable impacts on education, which requires urgent planning, action and public policies to reverse the situation.

Keywords: Disapproval; School dropout; Age-grade distortion.

RESUMEN

Los dos primeros años de la pandemia de covid-19, que corresponden a 2020 y 2021, fueron los más difíciles y desafiantes para la sociedad en su conjunto, que incluye la educación escolar, que comenzó a operar bajo el régimen de enseñanza remota de emergencia, cuyas clases, mediadas gracias a recursos tecnológicos, podrían impartirse en directo o grabarse y ponerse a disposición de los estudiantes. Otra medida adoptada por todas las esferas de gobierno es el sistema de progresión automática, con el objetivo de prevenir el abandono escolar y la retención de estudiantes por bajo rendimiento académico en los estudios. Así, con el objetivo de comprender los impactos de la pandemia de covid-19 en la producción del fracaso escolar en la educación básica en Brasil, se realizó una investigación documental en el Instituto Nacional de Estudios e Investigaciones Educativas Anísio Teixeira (Inep), centrándose en los resultados de evaluación de la educación básica, abarcando el período de 2018 a 2021, es decir, los dos primeros años de la pandemia, y dos años antes, para comparar con la realidad pandémica. Para complementar alguna información, también se consultaron otras fuentes documentales, además del Inep, como el Fondo de las Naciones Unidas para la Infancia y Consejo Nacional de Educación. Los datos de las encuestas no siempre son lo suficientemente claros, pero el análisis articulado de las diversas fuentes denota impactos sustanciales de la pandemia en la educación básica. Finalmente, incluso si los indicadores de fracaso escolar, como el fracaso, el abandono y la distorsión de la edad y el grado no están definidos cuantitativamente de manera confiable, el Inep y los demás organismos consultados señalan impactos inconmensurables en la educación, que requieren planificación, acción y políticas públicas urgentes para revertir la situación.

Palabras clave: Desaprobación; Abandono de escuela; Distorsión del grado de edad.

Introduction

With the covid-19 pandemic officially recognized by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020, the most diverse service segments in society, including medical and hospital care services, education and commerce, only to cite a few examples, were widely affected, on a global scale, by the calamity that occurred with the outbreak of the new coronavirus.

Before this date of official recognition of the pandemic, the WHO, on January 30, 2020, had already declared that the outbreak was a public health emergency of international importance. In Brazil, Law No. 13,979, from February 6, 2020, was

sanctioned with the aim of providing “on measures to address the public health emergency of international importance arising from the coronavirus responsible for the 2019 outbreak” (Brasil, 2020a, free translation).

On March 11, 2020, with the WHO declaration that the health emergency caused by the coronavirus had reached the level of a pandemic, many other legal provisions were created, such as Ordinance No. 343, from March 17, 2020, issued by the Ministry of Education, with the purpose of providing “the replacement of face-to-face classes to digital classes while the new coronavirus–covid-19 pandemic situation lasts” (BRASIL, 2020b, free translation).

A situation is defined as a pandemic not exactly because of the severity of a disease, but because the outbreak of such a disease reaches a global scale. This does not mean, however, that different places in the world suffer the harmful effects resulting from it in a similar way. In Brazil, the impacts of the pandemic were extremely aggressive.

An important study published by Araujo and Fernandes (2022, p. 2) points out that, “in general, Brazil had an occupancy rate in intensive care units close to 100%.” The peak in the number of deaths in just one day occurred on April 8, 2021, with 4,249 deaths, a few months after the vaccination had started, process that begun on April 19, 2021. At the beginning of October 2021, the country reached the total number of 600 thousand deaths from covid-19, and was already going through a period of reduction in the number of deaths. In March 2023, it reached the sad mark of 700 thousand deaths from the disease.

Aiming to investigate the impact of anti-covid-19 vaccines in Brazil, Araujo and Fernandes (2022) affirm that by mid-October 2021, i.e., six months after the start of the vaccination process, the country had reduced cases of deaths from the disease in 96.44%. In real numbers, it went from 4,249 deaths, on April 8, 2021, to 130 deaths on October 19, 2021. This number is an indicator that the population had reached, at that moment, with the advancement of vaccination, a relatively safe margin from the extreme risks of the disease, such as admission to an intensive care unit and even lethality.

Although the consequences of the pandemic were much more harmful in the health field, due to situations of illness, death and overcrowding in hospitals, the severity of the pandemic did not exempt education from many negative impacts. Saviani (2020, p. 7, free translation) reminds us that “one of the main functions of education is the socialization of children and young people, which cannot occur with remote or distance learning.” This socialization, it is worth noticing, could not be practiced during the period of social isolation established, fairly, as a public health measure during the pandemic.

Among the impacts of the pandemic on education, we cannot forget the school failure issue, a historical problem in our education and well known by parents, teachers, and practically the entire society. This is not, therefore, a problem that arose with the pandemic, but it was aggravated by the situation, deepening specifically among students from less favored classes, as shown by studies by Cipriani, Moreira and Carius (2021), Souza (2022), and United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef, 2021a; 2021b).

As it is a historical problem, what seems very serious about the school failure issue is the tendency towards naturalization, because it makes the issue perpetual, invisible, and restricted to the individual who *fails*, especially in cases in which the individual lives in a social vulnerability situation. Naturalization makes the problem of social and historical determinations that constitute reality opaque, thus preventing us from becoming aware of the true links that explain the production of this social phenomenon.

Considering that, in addition to not being something that simply happens, as if it were something *natural*, failure is also a feeling that affects both the individual, producing suffering (anguish, humiliation, and shame), and the world in which s/he is part of, since the stigma of disability inhibits his/her presence in the environment, especially in the school environment, where s/he should act as a subject.

In the covid-19 pandemic, according to studies by Cipriani, Moreira and Carius (2021), Souza (2022) and Unicef (2021a; 2021b), and others, the problem of school failure intensified, especially among students who are part of the most vulnerable

social segment of society, which justifies, among other measures, investigations. Given this and the need to understand more deeply the relationship between the pandemic and the situation of school failure increase, especially among students from the economically less favored classes in our country, the objective of this study was to understand the impacts of the covid-19 pandemic in the production of school failure in basic education in Brazil.

Considerations about school failure in Brazil

School failure is a problem that runs through the history of Brazilian education. Marques (2015) draws attention to the fact that, since the 1970s, the literature that deals with this issue has highlighted different explanations or justifications for student failure. Some of these explanations found and still find support in racist theories and in some psychological schools that attributed the causes of school failure to individual factors of the students, commonly identified as inability to learn, natural lack of motivation, and genetic inheritance. Other explanations were based on theories of social inequalities, which, in turn, attributed the causes of school failure to the students' socioeconomic and cultural conditions.

This scenario highlights that the problem of school failure in our country is not new, nor did it arise with the pandemic, but it has worsened with it. It is, therefore, a social and historical problem, since students and the school educational process cannot be confused with remote islands or those lost in the middle of the ocean. The school exists as part of the society that created it. This same society frequents the school and keeps it functioning, through taxes, scholarships or monthly fees. Furthermore, the school only exists because there are a curriculum, a pedagogical project, and an entire pedagogical, bureaucratic, and ideological structure that governs its functioning.

School failure is a very sensitive topic, as it is related to processes of social exclusion and suffering of people, generally children and adolescents who have internalized the values of a society that, based on liberal ideology, holds the individual responsible for the success or failure in building their lives. In other words,

liberal ideology naturalizes the individual's development possibilities. As pointed out by Bock (2017, p. 25, free translation), in his critique of the principle of “individualism” from the liberal perspective, “each individual is a moral being who has rights derived from his/her human nature.”

To understand the relationship between school failure and social exclusion (before the pandemic), observing this relationship as a historical process forged in capitalist society, we turn to Bauer (2021a, p. 5, free translation):

In 2019, 2.1 million students failed in the country, more than 620 thousand dropped out of school and more than six million were in age-grade distortion. Their profile is well known: they are concentrated in the north and northeast regions, and are often black, and indigenous children and adolescents, or students with disabilities.

What is the difference between this reality, in 2019, and the pandemic period, other than the worsening of inequality? According to Bauer (2021a, p. 5, free translation), “with the covid-19 pandemic, these [northern, northeastern, black, indigenous, and disabled ones] were also the students who faced the greatest difficulties in continuing to learn.” In other words, the effects of the pandemic were more intense on the school reality of these students.

Therefore, school failure cannot be explained scientifically by finding or surveying some cases of school failure or abandonment. It is often said this is just the tip of the iceberg. It is necessary to understand its social determinations, to get beyond the appearance of this phenomenon so that we can grasp as much of these determinations as possible.

Being such an old and complex problem in our reality, several theorists, in different periods in the history of education, have already looked very closely at the production of school failure in Brazil, and even in Latin America.

The *Brazilian Journal of Pedagogical Studies* (in Portuguese, *Revista Brasileira de Estudos Pedagógicos*), a current publication of the National Institute of Educational Studies and Research Anísio Teixeira (Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira–INEP), has addressed the subject since its

first publications. In volume 1, number 2, Barioni (1944, p. 326, free translation) points out that “one of the most serious pedagogical problems to be faced in South America is the school desertion.”

Knowing that this problem is also social, Barioni (1944, p. 326, free translation) draws attention to the essence of the issue, affirming that its cause “lies in the fact that the child from a very early age becomes an economic element of the family, since s/he is forced to leave school in order to help acquire resources for maintenance, joining workshops, or agricultural work.”

In the 1970s, the problem of school failure persisted in Brazil, mainly due to dropout and repetition. However, the problem was not limited to our territory. Saviani (1992) records, based on Tedesco (1981), that children's schooling in most Latin American countries in the 1970s was an intensely marginal and exclusionary process. It is worth remembering that a large part of the continent during this period, including Brazil, was governed by an exceptional regime.

Published in 1990, *The production of school failure* (free translation of the original title *A produção do fracasso escolar*), by Maria Helena Souza Patto, was one of the works, or perhaps the work, that had one of the greatest impacts among educators and researchers in education in the last 30 years, and it continues to be a prestigious reference on the problem of school failure. Carried out in a school on the outskirts of the city of São Paulo, SP, Brazil, the study points, among its conclusions, to the need to question the theoretical hegemony of education at that time. Therefore, it argued that explanations about school failure that were based on “deficit and cultural difference theories need to be revised based on the knowledge of school mechanisms that produce learning difficulties” (Patto, 2022, p. 540, free translation). In other words, it was necessary to overcome the explanations of liberal pedagogy, by blaming the child for school failure and, in the same logic, by naturalizing his/her difficulties in society and at school.

As a policy to combat academic failure in primary education, mainly regarding the issue of failure, the continued progression regime has been commonly adopted by public education networks, on an optional basis, across the country. The National

Education Guidelines and Bases Law (LDB), no. 9,394/1996 (Brasil, 2022a, p. 24, free translation), according to article 32, in its Section IV, § 2, ensures that educational establishments “can adopt in primary education the continued progression regime, without jeopardizing the evaluation of the teaching-learning process, observing the standards of the respective education system.”

The enthusiasm for continued progression in elementary education, also called automatic promotion or automatic approval, does not originate from the current LDB, Law no. 9,394/1996. This pedagogical model, which gained strength in the 50s of the 20th century, is the liberal and individualist ideological expression of an era and still prevails nowadays hegemonically over the conception of man, school, educational process, and society.

According to Fernandes (2000, p. 77, free translation), although the subject had already been discussed in previous decades, “automatic approval proposals were viewed with enthusiasm and optimism by politicians and educational policy managers” only in the 1950s. Teachers and researchers were also enthusiastic and optimistic about the proposals, but remained cautious, as it was a pedagogical model imported from England and the United States.

Even though it is not methodologically simple to grasp the determinations of reality, even in relation to school failure, there are situations that stand out, as the case of the large contingent of young people who still do not know how to read or write, in the 21st century. According to Oliveira (2022, p. 186, free translation), whose studies are based on information collected at the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística–IBGE), in “2021, throughout the national territory, almost 9.9 million people, aged 15 and older, declared that they do not know how to read and write a simple note.”

Adding to the various historical and social causes of school failure in the country, the covid-19 pandemic further intensified the problem in 2020–2022, making the educational process increasingly complex, whether at school or elsewhere. The data presented by Bauer (2021b, p. 5, free translation) allow us to understand that academic failure is not a problem generated only at school.

In November 2020, more than five million girls and boys aged 6 to 17 did not have access to education in Brazil. Among them, more than 40% were children between 6 and 10 years old, an age group in which education was practically universal before the pandemic.

What emerges from school failure in the context of the covid-19 pandemic is the revival of a discussion about a new and old problem. Old, because, as already explained, it permeates the entire history of Brazilian education, to the point of being known as a culture, that is, a culture of school failure. And new, given the challenges that arise over time, as in the case of the aforementioned pandemic, which, by leading to the emergence of remote teaching, further aggravated the precariousness of education for the poorest and, consequently, contributed to the increase in cases of school failure.

Method

News published by INEP on the subject from May 2022 showed that the 2021 School Census numbers pointed “to a reduction in the approval rate in the public network in all stages of education in comparison with the year of 2020” (Brasil, 2022b, p. 1, free translation).

However, still in 2022, INEP (Brasil, 2022c) drew attention to a fact that had not been considered by the research institution itself when publishing the results of the School Census and the Basic Education Development Index (IDEB) 2021: the automatic approval, a measure adopted by the majority of public schools in the country, artificially raised the approval rate to a level higher than that achieved in 2019. According to INEP (Brasil, 2022c, p. 3, free translation), to cite one example, “the approval rate of primary education in the public network went from 91.7%, in 2019, to 98.4% in the first year of the pandemic, in 2020 (variation of 6.7 p.p.), reducing to 96.3% in 2021 (still 4.6 p.p. higher than 2019).”

Therefore, “when evaluating the variation observed between 2019 and 2021 in approval and performance, no association was identified between the variables, and,

when the association was present, it was negative” (Brasil, 2022b, p. 3, free translation). Therefore, this complex variation in data and interpretation of reality is one of the reasons for researching the impacts of the pandemic on basic education.

Another reason also related to the topic originated from the contact with teachers who have experienced the challenge of facing the impacts of the covid-19 pandemic in the teaching and learning process in basic education, whether when they had to respond, with pedagogical resources that were not always adequate or efficient, to the school and learning needs of students in remote education, whether in the resumption of in-person classes, when vaccination had not yet been released to a large contingent of the population that makes up the school community.

In order to fulfill the general objective of the research, of qualitative and documentary nature, the necessary information was collected from INEP (Brasil, 2018; 2019a; 2019b; 2020a; 2020b; 2020c; 2020d; 2021a; 2021b; 2021c; 2021d; 2022b; 2022c), covering the period from 2018 to 2021, that is, two years before and two years later, that correspond to the most intense period of the pandemic in Brazil.

Still with the aim of complementing and deepening the understanding of some information, other documentary sources, in addition to INEP, were also consulted, such as the Unicef and the National Education Council (CNE).

Results: indicators of school failure in the pandemic

If in previous decades the school's most complex challenge was facing failure and dropout, currently, with basic education becoming mandatory, from pre to high school, the challenge has changed to the problem of age-grade distortion. Repetition, as a result and a phenomenon that mirrors failure and school dropout, has not ceased to exist. As explained by INEP (Brasil, 2021a, p. 19, free translation), “performance rates—approval, failure and abandonment—impact school delay, measured here by the age-grade distortion rate, and, obviously, the time that students remain in basic education.”

Failure, abandonment and age-grade distortion are intrinsically articulated processes, mediated by the same historical determinations—social inequalities. Even though dropout is not officially part of the list of indicators of school failure, it is still a present problem. Therefore, the number of students enrolled in high school is smaller than that present in the second stage of elementary school, which is smaller than in the first stage of elementary school. Moreover, youth and adult education has been the refuge, or the last hope, of many of those trying to regain what, even though it is a legitimate right, is nothing more than a desire, i.e., to complete basic schooling.

Given these initial considerations about the results, we began to analyze the information that was collected at INEP about the problem of school failure in 2020 and 2021, as they correspond to the most critical period of the pandemic, which implied at least two palliative measures: implementation of emergency remote teaching, whose classes, mediated by technological resources, could be taught live or recorded and made available to students; and the resumption of the automatic progression system by some schools, with the aim of avoiding student retention due to low academic performance.

At the same time, for comparison purposes, we also use the demonstration of data about 2018 and 2019, covering therefore two years before the covid-19 pandemic. The information collected covers the two stages of elementary and high school.

Thus, in order to contextualize the school failure issue during the pandemic, we began the discussion by exposing the enrollment situation in Brazil in the four years that delimit the study, according to the data contained in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1 – Total of enrolled students (2018–2021)

2018	2019	2020	2021
48,455,867	47,874,246	47,295,294	46,668,401

Source: prepared based on data from the Basic Education School Census.

Table 2 – Enrollment by school stage (2018–2021)

School stage \ Year	2018	2019	2020	2021
Elementary school I	15,176,420	15,018,498	14,790,415	14,533,651
Elementary school II	12,007,550	11,905,232	11,928,415	11,981,950
High school	7,709,929	7,465,891	7,550,753	7,770,557

Source: prepared based on data from the Basic Education School Census.

Analyzing the data from the tables 1 and 2, we found that the drop in the number of enrollments in the country was already a reality in basic education, having worsened in the years of 2020 and 2021, the height of the pandemic, reaching a deficit of 1,787,466 enrollments in 2021, compared to 2018. Another evidence showed by the numbers is that this decrease in the amount of enrollments is concentrated in elementary school, especially in the initial grades, which range from the 1st to the 5th year. According to data from the Unicef report, published in 2021:

In recent years, Brazil has been slowly advancing in guaranteeing access to education for every child and adolescent. From 2016 to 2019, the percentage of girls and boys aged 4 to 17 in school had been growing in the country. Inequalities, however, remained. In 2019, there were almost 1.1 million children and adolescents of mandatory school age out of school in Brazil (Unicef, 2021, p. 5, free translation).

According to data from the report, the problem of school exclusion mainly affected low-income children and young people in extremely vulnerable economic and social conditions, with the majority being black, brown and indigenous. In regional terms, the report points out that school exclusion is more pronounced in the north and central-west regions, mainly involving children and adolescents from families with a per capita family income of up to ½ minimum wage, proving that “the social inequality present in our society was reproduced when looking at school exclusion” (Unicef, 2021, p. 5, free translation). With the pandemic, the situation of school exclusion worsened in a timely manner and greatly affected the target audience of elementary school, as data from the report indicate.

Then the covid-19 pandemic arrived. And inequality and exclusion have worsened even further. With schools closed, those who were already excluded were even further removed from their right to learn. And those who were enrolled, but less able to continue learning at home—whether due to lack of internet access, worsening poverty, and other factors—ended up having their right to education denied. In November 2020, more than five million girls and boys aged 6 to 17 did not have access to education in Brazil. Among them, more than 40% were children aged 6 to 10, an age group in which education was practically universal before the pandemic (Unicef, 2021, p. 5, free translation).

Even though in 2020 and 2021 there was an increase in enrollment in the second stage of elementary school (0.64%) and in high school (3.92%), the Unicef's report (2021) confirms what the INEP's numbers (Brasil, 2019a; 2020a; 2021a; 2021b) point to the reduction in enrollment in the initial grades of elementary school, which covers children between 6 and 10 years old. This data is alarming and show us the great challenge of finding viable alternatives to overcome this situation of denial of the right to education to a generation of children and adolescents in our country.

According to Pires, Santos and Neto (2020), it is necessary to look at the decrease in enrollment over recent years in basic education, paying attention to factors internal and external to education such as politics, economics, and curricular reforms. The authors warn that the reduction in the number of vacancies and the worsening of precarious teaching conditions may be contributing to the emptying of public schools since 2019 and that the pandemic ended up worsening this reality.

Sousa and Ferreira (2021) refer about this issue when they warn that, in the scenario of the covid-19 pandemic, which began in 2020, school enrollment was compromised this year and the subsequent one, given the dependence on completing the school year, which was not possible due to the suspension of classes, and the non-compliance with the academic calendar. In an investigation on the decrease in enrollment in schools in Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil, in the context of the pandemic, the authors had access to statements from parents about the difficulty in enrolling their children in public schools, concluding:

The difficulties in consolidating the right to enrollment are related to management problems, lack of structure to deal with the enrollment system, organization, and planning. Besides, it permeates the lack of a political commitment to education and a commitment to the process of social transformation (Souza; Ferreira, 2021, p. 7, free translation).

In view of the problem of the drop in the number of enrollments that has been worsening since 2019 in Brazil, we can consider that, without guaranteeing the right to enrollment, it will be very difficult for us to overcome the educational problems in our country, including failure school, since, without access to school, children and young people are deprived of the right to humanize themselves, to develop as human beings. We affirm this based on the premise that the denial of enrollment, which generates school exclusion, prevents children and adolescents from having access to the cultural wealth necessary for their development as human beings, to the systematized knowledge that is the content of school, to the development of skills and values necessary for life in society, and the possibility of continuing to learn and develop.

In addition to the enrollment problem, the INEP reports also present data that show the percentage rate of school failure between the years of 2018 and 2021. This data is shown in Table 3:

Table 3 – Percentage index of school failure, by indicator (2018–2021)

School stage	Year Indicator	2018	2019	2020	2021
Elementary school I	Failure	5.1	4.3	0.6	1.6
	Abandonment	0.7	0.6	0.9	0.8
	Age-grade distortion	11.2	10.5	9.7	7.7
Elementary school II	Failure	9.5	8.2	1.1	2.5
	Abandonment	2.4	1.9	1.1	1.8
	Age-grade distortion	24.7	23.4	22.7	21
High School	Failure	10.5	9.1	2.7	4.2
	Abandonment	6.1	4.8	2.3	5
	Age-grade distortion	28.2	26.2	26.2	25.3

Source: prepared based on data from the Basic Education School Census.

The data presented in Table 3 refer to core issues (indicators), which constitute what we call school failure. Paradoxically, according to the data described in Table 3, the percentage rate of school failure suffered a large drop in the years of the pandemic, 2020 and 2021. Looking at the phenomenon in its appearance, immediately, we would have plenty of reasons to celebrate these rates. However, it is necessary to go beyond appearances and try to understand what this data reveal and hide.

The two main measures adopted by government bodies at all levels (municipal, state, and federal) during the pandemic regarding education were the automatic approval and the remote teaching, which meant, in relation to the second measure, teaching through technology, whose consequences to students' academic performance, regardless of learning indicators, were supported by the previous measure (automatic approval). Facing this reality, we ask: what was the situation of the majority of low-income students who did not have access to internet, computers, tablets or cell phones with the necessary power for teaching mediated by technology, much less the support of preceptors?

Thinking about this issue, we need to look very carefully at this data presented in the INEP reports, considering that countless investigations (Marques, 2015; Cardoso; Ferreira; Barbosa, 2020; Cunha; Saraiva; Vieira, 2020; Cunha; Silva; Silva, 2020; Stevanim, 2020; Dering, 2021; Malheiros; Carvalho; Gonçalves, 2022) carried out between the years of 2020 and 2022 reveal the serious situation of precariousness in teaching and learning processes, the worsening of educational inequality, and the increase in school exclusion of children and young people during the pandemic.

In Brazil, there was no shortage of reports broadcast by major television news programs revealing the terrible or non-existent study conditions for most low-income children. Entire families depending on a single cell phone with paid internet to ensure that their children stay connected during classes, precarious residences without infrastructure that guarantees good study conditions. This set of factors may have

contributed to the increase in cases of school dropout, and even more precarious learning conditions for students.

Alongside remote teaching, the automatic progression system officially adopted in the country during the pandemic is a factor that hides the reality presented in Table 3. In the technical summary of INEP 's 2021 school census (Brasil, 2021b), there is a warning regarding the increase in the approval rate for all teaching stages between 2019 and 2020.

However, it is important to highlight that the significant improvement in the approval rate was influenced by the adoption of adjustments in schools' curriculum planning in the face of the covid-19 pandemic and is in line with the recommendations of the National Education Council (CNE) and international organizations, such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef) (TECHNICAL SUMMARY, INEP, 2021, p. 21, free translation).

Regarding the adjustments the text of the summary refers to, we highlight the resolution published in December 2020 (Resolution CNE/CP no. 2, 2020), which, among other recommendations, suggested a set of measures to be adopted by education systems in order to avoid further harm to students and, thus, reduce the impacts of the pandemic on their educational processes.

Evaluations and exams at the conclusion of the 2020 school year in schools should take into account the curricular content actually offered to students, with a review of the criteria adopted in the evaluation processes with the aim of avoiding an increase in failure and school dropout rates, which would end up imposing a new penalty for students in addition to the pandemic itself. The document also presents several recommendations that aimed to guide education networks in facing difficulties, in order to reduce the impacts of the suspension of face-to-face activities caused by the global health crisis (TECHNICAL SUMMARY, INEP, 2021, p. 21, free translation).

This allows us to assume that the drop in the percentage of school failure rates in basic education between 2020 and 2021 reported in Table 3 is nothing more than a reflection of this set of adjustments suggested by the CNE to the evaluation processes as a way of minimizing the impacts of the pandemic in the students' lives,

especially to minimize cases of academic failure. This understanding needs to be very well consolidated, since, without knowledge about the situation of school failure and success, we will hardly be able to face such a problem.

Even recognizing that such measures guided by the CNE and adopted by education systems were necessary in order to solve the impacts of the pandemic on students' school lives and thus guarantee the minimum possible losses, we still need to demand that the authorities be responsible for making the real situation of education in our country clear for the Brazilian population. This means thinking about research instruments that serve the purpose of revealing the real objective conditions in which educational processes developed in our country and their impacts on our students' educational performance.

According to an official note from INEP (Brasil, 2022b), automatic approval during the pandemic distorted the IDEB results in 2021, masking the real situation of the quality of Brazilian education. These data hide the fact that, with the automatic approval of students and the drop in the number of participants in the National Basic Education Assessment System (Sistema Nacional de Avaliação da Educação Básica), the results ended up twisted, not representing the real impacts of the pandemic on learning. Table 4 presents these results in terms of institutional assessment.

Table 4 – Basic education development index (2019–2021)

School year \ Result	Early years of elementary school		Final years of elementary school		High school	
	2019	2021	2019	2021	2019	2021
Projected goal	5.7	6	5.2	5.5	5	5.2
Reached index	5.9	5.8	4.9	5.1	4.2	4.2

Source: prepared based on data from the basic education development index.

Looking at the IDEB results in 2021, we have the false idea that the pandemic did not have negative impacts on the lives of the vast majority of Brazilian students. This data hides what Stevanim's research (2020) reveals:

4.8 million Brazilian children and adolescents, between 9 and 17 years old, do not have access to internet at home. 58% of young people access the internet exclusively via cell phone—which can make it difficult to carry out tasks related to emergency remote classes during the pandemic (STEVANIM, 2020, p. 11, free translation).

This digital exclusion made it difficult to guarantee the right to education, deepened educational inequality, and became an obstacle to continuing studies during the pandemic. At the same time, the automatic progression system, a device provided in the LDB (Law no. 9,394/1996), was used without the support of any pedagogical project, which contributed to increasing the inequality gap in the educational process. Therefore, the IDEB 2021 results do not reveal the real conditions of the level of quality of education in our country, much less help to outline policies that effectively constitute a possibility for solving structural problems, as is the case of the high rates of school failure.

In short, we recognize that, as a nation, we have, at least, two great challenges ahead. One of them is to find alternatives that aim at the educational inclusion of all students who, as a result of social, economic, and regional inequality, were prevented from continuing their studies during the covid-19 pandemic, or, even having continued their studies, were unable to reach a good performance, due to the terrible teaching and learning conditions resulting from emergency remote teaching, thus corroborating the increase in cases of evasion, non-learning, abandonment, school exclusion, i.e., situations that characterize cases of school failure.

However, any action or strategy that aims to overcome all educational problems arising from the pandemic requires that public authorities assume the responsibility for thinking about evaluation strategies that actually reveal the real situation in which basic education finds itself. This, therefore, is another challenge that needs to be taken on, given the need to plan educational policies that aim to minimize the

impacts that the covid-19 pandemic has had on the teachers and students' lives, with commitments that are still difficult to measure totally.

Final considerations

It is not too much to repeat that the covid-19 pandemic was an event that caused countless challenges to society, so that new needs for existence were constituted in the set of social relations, especially in the sphere of work, which includes, as already stated, the educational field.

Being education a field of study, the object of our analyses is more limited, as it specifically deals with the impacts of the covid-19 pandemic on the production of school failure in basic education. No analysis allows us to understand the phenomenon in its complexity, if its real totality is not methodologically considered, i.e., the social and historical determinations that are beyond appearance, as Marx (1978) and Vigotski (2004) affirm.

Thus, when studying the covid-19 pandemic and school failure, we are not content with just analyzing the two phenomena by themselves, as we consider both are constituted dialectically. Therefore, as already highlighted and discussed, the research findings (indicators) show that the impacts of the pandemic are not restricted to the process of physical illness. In addition to the biological effect of the pandemic, markedly exclusionary social and historical issues have made reality much more challenging for a large number of people, especially those who compose the most vulnerable social groups.

Before this, we want to highlight that, in addition to physical illness, the phenomenon of social inequality was also responsible for the deleterious impacts of the pandemic on society, including education, and especially low-income students, as they couldn't count on pedagogical support that would be fundamental for their learning process, such as access to basic digital tools (as internet, cell phone, or computer), in addition to preceptorship support, given the importance of assistance from someone more experienced in the teaching and learning process, as a way of

boosting student development. In the case of preceptorship, we are not dealing with a luxury, or something superficial, but a fundamental pedagogical demand for those who are basic education students.

Finally, it is worth emphasizing that the indicators (failure, dropout, and age-grade distortion) of school failure are not isolated factors, much less detached from reality. Even though the INEP data are subject to questioning, we cannot lose sight of the methodological orientation that one factor dialectically constitutes the other one.

Thus, both school dropout (due to failing to attend classes before the end of the school year) and failure (generally resulting from problems related to school performance) are processes that lead to the problem of age-grade distortion, and viceversa, when it does not decline to the problem of evasion. However, none of these factors can be truly understood, as evidenced in the analysis, if the social and historical determinations of the pandemic are not considered, such as the palliative and exclusionary measures of remote teaching and automatic promotion, in children and adolescents' schooling process.

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