

TEACHER ILLNESS: A CASE STUDY IN A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY (CE)



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ABSTRACT

The research project entitled "Work and Teacher Illness: An Analysis of the Socio-educational Reality of Teachers at the University of Integration of Afro-Brazilian Lusophony (UNILAB)" has as its main objective to gather data on the illness of teachers at Unilab, taking into account records of leave for health treatment, diagnosis and time of teaching experience. The methodology chosen for this study was the Case Study, with the use of statistical data obtained through a survey form on illness in the teaching work, in addition to information on sick leave of professionals for health reasons. Thus, we seek to understand the institutional reality of the absence of teachers for reasons related to illness, adopting a reflective and critical approach, in order to generate information that can contribute to the understanding of the theme and to the development of institutional strategies and policies that value the teaching work. The study also highlights the importance of investing in the public university, promoting the quality of life and health of the professors who work at Unilab.

Keywords: Illness. Pandemic. University.

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INTRODUCTION

In the current global socio-political, economic, and educational context, deeply impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is essential to consider that we cannot ignore the changes around us. The transformation of the school environment during this period, the redefinition of the concept of face-to-face and the new times and spaces dedicated to closed teaching and learning that the teacher goes beyond the traditional educational model, and keeps up with the changes around digital information and communication technologies (DICT).

In that pandemic scenario of 2021, Brazilian educators, and especially educators, were called to reinvent themselves on a daily basis for the process of teaching and learning mediated by digital communication and information technologies (TDCI) (Oliveira et. al., 2021). In this context, Brazilian educators, and especially UNILAB educators, were challenged to reinvent themselves daily, adapting to the teaching and learning process mediated by these new technologies.

In the face of everything we experienced in that moment of human fragility and instability in the economic and social systems, teachers were subjected to a great overload, feeling physically and emotionally exhausted. Even so, they resisted and, on a daily basis, reinvented themselves, creating and recreating ways of organizing and managing the different times and spaces to ensure the continuity of the teaching and learning process of their students. It was precisely during the pandemic and post-pandemic period that the records of the increase in cases of physical and mental illness among teachers intensified.

Therefore, to understand the illness of teachers, it is necessary to go beyond the analysis of the architectural structures of educational institutions and the lack of appreciation and adequate remuneration. It is essential to discuss politics in both micropolitics and macropolitics, covering the public and private spheres. During the pandemic and even in the post-pandemic period, residences have been transformed into classrooms and workplaces for teachers. In this context, the public activity of teaching is mixed with other daily tasks of teachers.

Thus, it is essential to reflect on care and illness as essential aspects of the educator's experience, especially in the current context. This reflection should seek to understand teacher illness as a human limit, resignifying the care and affectivity between educators and students, in addition to proposing intervention strategies in the public

university environment. In this sense, the research project entitled "Work and teacher illness: an analysis of the socio-educational reality of teachers at the University of Integration of Afro-Brazilian Lusophony (UNILAB)" had as its main objective to collect statistical data on the leaves of teachers at Unilab due to health problems, taking into account the records of leave for treatment, among other aspects and variables that emerged throughout the research.

To understand this very complex scenario in 2021 to 2022, research on teacher illness began at the University of International Integration of Afro-Brazilian Lusophony (Unilab),⁵ on the Campi of Ceará. The main objectives of the research were: to analyze data on the illness of Unilab professors, taking into account the records of sick leave for health reasons in the years 2021 and 2022. The study seeks to discuss issues directly linked to a specific theoretical framework on teacher illness and, in a way, to suggest institutional strategies for the creation of internal policies that prioritize the health and quality of life of Unilab teachers.

In this context, the research proposal emerges as a strategy not only to understand illness, but also to analyze the condition in which university professors are inserted, involving both macropolitics and micropolitics. This highlights the importance of conducting studies in this thematic area and developing continuous intervention strategies in higher education. It is important to mention that, in studies on teacher training, we relate the discussion about teacher training and work to the precariousness and devaluation of educators who work in the public school system.

We observed that the issue of teachers' illness is a reality that appears in several studies, indicating that this subject should not be ignored. On the contrary, it is essential that more studies on this topic be carried out in universities. For education professionals, teaching activities involve several variables that can impact their physical and mental well-being, contributing to the emergence of stress and other diseases. Previous studies indicate that educators and health workers are the ones who face the most health problems in their jobs.

In the Brazilian educational reality, there has always been a precariousness of the work of teachers, aggravated by the structural conditions of public schools, the weakening

⁵ Research funded by the Scientific Initiation Scholarship Program (PIBIC/Unilab) and under the coordination of Professor Dr. Roque do Nascimento Albuquerque, who together with scholarship holders and collaborators carried out the research in the years 2021 to 2022, initially.

of teaching degree courses and the growing abandonment by the public authorities. Schools lack investments, both in infrastructure and in teacher training, which intensifies the crisis in teaching performance. Those who choose to stay in the profession often feel undervalued. On the one hand, there is the devaluation and precariousness of the teaching work; on the other hand, the demand for greater productivity, with an increase in the number of students in the classroom, without holding public exams that guarantee the adequate recomposition of the staff of professionals in schools. In this context, the research in question contributes to the intellectual formation of students/scholarship holders and members of the research group, as well as to the professors. Thus, research can help in the understanding of teaching work in public universities, while placing the university's scientific production at the service of the organization of educators, strengthening the teaching professionalization in Higher Education.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a predominantly qualitative approach, using the case study methodology. According to Yin (1994), the case study is an investigation of a contemporary phenomenon in its context, highlighting the understanding of a specific unit and allowing its analysis within a scenario in which the central questions are "why?" and "how?". Case studies are the preferred strategy when seeking to answer questions such as "how" and "why", especially when the researcher has little control over events and the focus is on contemporary phenomena inserted in real-life contexts (YIN, 1994, p. 19).

Thus, the methodology adopted is based on the contributions of Yin (2005), for whom the Case Study consists of the investigation of a contemporary characteristic inserted in its real context. In addition, this approach allows an in-depth analysis of a specific unit, favoring its understanding within a totality in which it is inserted.

According to Yin, *"the case study contributes, in an unparalleled way, to the understanding we have of individual, organizational, social and political phenomena"* (1994; p. 21), in this sense, this methodology will meet the objectives of the proposed research, as the specificity of this investigation is directly related to the singular reality that the research subjects find themselves in. *"The most appropriate view of these different strategies is pluralistic. Each strategy can be used for three purposes – exploratory, descriptive or explanatory"*. (YIN, 1994; p. 23). In the specific case of this research, we will use the three

strategies, exploratory, descriptive and explanatory, given the specificity of the theme investigated in this study.

When dealing with the theme of teacher illness in this study, the case study fits very well, because according to Arilda Godoy: "*The case study is characterized as a type of research whose object is a unit that is deeply analyzed. It aims at the detailed examination of an environment, a simple subject or a particular situation*" (1995; p. 26), this statement by the author fits this research into the aforementioned research methodology, as it will detail in its own environment the particular situation of singular subjects who are the quilombola teachers of the Lower Itacuruçá.

In addition, according to Godoy (1995), the case study aims at the detailed analysis of an environment, a subject or a specific situation. The choice for this approach was justified by its characteristics, which allow answering questions such as "how" and "why" certain characteristics occur, especially in view of the limited possibility of control over the investigated object and the actuality of the characteristics, which can only be fully understood within a particular context.

According to André (2008), the case study is indicated when the researcher wants to deepen it in a specific unit, exploring its complexity and dynamism. In addition, this approach makes it possible to understand the reality of teachers and their relationship with the school context. For Gil, when approaching this methodology, he highlights that "the case study is characterized by the deep and exhaustive study of one or a few objects, in order to allow their broad and detailed knowledge, a task that is practically impossible with the other types of delineations considered" (2008, p. 57).

Yin (1994) corroborates Gil's analysis when he states that "the case study is an empirical study that investigates a current phenomenon within its context of reality, when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly defined and in which several sources of evidence are used." In this sense, our research proposal is based on an investigation that deals with a specific situation, seeking to find the characteristics and what is essential in it.

We will also analyze the statistical data on the absence of teachers from the classroom, due to physical and/or mental health problems, recorded in google forms documents sent to teachers from different areas of activity and to the Superintendence of Personnel Management (SGP). Thus, the present case study fulfilled five stages: research design; research design; preparation and collection of data; analysis of cases and between

cases; thorough review of the data, theoretical triangulation and preparation of the research report and the writing of this article.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In 2019, we were surprised by the global pandemic caused by COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2), which imposes social isolation as one of the main strategies to contain its spread and preserve lives. This collective health measure has had a profound impact on the school environment, affecting teachers, students, and traditional teaching and learning practices. The social distancing caused by the pandemic has significantly altered our social, professional, and personal relationships. In the educational field, as well as in other spheres of social life, it has become necessary to reinvent forms of interaction and experience in the world, given the absence of face-to-face presence in public spaces.

Thus, in times of pandemic, staying alive has become synonymous with survival, and contact with others has become a threat to our already fragile existence. We experienced a profound contradiction: while we were forced into strict isolation from human coexistence, we resorted to contact mediated by technologies as an alternative, while we were subjected to absences and losses, to a need to reinvent the forms of face-to-face work, especially in the classroom (Oliveira, 2021).

Teachers suddenly had the responsibility of adopting a new teaching model: the virtualization of face-to-face learning, with the process of teaching and learning mediated by Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). This strategy became fundamental to meet the demands of students who, isolated in their homes, were unable to attend schools. It is important to highlight that the presence of technologies in the school environment and in the routine of education subjects was not unprecedented. However, until then, its effective incorporation into the pedagogical routine was limited and often on the margins of the formal educational process.

With the pandemic, these technologies have come to occupy a central role, becoming essential allies in the development of didactic-pedagogical strategies capable of ensuring students' access to systematized school knowledge. Although mediated virtually, this access was essential for the continuity of studies and the minimization of losses in school performance throughout the school year.

In this context, teachers began to exercise a "new protagonism" in their pedagogical practices, significantly modifying what they previously did in a conventional way. This

change changed adaptations in several dimensions – social, educational, political and economic – so that it was possible to respond to the challenges imposed.

Many teachers were faced with a lack of skills to use Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), in addition to the difficulties of reconciling the demands of teaching work with domestic responsibilities during a pandemic (Gomes et al., 2021). It became necessary to integrate the exercise of teaching with the activities of the home, since the act of teaching began to take place within the private space of each teacher. In this context, pedagogical practice went beyond the simple mediation of knowledge through the word and face-to-face classes with textbooks, requiring the construction of new ways of teaching and the resignification of "pedagogical doing" in media times and spaces (Oliveira, 2021).

The house has been transformed into a classroom, also becoming the place of learning and teaching, of pedagogical dialogue, of the exchange of knowledge and of the production, appropriation and reelaboration of school and scientific knowledge. Given this scenario, it was necessary to integrate ICTs with teaching methodologies capable of minimizing the impacts caused by emergency remote teaching.

In this new model, the meetings between teachers and students began to be mediated by digital technologies, updating the physical presence and direct communication through cyberspace, where interactions took place, mostly from the cameras and screens of the devices

Synchronous meetings refer to classes whose interaction between the teacher and students takes place in real time, since everyone needs to be at the same time and in the same virtual environment, establishing contact through cyberspace and Emerging Technologies in the Educational Field: education and technology in the contemporary scenario organize pedagogical time according to that time that is held in the face-to-face classroom. Asynchronous meetings is a term used in distance education to characterize communication that does not occur exactly at the same time, non-simultaneous, the messages emitted by a person (teacher) are received and responded to later by the students (Oliveira, et al. 2021; p.21)

Thus, the introduction of these technologies has changed and impacted all educational aspects of the teaching and learning process, as well as students' interest and ways of learning. Consequently, you directly affected teaching practice, as it required new approaches to teach and manage the educational process as a whole (Almeida, 1999).

With regard to ICTs, it is essential to consider their operability, practicality, use, potentiality and implications for pedagogical practice, as well as the access of students and teachers to these technologies in a broad and quality way. It is essential to understand that

we cannot simply ignore what is happening, and still happens, around us; the transformation of the school scenario during the pandemic, the redefinition of the concept of face-to-face, and the new times and spaces of teaching and learning imposed on teachers the need to overcome the old GLS model (Chalk, Blackboard and Saliva) and keep up with technological and media advancement.

The reinvention of teaching practices was essential, but this transformation caused abrupt changes in the personal and professional lives of teachers. In addition to dealing with technological equipment, you need to quickly learn to master ICTs, use various media resources to teach your classes remotely, and access these tools over the internet. Although some institutions have offered quick courses on the use of ICTs for insertion in the classroom, the greatest responsibility for the educational process falls on teachers, who need to adapt, study, learn and seek their self-training to handle technologies and media resources, to be able to teach their class remotely and be able to properly access such resources through the internet.

Thus, teachers were not distant from the pandemic context; on the contrary, they directly experienced the pandemic and its negative effects on collective living in society. Therefore, we consider it relevant to give visibility to the various forms of illness that affected teachers during the pandemic period and will continue to impact them in the post-pandemic period. Social isolation and the numerous losses of loved ones between 2020 and 2022 affected the physical and mental health of everyone globally, including education professionals.

Reflecting on teacher education goes beyond analyzing the structures of schools, the lack of appreciation and low salaries; It is necessary to consider both micropolitics and macropolitics, that is, public and private spaces, including the deepest field of the unconscious. It is not only about what happened during the pandemic, but about the entire process of illness in the workplace that teachers have faced in recent years, conditioned by the precariousness of teaching work and the lack of investment in the professional careers of those who work in education, especially in higher education.

In the pandemic and post-pandemic context, several studies point to the existence of a serious situation of suffering related to the pandemic (Gomes et al., 2021), highlighting the increase in levels of anxiety, depression, and professional burnout among education professionals. For these authors, "teacher malaise is related to new forms of relationships in pedagogical practice, teacher identity, and the new demands of the external world that

are beyond the control of teachers and students" (Pachiega and Milani, 2020, p. 222). This is because, in the learning conditions, emotional components are present that directly affect the professional relationship.

The work activities of education professionals directly impact their physical and psychological well-being, contributing to the development of stress and other diseases that arise during the exercise of the teaching profession (Weber, 2015). According to previous research, education and health professionals are among those who get sick the most, as previous research points out⁶.

For Tundis and Monteiro,

Teachers are in a critical work context, with experiences of pleasure/suffering that are both positive (professional fulfillment) and negative (professional burnout), but in the search for a psychodynamic balance they have resulted in damage to physical and psychological health (Tundis and Monteiro, 2028, p 7).

Already with a precedent of teacher illness on a global scale, during the pandemic and post-crisis period, between 2020 and 2022, teachers faced daily challenges related to their health, both physical and emotional, in addition to dealing with the loss of family members, loneliness, fear and anguish, the result of a personal and collective experience of social isolation.

Thus, to meet the proposed general objective, we analyzed the data below on teacher absences in the pandemic period in the years 2021 and 2022. Thus, in order to understand the situation of teacher illness in the university reality of Unilab, we identified some factors

To think sociologically about issues related to the body, health and disease, as well as rights in relation to health, is to think today not only about this reference of capitalist society, but also within its class contradictions and inequalities and other social determinants articulated with it, such as gender, generation and ethnicity (Pimenta and Oliveira, 2020; p.6).

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, we observed deep contradictions of capitalism, especially in Brazil, where the government of the time developed a denialist stance dedicated to the defense of life and human rights, directly impacting the majority of the Brazilian population.

⁶ CARLOTTO, M. S.; PALAZZO, L. S. Burnout syndrome and associated factors: an epidemiological study with teachers. Cadernos de Saúde Pública, Rio de Janeiro, v. 22, n. 5, p. 1017-1026, May 2006.

According to the data collected in the field research, in 2021, more than 50 (sixty) teachers were absent for health reasons, with periods ranging from 10 (ten) to 60 (sixty) days. During the same period, 8 (eight) professors requested leave of absence for more than 60 (sixty) days. Most of the leaves recorded were from 1 (one) to 5 (five) days, usually for medical consultations and exams, as reported by the professors. In 2022, there was a reduction in cases of long-term leave, but even so, more than 100 (one hundred) teachers requested leave for health treatment, lasting between 1 (one) and 5 (five) days.

When we analyze the context presented in the table above, especially in relation to the university faculty, we realize the need to go beyond statistical data on educational performance, the implementation of a school calendar or the fulfillment of curricular content. It is essential to resort to other areas of knowledge to understand the deepest and real form.

To understand how the pandemic caused physical and/or mental illness among teachers, it is necessary to look beyond the structures of schools and the visible factors already discussed in various studies and academic works. We must consider that school/formal education is not limited to being a discipline of the body to meet the demands of a capitalist world, which affects everyone (Oliveira, et al, 2021). It is necessary to understand that educating involves care and affection in human formative processes; it is about the encounter with the other, the fraternal and constant dialogue, listening and being heard (BOFF, 1999).

We must recognize that the pandemic caused physical and/or mental illness among teachers, it is necessary to look beyond the structures of schools and visible factors, such as adaptation to remote teaching, work overload and technological difficulties, which have already been widely discussed in various research and academic works. The COVID-19 pandemic generated a context of exceptionality, which affected not only the material working conditions, but also the psychological and emotional health of teachers.

CONCLUSION

From an analysis carried out from the research undertaken, we can see that the impact of the pandemic period was not limited to the immediate challenges related to online classes and social distancing measures. The teachers faced, in addition to these difficulties, a scenario of uncertainty and fear, both in relation to their own health and the health of their families and students. The fear of contagion, the loneliness caused by social

isolation and the loss of loved ones contributed to the worsening of stress and anxiety among education professionals.

In addition, the pandemic exposed the structural weaknesses of the educational system and revealed the emotional overload that teachers already faced before the health crisis. The teaching profession, which in itself already involves great responsibility and a strong emotional charge due to the interaction with students and the management of conflicts within the classroom, began to require even more resilience during the pandemic. Physical distancing, lack of emotional support, and the wear and tear caused by constant adaptation to new technological demands have resulted in mental and physical exhaustion for many teachers.

Therefore, it is necessary to understand that the illness of teachers in the pandemic context cannot be attributed only to external factors, such as the increase in educational demands or the transition to remote teaching. One should also consider the profound impact on the emotional well-being of teachers, who have experienced a range of emotional and psychological challenges. This includes facing personal losses, the constant fear of contagion, and the difficulty of balancing professional and personal life in a scenario of uncertainty and constant change.

This broader view, which goes beyond visible issues, allows us to understand that the illness of teachers during the pandemic is closely related to a combination of social, emotional, and cultural factors that directly affect the mental and physical health of these professionals. Thus, public policies and strategies to support educators need to go beyond improving material working conditions and also include mental health care, offering emotional support and creating spaces for listening and welcoming teachers.

In this sense, it is important to highlight that Unilab has a specific sector to welcome employees in relation to illness issues that impact work activity. However, as evidenced by the data presented, the indicators are significant with regard to the need for personal and family health care, which has led teachers to take time off to deal with these issues. However, it is essential that there is a more specific and individualized follow-up of cases of illness among teachers, especially in this post-pandemic context.

We cannot consider that we are still affected by the covid19 pandemic, and that the developments we still do not know in their entirety. That said, our analyses are significant for Unilab as a public university to invest in a robust program of care for civil servants, whether they are teachers or administrative technicians in education (TAE).

We cannot fail to consider that we are still being impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and that its full consequences are still unknown. In view of this, our analyses become fundamental for Unilab, as a public university, to invest in a comprehensive program of care for civil servants, both teachers and administrative technicians in education (TAE).

In the post-pandemic context, the health of teachers has become a central concern for educational institutions, and it is essential that public universities such as Unilab adopt effective strategies to promote the physical and mental well-being of their employees. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought unexpected challenges to education professionals, directly impacting their working and health conditions. Thus, it is essential that Unilab implements care policies that meet not only academic demands, but also the physical and emotional health needs of professors.

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