

PERCEPTIONS OF PORTUGUESE SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS ABOUT THE EFFECTS OF THE CONFINEMENT PERIOD FROM COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE TEACHING/LEARNING PROCESS

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Abstract

Concerns about the impact of the pandemic on the training of university students, in particular social work students, were the starting point for this research. The objective was to know the perceptions of these students about the effects of the substitution of face-to-face classes by distance classes in their teaching/learning process during the confinement period. To this end, a questionnaire was applied, using the *Google Docs* platform, to all the students enrolled in the 2019/2020 school year, in the degree course in social work at the Lusófona University. The results revealed students' concerns about the pandemic and its impacts on learning. Although distance learning has been assessed as having negative effects on their learning process, it has not negatively impacted students' academic outcomes. The results also draw attention to the importance of rethinking teaching/learning methodologies, with a focus on the development of more participatory strategies capable of motivating, attracting the attention and interest of students for learning.

Keywords: perceptions, teaching/learning, distance learning, students, social work, covid-19, Portugal.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The covid-19 pandemic and education policies

In December 2019, the SARS-CoV-2 virus, which caused the disease COVID-19, was identified for the first time in Wuhan, in the province of Hubei - China. Given its rapid spread, on March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the outbreak of COVID-19 as an international pandemic, having become an epidemiological problem worldwide. It is currently present in more than 187 countries and 200 territories, has infected more than 82 million people and has made more than 1 800 000 fatalities [1].

In view of the serious public health crisis and the identification of registered cases of COVID-19 contagion in Portugal, on March 18, 2020, the Portuguese government declared a state of emergency [2] in order to contain the progression of the virus. Similar to what was being implemented in other affected countries As was being implemented in other affected countries, exceptional political measures were adopted that imposed social isolation and compulsory confinement on citizens, profoundly altering everyday interactions and practices in all social contexts. In terms of education, these measures resulted in the temporary closure of educational institutions, of all levels of training, for almost 6 months (from March to September). Faced with the challenge of continuing student training, the education system replaced classroom classes with distance classes using the internet and forms of videoconferencing communication (e.g. Zoom, Microsoft Teams or Webex) [3], with students and teachers - most without experience of any form of distance learning - to adapt quickly to this reality [4].

Scientific research on the impact of class interruption on students' school performance, due to the planned and pre-defined closure of schools, has shown ambiguous results, and there is no evidence to confirm the hypothesis of learning loss [5], although it is believed that they may be more significant at certain levels of education, subjects and less favored social groups.

Studies have, however, shown that the ability of teachers to communicate clearly with students has robust effects on learning [6], so its relevance is supposed to remain also in distance learning.

In the comparison between face-to-face teaching and distance learning, some studies (e.g. [7], [8]) have indicated that the use of methodologies that combine, in an organized and structured way, the different types of teaching, tend to produce more effective results in terms of learning and, therefore, to be seen as more promising. The problem is that "mixed" strategies are not only not available to most schools

and universities, but they are faced with gaps in accessibility and handling of distance learning platforms by students and teachers.

UNESCO [9] reports that when schools and universities close unexpectedly and with indefinite duration, teachers tend to reveal doubts about their obligations, the strategies to be adopted for the continuity of teaching activity and how to maintain links with students to support them in learning. Transitions to distance learning platforms also tend to promote a sense of distress, confusion and frustration at the lack of know-how for the operation of digital platforms and resources, the overload of information to learn how to use them correctly, and the technical challenges related to internet connectivity. UNESCO [10] also recognizes that the closure of schools and universities tends to promote, in students, concerns related to the loss of social contact and socialization routines (the effects of which may be reflected in the socio-emotional balance) and the difficulty of access to technological resources (computers and mobile phones) and quality internet that may jeopardize the quality and continuity of their learning.

1.2 Distance learning in social work

An increasing number of publications have been emphasizing that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a greater impact on people and groups in situations of social vulnerability (e.g. [11] [12] [13]). As a result, this situation affected the intervention of Portuguese social work which, in the face of worsening poverty and social inequalities, had to develop more pragmatic and care-oriented approaches, in close cooperation with other professionals, organizations, local policies and voluntary citizens, in order to respond to the numerous challenges that were being addressed, putting the profession under additional pressure.

This pressure was also felt at the level of social work education. In Portugal, training in social work in *b-learning* is not a common practice, although some (few) universities have experience in this field. Therefore, the suspension of face-to-face school activities due to the COVID-19 pandemic generated concern, anxiety and *stress* in most teachers and students because they were “forced” to leave their “comfort zone” and have to adhere, in a short time, to a new modality of teaching/learning (including synchronous and asynchronous training activities) which, due to inexperience and ignorance, could affect the quality of the transmission/acquisition of knowledge.

In addition, it is recognized that the process of socialization in the academic and professional community of social work, learning through the exhibition and reflection of social intervention practices, and direct contact with users of social services and their problems through face-to-face curricular internships are crucial for social work training. However, the physical proximity that is required and fostered in social work education had to be abruptly interrupted because it presented health risks to users, social workers and teachers. Thus, believing that the reduction of the participation of students in the academic and professional community of social work may have led to an erosion of learning and the skills necessary for social intervention, it was intended, with this study, to know the perceptions of social work students about the effects of the substitution of classroom classes by distance classes in their teaching/learning process during the confinement period.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Type of study

Given the proposed objectives, we performed a quantitative, descriptive and correlational [14], with hindsight temporal directionality, based on a descriptive analysis of the collected data.

2.2 Instruments

A questionnaire was drawn up using the Google *Docs* platform for data collection. It was structured around three dimensions: 1) sociodemographic characterization data (9 items); 2) concerns about physical and emotional well-being and sociability during confinement (9 items); and 3) impacts of confinement in the teaching/learning process (20 items), having explored (i) access to information and communication technologies, (ii) the resources used, (iii) perceptions about distance learning, (iv) perceptions about workload and (v) perceptions about the impact of confinement on learning process. The questionnaire consisted of 38 questions, of which 3 were open, 31 closed and 4 *Likert*-type, with

an intensity scale of 1 to 5 points. The instrument was validated after the pre-test to 25 students and teachers.

2.3 Procedure

With the help of the secretariat of the Institute of Social Work of Lusófona University, we sent email to all the students enrolled in social work undergraduate course, in the year 2019/2020 ($N=133$) with the presentation of the study and its social and scientific relevance. It was called for their participation by completing the questionnaire, made available online through a link created for this purpose. Participants were asked for consent to participate, having been granted anonymity and confidentiality of the data, complying with the ethical requirements prescribed by the Code of Ethics of Social Workers in Portugal [15], the General Data Protection Regulation [16] and the international scientific community [17]. Data collection took place during 15 days, between 14 and 28 October 2020. A total of 111 responses were obtained and 17 were excluded because they did not meet the criteria defined for the sample. In view of the above, the study totaled 94 valid responses. The data were processed using the software Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS – version 27).

2.4 Sample

The sampling technique was non-probabilistic [14]. The sample ($n=94$) was composed, as mentioned above, by students enrolled in the school year 2019/2020 in social work undergraduate course of the Lusófona University. According to Table 1, the majority of the participants were female (95,7%), with portuguese nationality (91,5%), with residence in the district of Lisbon (74,5%) and between 18 and 53 years of age ($M=23,27$; $SD=5,7$). In the period of confinement resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic, 39,4% attended the 1st year of the undergraduate course, 46,8% attended the 2nd year and 13,8% attended the 3rd year.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the students surveyed ($n=94$).

		<i>n</i>	%	Descriptive
Gender	Female	90	95,7	<i>Mo</i> = Female
	Male	4	4,3	
Age Group	18-22 years old	60	63,8	<i>M</i> = 23,27 <i>SD</i> = 5,7 <i>Min</i> : 18 <i>Max</i> : 53
	23-27 years old	25	26,6	
	28-32 years old	3	3,2	
	33-37 years old	2	2,1	
	38-42 years old	2	2,1	
	48-53 years old	2	2,1	
Nationality	Portuguese	86	91,5	<i>Mo</i> = Portuguese
	PALOP*	8	8,6	
Residence District	Lisbon	70	74,5	<i>Mo</i> = Lisbon
	Setúbal	16	17,0	
	Santarém	4	4,3	
	Leiria	2	2,1	
	Évora	1	1,1	
	Portalegre	1	1,1	
Year of Degree	1st year	37	39,4	<i>Mo</i> = 2nd year
	2nd year	44	46,8	
	3rd year	13	13,8	
Employment Situation	Student	73	77,7	<i>Mo</i> = Student
	Worker-student	21	22,3	

N = frequency; *Mo* = mode; *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation

*PALOP = Portuguese-speaking African Countries

3 RESULTS

In this section we present the main results of the research, although exploratory, centered around two axes of analysis: 1) the concerns and impacts of confinement and; 2) the impact of confinement on the teaching/learning process. We chose, in this article, for its descriptive presentation, with its deepening and correlational analysis being developed in later publications.

3.1 Concerns and impacts of confinement

The results demonstrate the concern of social work students with the issue of COVID 19-pandemic and confinement imposed by the Portuguese government. Of the 94 students surveyed, about 80% said they were “concerned” or “very concerned” about this situation, not only due to their lack of information, but also due to the uncertainty associated with it and the possible impacts on the various spheres of life that result from it. Demonstrating this, it is the evaluation made by the students on the impacts of confinement on their well-being, with 77,7% considering that it had negative impacts, particularly in terms of greater “stress/anxiety” (70,6%), “demotivation” (61,7%) and “tiredness” (50,6%).

A similar impact is visible in sociability, with around 40% of students seeing their social relationships with classmates and/or friends reduced (25,5%) or even interrupted (14,9%).

Despite this (or because of this), confinement revealed some positive aspects in the students' lives, with sports practice emerging as a *coping* strategy to deal with these negative impacts. In fact, when asked about this issue, it was found that before the confinement only 30% maintained sports practice, passing this number to 76,6%, an increase of more than 150%.

Table 2. Concerns and impacts of confinement.

		<i>n</i>	%	<i>Descriptive</i>
Concerns about the pandemic	Little worried	4	4,3	<i>Mo</i> = Very worried
	Indifferent	15	16,0	
	Worried	37	39,4	
	Very worried	38	40,4	
(Negative) impacts of confinement on well-being	Yes	73	77,7	<i>Mo</i> = Yes
	No	21	22,3	
Type of impacts	Listless/depressed	33	38,8	<i>Mo</i> = Stressed/Anxious
	Unmotivated	57	61,7	
	Stressed/anxious	60	70,6	
	Isolated/lonely	22	25,9	
	Tired	43	50,6	
	Angry	20	23,5	
	Other	2	2,4	
Sports practice	Before confinement	28	29,8	
	During confinement	72	76,6	
Maintaining social relationships with classmates and/or friends	Yes, almost every day	56	59,6	<i>Mo</i> = Almost every day
	Only once in a while	24	25,5	
	No	14	14,9	

N = frequency; *Mo* = mode

3.2 Impacts of confinement on the teaching/learning process

As for the impacts of confinement on the teaching/learning process, these were analyzed in three specific domains: the perceptions of students about 1) distance classes, 2) the workload requested by teachers and; 3) global impacts on learning and evaluation.

Thus, with regard to the perception of students about distance classes, it was found that confinement implied some changes, both in terms of their attendance and in terms of their participation and interest in classes. Regarding attendance, 68,1% of the students reported maintaining the same level of attendance to classes as in the period before confinement, with 21,3% having increased their presence (especially working students). If distance learning seems to have brought benefits for some students, who have thus started attending classes more regularly and, consequently, ensuring greater monitoring of the content taught, the same can no longer be said about their participation and interest in classes, which registered relevant breaks (44,7% in terms of participation and 38,3% in their interest).

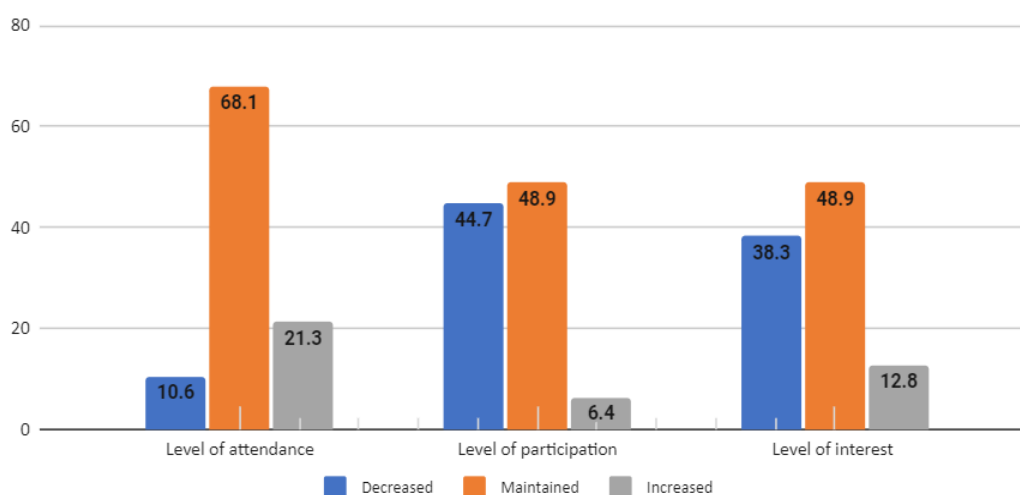


Figure 1. Impacts of distance classes.

The analysis of the results on whether or not confinement brought benefits to the learning process is in line with the results presented above. In other words, most students consider that it had little or no positive effects on their learning process, with only 22,3% making a clearly positive assessment of this situation.

As an explanatory factor for this evaluation, the students highlight the burden of work requested by the teachers during this period, with 87,2% indicating the highest workload, when compared to the classroom teaching (face-to-face).

Table 3. Impacts of confinement on the teaching/learning process.

		n	%	Descriptive
Has confinement brought benefits to the learning process?	No, on the contrary	17	18,1	Mo = Yes, but little
	No, unless on specific situations	18	19,1	
	Yes, but little	38	40,4	
	Yes, no doubt	21	22,3	
The distance learning represented a workload	Larger than the face-to-face	82	87,2	Mo = Major
	Identical to face-to-face	10	10,6	
	Smaller than the face-to-face	2	2,1	
Assessment of the impact of distance learning on academic results	They have greatly damaged	1	1,1	Mo = Neither harmed nor benefited Me = Benefited little
	They harmed little	6	6,4	
	Neither harmed nor benefited	36	38,3	
	They have benefited little	35	37,2	
	They have benefited greatly	16	17,0	
Overall, consider that the situation of distance learning was	Completely unfavorable	7	7,4	Mo/Me = Neither unfavorable nor favorable
	Unfavorable	17	18,1	
	Neither unfavorable nor favorable	44	46,8	
	Favorable	17	18,1	
	Completely favorable	9	9,6	

N = frequency; Mo = mode; Me = median

Despite this perception, students recognize that distance learning did not have a negative impact on their academic results (only 7,5% indicated that they had been harmed in some way with this modality). Most students (54,2%) consider, on the contrary, that it has benefited, to a greater or lesser extent, its academic results.

Overall, despite fears and work overload, most respondents end up evaluating distance learning as an alternative form of teaching, with no significant impact on their learning process (46,8% consider that this was “neither favorable nor unfavorable”). In particular, there are a significant number of students for whom it turned out to be, somehow, “favorable” (27,7%). Still, it is worth mentioning those for whom this was considered “unfavorable” (25,5%) that require further analysis.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The results presented show that students evaluate distance learning as having no positive effects on their learning process, in good reason due to the overload of work felt during the confinement period. It is recognized that most social service teachers, inexperienced in distance learning, have adopted a set of differentiating strategies to evaluate and assess students' learning. However, if, on the one hand, these strategies allowed to question "the centrality of instruments such as tests or exams" [3, p. 50], on the other hand, produced an overload of work in students who, together with a greater degree of commitment and discipline that distance learning requires, eventually promoted in these feelings of anxiety, tiredness and demotivation. It should be noted that although this situation has occurred, it has not negatively impacted the academic results of the pupils. It is believed that its justification may be related to two aspects: on the one hand, the students' ability to respond to the multiple requests of teachers, evidencing enormous resilience in the face of constraints and adversities and, on the other hand, the greater transition of teachers in the evaluation processes resulting from the self-recognition of a limited professional experience in order to be able to carry out adequate distance learning.

The results also seem to confirm the thesis defended by some precursors of developmental psychology (see [18] [19] and others) that highlight the importance of participation, understood as a process of interaction between subjects, in the learning process, particularly in terms of their interest and motivation for the construction of new knowledge. In addition, these results draw attention to the need to (re)think about the issue of interaction/participation in teaching/learning (especially in distance learning), both in terms of the relationship between student/content taught (which should be able to stimulate the understanding and cognition of the student, but also to hold their attention for long periods of time), the relationship between student/teacher (in which the teacher must have the ability to maintain his interest, motivating the student for discovery and presenting multiple learning opportunities to the student) and the student/student relationship (in promoting sharing and discussion as a way of building new knowledge). In particular, and with regard to the relationship between student/teacher, we emphasize that the effectiveness of distance learning is, according to Mälinen [20], associated with the teacher's ability to engage in online teaching, to interact and communicate with students (a situation that also meets other studies [6]) and to promote a continuous assessment of knowledge.

Since the current "teacher training does not include digital skills, neither specifically nor in a generic or transversal way" [3, p. 50], and it is not yet possible to determine exactly the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is believed that, in addition to reinforcing the technological plan of universities, it is not possible to invest in the training of social service teachers in the use of online methodologies so that they can promote qualified interaction, consolidating an educational culture that benefits from the complementarity of the different teaching modalities.

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