

DOSSIER

The sociology of family-school relationships: social reconfigurations and new analytical and methodological perspectives

The pandemic and the bonds between families and schools in Early Childhood Education: an analytical proposal beyond Socioeconomic Status (SES)

A pandemia e os vínculos entre famílias e escolas na Educação Infantil: uma proposta de análise para além do NSE

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes adopting the type of school and the differences between market-driven and state-driven actions as relevant and promising analytical categories when examining variations in strategies for approaching and maintaining ties with families in Early Childhood Education during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic. The research procedures included interviews and field diary records. The schools in the sample are located in two Brazilian municipalities: Sobral (public network) and Rio de Janeiro (non-affiliated and affiliated private schools). The results suggest, among other conclusions, that: (I) the type of school and the differences between market-driven and state-driven actions constitute influential factors with the potential to be explored in future studies; (II) aligning the literature of the Sociology of Education with educational research focused on Early Childhood Education can provide new analytical perspectives that help in understanding the family-school relationship at this stage of schooling.

Keywords: Family-School Relationship. Early Childhood Education. Covid-19.

RESUMO

O presente artigo propõe-se a adotar o tipo de escola e as diferenças entre as formas de ação próprias do mercado e do Estado como categorias de análise relevantes e promissoras ao tratar das variações nas estratégias de aproximação e manutenção dos vínculos com as famílias na Educação Infantil, durante o primeiro ano da pandemia da Covid-19. Os procedimentos de investigação incluíram entrevistas e registros de diário de campo. As escolas da amostra estão localizadas em dois municípios brasileiros: Sobral (rede pública) e Rio de Janeiro (escolas privadas não conveniadas e conveniadas). Os resultados sugerem, entre outras conclusões, que: I) o tipo de escola e as diferenças entre os modos de ação próprios do mercado e do Estado constituem fatores de influência com potencial para serem investigados em estudos futuros;

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II) alinhar a literatura da Sociologia da Educação a leituras da área educacional, voltada à Educação Infantil, pode agregar chaves de análise, que ajudam a compreender a relação família-escola nesta etapa de escolarização.

Palavras-chave: Relação Família-Escola. Educação Infantil. Covid-19.

Introduction

The present text analyzes the family-school relationship in Early Childhood Education (ECE) during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic and seeks to broaden the debate on the observed variations in the strategies adopted by schools to foster engagement and maintain ties with families.

Socioeconomic status (SES) has remained a predominant explanatory factor in the Sociology of Education when investigating the family-school relationship (Alves *et al.*, 2013; Nogueira; Resende, 2022). However, this study argues that the types of schools – public, private non-affiliated, and private affiliated – and the typical modes of operation of the state and the market (Hirschman, 1973) can provide promising analytical perspectives for understanding the distinct interaction patterns established between parents and teachers. This is particularly relevant when considering the suspension of face-to-face classes due to the pandemic and the unique intensity of the relationships among the actors involved in this stage of schooling. The perceptible *ambiguity* regarding the compulsory nature and importance of ECE for child development makes these categories even more relevant for understanding the specificities inherent in the beginning of the educational journey.

In order to contextualize the discussion, it is important to highlight that the family-school relationship has held a significant place in the field of the Sociology of Education since the 1960s (Nogueira; Resende, 2022). Silva (2003) supports this claim, noting the existence of extensive literature on the topic. According to the author, research in this area continues to grow at an exponential rate due to two “specific social conditions” (Silva, 2003, p. 97): the emergence and expansion of parental participation in school life in the post-war period and the growth of higher education research centers, which are characteristic of the post-industrial era.

In Brazil, the scenario is no different. Research on the relationship between families and schools has intensified and now plays a significant role in the literature of a new subfield within the Sociology of Education, which Nogueira (2022, p. 4) refers to as the “sociology of family-school interactions”.

Several studies in the field of the Sociology of Education argue that the more harmonious the relationships between families and schools, the greater the chances of a stable academic trajectory (Epstein; Sheldon, 2022; Montandon; Perrenoud, 2001; Bhering; De Nez, 2002), particularly for young children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (See; Gorard, 2013; Bhering; De Nez, 2002). This premise is adopted in the present study, which supports the idea that this partnership can serve as a protective factor for ensuring children’s right to education at this stage.

However, Montandon and Perrenoud (2001), as well as Silva (2003), caution that a smooth relationship between parents and teachers often exists more as an idealized concept than as a reality. These interactions are shaped by power asymmetries, socioeconomic and emotional factors,

among others, and therefore inherently involve conflicts between the interests and expectations of both parties.

The theoretical framework adopted in this article is grounded in a contemporary perspective of the Sociology of Education, which recognizes socioeconomic status (SES) as a fundamental factor in explaining different patterns of interaction between parents and schools. While acknowledging the contributions of Bourdieu (2015), this approach also seeks to question the “deterministic/pessimistic” tone often attributed to the role of schools (Payet, 2017, p. 10) in this theoretical perspective, which primarily attributes the explanatory power of family-school relationships to social class. This study examines why schools that serve relatively homogeneous family groups, in terms of SES, nonetheless exhibit variations in the actions and relationships established between school agents, as suggested by empirical observations.

In the Brazilian context, the past two decades have seen a significant increase in studies within the field of the Sociology of Education focusing on the functioning of the school market (or quasi-market). While these studies explore various relevant topics concerning the family-school relationship, the majority focus on families’ school choice strategies and related themes, such as demand and supply of school seats, variations in enrollment strategies under different admission policies, residential segregation, and families’ cultural and social capital, among other factors (Alcântara, 2024; Alves *et al.*, 2015; Alves *et al.*, 2013; Resende; Nogueira; Nogueira, 2011; Perosa; Dantas, 2017; Koslinski; Carvalho, 2015a; 2011)¹.

In contrast, the present study does not focus on family choices and strategies but rather on the relationships established within schools. To capture the variations mentioned in the previous paragraph, this study proposes the use of analytical categories that allow for the identification of differences between actions typical of the public sector and private market spheres. To this end, the study is based on Hirschman’s (1973) proposal, which argues that when users or clients – in this case, families – are dissatisfied with an organization, institution, or service, they have three alternatives²: (i) using *voice*, by expressing concerns and seeking change; (ii) opting for *exit*, by leaving the organization and seeking an alternative; or (iii) demonstrating *loyalty*, by accepting the situation and waiting for long-term rewards³. In basic social organizations – such as family, the state, and the church – Hirschman (1973) highlights that *voice* is often the only available means of response when the *exit* option is not feasible, which appears to be the case in Brazilian public education. However, it is worth noting that even in school systems that allow open enrollment, many families still opt to remain in the public sector.

¹ It is worth noting that studies conducted in Brazil rarely include empirical data analyses that simultaneously encompass public, private, and affiliated schools.

² Payet (2017) expands Hirschman’s typology with the contribution of Belgian sociologist Guy Bajoit (1988), who added a fourth stance: apathy, meaning the absence of a strategic reaction.

³ “Voice” can be defined as a political mechanism whose function is to alert a company or organization about its shortcomings “through individual or collective petitions to the directly responsible administration, appeals to higher authorities with the intent of pressuring management” (Hirschman, 1973, p. 40), or even through other forms of protest and intervention, including those aimed at mobilizing public opinion. When referring to “exit”, it represents a more drastic reaction: users or clients stop purchasing the product or service, or some members leave the organization or company. This is a mechanism characteristic of the market economy (Hirschman, 1973).

According to Hirschman (1973), the public service sector represents a privileged domain for applying the concepts of *exit* and *voice*. This sector provides services through a single provider, whether public or publicly regulated. In the case of education, services are not directly paid for, based on the principle that all citizens, regardless of income, are entitled to access them and, therefore, they should not be provided through market mechanisms.

Payet (2017), building on Hirschman's (1973) concepts, further clarifies that more educated middle-class families tend to use the first two strategies – *exit* and *voice* – when dissatisfied with the school. They may choose to leave if their complaints regarding their child are not adequately addressed or if the child is placed in an unfavorable school situation (such as being at risk of academic failing).

Moving forward, in order to understand the family-school relationship in Early Childhood Education (ECE) during the pandemic, Hirschman's (1973) concepts and Payet's (2017) contributions will be used as analytical frameworks in the analysis of the results presented in this study. This approach will allow for a discussion on how these mechanisms can influence and even disrupt relationships between families and schools.

This article is divided into three sections, in addition to this introduction and the final considerations. First, the challenges posed by the pandemic are discussed, taking into account the specific context of Early Childhood Education. Next, the methodological procedures adopted in the study are outlined, followed by an in-depth analysis of the variations observed in the strategies for fostering and maintaining engagement with families during the pandemic.

Pandemic context and specificities of Early Childhood Education (ECE)

In March 2020, as Covid-19 cases surged worldwide, in-person classes were suspended, and remote learning was implemented in Brazil (Brasil, 2020). This measure presented numerous challenges for teachers, families, and governments in the process of distance education. For Early Childhood Education (ECE), in particular, it introduced additional difficulties: delaying children's integration into an environment of extrafamilial interactions and relying on resources that were not ideally suited for this age group, such as electronic devices – computers, tablets, and smartphones (FCC, 2020). The pandemic thus generated a series of urgent and unprecedented demands that had a particularly profound impact on Early Childhood Education (FCC, 2020).

Most schools and parents were unprepared to teach or support learning without physical contact and direct interactions (Campos; Vieira, 2021) or to manage the shift of schooling into the domestic environment, imposed by Covid-19 (Guizzo; Marcello; Müller, 2020). On one hand, teachers and school administrators had to develop and adapt strategies to reach children at home (Campos; Vieira, 2021). On the other hand, many families faced continued or premature returns to work, which prevented or significantly hindered their ability to support school activities at home (Cruz; Martins; Cruz, 2021). Additionally, precarious housing conditions and difficulties related to access to devices and the internet connectivity emerged as further obstacles to maintaining a stable routine for young children, despite the efforts and support of schools (Cruz; Martins; Cruz, 2021).

It is important to highlight that entry into ECE has specific characteristics that require attention. The first is that enrollment in daycare or preschool marks the beginning of a child's and their family's educational journey. Upon entering the educational process, an unavoidable relationship is established (Montandon; Perrenoud, 2001), an "inescapable requirement" (Brasil, 2010) that is imposed on parents of young children in Early Childhood Education.

Other significant aspects include the fact that this stage of ECE corresponds to a period in life when children are highly dependent on adults, as they are in the process of developing their identities and language skills, requiring substantial support and supervision in both caregiving and educational activities. This particularity of ECE leads to a need for closeness and bonds supposedly demonstrated much more intensely than in other stages of schooling (Montandon; Perrenoud, 2001; Lahire, 1997). However, such closeness can also lead to increased conflicts, which requires further attention.

Additionally, according to Abbud and Oliveira (2020), the pandemic disrupted the process of "approaching, understanding, and adopting a new framework introduced by the National Common Curriculum Base for Early Childhood Education" (Abbud; Oliveira, 2020, p. 3), which had begun to be implemented in the education system. These new guidelines introduced changes by establishing learning rights and objectives for this age group, essential for overcoming an assistentialist or preparatory approach that undermines the identity of this educational segment in Brazil.

If the family-school relationship in Early Childhood Education (ECE) was already complex before the pandemic (Cruz; Martins; Cruz, 2021), an analysis of the reality imposed by social isolation reveals that families were required to take on to an even more active role in their children's schooling, in an unprecedented and urgent manner, in an effort to mitigate the effects of school closures. The challenge was even greater in ECE, considering the level of guidance and care required, as well as the essential need for interaction with other adults and peers at this developmental stage (Campos; Vieira, 2021; Abuchaim *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, the crucial need for frequent exchanges of information between the adults responsible for the child, both inside and outside the school, is highlighted, as mentioned earlier.

The next section outlines the methodological procedures for data collection and analysis that underpin this study.

Methodological procedures

This research is part of a broader longitudinal study⁴, conducted by researchers from the Laboratory for Research on Educational Opportunities (LaPOpE) at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ) at two distinct points in time: before and during the pandemic (2019 and 2020/21), in two Brazilian cities—Sobral (Northeast region, Municipal Public School System) and Rio de Janeiro (Southeast region, affiliated and non-affiliated private schools).

⁴ The study was funded by the Maria Cecilia Souto Vidigal Foundation, the Academic Excellence Program (PROEX/CAPES), and the Institutional Scientific Initiation Scholarship Program (National Council for Scientific and Technological Development/CNPq and UFRJ).

It is important to highlight that the selection of these cities for the study was based on the availability of previously collected data from 2019 in both Sobral and Rio de Janeiro, which enabled an analysis of the pandemic's impact. However, the study does not seek to establish direct comparisons, as the composition of school groups (public, private, and affiliated) in different cities does not allow for such an approach. Nonetheless, a key contribution of this research is the identification of patterns between the types of schools included in the study, given the scarcity of data on Early Childhood Education in the Sociology of Education literature, particularly in Brazil (Romanelli, 2013; Rodrigues; Muanis, 2020).

Regarding the sample, it is important to emphasize that Sobral's Municipal Public School System is unique, being recognized for promoting both quality and equity in education among its students. In 2021, it achieved a score of 8 on the Basic Education Development Index (IDEB) for the early years of elementary school (INEP, 2022).

The private school sector, which is also part of the study's sample, has attracted significant research interest due to its strong representation in the country. Early Childhood Education (ECE) is the educational segment where the private sector has the highest proportion of students. In preschool (ages 4 and 5), private institutions account for approximately 25% of enrollments in this age group. In the city of Rio de Janeiro, the private sector plays an even more significant role, representing around 32% of preschool enrollments (INEP, 2023).

See Table 1 below, which presents the distribution of public and private school enrollments in both cities and across the periods relevant to this research:

Table 1: Percentage of school enrollments in preschool: Sobral and Rio de Janeiro

	Public schools		Private schools	
	2019	2021	2019	2021
Sobral	80,5%	85,2%	19,5%	14,8%
Rio de Janeiro	61,7%	67,7%	38,3%	32,3%

Source: INEP (2023).

When discussing the family-school relationship in private schools in the city of Rio de Janeiro, it is important to note that in 2019, the private sector accounted for a significant proportion of preschool enrollments (nearly 40%). Meanwhile, Sobral's municipal public school system enrolled 80.5% of preschool students, while the private sector was responsible for fewer than 20% of enrollments in this municipality. In both cities, the proportion of preschool enrollments in private schools declined during the pandemic – dropping to 32.3% in Rio de Janeiro and 14.8% in Sobral – a factor that helps to explain the tensions in the family-school relationship in private schools during the studied period.

This analysis considers only data collected during the second phase of the umbrella study (2020/21), based on interviews with teachers, supplemented by field observations recorded by one of the study coordinators. These records provided evidence of nuances in the relationships between school staff and families during the pandemic, especially depending on socioeconomic status (SES), as well as the type of school and the influence of market-driven and state-driven educational models.

It is important to clarify that only teachers' perceptions will be considered, as it is understood that the content of the interviews allows for the construction of a consistent narrative regarding the strategies for engaging and maintaining bonds with families during the pandemic. This is because these actions were intentional, organized, and implemented by the schools. The same level of consistency was not observed in the parents' accounts. For the interviews conducted in Sobral, eight (08) schools were randomly selected based on the type of school unit: (i) Early Childhood Education Centers; (ii) Integrated Schools located in the municipal headquarters; and (iii) Integrated Schools located in districts⁵. The district schools are those situated away from the city center, ranging between 15 km and 60 km from the municipal headquarters, and may be located in district hubs or rural areas.

Among the eight (08) public schools selected, three (03) were located in districts, while the remaining schools were in the municipal headquarters (either in or near the city center). In each school, two (02) teachers were randomly selected: one (01) teacher from Infant IV and one (01) from Infant V, based on their teaching experience in 2020.

Regarding the private schools in Rio de Janeiro, all participating institutions from 2019 (36 schools) were invited to continue in the research, and 21 of them agreed to participate in the second phase of the project. From these 36 institutions, 8 schools were randomly selected, 02 from each stratum (high tuition, medium tuition, low tuition, and no tuition or affiliated). In each of these schools, 02 teachers were randomly selected, 01 teacher from Pre-1 (Preschool 1) and 01 from Pre-2 (Preschool 2), considering their work in 2020. Due to refusals, it was necessary to randomly select one more school from this group, resulting in a final sample with the participation of 09 teachers from Pre-1 and 07 teachers from Pre-2, totaling 16 teachers.

Table 2 presents the sample of participating public schools from Sobral (1 to 8) and Rio de Janeiro (7 non-affiliated private schools and 2 affiliated private schools, and their respective strata), the number of interviews conducted in each institution, and also the educational levels offered in each institution: Early Childhood Education (ECE), Elementary School (ES), and High School (HS):

Table 2: Schools participating in the interviews

School code	Interviews/ Teachers	Classification	Educational levels offered
Public School 01	2	Public CEI	ECE
Public School 02	2	Public CEI	ECE
Public School 03	2	Public integrated	ECE /EE
Public School 04	2	Public integrated	ECE /EE
Public School 05	2	Public integrated	ECE /EE
Public School 06	2	Public CEI	ECE
Public School 07	2	Public integrated	ECE /EE

(continue)

⁵ Early Childhood Education Centers (Centros de Educação Infantil) serve only daycare and preschool levels. Integrated Schools (Escolas Integradas) operate from Early Childhood Education up to Elementary School (Fundamental I and/or II). There are Integrated Schools both in the city center (Sede) and in rural districts. However, at the time of the research, Early Childhood Education Centers were located only in the city center.

Table 2: Conclusion

School code	Interviews/ Teachers	Classification	Educational levels offered
Public School 08	2	Public integrated	ECE /EE
Private School 09	2	High tuition	ECE /EE/HS
Private School 10	1	High tuition	ECE
Private School 11	1	Medium tuition	ECE /EE
Private School 12	2	Medium tuition	ECE /EE
Private School 13	2	High tuition	ECE /EE/HS
Private School 14	2	Low tuition	ECE /EE/HS
Private School 15	2	Low tuition	ECE /EE
Affiliated School A	2	No tuition	ECE
Affiliated School B	2	No tuition	ECE /EE
Total: 17 schools	32		

Source: Elaborated by the authors (2023).

The interview script (Chart 1) was developed after conducting a *survey*⁶ with a portion of the participants in Sobral. Since the processing of the initial questionnaire data was very fast, the responses guided the construction of the interview items.

Chart 1: Roteiro das entrevistas

Script	Topics
Teachers	BLOCK 1 – Understanding/perception of the SME/School Administration guidelines for pedagogical activities in 2020. BLOCK 2 – Communication with families/children. BLOCK 3 – Perspectives for 2021.

Source: Elaborated by the authors (2023).

In the next section, we specifically share the topics covered in Block 2 of the teacher interview script (communication with families/children).

Regarding the research limitations, it is important to clarify that the sample loss of the number of private and affiliated schools between 2019 and 2020/21, due to limitations and constraints caused by the pandemic, as previously explained, constitutes a factor that weakens the results of this part of the study.

The interviews, in turn, were conducted in the first semester of 2021, using the 2020 school year as a reference, which required participants to reconstruct a past period, potentially compromising the reported content to some extent.

⁶ It is important to clarify that the umbrella study was structured into four stages: 1) application of questionnaires to principals and teachers; 2) application of questionnaires to families; 3) conduction of semi-structured interviews with a smaller number of teachers and parents; 4) direct measurements of children's cognitive and motor development, as well as assessments of their personal, social, and emotional development based on teachers' impressions. In this article, only the interviews conducted with teachers are considered.

Beyond socioeconomic status: what do the strategies for approaching and maintaining links between families and schools suggest?

In the interview script conducted with the teachers, there was a question regarding the guidelines from the Municipal Secretary of Education (MSE) and private and affiliated schools about new forms of contact between teachers and parents. When analyzing the collected content, one of the concerns that emerged, particularly in the interviews with teachers from Sobral, was related to the distancing and decline in participation of children and their families with the onset of the pandemic. The teachers expressed concern and discomfort with the reduction in class sizes and the lack of contact with some guardians, as emphasized in the following statement.

(Preschool Teacher IV - Public School 01 CEI) It wasn't easy at first. I'd say around April or May; it was a really challenging situation. It took a lot of persistence, really pushing to have conversations with some of the mothers, and there was resistance, you see? I think they were holding onto the hope that things would quickly return to normal, so they didn't see the need for this contact. But it eventually normalized, you see?

The impressions regarding the fragility of the bonds initially established with families could also be observed in the statements of teachers from private schools, as exemplified by the following account.

(Pre-2 Teacher - Affiliated School B) Well, before the pandemic, I only had the class for a month, which was February, and then everything shut down. We had a good rapport, but it was mostly limited to the drop-off, when I greeted the students, and pick-up, when I handed them over. I'd give them a quick kiss, chat with the mothers about how their day went, how they were doing. I was just starting to get to know the class and the parents/guardians.

Although the initial perception of teachers from public, private, affiliated, and non-affiliated schools' points to the same diagnosis – the threat to proximity and bonds with children and families during the pandemic – the strategies implemented to reverse this situation showed some variations influenced by socioeconomic status. However, it is also argued that these variations were shaped by the types of schools and the different modes of operation of the State and the market.

To guide the discussion on variations in the family-school relationship, we adopt specific analytical categories. The first concerns the guidelines provided to teachers by the Municipal Secretary of Education (MSE) and school administrators in private and affiliated schools on how to manage communication with parents (considering aspects such as strategies used by administrators to prepare teachers, the focus of the guidelines, and the resources recommended or made available). This aspect, highlighted here, is relevant as it helps to understand the parameters teachers used to guide their interactions with families.

The second category of analysis concerns the specific strategies for establishing and maintaining connections, aiming to detail the types of approaches undertaken by schools to engage with families. Finally, the teachers' perceptions of the investigated process will be analyzed, considering the implementation of guidelines within the school context, as well as the difficulties and solutions presented in response to the challenges encountered.

The analyses will first focus on the context of public schools, followed by a discussion related to private (non-affiliated) and affiliated schools.

Initially, the teachers' reports clarify that the Municipal Network of Sobral remained without activities for fifteen days at the beginning of the quarantine. After this period, another fifteen days passed without the prospect of face-to-face activities, but with initial guidance for remote support. Some reports indicate that this process began in May of that year (2020).

The guidelines from the Municipal Secretary of Education (MSE) were communicated to administrators and teachers at each public school through online meetings hosted by the MSE. There was a continuous training process, held monthly, that had already been systematically practiced before the pandemic, providing teachers with confidence regarding the work to be carried out, as attested by several educators. The meetings started to take place online, under the guidance of the MSE team. Additionally, weekly planning meetings with each school's pedagogical team also moved online, serving as a space to adapt the SME guidelines to local contexts.

Reports from public school teachers largely converge, indicating that the MSE's guidance on conducting activities with children and communicating with families centered on three main issues: 1) pedagogical activity planning (mentioned by 14 of the 16 teachers interviewed); 2) guidance on technology use, particularly the creation of WhatsApp groups with parents (mentioned by 11 of the 16 interviewees); and 3) maintaining the connection between the child, family, and school (cited by 8 of the 16 interviewees). Notably, many teachers mentioned multiple topics. One report, in particular, highlighted that the guidelines from the City Hall also included communication strategies both with and without the use of cell phones/internet, aiming to reach all children, even those in more remote districts and locations.

The teachers' discourse significantly highlights the MSE's declared focus on maintaining the connection with families, as well as the understanding that the school's role extended beyond merely fulfilling programmatic content. In this regard, issues related to food and health were frequently mentioned, along with concerns about families' financial difficulties (such as unemployment, increased food expenses, and lack of resources to maintain internet access, among others). The following statement reinforces this assertion.

(Preschool Teacher IV - Public School 01) Well, we were really expected to make phone calls, you see? To check in on them, see if they needed anything, and doing the activities became less of a priority. Our main priority was this: staying in touch with the families.

One aspect that also deserves attention, as it is quite prominent in the discourse of public-school teachers, is the fact that there are no observations indicating divergences in the guidelines between different management levels (MSE and school units) regarding directives to establish communication with children and families. The reports suggest that the MSE's directives were assertive and implemented by local management and the teachers themselves.

Regarding the specific strategies for engagement, it was observed that public school teachers showed significant commitment to restoring and encouraging the participation of children and families. They mentioned making persistent phone calls, home visits, and other unconventional strategies, as will be illustrated in the following accounts.

(Preschool Teacher V - Public School 06 CEI) *We're always calling [...] We call and ask about another student. For example, we'll call Sara, knowing that she lives close to Patricia. 'Sara, can you give me an update on Patricia? Go over there and tell her that her teacher wants to call, wants to speak with them'. Sometimes, someone would lend their phone; we were always trying something. So, there's a teacher who lived in the neighborhood [...], we have a teacher who lives nearby, who even owns a small grocery store, and she always contacts the students who don't have WhatsApp or internet access. We always have this teacher in the neighborhood who helps us out with that. So, in the end, we end up getting information through other people.*

(Preschool Teacher V - Public School 01 CEI) *[...] The school administration also helped; we encouraged it. There were deliveries of food kits, and deliveries of small gifts for the children who were doing the activities [...], we set up a system where they'd receive a small prize [...] I'd find a way; if I couldn't get through by phone, I'd go out and visit their homes. Even though I had another job, I might get home at six in the evening, but I'd still have these conversations at night.*

Based on the reports, there is a strong tendency among teachers to take on co-responsibility for reintegrating families and children into the school process, even mobilizing other agents (principals, coordinators, school staff – without specifying roles, neighbors of the families, fellow teachers, and local merchants). Additionally, there is a willingness to make contact routines with parents more flexible to establish and maintain the connection between children, families, and the school. It seems evident that the difficulties faced by the guardians were not ignored but rather mapped and addressed using the available resources.

Regarding the start of orientation activities for teachers on new communication procedures with parents in non-affiliated and affiliated private schools (such as determining in which month they began), the reports do not allow for establishing a clear pattern. In this sense, according to the field journal records from the research coordination, greater variation was observed in this aspect, as each school responded based on the technological and human resources available before and during the pandemic.

As for management guidelines, teachers from private and affiliated schools indicate that online meetings were the primary space for disseminating instructions from school administrators, similar to public schools. The majority (10 teachers) mentioned the existence of a structured preparation process for the teaching staff to meet the demands of that moment.

It is important to clarify that non-affiliated private schools lack a central governing body responsible for issuing action guidelines to be disseminated during continuing education meetings, unlike the situation in Sobral's public school system. Although the legal framework established by the Law of Directives and Bases of Education (LDB 9394/96) mandates that Early Childhood Education institutions established and maintained by private entities be integrated into municipal education systems (Brasil, 1996), there were few direct references to guidance from public authorities (specifically, the Municipal Secretary of Education – MSE – of Rio de Janeiro), suggesting a potential lack of oversight of the private network by the MSE. Affiliated schools, on the other hand, reported adhering to the Rio de Janeiro City Hall's calendar and protocols for returning to face-to-face

instruction, while also utilizing their own resources for remote learning and communication with parents/guardians.

In Rio de Janeiro's private schools, according to the teachers interviewed, administrator guidelines concerning family-school interactions primarily focused on: 1) developing pedagogical activities and 2) appropriately using internet tools. However, the greatest emphasis was placed on matters related to content and planning. Few teachers explicitly mentioned concerns regarding the socio-emotional well-being of children and families

It is observed that affiliated schools share similarities with private schools (considering the reports of 3 out of the 4 interviewed teachers) regarding the topics predominantly addressed by administrators in continuous training sessions. In both cases, the concerns were primarily focused on pedagogical activities and mastering the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT).

Non-affiliated private schools, on the other hand, demonstrated a tendency towards a more *resigned* posture regarding the procedures for approaching children's families, especially in response to refusals to participate from children and their guardians. When questioned about the strategies used to reach families who distanced themselves from the school, we selected some teacher statements that confirm this trend:

(Preschool Teacher Pre-2 - Private School 12 Medium Tuition) *I had five kids who went a whole year without speaking to me. The children, you know? The parents would come and say, 'Oh, they couldn't make it today, and I'm really busy'. Or, 'Just send some worksheets, and I'll have them do it'. And there were some children and families that I had absolutely no contact with all year.*

(Preschool Teacher Pre-1 - Private School 13 High Tuition) *No, not me personally, the school did. The school reached out and explained the importance of maintaining this contact, emphasizing that it's also about emotional connection with the children. But it seemed like the child wasn't interested, and the family didn't push it either, so that's how it remained.*

It should be noted that several statements from private school teachers suggest a constant fear of putting too much pressure on parents, and this concern was evident across all school fee categories (low, middle, and high tuition private schools).

(Preschool Teacher Pre-1 - Private School 14 Low Tuition) *They weren't attending classes, and the parents wouldn't give us any explanation when we asked. We were the ones who had to keep following up. But if you ask too much, the parents get annoyed, you know? 'Oh, I already told you I'm busy, it's not possible', and so on. It's pointless, that's just how it is.*

(Preschool Teacher Pre-2 - Private School 12 Medium Tuition) [...] *I had one child whose mother told me not to call anymore because she was keeping up with the activities, and there was no need for me to keep calling. So, I stopped calling. [...] After I'd mentioned it so many times, the school coordinator contacted her to follow up, and she claimed that I had abandoned her, that I wasn't providing any further support. And then the coordinator came down on me [...].*

(Preschool Teacher Pre-1 - Private School 10 High Tuition) [...] *We had a few meetings with them, and at other times we spoke with the parents individually. But, you know, we were also careful not to be overbearing. Sometimes, the parent just wanted some peace and quiet, you see? So, we had to be mindful of that; we try to stay in touch, but without being invasive.*

It is worth noting that in low-tuition schools, the SES of the children is similar to that found in public and affiliated schools. This observation ties into the central argument of this study: the trends in approaches to family engagement and maintaining school-family bonds require a perspective that goes beyond social class, also raising questions about the influence of public and private spheres (Hirschman, 1973) and the types of schools. These institutions sometimes blend practices from both the market and state educational systems, challenging explanations based solely on the SES of families.

A field diary entry from the research coordination team documents an unusual situation reported by the principal of a low-tuition private school, identified here as School 15, which illustrates the previous assertions. The principal described cases of families facing severe financial difficulties due to the pandemic, leaving them unable to pay tuition fees and keep their children in the school. Some of these parents had already transferred their children to public schools but maintained their enrollment in the private institution to continue accessing learning activities provided by teachers through digital channels (email, WhatsApp groups), in an effort to preserve what they considered a suitable educational standard for their child.

The strategy adopted by these families, as mentioned by the school administration, suggests that once immersed in a market-driven context, some families adopt behaviors characteristic of this sphere, even when facing financial difficulties that push them toward the public education system. Therefore, it is speculated that SES alone does not determine parental actions. Some families, equipped with information, displayed a strategic approach to securing educational advantages for their children (Lareau, 1992).

Thin (2006, p. 212) argues that cultural capital is indeed a powerful indicator for “classifying social subjects and their cultural and educational practices, comparing them, and situating them in relation to one another”. However, it is insufficient to fully represent the complexity and variety of practices, as it overlooks the actual relationships between parents and schools, how parents engage with their children’s education, and the meaning they attribute to this process.

There were reports from parents of non-affiliated private schools (two high-tuition institutions) that corroborated the teachers’ testimonies, stating that their children had lost interest in participating in the assigned activities, which had become a major source of stress for their families. As a result, they chose to disengage from the school activities without formally withdrawing their children from enrollment. Despite having the financial means to attend a prestigious school in the city, these families opted not to do so for the well-being of both their children and them. This suggests that a higher SES, coupled with enrollment in a private school operating under market logic, granted these families a level of decision-making power that allowed them to disregard compulsory education laws without facing any consequences for their actions.

In their accounts, some teachers from low-tuition private schools refer to their efforts to engage with families as part of the *service provision* expected of them. This perspective once again

suggests practices characteristic of market-driven logic, even though these institutions cater to low-SES families. In contrast, in public and subsidized schools, perhaps due to the absence of concerns about *pressuring the client* or because parents, as users of the system, do not trigger the *exit* mechanism by switching schools (Hirschman, 1973), teachers seem to have adopted more assertive strategies to engage families in the schooling process of their children, as previously observed.

Hirschman (1973) also notes that in public organizations, which are less sensitive to the loss of users because their funding is secured through other sources, the use of *voice* may become weaker for families due to the lack of real alternatives for transferring their children elsewhere. In the private sector, however, clients/parents, who have more access to information and financial resources to change schools, keep the possibility of *exit* as a latent (or explicit) threat, influencing their relationship with the institution.

Resuming the observations regarding the more *resigned* approach predominant in non-affiliated private schools concerning children's absence, it is essential to emphasize the role of the family-school relationship in safeguarding and ensuring children's right to education. In Brazil, school enrollment has been mandatory from the age of four, with no distinction between public and private systems or different socioeconomic levels (Brasil, 1996). However, the approach adopted by teachers in private schools to address student disengagement appears significantly more lenient than in public schools.

In affiliated schools, teachers' accounts exhibit a pattern similar to that observed in public schools, where strategies to reintegrate absent families are described as more persistent and assertive. These strategies include home visits, the involvement of parent representatives as an additional resource to reach out to disengaged families, direct interventions from school management, and even mobilization of the Child Protection Council, following the guidelines of the Child and Adolescent Statute (Brasil, 2021), for instance.

(Preschool Teacher Pre-2 - Affiliated School A) *We don't just let it go, no. We're constantly following up and trying to find out what's going on, always wanting to know why a child isn't attending, why a child isn't participating.*

(Preschool Teacher Pre-1 - Affiliated School B) *Look, the school has tried everything, it really pulled out all the stops last year. E-mails were sent, WhatsApp messages, even telegrams were sent to some parents/guardians who never joined the online classes, never logged into Meet, and never provided feedback on the activities. Because, you see, we don't give grades. Early childhood education doesn't involve grades, but we need some kind of feedback on these activities, you know? We need to know that the child is engaging with the material. The school, even this year, for example – it's not my class, thankfully – but Child Protective Services is even being contacted for some cases, because these children need to be connected to education.*

Regarding the support of the parent representative in reaching out to families who had disengaged, one of the teachers from Affiliated School A explains:

(Preschool Teacher Pre-1 - Affiliated School A) *(Interviewer: Do you think the parent representative helped with contacting the families?) Absolutely, she was a huge help, because, you know, she already has a connection with them, right? [...] Sometimes they're neighbors,*

sometimes they visit each other's homes, you know? [...] She was really dedicated and did everything she could to make all the parents feel welcome. [...], you know? To pass along information, to relay messages from the school. [...] If she couldn't reach a parent, or if their number had changed, or [...] the parent didn't reply, she always let us know, too.

It is important to emphasize that the teachers from affiliated schools demonstrated, like those from public schools, a higher level of assertiveness when it came to reestablishing and maintaining connections with families. On the other hand, teachers from non-subsidized private schools generally appeared more hesitant about insisting on engagement, likely due to concerns over how parents might react. For instance, in this group of schools (non-affiliated private schools), there were no mentions of referrals to the Child Protection Council, despite reports of student abandonment.

It is possible that this reluctance is linked to the higher socioeconomic status of families, particularly in high-tuition schools. Additionally, the teachers' fear of pressuring parents –worried that it could lead to further withdrawals – combined with the firm stance of some parents in removing their children from school, seems to be rooted in market dynamics. In this context, directly paying for a service appears to grant families the autonomy to decide on leaving or switching schools according to their specific interests (Hirschman, 1973).

It is crucial to emphasize that young children in early childhood education are entirely dependent on the cooperation and support of adults to have their right to learning guaranteed, as established by national legislation, without facing any form of discrimination. However, market rules can overshadow this perspective, even for low-income families who still pay for educational services, thus gaining greater bargaining power (*voice*) and the ability to exit the system (*exit*) (Hirschman, 1973).

Final considerations

The demands brought about by the suspension of in-person classes largely shifted the responsibilities of caring for and educating young children onto families, a situation that was even more intense in the public and affiliated schools analyzed in this research. Given this context, this article aimed to analyze variations in the family-school relationship by examining the strategies of engagement and bond maintenance adopted by early childhood education institutions during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. To do so, two factors were considered in addition to socioeconomic status: (1) the types of schools included in the research sample and (2) the different patterns of action between the public and private sectors.

In arguing that the type of school is a relevant factor in influencing the family-school relationship, it is worth reflecting on an important point: social class plays a major role in shaping this relationship. Bourdieu's (2015) theoretical and conceptual framework provides a fundamental foundation for understanding the family-school relationship, having been empirically validated at various times by numerous researchers. Ignoring this perspective would be unwise, especially in light of the scenario observed during the pandemic, which revealed a deepening of social and educational inequalities, as highlighted by recent studies (Campos; Vieira, 2021; Koslinski; Bartholo, 2021).

However, it is also considered that many social changes have occurred, and the very concept of social class or sociocultural group today encompasses “important variations in individuals’ trajectories, their relationships, school outcomes, and family-school relations”, as noted by Montandon (2001, p. 120). In this sense, it is understood that other influential factors, aligned with Bourdieu’s (2015) ideas, may significantly enhance the explanatory power of phenomena related to the family-school relationship.

The type of school, as well as issues concerning the convergence and divergence between the state and market spheres, are two relevant factors that emerge from this study. These factors are believed to expand the interpretative frameworks for understanding interactions between parents and schools. If incorporated and further explored in future research – especially when considering different tuition levels (high, medium, low, and no tuition) –these aspects may provide a more comprehensive understanding of the topic.

Distinct and significant trends were observed among different types of schools. In public and affiliated schools, efforts to establish closer ties with families were notably more direct and persistent compared to non-affiliated private schools. Even in low-tuition private schools, teachers employed more lenient strategies to address the disengagement of children and their parents, in contrast to the more proactive approaches seen in public and partner schools. The constant risk of institutional change – referred to as *exit* (Hirschman, 1973) – appears to serve as a permanent underlying threat for teachers in private schools, particularly during the pandemic, when financial difficulties affected a large portion of the Brazilian population, creating tensions and ruptures between families and educational institutions.

The analysis of these accounts raises important questions, prompting reflection on how legal statutes are applied differently depending on the context, even though all children are theoretically considered equal citizens with rights. The findings of this study suggest that the family-school relationship is influenced not only by socioeconomic status but also by the type of school children and their guardians are enrolled in, as well as the contrasting operational logics of the market and the state within educational institutions.

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Author 2 – Conception and design of the research; construction of instruments and data; conception of the theme and structuring of the methodology presented in the article, argumentation of the text.

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