

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18764/2178-2229v32n3e25924>

## **Pandemic and trauma among public school teachers: a discussion in the light of Sándor Ferenczi's psychoanalysis**

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**Abstract:** For psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczi, trauma results not from a violent event in itself, but from the failure to recognize a situation suffered, in which a “strong” belies a vulnerable one. This concept can be related to the denialism and violence that occurred during the pandemic and its consequences in the school context. This research had the general objective of understanding how public school teachers have dealt with the traumatic dimension caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Qualitative research was carried out, in which 10 teachers who worked in elementary education in public schools in the west of Santa Catarina were interviewed. The results indicate the lack of recognition of vulnerability, or of all the effort made by teachers to ensure that the imposed schooling model occurred, and of the exhaustion that this generated. The effect produced was one of submission, in which the teachers lost the ability to act, think, resist, therefore, to defend themselves in front of others, which characterizes the traumatic dimension of this experience in the Ferenczian sense. It was observed that one of the destinations for the pandemic trauma was the suffering and illness of teachers. In view of this, the expressions witnessed were understood as social symptoms, and not individual symptoms, which requires political actions to combat them. It is concluded that the pandemic accentuated educational inequalities and made teachers even more vulnerable, requiring institutional recognition policies and collective actions based on an ethical position of care.

**Keywords:** trauma; pandemic; basic education; teaching work.

### **1 Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic established a scenario of severe health crisis worldwide, which has been understood as a traumatic phenomenon of comparable magnitude as great historical events from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as both the Great World Wars (Birman, 2021). There have been plenty of catastrophic effects, which continue to unfold, even during what is commonly referred to as the “post-pandemic” period. When the pandemic is considered within the Brazilian context, it takes on an



even more complex character, as the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus crisis has exacerbated the multiple vulnerabilities of the Brazilian population. This complexity becomes even more pronounced when considering that, in Brazil, the management of the COVID-19 pandemic was marked by ideological and political bias, in which the denial of the pandemic's magnitude invalidated scientific knowledge produced through a global and unprecedented effort, exposing the population to a state of abandonment (Birman, 2021). In this sense, pandemic denialism has generated an outrageous situation: both in Brazil and in other countries, misinformation was employed as a tool of domination within political discourse (Dal Magro; Almeida, 2023).

In the field of Basic Education, such a scenario has also been reproduced. Brazilian education, already historically marked by inequality, was once again undermined when the MEC (Ministry of Education) faced the need to suspend in-person classes—measure adopted to reduce the spread of the coronavirus—decided, hastily and unilaterally, to maintain the academic schedule and migrate from in-person education to emergency remote teaching, despite knowing that such decision would weaken the learning process, exclude students, and further make teachers—especially female teachers—more vulnerable. This decision has made Brazilian education even more unequal, given that, historically, the differences between public and private schools have been marked by social class inequalities, as can be inferred from the reflections of Arreguy and Montes (2019); to which we may add gender and ethnic inequalities, which intersect<sup>1</sup>.

In the context of the pandemic, the new form of schooling, which denied the reality of Brazilian public education, produced a disavowal with traumatic effects, considering that denialism negates the lived experience from the individual. It is from this complex of situations that we draw on the concept of “trauma” from psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczi to reflect on the COVID-19 pandemic in an arrangement with formal education, particularly its impact on the lives of female teachers. According to Gondar

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<sup>1</sup> Intersectionality is a concept that points to the existence of axes of inequality related to social markers such as gender, social class, and race, which intersect and overlap, “indicating a model in which the axes of oppression, discrimination, and exclusion are interrelated and mutually co-constituted” (Gomes; Nogueira, 2023, p. 92).

(2012), Ferenczi understands trauma as resulting from “disavowal,” from the non-recognition of a hardship. Thus, trauma does not lie in the occurrence of an event or in its violence, but in something that may arise in a future event. His originality lies in the idea that trauma is experienced through disavowal. Ferenczi (1933 [2011])<sup>2</sup> constructed this model of trauma from a family scenario in which a child is abused by a trusted adult and, when seeking help from another trusted adult, this second individual disavows the experience, does not believe what happened, and fails to recognize the child's lived experience.

Gondar (2012) emphasizes that this model of trauma can be used to reflect on social traumas, collective trauma, all types of traumatic situations in which power relations, dependence, devaluation, in short, political relations are at play—since Ferenczi emphasizes otherness and power dynamics in the constitution of trauma when he locates its occurrence in the time of disavowal. Trauma is intersubjective; it occurs within the relational field, where a “strong” subject disavows a “vulnerable” one. In this sense, the disavowal relationship, which is a psychic mechanism of denial (a form of refusal of reality), articulates with pandemic denialism. This allows us to problematize the extent to which denialism, grounded in a power relation, and everything that has followed from what has been denied, can be thought of as the operator of the pandemic trauma, rather than the pandemic itself, despite it having been a phenomenon that caused immense suffering.

Within the framework of taking the disavowal enacted during the COVID-19 pandemic within the schooling context and seeking to recognize the traumatic dimension of teaching within these conditions, this research was carried out. For this, the following research question is presented: how did public school teachers deal with the traumatic experience caused by the COVID-19 pandemic? As a general objective, this article aims at understanding how public-school teachers have dealt with the traumatic dimension brought by the COVID-19 pandemic.

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<sup>2</sup> The date in brackets indicates the publication date of the source consulted, which will be mentioned only in the first citation of the work in the text. In subsequent citations, the original publication date of the work will be used (here in parentheses), to ensure the historical and temporal contextualization of the cited author's writing.

To address the proposed objective, a qualitative study was conducted from the perspective presented by González Rey (2005). This perspective is also characterized as a psychoanalytic research approach. According to Iribarry (2003), psychoanalytic research differs from other approaches in at least two fundamental aspects: firstly, it does not include in its objectives the need of generalizing inference; “[...] secondly, its analysis strategies do not work with the sign, but rather with the signifier [...]” (Iribarry, 2003, p. 117). Still according to the same author, the method of psychoanalytic research takes the psychoanalytic treatment setting as its model, in which the transference is the identifying feature, and in which the researcher takes unconscious processes into account.

Another aspect highlighted by Iribarry (2003) in psychoanalytic research, concerns the implication of the researcher as an important participant in the investigation that was carried out. The author states that to say the psychoanalytic researcher is the first subject of their research is to acknowledge their implication, “[...] since it is through the researcher’s own hand that a conceptual contribution will be organized during the research process” (Iribarry, 2003, p. 122).

Ten female teachers who worked in public schools located in the western region of the Brazilian state known as Santa Catarina participated in the research. The criterial requirements were: being a teacher who worked during and after the COVID-19 pandemic in the region, teaching in upper elementary (*Ensino Fundamental II*) and/or high school (*Ensino Médio*), and agreeing to participate in the study. The ten participants lived and worked in four different cities in western Santa Catarina from October to December 2023, a period understood as “post-pandemic”, during which the interviews were conducted. As the technique for data gathering, the “free” or “clinical” interview was used, based on the psychoanalytic clinical model of free association, along with floating attention and transference (Pisetta; Charczuk, 2018). For data analysis, the method used was “reading guided by listening and instrumentalized transference,” a method in psychoanalytic research in which the researcher identifies, within the transcribed interviews, the signifiers that contribute to the research (Iribarry, 2003). The research has been approved by the Research Ethics Committee for Human Subjects

(CEP/Conep), following the ethical standards established by Resolutions 466/2012 and 512/2016.

## **2 “You’re not working”: the shock of non-recognition**

Gondar (2012, p. 199) states that “[...] the notion of disavowal or disbelief is, in Ferenczi, a starting point; around it, it’s articulated a series of other notions and concepts that, taken together, allow us to understand the genesis of social trauma in its many nuances.” Speaking with the teachers who participated in the research, it was possible to hear some expressions of these disavowals, through the lack of recognition of their vulnerable conditions, or of all the effort they were subjected to so that the imposed schooling method could take place, and of the exhaustion it has caused. The teachers stated: “I’ve never worked so much in my life [...]” (teacher 02). “[...] The workload tripled, literally” (teacher 08). “[...] It was much more exhausting for *us* and for the students [...]” (teacher 06). “[...] It was really draining” (teacher 04). “[...] My workload doubled” (teacher 03).

Thus, the teachers had to cope with disavowals that failed to acknowledge all their effort and suffering. At the same time, they had to listen to “[...] little insults” (teacher 07). “[...] These slackers are getting paid and doing nothing, why don’t they go back to teaching? [...]” (teacher 02). “[...] You’re at home, you’re not working, you’re just chilling” (teacher 01).

These are words/phrases loaded with meaning; the last ones, being capable of creating mental confusion, of producing disavowals, and of triggering illness. “For Freud, words are means of enabling healing, as well as pathways to illness (‘ideas capable of generating pathologies’)” (Carrenho *et al.*, 2018, p. 89).

Gondar (2012), when discussing the traumatic effects of disavowal in the political sphere, points out that it is addressed by its opposite: the need for recognition. “Understood as the vital need every individual has to be seen, heard, approved of, and respected by the people around them, recognition is at the heart of contemporary political claims [...]” (Gondar, 2012, p. 199). In contrast, what we found in the educational context of the pandemic was disbelief and disrespect, even by agents who should have protected and defended the teachers but instead attacked them. “And we

suffered from the students' disrespect and from the disrespect of the Department of Education itself" (teacher 04).

When discussing the ramifications of trauma as a product of disavowal, Ferenczi (1932) [1985] points out that the unexpected shock acts as an anesthetic, provoking a suspension of psychic activity, a disconnection from representation, a "psychic commotion." This is preceded by the destabilization of the sense of inner security, which is shaken and transforms into a kind of discredit regarding the experienced event. This shock is equivalent to the annihilation of the sense of self, of the capacity to resist, to act, and to think in defense of the self (Soi). Still according to Ferenczi, "[...] the word *Erschütterung* – psychic commotion – derives from *Schut* = remains, debris; it encompasses collapse, the loss of one's own form, and the easy and unresisting acceptance of an imposed form, 'like a sack of flour'" (1934, p. 125), which adapts its shape according to the blows it receives. Accounts from the teachers participating in the study, presented below, give us insight into this effect of trauma, of its annihilation of the capacity to resist, and of the transformation into discredit, disappointment, and acceptance of what is given.

"We" spoke, tried to find a solution, you know? What to do? But that was in the beginning, later people disconnected too. Because they saw it didn't have the expected effect. And as I said, many teachers completely disconnected [...] there was a certain discouragement in that sense [...] (teacher 02).

Gondar (2021) states that the destruction of the sense of existence, of the sense of self, leaves the subject deprived of the capacities to act, think, resist, and defend themselves against others. An unexpected shock acts like an anesthetic, paralyzing the subject on all levels—both sensory and motor—since it produces a suspension of thought, a subjective paralysis on all fronts. We find such an effect of traumatic shock, this anesthetizing submission—like a sack of flour—in the narratives of the teachers who participated in the study: "[...] sometimes I did things I didn't want to. Because of so much uncertainty" (teacher 07). "[...] I, personally, never questioned it, we just did it, didn't even think about it, just did it. [...] there was no questioning. You had to do it, that was the order, and we followed it, right? [...]" (teacher 09). "So, the teacher became almost like a little robot, you know? Like, a puppet? So, everyone said, you do it this way, you do it this way, you do it this way" (teacher 02).

The response to denial/discrediting is revealed through feelings of fear, helplessness, and submission—to the environment and to the other. According to Gondar (2012, p. 196), what is at stake is a “[...] discrediting of the perception, the suffering, and the very condition of subjectivity of the one who experienced the trauma. Therefore, what is denied is not the event, but the subject”; a denial, the author continues, capable of causing collective subjects to lose their status as political agents.

[...] I still tried to understand the school as an organism in which people help each other, collaborate, and share the same goal, which is the pedagogical aspect, the classroom. But I started losing motivation because I realized that school administrations are not like that—in many cases, there are interests far beyond the classroom [...]. I became very disheartened by many things and decisions they make and that we sometimes have to accept. They don't listen to us, even when I'm certain that my idea is better, when I truly believe in my idea, and it gets dismissed, because a political decision was made instead of one that was necessarily pedagogical (teacher 04).

A discredited subject is likely to become confused and anesthetized, appearing unable to act and doubting their own perceptions and convictions. This is the traumatic unfolding. This mental confusion, which muddles perceptions and paralyzes subjects, was also discussed by Figueiredo (2008), who describes how the process of deauthorization occurs within the subject's psyche. In the face of trauma, the subject resorts to deauthorization as a defense mechanism to cope with horror. It is a deauthorization of the perceptual process, in which the contact with reality becomes compromised. Part of reality is refused, and this refusal becomes a psychic process in response to an event that cannot be metabolized—a traumatic shock in which the subject finds themselves alone and unable to cope with reality as it is—marked by invalidation, non-recognition, and discredit.

In Figueiredo's words (2008, p. 64), “What is disavowed, in turn, is not the meaning of the perception, as this can be preserved. It is not, for example, a denial of what is seen in the proper sense, but an impediment to the psychic process that would allow what is seen to lead to an inference about what has been perceived [...]” Refusal, therefore, is an intensified form of denial, as it not only denies, but also rejects reality.

We could say that the pandemic, as a major catastrophe—combined with the way it was managed by the administration of the president Jair Messias Bolsonaro (2019–2022), marked by denialism, the discrediting of the real situation, and a clear

stance favoring the market over life (Birman, 2021) —became a fertile ground to produce various types of disavowals. In the same vein, it may have intensified the defensive recourse to the deauthorization of the perceptual process (Figueiredo, 2008) as a way for subjects to cope with the imposed reality. Specifically, this refers to the need for teachers to resort to this psychic mechanism to deal with the situation.

This unfolds in the field of relationships: one deauthorizes the other, the strong deauthorizes the vulnerable; and “[...] in Ferenczi, the subject is vulnerable in relation to the other” (Gondar, 2012, p. 202), meaning that what is at stake are power relations. It is within this field that disavowal can operate with traumatic potential.

[...] and with each new situation that arose in the federal government—and there were many, right—of denialism, of lack of guidance, contrary to what the WHO itself was recommending and all that. Such denialism, and we could see at school that it was wrong, and we still had to somehow adapt to that reality, it was all very exhausting (teacher 04).

In the denialist stance towards the pandemic, we observed denials gradually taking hold, slowly and subtly, which led the subject into a state of confusion, as if they're immersed in a white fog, gradually losing the ability to feel indignation, to resist, becoming more submissive, in a stance of “it is what it is.” This represents a possible response to a trauma that affects everyone: those who submit and those who submit less; even those who are aware of it all are affected (Gondar, 2021). This state of confusion, generated by conflicting messages about the pandemic catastrophe in Brazil, undermined the trust once placed in science, education, the Other, and in ourselves. It led to immobilization and, often, hopelessness, as everyone was left to fend for themselves.

Birman (2022), in a text on trauma and the pandemic, reflects on the symptomatic formations of helplessness and hopelessness, distinguishing them as two structural modalities of subjectivation in response to what was experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. He states that “[...] in the experience of helplessness the subject believes that the Other wanted to welcome and protect them” (Birman, 2022, p. 197); whereas in the experience of hopelessness “[...] the subject no longer expects to be welcomed by the Other, so that the Other will neither protect nor shelter them, and thus

the subject is vertiginously and dangerously cast into the uncertainties and contingencies of existence” (p. 198). Here, the Other may be understood as the State and its various representatives.

Supposing that the accounts we gathered from the teachers who participated in the research point to experiences of hopelessness. “[...] When one cannot rely on public protection institutions that are trustworthy, as was concretely the case in the Brazilian social context shaped by double messaging, the subject becomes inscribed in the psychic register of hopelessness” (Birman, 2021, p. 136). Indeed, the form of “political” management of the pandemic, which also penetrated the education sector, appears to have produced a *confusion of tongues* (Ferenczi, 1933). The teachers had to deal with a double message between (1) the notion that the schooling process could continue under the terms proposed by the Ministry of Education and adopted by State and Municipal Education Departments and (2) the reality of Brazilian public education, which prevailed and conveyed another message—that of impossibility—a message in a language neither understood nor respected by those in power, ultimately reinforcing a perverse logic.

We can observe this *confusion of tongues* in the following excerpts: “[...] I began to realize that participation through Google Meet was very low and that we had a large number of students who had no access to any technology, or if they did, it was mobile data that they couldn’t use for long [...]” (teacher 08). “So, they didn’t have internet, they didn’t have anything. So how could we, at times, expect something from a child? [...]” (teacher 05). “And there was nothing there, it was just the coming and going of an activity that, for us, ended up making little sense, unfortunately. Later, with Google Meet, on video, they would talk a little, even express themselves. But still, only a few; the majority didn’t participate” (teacher 01). And to complete the denial, in the assessments the guideline was to pass everyone: “And then there was this situation, we didn’t know whether to demand or not, whether we could assign a zero grade because the student did nothing or not. So, the guidance ended up being, oh, just pass everyone and move on, like that” (teacher 04).

There were different realities: one was the proposal devised by the Ministry of Education and replicated by the federal entities; another was the one implemented by

the teachers, connected to their own conditions for acting within a new form of schooling; and yet another was the reality of the students from public-schools—which rendered the proposal unfeasible, impossible, unreal; a kind of open-air unreality.

When we apply Ferenczi's theory of trauma to this context, we see that such vastly different realities can only be sustained at the cost of ego splitting—a phenomenon that Ferenczi (1931) called narcissistic self-splitting, "[...] to which the subject resorts in the face of the experience of traumatic denial" (Kupermann, 2022, p. 87). "One clearly gets the impression that abandonment causes a splitting of the personality. [...] A splitting of the person into a sensitive part, brutally destroyed, and another part that, in a way, knows everything but feels nothing" (Ferenczi, 1931, p. 88). Apparently, the teachers resorted to this defensive mechanism to be able to "cope" with the demands of implementing the new form of schooling, even when faced with a reality that was incompatible with such a proposal.

This ego-splitting, as a defense in response to trauma, is related to "identification with the aggressor" (Ferenczi, 1933). The fragmented subject loses their own form and accepts anything imposed by another. They internalize the aggressor's lie as if it were their own, as can be seen in the following excerpt:

Sitting in front of the computer all the time—it made me anxious. I had the feeling that I wasn't doing anything, the feeling that the community was thinking—and people even said it to me—that I was getting paid without doing anything. And that hurt me a lot, because I have never gotten paid for doing nothing (*gets emotional*) (teacher 02).

It is interesting to notice this device in the teacher's report: one part of her perceives the aggression, while the other part is identified with what came from outside as if it were her own, identified with this discourse of "not doing anything"; the outside and the inside seem to blur, "by identification, let's say, by introjection of the aggressor, he disappears as an external reality and becomes intrapsychic [...]" (Ferenczi, 1933, p. 117). Kupermann (2021, p. 35) states that identification with the aggressor "[...] is a common currency in any situation in which we are subjected to orders that are effective enough to produce the effect of submission."

Identifying with the aggressor places the subject in a position to reproduce the traumatic situation. Gondar (2012) asserts that this occurs because of trauma. The

subject naturalizes the violence they've experienced and begin to repeat the structure of this violence with someone more vulnerable. This seems to have happened when teachers also imposed on students and their families the same denial that was imposed upon them—that “teaching should/could continue”—even knowing that many students did not have access to the required electronic devices for the new remote learning format, and that parents would not have the (psychological, technological, financial, pedagogical) means to support their children, just as the teachers themselves did not feel, and were not, prepared to implement this new form of digital schooling.

In this sense, we find in the pandemic school trauma a reproduction of the trauma operating in layers, having been reproduced in different positions that subjects/institutions assumed in relation to one another, across various hierarchies and power relations: State (State Department of Education; Regional Education Coordination) vs. school administration; school administration vs. teachers; teachers vs. students; students vs. teachers; teachers vs. parents; parents vs. teachers; parents vs. school administration; school administration vs. parents. This reveals the complex web of power relations and the potential for denial—and consequently, trauma—to emerge. Within this context, the same subject may at times operate the denial, and at others suffer it. What we see is a chain of vulnerabilities that are not acknowledged.

Some excerpts from the interviews we've conducted can bring this to light: “So there was pressure from both sides. Some overwhelmed parents said their children were getting too much to do, and society was saying that the freeloaders were getting paid to do nothing” (teacher 02). The report below also gives us elements to understand how this unfolded:

[...] and the pressure came to us, and then we passed that pressure on to the students, but in the end, we realized that all that pressure we were putting on them turned out to be kind of pointless, because that whole period—I don't even know what it was worth. If it was worth anything at all (teacher 01).

In trauma, the subject is forced to speak the language of the aggressor—it is a colonizing effect (Gondar, 2018; Kupermann, 2022). This mechanism becomes evident when teachers begin to reproduce, without a reflection, all the excessive workload that was demanded from them: they imposed the same pace on students, even though

they knew it wasn't feasible—not under normal classroom conditions, and even less under COVID times. The following testimony helps us reflect on this:

Today, when I look back, I realize it was a lot, but it was a demand we had at that time. So, today, thinking about the classroom here, in person, I see that what I assigned them to do in a week—sometimes I need two or three weeks here—and I wanted them to do it in one week [...] or maybe it was a way for the school to show, 'let's send them things every week so they understand they have to do it, that we are here,' but today I see that as unfeasible, because in-person learning isn't like that (teacher 08, our emphasis).

This statement raises some important issues to consider. It gives evidence of the state of submission, of numbness, that the circumstances and their mode of governance printed upon the teachers' subjectivity. It also reveals the possibility of thinking when one is no longer submerged, anesthetized, and prevented from reflecting. Finally, it acknowledges—in retrospect—what had once been denied in favor of keeping the classes going.

### **3 “It feels like a time I didn't live through”:** the non-inscription of the traumatic experience

The testimonies suggest that some teachers seem to have been unable to psychically inscribe the experience they've endured during the pandemic, which denotes the presence of trauma. Gondar (2018) offers us elements to think about the psychic non-inscription of a traumatic event. According to the author, it is the divide that prevents the subject from psychically inscribing the traumatic experience—rather than leaving a memory trace, what remains is a kind of “psychic blank,” so to speak. As a teacher told us: “It feels like I didn't go through that. I don't know why. It's weird, like, I don't know. It feels like a time I didn't live. I can't explain how or why that is. But it's as if I had to go back and live it all over again, you know? Strange [...]” (teacher 09).

“This kind of unreality is known to be characteristic when it comes to the perception of traumatic memory” (Seligmann-Silva, 2008, p. 69). We are facing a reality that is difficult to bear. The experience carries an excess that cannot be inscribed, and according to Ferenczian theory, it fails to be inscribed because of the denial that occurs in the face of the trauma's intensity. For Cintra (2020, p. 172), an un-symbolized trauma

"[...] pierces the ego from end to end like an enclave. It is something indigestible, that was 'swallowed without chewing,' so to speak. The traumatic event is silenced and isolated in a crypt, where shame and guilt render it unspeakable and unpalatable." We found this silencing in the testimonies we collected, as there was an attempt to keep encrypted an event that brought so much discomfort to the teachers. Some excerpts from the interviews illustrate the difficulty on meeting what was lived:

There's so much that we kind of delete, that doesn't even come up anymore. And now, while speaking, I started retrieving, recalling, but it was yesterday, and yet it feels like so long ago. And you've already forgotten, because the school took you on a different path and that's already past, it's gone. But going back like this, it's a lot. It's strange, really complex. I had never stopped to talk about it either, after it all happened. So now, with this interview [...] it was all of that [...] And it really was, wasn't it? Because we didn't stop to think (teacher 08).

[...] actually, it was a period that we wanted to forget. Yesterday I kept thinking, my God, now we'll have to remember things that, in a way, we didn't want to talk about anymore, didn't want to remember, because it was a time of great anguish and uncertainty (teacher 01).

According to Reynaud (2020, p. 129), the act of forgetting can have benefits because "[...] it spares us the pain of remembering the event and the suffering." However, the author continues, forgetting is paradoxical; it is often only the first layer that may reopen (Reynaud, 2020). In this sense, the attempt to forget can present itself as a psychic protection mechanism, sometimes necessary for a period, but incapable of resolving a traumatic situation that needs to be remembered and processed. For Freud (1914/1976), the only real way to forget—meaning to overcome and not to repress—would be to remember; because remembering "[...] constitutes the condition that allows the psychic apparatus to delimit, to carve out a past. Otherwise, the trauma tends to compulsively repeat itself, endlessly, tormenting the subject in an eternal and unlimited present" (Merlin, 2018, p. 102). In addition to serving the investigation, the interviews offered an opportunity to remember and process (Freud, 1914/1976) the suffering experienced through the conversation with the interviewer.

To remember, it is necessary for our memory to be summoned both from the standpoint of reconstructing a traumatic situation experienced individually, and from that, of what was experienced collectively. "We understand human memory as the recollection of past events or experiences lived at a time prior to the present, and social

memory is characterized by the construction of this process from a collective perspective" (Coura, 2023, p. 15-16). Memory is more than a neurophysiological faculty; it is also a social phenomenon capable of exerting influence over the individual history of each subject, of a society, and of its social phenomena. In this sense, forgetting, the erasure of memory, may be not only a psychic resource for self-protection but also ideologically encouraged and constructed.

In this regard, Gondar (2021) warns us that not remembering, not thinking about the past, erasing from memory what happened—not only makes it impossible to name and assign meaning to the experience, but also invites one to become alienated from memory and to uncritically adapt to what is already given, to what already exists—thus becoming condemned to blindly repeat what already is. The same author, citing Theodor Adorno, states that adaptation to what already exists—this identification with what is given, with power—is precisely what generates totalitarian potential, and that this is what Ferenczi called relating to the aggressor.

Still according to Gondar (2018), for a trauma to be overcome, it must be recognized, with recognition being the opposite of disavowal. The author is emphatic in saying that, in Brazil, the disavowals that have constituted our country—such as the traumas of colonization and slavery—have not yet been overcome, and they remain active to this day, both on a macro and micro-political level, as seen, for example, in the economic inequalities between white and Black people. These inequalities also reverberate, as Arreguy and Montes (2019) remind us, in the educational field: public and private schools have different levels of access and recognition. These disavowals, we recall, were exposed and exacerbated during the Covid-19 pandemic. In a country built upon historical disavowals, it is not surprising that in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic catastrophe—managed with ideological and political bias—this mechanism would repeat itself. Following the already-established path of non-recognition, what remains is the compulsion to repeat (Freud, 1920/1996).

Adorno (1995), in writing *Education After Auschwitz*, emphasizes that the primary commitment of education is to recognize and not forget the horrors experienced by humanity, so as not to repeat them. In the author's words: "education has meaning

only as education directed towards self-reflection” (Adorno, 1995, p. 2). It is the responsibility of education to fight against denial, against the forgetfulness of lived experiences and the damage they’ve caused—whether in relation to Auschwitz or to the Covid-19 pandemic.

In this sense, we can draw on the reflections of Coura (2023, p. 85), who, when discussing traumatic historical events and their influence on education and the identity of teachers, emphasizes the importance of “understanding the concepts of memory and post-memory within the educational realm.” The author also argues that this could help to break the silence surrounding historical events. Although Coura’s study focuses specifically on the traumatic event of the Brazilian civil-military dictatorship (1964–1984), we can apply her arguments to think about various traumatic historical events, such as the one we are addressing in this study—the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on education. Coura (2023, p. 85) also states: “through situations in which opportunities for speaking and listening are created, teachers may come to better understand their ‘being’ and ‘doing’, aiming at an education focused on combating social injustices and avoiding the repetition of past mistakes.”

The teachers participating in the research reported that the topic of the “pandemic” is no longer discussed in the school context—no one talks about the pandemic anymore. We are left to wonder whether this is a self-protective mechanism or a symptomatic response to the actions of neoliberal governance that enforces a policy of forgetfulness and silencing, ideologically crafted for the post-pandemic era. Some excerpts from the interviews assist in a possible discussion about the underlying causes of this phenomenon of “no one talks about the pandemic anymore”: “No, it’s not talked about anymore [...] no one mentioned it again” (teacher 08). “I think the teachers here at the school have forgotten the pandemic. Because we hardly hear anything about it. It is rarely discussed” (teacher 06). “No, firstly, there aren’t moments when I get together with the teachers. So, if you don’t get together with the teachers, you don’t talk” (teacher 03).

This is why we refer to the perverse intensification of an educational logic already marked by a split in which speech does not circulate and the truth cannot be collectively processed. What we repeatedly heard in the interviews is that the teachers’

working conditions do not allow time or space for them to think or speak together to collectively process what they've experienced during the pandemic. What exists are numerous demands that keep them constantly occupied, as denoted by their own accounts: "Here, at school, everything is rushed. The year passes and you don't even notice [...] we aren't able to meet for planning" (teacher 05). "When do you really get to share that doubt with your colleague or create a project together? If now you no longer have that shared moment, it's each one on their own" (teacher 01).

This "now you no longer have that shared moment" refers to the elimination of planning hours. It seems to us that we are dealing with a neoliberal strategy that both demands increasingly more from workers—pushing them to their limits—and weakens the spaces for collective interaction. These spaces would allow teachers to share their distress and recognize it as something collective rather than individual, which could foster identification as a working class and perhaps even spark a collective movement for change. The rest of the teacher's sentence— "it's each one on their own"—reinforces our hypothesis about the neoliberal hallmark of this action, which is deliberate. It reinforces the individual, or rather, individualism, competition, and the suppression of collectivity.

If, today, the school deliberately prevents exchanges, how can the anguish of a denial that does not cease be processed?

I don't know if we have, in a certain way, the space to talk about it today [...] we've already created other problems, other priorities, and I think that was left aside. I think it's already been somewhat, maybe unconsciously, buried, it's over and done [...] because new demands have already emerged, new bureaucracies we have to fill out (teacher 04).

It is interesting to observe that this same teacher (teacher 04), when asked what name she would give to the experience she lived through during the pandemic, could not name it: "Well, that's a good question. I never really reflected on it that way, because I don't know if I ever... Because I never really came to close it within myself, you know? I never came to end it to say whether it was this or that" (teacher 04). Where does that which has not been closed reside? What is the fate of those "words buried alive" (Abraham & Torok, 1995), of that which has no name, the unspeakable, as Ferenczi puts it?

Another issue also deserves to be pointed out: the silence about the deaths from Covid-19 during the interviews. Although some of the cities where the interviewed teachers lived and worked experienced critical situations during the pandemic—such as a lack of hospital beds and a significant number of deaths—deaths were not mentioned, nor was the fear of death or the grieving process. Of the ten interviewees, only two teachers reported anything about it. One because she lost family members to Covid-19 and shared her experience, and the other who briefly commented that when she heard or read news about the death of a fellow teacher in Brazil from Covid-19, she would wonder if it would eventually reach her.

This silence was also not “heard” by the researcher conducting the interviews, who could have brought up the issue during the conversations, suggesting an unconscious collusion between researcher and interviewees—revealing how difficult it is to deal with traumatic situations such as those provoked by the Covid-19 pandemic, especially grief and the resulting state of helplessness/despondency.

#### **4 “There comes a time when you can’t take it anymore”:** suffering as a social product

From the reflections we have built and in dialogue with the testimonies we gathered from the interviewed teachers, we infer that one of the possible outcomes of the traumatic experience lies in the suffering and illness of teachers in this pandemic and post-pandemic context. Based on what has been presented so far, it seems understandable that all this traumatic denial would generate suffering that seeks some outlet for the anguish. As Prado (2015, p. 07) emphasizes, “all suffering is a desire for things to be different; distress has its origin in the loss of experience of a form of life not yet recognized; pathologies must be understood as unrecognized blockages or contradictions.”

What we heard was “excessive workload,” “controlled and monitored work,” “lack of recognition,” “exhaustion”—reflecting pressure from all sides and of all kinds. The demand was for a change in didactic-pedagogical profile to adapt to a new class format, in which the blackboard, chalk, eye contact, and dialogue no longer had a

place—significantly impacting the teachers and causing suffering. This can be exemplified by the accounts regarding the experience of teaching via Google Meet, where they felt tired, frustrated, and helpless:

*A Meet, for example, I was terrified of doing it, it was torture for me to have to use Meet. I didn't have the same command that I have in the classroom, of looking at my student and being able to speak, to ask questions. So, I ended up talking to myself, and that frustrated me, because sometimes the student wouldn't respond, wouldn't even turn on the camera. You couldn't see them. Wow, that was just too monotonous, too frustrating—this part of having to teach online (teacher 08).*

*I felt distressed every time I had to record a class, because I thought, "My God... they can't even ask me questions." I used Meet, I taught high school, they would log in, they would join, but none of them turned on their cameras. So, I didn't know if they were actually there. You know, talking to the walls—it felt the same as talking to the walls. [...] It was a horrible feeling; for me, that was the worst time ever to teach (teacher 10).*

According to Pereira, Santos, and Manenti (2020), "teachers, under changing conditions, are driven or forced to adapt to the demands of a new professional profile and, consequently, to the requirements of new performances in order to meet the demands." The accounts we collected from the teachers lead us to agree with these authors. They were constantly seeking a way to become "online teachers," a performance of digital teaching, without being able to meet either their internal expectations or external ones—which resulted in psychological suffering. The following excerpts speak to this:

*[...] I started to feel panicked, about meeting the demand of sending the correct assignment. Then I'd do it, delete it, think it was difficult, then think it was easy, and I felt insecure [...] (Teacher 07).*

*For me as a teacher, it was really hard, you know why? Because, in fact, I wasn't used to doing everything on the computer, I was more into writing [...] so imagine with those online classes, that was hard, really hard [...] (Teacher 05).*

*And what we used to know how to do—I think today we're not even sure if it's right anymore. Because... sometimes I just say at school, my God, I used to think I knew how to teach. I don't know anymore. How do we teach now? (Teacher 01).*

These statements point to a disempowerment of the subject, related to their concrete experience of what it means to be a teacher—an experience that, from one moment to the next, no longer seems to matter, as if it were useless knowledge in the

face of a new scenario. They were mere executors, not called upon to help build the answers collectively; a lifetime's know-how was ignored. In truth, no one knew how to teach online to children and adolescents, but it felt as if they were the ones who didn't know—it was perceived as personal incompetence, yet another sign of denial and the loss of belief in their own reality due to relating to the aggressor: the State and its abrupt technological demands.

Drawing on Ball's (2014)<sup>3</sup> assertions, Pereira, Santos and Manenti (2020, p. 29) reflect on how the demands for change can generate doubts about professional capacity and produce "[...] movements of self-devaluation and inadequacy, as well as feelings of guilt—situations that can lead to mental suffering in teachers [...]". How can one maintain mental and physical health in such a context? To split, dissociate, repress, project, displace, sublimate, etc.? Perhaps, more than in previous experiences, our defense mechanisms were especially overused "now." But, as Freud (1938) [2014] states, "only death is given to us free of charge"; each of the teachers, in their own way, exhibited symptomatic responses, whether permanent or temporary. The demands were excessive, to the point that occupational illnesses among teachers—which had already been increasing significantly in recent years—became even more pronounced during and after the pandemic.

Authors such as Moreira and Rodrigues (2018), Tostes *et al.*, (2018) had already indicated, even before the pandemic, that the exploitation and precariousness of working conditions have significantly worsened teachers' mental health, in such a way that the International Labour Organization (ILO) points to the teaching profession as the second with the highest rates of occupational diseases. More recent studies by Caldas, Silva and Santos (2022), Pereira, Santos and Manenti (2020), Souza and Fernandes (2023), discuss teachers' mental health in the pandemic context. They state that the Covid-19 pandemic impacted teachers' mental health and that the predominant symptoms are anxiety, depression, stress, associated with work overload and lack of appreciation. The authors also point out that physical and mental exhaustion has

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<sup>3</sup> Reference to the book *Global Education Inc.: new policy networks and the neoliberal imaginary*, by Stephen J. Ball (2014).

mainly caused psychosocial, musculoskeletal, cardiovascular illnesses and burnout syndrome.

Such studies are in line with our empirical findings. Not only the pandemic scenario itself, which already generated fear and uncertainty, impacted teachers' lives: the working conditions imposed on them during the pandemic, associated with such a scenario, brought great impact to their mental health, as can be exemplified by the following statements:

And with the teachers, many cases of depression, mental health related in this sense. Quite a lot. [...]. Appointments with psychiatrists, therapy [...]. Because it's a very heavy burden, right? And then comes a time when you can't take it anymore. The body can't take it, the mind can't take it. [...]. I think sometimes this mental health issue is slow to appear, sometimes a consequence. It's not like, from one day to the next. But it develops little by little. So, after a while, what was experienced back then, today comes as anxiety, as fear, as insecurity (teacher 09).

[...] and you had no contact with anyone, I also think that was very frustrating for me, I had anxiety crisis moments, because just being at home, locked in, isolated, going out very little, so I still use medication today, it's been years that I've used fluoxetine for anxiety, but during that period I increased the dose, because the crises of being alone, of not having anyone to talk to, to share the anguish with, were very intense, I went through this anxiety crisis. [...] because it was really hard to process all this. The impacts for us are enormous, we will keep feeling them, we were saying these days, at least for another three, two years it will still impact us (teacher 08).

[...] several had serious health problems, almost died, and they're afraid, it seems I still see that today, from weight gain, from skin problems, some developed diabetes, abnormal test results, and yes, we notice it, we perceive ourselves more anxious (teacher 07).

Another excerpt shows us how “symptomatic” responses to suffering can be diverse and calls us to listen to such symptoms as products of a social context. This is what we find in the words of a teacher who reports the current situation of the educational labor context in a post-pandemic moment, in which we can perceive the unfolding of the traumatic in progress:

[...] I see many teachers extremely fragile, very fragile, teachers who... I'm one of them, I cry, here right, but I see many teachers leaving the classroom crying. There are three situations, three—I don't know if I can say types of behavior—three reactions: those who leave crying in despair and go to the pedagogical team and leave the class behind [...]. There are those who are aggressive, who give it back in the same coin [...]. And those who have given up. [...] I

think it got worse, it's always existed, it's always existed, but I think it got worse post-pandemic (teacher 02).

It seems important to us to take these “situations/behaviors” pointed out by the teacher as “symptoms” in the face of the recent lived situation, still resonating and without “space” for elaboration (Freud, 1914/1976). What is not thought, reflected, spoken, is acted out. If it doesn't come out in words, it comes out in acts. In this sense, it is important to consider Reynaud's (2020, p. 129) argument, that what cannot be thought “[...] emerges as symptom, as distortion, as rage directed at a harmless object, as fragile as the precariousness concealed by the symptom.” Therefore, it seems mistaken to take such behaviors as if they were individual symptoms of some teachers, although that is how mental illness is usually understood and treated. As Prado (2015, p. 07) tells us: “The path chosen in Brazilian history is to depoliticize suffering, medicalize malaise, and turn the symptom into a condominium matter.”

Other reports from our field research help support this understanding: “[...] And when I tell you that we were different, because I worked with them before, with my colleagues, and we were lighter. And we were all quite tense and getting stressed over small things” (teacher 07). “Every Thursday I had diarrhea, I had nausea, I had headaches [...] And then one day I told the principal, I can't take it anymore. I can't, I can't, I can't, I can't” (teacher 02).

These two reports refer to situations of conflict that occurred among groups of teachers from different schools and cities; situations that involved the pandemic moment and pedagogical circumstances. Here again, if we want to take an ethical-political position to interpret what happened, we must take the symptoms as a response to a political and social context of the phenomenon in question, and not only as a singular symptom. In this sense, we follow Safatle's (2018, p. 08) position, in “[...] insisting on the need for criticism to position itself as an analysis of social pathologies. This assumption involves understanding societies as systems that produce and manage pathologies.”

It is important to emphasize that these expressions of the traumatic, which are connected through denial and reflect the social context, are linked to the political choices that have been made in Brazil, especially those of the pandemic period, in

which denialism was insistently present and took on faces and narratives, entering and undermining various social environments—one of them being education, our study's locus. In this light, the expressions witnessed here are understood as social symptoms, not individual ones, which demands political action for their confrontation. Collective actions based on an ethical stance of care.

## **5 Final Considerations**

The present study aimed at understanding the traumatic impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the lives of public-school teachers, based on the notion of trauma proposed by Sándor Ferenczi and its connections with denial. The research results show that the political management of the pandemic in Brazil—marked by denialism and the imposition of emergency remote teaching without considering the structural inequalities of public education—had profound impacts on the subjectivity of the teachers.

The participants' statements revealed an experience of exhaustion, frustration, and invalidation, indicating denial as a central element of the trauma experienced. The social discourse that disqualified teaching work, combined with the precarious conditions of remote teaching and the lack of institutional recognition, resulted in a feeling of discouragement and submission, becoming a factor of mental illness.

Another relevant point was the identification of defensive mechanisms such as ego-splitting and identification with the aggressor, aspects theorized by Ferenczi. The teachers, while suffering denial from educational institutions and society, ended up reproducing this same denial toward their students, perpetuating the logic of trauma at different levels of the pedagogical relationship.

The analysis also indicated the absence of spaces for elaborating what was experienced, reinforcing the neoliberal policy of forgetting and silencing. The teachers reported that, in the current school context, little or nothing is said about the pandemic and its effects, whether regarding working conditions or how they dealt with the demands imposed by remote teaching. This silencing makes a collective process of re-signification of the experience impossible and prevents the overcoming of the traumatic effects.

It is concluded that the pandemic accentuated educational inequalities and further weakened female teachers, demanding institutional policies of recognition and collective actions based on an ethical stance of care. Thus, it is essential that there be institutional initiatives that promote spaces for listening, reflection, and elaboration of the trauma experienced. The construction of a more welcoming educational environment that is sensitive to the vulnerabilities of teachers is essential for rebuilding teaching self-esteem and strengthening the professional category. Moreover, it is necessary that there be a collective movement of recognition of the pandemic as a historical event that profoundly impacted education, to avoid the repetition of denials in future crises.

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Received in january 2025 | Approved in april 2025

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