STUDENT’S SOCIAL VULNERABILITY IN DISTANCE LEARNING IN COVID-19 TIMES

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ABSTRACT
This work aims to analyze the social vulnerability of students in the disciplines taught in distance education in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is a theoretical study, reflective analysis on the various issues of social vulnerability, focusing on how students experience distance learning within the social isolation obligation context. The following points are based on literature review with discussion: Distance learning as a realistic response on the fight against social isolation and social vulnerability, on higher education students, while aiming to avoid losing any semester topics. As a result, it is important to highlight the student's requirements in terms of preparation with information and communication technologies and, especially, those in a situation of social vulnerability who do not have all the necessary resources to access contents taught in this teaching modality, at a distance. There must be a perception of diversity, accessibility and the principles of inclusion so that the demands of students in situations of social vulnerability can be met in an equitable way.

KEYWORDS
Distance Education, Educational Technology, Social Equity, Educational Equity, Distance Learning, Coronavirus, COVID-19, Pandemic

1. INTRODUCTION
In the world scenario, the respiratory disease called COVID-19 was named as a pandemic on March 11, 2020, by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020). In several countries, including Portugal, social isolation measures were taken to prevent and mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Among these measures, it was verified that many educational institutions had to close their classes and presential activities (Camacho et al., 2020).

Taking into account the measures of social isolation, the Presidency of the council of ministers establishes Decree-Law 10-A/2020, of March 13, 2020, which provides for the substitution of face-to-face classes with classes in digital media, while the pandemic of the New Coronavirus (COVID-19) lasts. In this compliance, article 1 states that the authorization period for substituting presential classes with classes in digital media for the duration of the pandemic situation, is up to thirty days, extendable. Such authorization depends on guidance from the Ministry of Health and regional, municipal and district health agencies. Still in the second article, it is emphasized that, is the institutions' responsibility to define the subjects that can be replaced, the array of tools available to students that allow monitoring of the disposed contents, as well as the performance of evaluations during the authorization period (PCM, 2020).

Given this new reality, it appears that this information and communication technology used for Education at a Distance (E@D), represents a way of thinking about its viability, while also bringing challenges. The term accessibility, present in several areas of activity, places a great burden on computing, a great responsibility, of important relevance. It represents, for the user, not only the right to access the information network, but also the right to eliminate architectural barriers, availability of communication, physical access, appropriate equipment and programs, content and presentation of information in suitable formats and so on. In addition to this, there are other principles of great importance, that also need to be taken into account: the profile of students and their requirements (it must be taken into account that there may be cases in which the

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equipment foreseen to be used by teachers, has to be adapted to a potential group of students); the objectives for which they are intended; the contents necessary for the effective activities execution (Ramos, 2009), were placed in a E@D environment in record time by teachers, thus to minimizing time without classes and also preventing course calendar lagging.

In this perspective, a movement was transformed from the face-to-face reality to the E@D present, so that it was possible to revert courses, without excluding students in the conversion/adaptation process, for whatever reason. The biggest challenge for teachers today is to keep the school/course/institution where, students with different degrees, levels and learning conditions, stay together and motivated. Teachers are also facing these situations all over the world whatever course, school or institution.

A relevant aspect is the difficulty that not all students are on an equal ground regarding technology access, while some still struggle to maintain some kind of access; those who are from lower social classes and live in areas where access to internet is inexisten or its speed is below minimum requirements. Many are at home, unable to go out due to the lack of accessibility, some located in difficult access places. There are also those cases that do not have enough financial resources to have access to technological facilities (people without financial resources to buy a higher end computer, faster Internet, or simply having a suitable space to study and work) and now also unable to find these assets outside their home, due to social isolation.

In a day-to-day, traditional teaching face-to-face interaction, common sense and tact on the part of teachers have granted a way of analyzing, discussing and identifying such cases (students’ right of access to E@D but, who’s in a situation of social vulnerability). E@D requires didactic computer resources, with preparation and planning of activities that form the key moments of active learning, having greater meaning for both the student and teacher (Camacho et al., 2020).

Thus, in the context of the current scenario, it aims to analyze the social vulnerability of students in E@D disciplines in times of COVID-19.

2. METHODOLOGY

Reflection study on students in social vulnerability in E@D disciplines in times of COVID-19. The use of the analysis of the different types of reflection, in formative experiences, can favor a greater understanding of the student and the teacher, about the reasons for their actions; enable the questioning of these actions; raise awareness of how theoretical frameworks are present in practice; expand the possibilities for reflection when the professional is faced with situations of uncertainty and conflict of interests, and also serve as a source of evidence for improving the practice (Marcolino & Mizukami, 2008).

This work is a review of narrative literature by discussing the following points: E@D as a proposal due to social isolation and E@D students in social vulnerability.

Thus, the review of narrative literature is characterized by broad publications, appropriate to describe and discuss the development of a given subject, from a theoretical or contextual point of view. The narrative reviews do not inform the sources of information used, the methodology to search for references, nor the criteria used in the evaluation and selection of works. They basically consist of an analysis of literature published in books, articles from printed and / or electronic magazines in the interpretation and personal critical analysis of the author (Rother, 2007).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In Portugal, social isolation measures were implemented to prevent and mitigate the spread of COVID-19. The closure of educational institutions was determined by the competent authorities in the country, as well as other situations in which only classes and presential activities were suspended, making E@D via videoconferencing, video classes, synchronous and/or asynchronous classes a requirement.
3.1 E@D as a Proposal Due to Social Isolation

According to the General Directorate of Health (DGS, 2020) it’s important to combine two strategies: first, to stop virus transmission, with every social distance measure that can be adopted into the country reality. Second and foremost, to prepare all National Health Service (SNS, 2020) services, so that in case of need, at any time and in any place, assistance capacity can be increased.

Therefore, the isolation period brought immense challenges, new forms of relationship, skills for teleworking and the redefinition of “daily routine”. Social isolation generates the preservation and contribution to the common good to prevent the number of cases of COVID-19 from rising in an uncontrolled fashion and, specially, due to a shortage of Intensive Care Units (UCI) available for the treatment of critically ill patients.

In the case of E@D brings to light some considerations. Is absolutely necessary that educational institutions, teachers and their students are prepared and to, pedagogically, socially and technologically, fulfilling their tasks. The situations, terms and conditions, were different between different courses and institutions, but at the level of higher education it was found that adaptation period varied from 3 days to 2 weeks.

Especially for students in a social vulnerability situation, who do not have all the resources to access the content taught in the E@D modality, in this case, it’s particularly important to meet student's needs, in terms of information access and communication technologies.

It is fundamental for teachers and students the existence of computers with the right software, to be used in the subject of the discipline, while still having access to the course information necessary for the semester’s classes, so that, with the help of colleagues, this strategy can provide the production of works, monitoring of classes, synchronous and asynchronous, performance of generic tasks, everything that is defined by the course, for all intents and purposes, helping the students in their progress, while mitigating the potential negative impact.

According to Carmo & Franco (2019), one of the challenges in teaching via web, is the lack of physicality of the student, a factor that influences the teaching work both from the point of view of building knowledge and interpersonal relationships. In search of university education for professional and human training, students’ reading and writing are means by which tutors/teachers are guided to determine who these students are, what their learning needs are and what teaching strategies to direct the they in the face of the difficulties of distance learning.

We must also not forget that the teacher/tutor who works must master this whole set of information and communication technologies (software, virtual learning environment and the available content) with perfection. This makes this teacher a person with highly specialized educational competence and with a solid background in operating computer equipment.

3.2 Distance Learning Higher Education Students in Social Vulnerability

The concept of social vulnerability is a concept that presents itself with a multifaceted character and can encompass several dimensions. Being aware of such dimensions, it is possible to identify situations of difficulty for individuals, families or communities. Such dimensions relate to elements linking characteristics of individuals and families, such as their assets and socio demographic characteristics, or even those related to the social media where they are inserted. What is perceived is that, for scholars who deal with the theme, there is an essential character of vulnerability, that is, an attribute related to the ability to respond to situations of risk or constraints (Cunha et al., 2016).

In such context, the understanding of legislation, as a reality and not a utopia, needs to be taken into account. E@D needs to be seen as a continuous orientation work in our inclusion-oriented society. Inclusion alternatives are in our daily lives. Respect and application of inclusive legislation to people must be a reality. Technologies must be at the service of everyone and not just a few. Hence other constraints arise: the opportunity to integrate knowledge with reality.

Therefore, there is an urgent need to implement Public Policies aimed at youth, such as offering internships and jobs, aimed at insertion in the labor market, and also, keeping their studies up-to-date, so that one can access job opportunities. It should be noted that digital inclusion has become a fundamental element to tackle socioeconomic inequalities, even for students who do not want to pursue academic studies, it is
essential to guarantee the well-being of citizens, regardless of the level of education, the use of information and communication technologies, where today, still represents a strong disparity when analyzed in a socio demographic way (Dambros, 2018).

Facing the inequality in education that takes place in contexts of social vulnerability in large cities, would require profound changes and great efforts in new educational policies implementation. Given the difficulty of general discussion between educational institutions and political bodies, in country education direction and intent. Reflections on the challenges ahead, for increasing the equality and quality of Portuguese education, are thoroughly necessary (Ribeiro & Vóvio, 2017).

Fortunately, every day we witness an undeniable change in posture, preconceptions and attitudes on behalf of teachers, researchers, opinion makers and general public. The integration of differences as natural attribute of humanity, in the recognition and affirmation of human rights, in the openness for innovation in the theoretical-practical field, and in the assimilation of values, principles and goals to be achieved.

Social inclusion is way for equalize opportunities for all students, and in this case of E@D, it can be a very powerful tool. It is intended that this new way of teaching, continues to demonstrate an array of possibilities and advances for all, allowing the democratization of education for citizens of different levels, places and timezones (Maia and Bokums, 2018).

All this streamlining generated needs for flexible schedules, recording of online transmissions of classes so that students can have access to content at other timezones (asynchronous). This also allows greater opportunity for flexibility in controlling students' attendance, through their access to virtual learning environments (Moodle and others) and Videoconferencing Tools (MSTeams, ZOOM, GoogleClassRoom, etc ...). The teachers are committed to offering quality services, reducing stress, avoiding an increase in social vulnerability, defending the democratic process and promoting social emancipation. The commitment to students' autonomy is emphasized, strengthening their potential in order to break the exclusion process, providing assisting through local school or parent institution, in order to maintaining their protagonism, in their own stories of realization of their student rights (Dambros, 2018).

Thus, it is essential to assert a constitutional right of every citizen, the right of access to knowledge so that, from there, with training and commitment, it can be independent of assistance policies, breaking the cycle of social vulnerability, which is sometimes passed down from generation to generation in low-income families (Dambros, 2018).

These findings help us understand that for E@D to be effective, in COVID-19 context, has to be considered as multi-part process that includes: planning, organization, information technology and open communication between teachers and students within the established class schedule. In addition, students in a situation of social vulnerability and with low accessibility to information and communication technologies would become invisible, because they do not have all the technological resources to access the content taught in the E@D modality, but as we have already said, once identified, they can be supported, allowing them not to miss the courses in which they were enrolled.

It was necessary to outline action plans, that should be put into practice, when democratic solutions, based on participatory democracy oriented towards solidarity and cooperation were needed, and not towards entrepreneurship and competitiveness at all costs (Santos, 2020).

The understanding of diversity, accessibility and the principles of inclusion must always be taken into account, so that the demands of students in situations of social vulnerability can always be met in an equitable manner, especially when a situation arises that makes them leave their comfort zone, while imposing rules, at a national level, in an exceptional situation, as it was the case of COVID-19.

4. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In order to analyze the social vulnerability of students in E@D disciplines in times of COVID-19, it was needed to attend inclusive practices, allowing visibility into the difficulties of students, in terms of organization, dealing with information, communication technologies and, especially, those in situations of social vulnerability who do not have all the resources to access the content taught in the E@D modality.

As a limitation, it is highlighted that the difficulty of access to information and communication technologies, by students in times of Pandemic COVID-19, arises (into the education authorities) new reflections on the reality of the population when we move to the National panorama.
As a recommendation, it is suggested an increased attention to students in socially vulnerable situations at E@D so that it is inclusive, giving the opportunity to integrate knowledge with reality and not making this student feel increasingly excluded. A pivotal point is to involve colleagues in work groups, and/or class, to make them part of the integration, trying to reduce this possible inequality that the student may feel.

The E@D must be inclusive, respecting the differences of each region, proposing actions and measures that aim to ensure the improvement of the quality of education, the investment in training by the teachers, the removal of physical barriers and changes in attitude, the planning and preparation of resources materials that are necessary for an effective E@D must be prepared by teachers using access to virtual learning environments (Moodle and others), which were eventually already used to support presential classes. And all the preparation of the Videoconferencing tool (MSTeams, ZOOM, GoogleClassRoom, etc ... ) that meanwhile was chosen to be used for classes by videoconferencing (synchronous), chat, tasks, etc. (asynchronous).

5. CONCLUSIONS

In this new world scenario, a new pulmonary disease, created a Covid-19 Pandemic. With unprecedented speed and worldwide dissemination, caught several governments off-guard, even though WHO (2020) kept disease data updated (as one can expect in a time of upmost uncertainty), disseminating disease evolution status, trying to prevent mass uncontrolled infection.

Portugal, as a mitigating action, establishes in a council of ministers from 13 March 2020, that presential classes should be cancelled, while recommending remote work, followed by a strict social isolation policy.

In the Higher Education context, the direct application of such policies had a heavy impact, as one should expect, even considering pre-existing social vulnerabilities.

- We can now say that, we were all caught off-guard with overall activity shutdown. While transforming course into E@D is a challenge itself, even more when the timeframe is so short, and so little margin for error. The semester should maintain context, in content and grading. Provided tools should be solid and also user-friendly. The teacher’s commitment and overtime dedicated this few days after lockdown, were crucial for semester continuity, and even more important, academic continuity.

- There was no questionnaire. The authors are, in firsthand, reporting class students’ comments and feedback. In general, students agreed to the E@D found solution. As every class is different, each Teacher restructured the class towards a format more compatible with their students, offering live or postponed lessons, reading documents or quizzes, reflection papers or group work, and so on. Students found diversity and they liked it - some students complained in the past - demonstration oriented - so work was more practical, more team based. Individual work was now more flexible, and teachers were all online, most of the time, so, more accessible.

- Teachers have an active role in detecting social vulnerability. Social isolation stresses areas untouched until now. Students with no compatible or up-to-date equipment, bad internet or expensive connections. Working students should maintain their expenses, and even, in some cases, invest in equipment to keep studying. Some students had complex family situations (little children, elderly or even handicap relatives) that now lost their outside support. This teacher “new” role, is a relevant one on preventing that complex situations became worst.

- Since March 2020, the teacher’s spend most of its time feeding the chosen platform with the remaining of the course data, while adapting evaluation and exams.

- Now interaction happen 24/7, questions are asked at any hour, in any format (chat, group forum, phone or video call), replies are made ASAP. This one to one process personalizes the follow-up, making it effective and assertive.

- This home-based class system as a negative effect on costs, as it increases consumption of water, electricity, gas, internet and so on.

- Some more complex situations were detected where students could not adapt to E@D. A small group of students quitted classes or even the hole course – group partners complained about lack of or even no communication with dropped out students. Others reported that online courses implied a bigger workload, incompatible with their family routines. Others had to maintain their jobs (first line work, needed in times of COVID-19), complicating all aspects of E@D even further.
On last but very important reference, E@D classes were home-based classes during isolation, which is expected, however, the format is maintained now, after isolation obligation is over. Exams will occur in E@D environment, which, in our opinion, is a very relevant finding.

E@D is here to stay. It is already considered a de facto solution for learning, whatever the distance. The information and assets accessibility as had an unprecedented leap forward. These initiatives empowered the school to accelerate and conclude the opening of several new courses, some with E@D features. Fully, partially or specific case oriented. E@D will allow remote students to keep tabs with learning while allowing to invite teachers and professionals, from all over the globe for inputs, interaction or even course classes. This is a new dawn for E@D, in the expectation this dawn leads us to a COVID-19 free future.

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REFERENCES


