

# Being a Basic Education teacher, black woman, a single mother, atypical and peripheral in the context of the covid-19 pandemic in Brazil

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**Abstract:** This article aims to recognize challenges experienced and faced by a Basic Education teacher, a Black woman, single mother, atypical and from the periphery in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic in Brazil, focusing on Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT). The study is justified by the urgent need to expand and deepen research on teaching work and conditions, especially in connection with discussions about the living conditions of Black and poor women in our society. We configured the methodology from the perspective of a case study (Yin, 1994), through semi-structured interviews, questionnaire application, and netnography records (Nogueira; Gomes; Soares, 2012) of a teacher in the early years of a small private school located in a peripheral region of Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais. The data were processed through content analysis (Bardin, 1977), through the lens of intersectionality. The teacher's account highlights aspects related to historical cultural baggage of exclusions that encompass gender, class, race, territory, generation, work, and many other variants that intersect. The challenges faced by the interviewee during the period in question are multiple, overlap, and thereby intensify. They highlight obstacles rooted in the Brazilian socio-historical and structural context, marked by sexism and racism. It is essential to recognize that these challenges are not individual but rather the results of social systems and power structures that perpetuate inequalities.

**Keywords:** case study; teaching; pandemic; black and poor woman.

## 1 Introduction

"When a Black woman moves, the entire structure of society moves with her"<sup>1</sup>  
(Davis, 2017).

We begin this article with the words of Ângela Davis (2017), a Black woman, philosopher, writer, and American activist, whose formulation challenges us to reflect on the living conditions of Black women in our society. In Brazil, as Santos (2020, p. 1)

<sup>1</sup> This quotation, like all others in this work, was freely translated into English from the original text in Portuguese.



discusses, if confronting a set of socially constructed challenges "was (and still is) an arduous and continuous task" for women in general, for poor Black women, overcoming them "[...] constitutes a tough battle—incidentally, three times more painful and difficult than that of non-Black women" (Santos, 2020, p. 1). In this context, if the situation for these women was already alarming in our country by 2019, given a history of oppression, subjugation, inequality, racism, and violence, it was further aggravated when their experiences became enmeshed in a scenario of a "multidimensional health and humanitarian emergency": the COVID-19 pandemic (Fiocruz, 2020).

In February 2020, Brazil confirmed its first case of the new coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), the cause of the COVID-19 disease, while other countries around the world were already reporting thousands of infections. With the spread of the disease across the globe and the occurrence of community transmission, social containment measures began to be adopted, such as social distancing<sup>2</sup>, the main coping measure recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO).

The pandemic had ramifications that went beyond contamination by the virus. Social distancing, for example, changed the global landscape in terms of health, economy, mobility, education, and other spheres of life. In Brazil, this period was marked by the absence of available vaccination, aggravated by the existence of a "[...] criminal, outrageous, and nefarious political project of the [federal] Brazilian government," as asserted by Silva and Silva (2022, p. 1).

The pandemic affected everyone, but in different ways. In 2020, Nísia Lima, president of the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (Fiocruz, 2020, p. 1), declared: "The pandemic is not the same for all countries, nor is it the same for everyone within the same country or the same city. Many say that we are all in the same boat, but that is not quite the case." She continues: "We are all going through the same storm in the same sea. But it is as if some are on ocean liners, others on yachts, others on sailboats, or even canoes" (Fiocruz, 2020, p. 1).

In this regard, it should be noted that the contagion by the SARS-CoV-2 virus and the impacts of the pandemic particularly affected the poor and Black population in Brazil, whose access to housing, work, health services, education, sanitation, and

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<sup>2</sup> It refers to the reduction of interaction among people in a specific location with the aim of reducing the speed of transmission of the virus.

leisure is constantly denied or marked by precarity. In this context, amidst a structural scenario of racism, poverty, and gender-based violence, poor Black women living in precarious housing in peripheries and communities were the most negatively impacted, which highlights the social and racial inequalities in Brazil.

They were the ones who lost the most social rights, who became unemployed at the highest rates (OXFAM Brasil, 2020), and also the ones who died the most during the pandemic, especially when compared to all other groups at the base of the labor market (Jornal da USP, 2021). As an example, the first victim of COVID-19 in Brazil, who passed away in Rio de Janeiro-RJ, was Cleonice Gonçalves. She was 63 years old, Black, a domestic worker since the age of 13, and was infected at her employer's house, who had returned from a trip to Italy, where the crisis caused by the pandemic seemed uncontrollable at the time (OXFAM Brasil, 2020; SOF, 2020). This was considered an “[...] emblematic case of Brazilian inequalities and [of] how the pandemic affects women more – especially the poorest and Black women” (OXFAM Brasil, 2020).

With this in mind, in this work, we consider the pandemic to be “[...] a historical analyzer, an unexpected event that reveals a field of dispute between forces, between the micro-social and the macro-social, making visible what is naturalized by institutions” (Barbosa *et al.*, 2020, p. 8). In this sense, using a metaphor, we start from the assumption that wounds were laid bare and became more open and profound in the lives and on the skin of poor and Black people in the Brazilian pandemic context, with an emphasis on women, an aspect that needs to be further investigated. Although the topic has sparked interest and generated surveys and studies (by academia, governments, among others), the demand for greater investment in research is notorious, given the need to highlight the vulnerability to which this population group was (and remains) subject.

We reiterate that various forms of oppression, which were already concrete in the lives of poor Black Brazilian women before the pandemic, became even more evident, more acute, and more profound, especially if we consider the intersections between different social markers, such as gender, race, class, territory, work, and family. In this respect, we highlight that more challenging situations were experienced, for example, by these women as single, atypical mothers of single-parent families living in peripheral regions, and also those in professions centered on caregiving

relationships. This is the case for domestic workers, nannies, caregivers for the elderly, nurses, teachers of young children, among others. These are jobs that are historically devalued, marked by informality, precarity, and low wages.

In the case of teaching, in particular, we emphasize that living and working conditions have been increasingly debated, both in universities and in other spheres of society. In this regard, various discussions and reflections are emerging; however, in terms of public policies for professional valorization, the country still has much to debate and advance. During the pandemic period, especially, teachers faced various challenges that deepened and/or expanded those they already faced, which generated a significant impact on their personal and/or professional lives and calls for new research.

In Brazil, at the beginning of the pandemic, there was a rapid shift from the in-person school environment to the virtual one, marked by a lack of prior planning and necessary technical support, as pointed out by Oliveira, Pereira Junior, and Clementino (2021). It was in this context that teachers had to adapt their homes to become their workplace – just like other individuals, according to the needs and demands of each profession. For a large portion of teachers, if their homes were previously places of rest and comfort (although teaching work had already colonized the territory of their residences even before the pandemic), they now had to transform their rooms into classrooms, combining the practice of teaching with other duties within their homes and with their cohabiting family.

Particularly in Basic Education, it must be emphasized that one of the hallmarks of the teaching profession is its feminization. Currently, out of 2,315,616 active teachers in the country, 1,834,295 (79.2%) are women (Brasil, 2023). Research prior to the pandemic already indicated that the teaching routine was commonly marked by the intensification of work in double or triple shifts, at home and at school. During the pandemic, this situation worsened. The Sempre Viva Organização Feminista (SOF, 2020), for example, identified that during this period, about 50% of Brazilian women began to dedicate themselves to caring for someone, and for those who remained in the workforce, about 41% indicated that they were working more. Among these women, there were certainly teachers, some of them Black, single mothers, atypical

mothers, and from peripheral communities, who experienced the pandemic period differently from others – an aspect that drew our attention and led to this research.

Therefore, considering the issues presented and discussed so far, the general objective of this investigation is to recognize the challenges experienced and faced by a Basic Education teacher—a Black woman, single mother, atypical mother, and from a peripheral area—in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil, with a focus on Emergency Remote Teaching (ERE). The study is justified by the urgent need to broaden and deepen research on teaching work and conditions, a theme adopted as the central axis of the discussions presented in this article, in conjunction with discussions on the living conditions of poor Black women in our society. During the pandemic period, especially, these teachers faced various challenges that deepened and/or expanded those they already faced, which generated significant repercussions on their personal and/or professional lives, and prompted new debates and investigations on the subject.

This article is an excerpt from a Final Course Project (TCC) developed by a student (an anti-racist Black woman) and a professor (an anti-racist white woman) from the Geography teaching degree program at the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG). The research was conducted between March 2022 and July 2023 and is configured as a case study (Yin, 1994). It was carried out through a semi-structured interview, a questionnaire, and netnography records (Nogueira; Gomes; Soares, 2012) of a Basic Education teacher—a Black woman, single mother, atypical mother from a peripheral area, and an early years worker at a small private school in a peripheral region of Belo Horizonte, the capital of Minas Gerais. The data were treated through content analysis (Bardin, 1977), through the lens of intersectionality.

The article is divided into three sections. In the first, we present the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of the investigation. In the second, we explain the methodological path of the study, highlighting the instruments used for data production. In the third, the research results are presented, with an emphasis on the living conditions of the teacher who kindly gifted us with generous and precious contributions for this research.



## **2 Theoretical and conceptual frameworks**

Given the general objective of the work, we highlight three axes around which we present some theoretical and conceptual reflections: the teaching profession, with a focus on issues related to the pandemic period; the concept of intersectionality; and atypical motherhood.

To understand and situate some discussions about the teaching profession, we must emphasize that it should not be reduced to the act of teaching a class, as it involves planning, dialogue, communication with students and other members of the school community, among many other aspects. Furthermore, it is necessary to understand that although teaching is a large part of a teacher's identity, they are not just professionals, but subjects who have personal experiences that extend beyond work, involving rest, family, friends, leisure, among others (Teixeira, 1996).

According to Teixeira (1996), teachers are sociocultural subjects and possess peculiarities and singularities that only they can have through their experiences. Thus, it is understood that they “[...] carry out their activity and are constituted as such in social and historical contexts, dimensioned in structures, institutions, and processes resulting from the choices and contingencies of human action” (Teixeira, 1996, p. 180).

The teaching profession in Brazil is fraught with distinct challenges and setbacks, especially in Basic Education. Teachers face considerable obstacles in exercising their profession. Among these adversities are problems with salaries, qualifications, working conditions, and the challenges of the educational processes in the classroom. Sampaio and Marin (2004) discuss the precarity of the teacher's work, highlighting the devaluation it entails. For example, currently in the country, there are many teachers who work without proper qualifications and teach subjects different from their basic training.

Furthermore, it is worth remembering that the working conditions of teachers are not always the most adequate to provide comfort for the teacher and learning for their students. Among the situations of overload, an extensive workload, classes with large numbers of students, and insufficient planning time stand out. Moreover, many teachers work outside the school environment and do not receive adequate financial compensation for these duties, in addition to not always having time to study or update their knowledge frequently (Sampaio; Marin, 2004). Many teachers, “[...] in some

places, still work double shifts, taking on workloads in different public school systems – state and municipal – or in public and private schools” (Sampaio; Marin, 2004, p. 12).

It should be remembered that the majority of the teaching staff is female, and that the gender relations surrounding the profession make it more vulnerable to control, which is one of the reasons for its precarity, as well as lower pay. In addition, attributes socially directed at women persist in association with teaching and remain naturalized, which contributes to the recognition that it is customary or habitual for them to have a vocation for forming future citizens to be disciplined, orderly, careful, and hardworking (Costa *et al.*, 2010). In this sense, given that teaching is socially seen as women's work, it is linked “[...] to the dominant, patriarchal view, in which women are positioned as guardians of virtue, morality, and order, and ‘naturally’ suited for mothering, care, affection, and self-sacrifice” (Costa *et al.*, 2010, p. 2).

In this respect, historically, among the possible options for stipulating class divisions in relation to the female sex, entry into the formal labor market occurred (and still occurs) in professions that have similarities with the domestic sphere. These roles relate to care and responsibility correlated with the home and family, which leads to the concentration of women in services with specific qualities, such as teaching or nursing. In the case of teaching, after the gradual decrease of men in the profession, it became predominantly occupied by women. The teaching profession also underwent important changes in terms of class origin and, later, was performed by women from the working classes, as indicated by Neves, Brito, and Muniz (2019).

Bringing in other aspects, although linked to the previous discussion, it is emphasized that part of the duties performed by teachers in Brazil commonly exceed the limits of the workday. It is often considered natural for these workers to perform activities outside of school, such as dedicating time to planning and preparing lessons, which involves uncompensated time. According to Gasparini, Barreto, and Assunção (2005, p. 1), “It is pertinent to argue that the school system transfers to the professional the responsibility of covering the existing gaps in the institution, which establishes rigid and redundant evaluation mechanisms and hires an insufficient number of staff, among others.” In this sense, the fact that, in various situations of precarity, the teacher “[...] takes the reins in order to compensate for the structural imbalances of the school

through their own efforts, as well as cognitive and biological resources” is naturalized (Assunção, 2008, p. 5).

From this, it is important to think about the repercussions of the responsibilities assigned to the teaching professional, both with regard to educational processes and in terms of their mental or physical health. For Gasparini, Barreto, and Assunção (2005, p. 192)

Working conditions, that is, the circumstances under which teachers mobilize their physical, cognitive, and affective capacities to achieve the goals of educational production, can lead to overexertion or hyper-demand on their psychophysiological functions. If there is no time for recovery, clinical symptoms are triggered or precipitated that would explain the rates of leave from work due to mental disorders [...].

In light of this, we emphasize that even before the period of social distancing intended to mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers already experienced and perceived that their teaching duties invaded their domestic lives and took up part of their free time. The greatest implications of this perception were for female teachers, as they are the ones who traditionally take on the work done in the domestic space (Neves; Brito; Muniz, 2019). Consequently, it is understood that various factors work together to affect the physical or mental health of Brazilian teachers, and a large part of these factors became more intense with the COVID-19 pandemic. In other words, the teaching profession in Brazil, even before the pandemic, was already arduous, full of challenges, and often carried out under conditions of great precarity. With the pandemic, such situations were, in many respects, aggravated.

Regarding the pandemic period, it was perceived that the changes in educational delivery were experienced by teachers as something new, just as they were for many other professionals. The key point is that relational, social, and environmental aspects were the ones that most clearly showed a loss in quality of life, mainly because the teaching profession in Brazil is carried out in conditions often marked by high precarity. Even more pronounced impacts were perceived in relation to Basic Education teachers, whose working conditions are worse when compared, for example, to Higher Education.

The mandatory readjustment of pedagogical planning, the lack of resources to continue activities in a remote format, combined with insufficient training to handle technological programs and resources, the insecurity of unstable employment



contracts in private and public schools, and pressure from school management teams, among other aspects, caused suffering for many teachers (Oliveira; Pereira Junior; Clementino, 2021). All these issues, associated with the period of online classes—not always synchronous and often dissimilar to the in-person school environment—led to what is called an “exhaustive learning” experience for teachers (Oliveira; Pereira Junior; Clementino, 2021, p. 9), which resulted in a decline in their quality of life.

It is understood that Emergency Remote Teaching (ERE) was carried out by most teachers in their domestic space, as previously indicated. Therefore, it is fundamental to consider the domestic circumstances of its implementation, from the space the teacher occupied in their own home to work, and how many and who were the people in the professional's household, to the gender relations in which they were entangled. On this topic, current research indicates that many household tasks remain socially performed by women. Realizing that the majority of teachers in Brazil are female, this overload was felt, above all, by female teachers. Considering the racial breakdown, this situation appears to have been aggravated.

Data from the Institute for Applied Economic Research (IPEA) from 2015 show that, regarding the issue of race, there is an underrepresentation of Black people among Basic Education teachers when compared to white people (Matijascic, 2017). As Black individuals have a lower level of schooling than white individuals, and given the requirement of a minimum education equivalent to Higher Education (with some exceptions), there are limitations for this group's access to a teaching career at this level. According to Matijascic (2017), the IPEA research found that, in addition to non-respondents, white male teachers represented 8.7% of the category, while Black male teachers were 8.1%, whereas white female teachers were 47.2%, and Black female teachers corresponded to 35.9%. It is underlined that, at the time, 51.7% of the female population in the country was composed of Black women – which leads us to reiterate the reduced number of Black female teachers in Basic Education, including when compared to their percentage in the Brazilian population.

For Paes and Darsie (2022), Black women are an invisibilized contingent immersed in various stereotypes in all regions of Brazil, in different instances of public life. For the authors, “[...] racial markers, originating from slavery, erase the qualities of Black women while simultaneously sexualizing them” (Paes; Darsie, 2022, p. 188).

They claim there is, for example, a significant difference in opportunities and quality of infrastructures that constitute the territorialities of Black and white people. “Black Brazilians live in territorialities more commonly marked by poverty and limitations, a fact that highlights a social and economic imbalance with a racial bias” (Paes; Darsie, 2022, p. 186). In this respect, Paes and Darsie (2022) analyze that, during the slavery period, Black women ensured family subsistence with exhaustive work in slave quarters and tenements. Today, this logic is maintained and takes “[...] into account that many face daily challenges to secure economic resources that help with their families' expenses, often characterized by social precarity” (Paes; Darsie, 2022, p. 188).

Alves, Castro, and Oliveira (2023), in turn, when discussing Black female teachers in Basic Education, state that, in school, they face the stigmatization and discrimination imprinted on the fabric of a society that insists on inferiorizing them, a violence aggravated by the intersection of racism and sexism. Therefore, they are continuously forced to reaffirm their legitimacy to occupy positions and access spaces that have historically been denied to them. These women also need to “live with the pains and anguishes of racism” (Alves; Castro; Oliveira, 2023, p. 825). Here, the focus is on the “[...] discrimination regarding Black aesthetics, such as braided or voluminous hair, thick lips, wide nose, among many other identity traits that racism insists on labeling as ugly” (Alves; Castro; Oliveira, 2023, p. 826).

Bringing in other issues, as highlighted in the introduction of this work, the pandemic can be defined as a scenario that establishes a social, economic, and health crisis. Thus, the emergency distancing measures adopted during the period undoubtedly had repercussions that impacted the vulnerability of women and, consequently, had short, medium, and long-term effects that are still felt today (Barbosa *et al.*, 2020). We reiterate that various forms of oppression, which were already concrete in the lives of Brazilian women before the pandemic, became more evident between 2020 and early 2023 due to the pandemic context. This seems to have been even more acute when considering the experiences of poor Black women, especially mothers in single-parent families involved in professions related to caregiving – such as teaching children, as we mentioned – and also those with experiences related to atypical motherhood.

On this aspect, we highlight that atypical motherhood is a concept that has been adopted to refer to motherhood and the relationship with neurodivergence.<sup>3</sup>. This means that women who have children diagnosed with neurological or genetic conditions, or with adverse psychological, cognitive, and/or motor development, experience motherhood differently from typical motherhood. Atypical mothers are understood as women who carry out maternal duties according to the neurodivergence of their child(ren). Using the experience of typical mothers as a reference, being an atypical mother can lead to a series of burdens for these women. This occurs, mainly, because they carry a different weight of responsibilities, doubts, sacrifices, care, expectations, frustrations, desires, changes, adaptations, routines, limitations, overloads, and fragilities, in addition to the feeling of abandonment due to a lack of support, which can lead to conditions like anxiety and depression, for example. Many of these women give up their professional careers, social lives, and romantic relationships for the sake of maternal care. With this, feelings of uncertainty, sadness, and helplessness arise (Smeha; Cezar, 2011).

It is necessary to consider that atypical motherhood is not homogeneous. In the case of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) – which is of specific interest to us in this research – one must consider the existence of different levels of support and cognitive development, for example (Christmann *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, Guedes (2021) emphasizes that factors such as race, class, and the region where she lives affect the daily life of an atypical mother. According to her,

For those who are Black, all the aforementioned factors coexist, but there is one more marker: race. Black atypical motherhood also encounters intersections based on color, class, and the region where one lives (the periphery). It is not just atypical motherhood that defines us socially; we still have to deal with the oppressions that constantly cross and interrelate with our motherhood. If a base of the pyramid exists, we are far below it; forgotten and made invisible. The situation becomes even more complex and, once again, has nothing to do with our children's diagnosis, but with social existence and the need to ensure our own survival (Guedes, 2021).

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<sup>3</sup> Neurodivergence is a term that describes people whose neurological functioning differs from the socially expected standard (neurotypical), which includes conditions such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and other neurodevelopmental disorders. The concept, linked to the neurodiversity movement, understands these variations as natural forms of human biology, and not as pathologies to be cured, and advocates for respect and inclusion for these neurological specificities.

According to Costa (2020), who is also an atypical mother, it is common in our society for people to consider mothers of "different" or atypical children as "warriors" or special. This gives the impression that "[...] this type of motherhood is itself endowed with all the necessary resources for a happy outcome, depending solely on the warrior and her unique characteristics" (Costa, 2020, p. 2). She argues that for a war to exist, it is necessary for two parties to be in conflict and unable to reach an understanding without "the force of the sword." In this sense, when one is designated as "special" in the sense of a "warrior," it presents a hierarchical impression or perspective that the mother or child has something more, or less, than the individual making these observations (Costa, 2020).

Smeha and Cezar (2011) emphasize that the journey of an atypical mother cannot be walked alone. This is because these mothers find themselves forced to strive to create support networks, with the help of other people or institutions, to be able to handle the overload of care. It is in this sense that Costa (2020) indicates that society needs to seek to be more supportive, inclusive, and aim to recognize the singularities of individuals. In the case of atypical mothers who are also teachers of other individuals, some of whom are also neurodivergent, the challenges can intersect and accumulate. Caring for the caregiver, in this case, becomes both a challenge and a social demand, to which we also draw attention in this research.

### **3 Methodology, interviewee profile, and teaching at the start of the pandemic**

The research employs a qualitative approach. The work is a case study. According to Yin (1994), through this investigative strategy, we can answer questions like "what?" and "how?" (which unfold into descriptive inferential analyses) and also the "why?" type, focusing on real-life contexts of current cases. For the author, "[...] as a research endeavor, the case study contributes, in an unparalleled way, to our understanding of individual, organizational, social, and political phenomena" (Yin, 1994, p. 21).

The research data were produced from a semi-structured interview and the application of a questionnaire to outline the socioeconomic and cultural profile of the participating teacher. Rocha and Reis (2020) argue "[...] that research conducted with subjects in situations of exclusion should occur, mainly, because it brings their lives

and realities out of anonymity” (Connelly; Clandinin, 1995, cited in Rocha; Reis, 2020, p. 4). Furthermore, “[...] there is a dialogue with the researched subjects, with their memories, their feelings, emotions, and situations that enrich whoever reads, hears, and/or analyzes these narratives, providing the opportunity to recover a time and situations that cannot be forgotten” (Rocha; Reis, 2020, p. 5).

As for netnography, the strategy was adopted because it is “[...] an approach that proposes to use, as much as possible, the same criteria as ethnographic research, for research that takes place, partially or wholly, in the virtual environment” (Nogueira; Gomes; Soares, 2012, p. 3). Its use is justified by the fact that records on social media became evident during this period, especially as a result of social distancing. “From the understanding that the internet, as an object of study, can be thought of both as a culture and as a cultural artifact, [...] new possibilities for understanding the relationships between school and society have emerged” (Nogueira; Gomes; Soares, 2012, p. 3). When we conducted the research, the teacher had a Facebook account and a YouTube channel, both of which were consulted.

The data were treated through content analysis (Bardin, 1977), under the lens of intersectionality. Bringing this latter construct and approaching it as an analytical tool to think about the social markers of difference proved to be a fruitful path for the investigation. In dialogue with Barbosa *et al.* (2020) and Oliveira and Zucchetti (2022), we highlight that the concept was coined in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw, an American civil rights advocate who has a vast body of theoretical work on the subject. With regard to Black women, the researcher indicates that they often find themselves in a space where racism or xenophobia, class, and gender meet. These women are as if at a crossroads, vulnerable to being hit by the intense traffic from all roads which, in this case, represent the social markers of difference.

The concept of intersectionality is configured as an important analytical tool because it allows for the analysis of more than one form of oppression concomitantly. Carla Akotirene (2019, p. 15), an activist and doctor in Interdisciplinary Studies on Gender, Women, and Feminism, defines intersectionality as “[...] an interlinked system of oppression.” Barbosa *et al.* (2020) emphasize that the category is a support for us to think about how the foundations of oppression intersect and intensify.



For Leite *et al.* (2021, p. 6), “[...] experiences of oppression were only understood through the perception of the coexistence of distinct situations of domination. Hence the term intersectionality, which alludes to the idea of belonging to two or more sets [...]”. The authors emphasize that intersectionality is a concept used to designate a theoretical and methodological conception focused on the interconnections that occur from power relations and crossed oppressions, especially of class, race, and gender, which do not usually happen in isolation from one another (Vigoya, 2016 *apud* Leite *et al.*, 2021). It is worth remembering that working with this category proposes new perspectives regarding the way in which discriminatory systems, such as racism, patriarchy, and class oppression, create basic inequalities and structure the relative positions of women, races, ethnicities, and classes in the social structure (Barbosa *et al.*, 2020).

In this respect, it is worth remembering that the pandemic context caused Black women to experience, in their daily lives, various forms of violence and oppression that go beyond poverty, racism, and sexism, such as difficulties in accessing health services, precarious workspaces, low levels of schooling, and high rates of being the head of the household (Leite *et al.*, 2021). In this research, we warn that it is fundamental to remember that, although oppressions against women were highlighted in the pandemic context, these oppressions and violences do not originate from the pandemic. From this, we can question the assertion that, through the pandemic, normality was lost or that we began to live in a “new normal.” These scenarios (pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic) were never (and continue not to be) normal and/or “safe” (Leite *et al.*, 2021) for poor Black lives in general, with an emphasis on women. With these issues in mind, we present the results of the research.

From the interview, the application of the questionnaire, and the netnographic approach, we emphasize that the presented case study signals important reflections for the debate on the question posed in this research: after all, what challenges were experienced and faced by a Basic Education teacher, a Black woman, single mother, atypical mother, and from a peripheral area in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil, with a focus on ERE?

Marusa<sup>4</sup>, whom we thank for sharing memories, stories, struggles, and dreams, is a Black woman who, when interviewed, was 45 years old and lived with her two sons, the eldest aged 16 and the youngest aged 11, who has ASD. She was born in Belo Horizonte-MG, where she currently lives in her own fully paid-off apartment situated in a peripheral neighborhood of the Venda Nova region. She self-declares as a Black and Christian woman.

Marusa divorced her husband due to situations of violence experienced when her second son was a newborn. At the time, her mother, a nurse with a complete high school education, was an important source of support that allowed her to balance motherhood and teaching, unlike some leaders of the religious community she was part of, who blamed her for the end of her marriage. In this respect, we highlight the attribution of unjust sentences of guilt to a woman by people who could have offered help but instead disregarded the oppressions she already carried. In this sense, the religious institution constitutes another element of oppression, which reveals a moral crisis and also the symbolic violence against women practiced by the church as a participant in society.

Marusa declared an income in the range of 4 to 7 minimum wages. When interviewed, she did not have help from other people (relatives, friends, colleagues, etc.) in her daily activities of caring for the house and/or her children. According to research by the Brazilian Institute of Economics at the Getúlio Vargas Foundation (FGV, 2023), Brazil currently has more than 11 million mothers raising their children alone. In the last decade alone, there has been an increase of 1.7 million women in this condition. The survey also shows that 90% of the women who became single mothers between 2012 and 2022 are Black. Single mothers head about 15% of households in Brazil, with the largest proportion concentrated in the North and Northeast regions. The majority of them, 72.4%, live alone with their children and do not have a close support network. Also according to the research, single mothers have an income 39% lower than married men with children and 20% lower than married

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<sup>4</sup> The participant chose not to use a pseudonym and authorized the use of her real name, as recorded in the Free and Informed Consent Form (TCLE), which was signed voluntarily. The study followed the internal regulations of the Institute of Geosciences at UFMG regarding ethical issues in research and ensured the principles of voluntariness, respect, and free, informed, and enlightened consent, as recorded in the form.

women with children. It was also identified that more than 50% of these women do not have a higher education or high school degree.

Our interviewee shares many connections with these other mothers identified in the research (FGV, 2023), as well as differences, such as her educational path. Marusa's schooling took place in a state public school (elementary and high school). She completed a technical course in Clinical Pathology and a teaching certification program (Magistério). She dreamed of being a psychologist but was not accepted in the selection process at a federal university, which caused great frustration. The teaching program and her experience as a Sunday school teacher heavily influenced her decision to study Pedagogy at a private higher education institution and become a teacher. On the one hand, unlike a large part of the Black population in our country, she managed to attend higher education (Paes; Darsie, 2022); on the other hand, like some Brazilian teachers, teaching was not her first choice for a professional career (Alves; Castro; Oliveira, 2023). Marusa became a teacher over the course of her professional journey.

She highlighted several investments in her continuing education for the teaching profession. When interviewed, she was pursuing a postgraduate degree in Psychopedagogy/ABA Therapy <sup>5</sup>. Although she did not state it explicitly, we hypothesize that this training has an interface between her professional practice, as a teacher, and personal matters, given that her youngest son has ASD. She began her teaching career in 1995, and therefore had been a teacher for 28 years.

Throughout her career as a teacher, Marusa states she has always worked a double shift, taking on a two-shift workload, either at the same school or in different schools, for financial reasons. When she was interviewed, she revealed that she could not afford to work only one shift, as she is the sole provider for her family.

From March 2020 onwards, the organization of Marusa's personal and professional life changed significantly due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The school where the teacher worked initiated the social distancing suggested by the WHO, and from that point on, the way she practiced motherhood and teaching was completely altered. Marusa described that it was not always possible to take care of her children's basic tasks, as it was very complicated to organize the responsibilities attributed to her

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<sup>5</sup> The English acronym for Applied Behavior Analysis is ABA.

profession, which piled up after the start of the pandemic. For this reason, she emphasizes that it was a very difficult time. As Costa *et al.* (2022, p. 5) discuss, teachers “[...] had to open the doors of their homes for children and their families to enter, even if virtually. The private environment, previously considered a place of rest and refuge, came to be called a ‘home office.’” “If in ‘normal’ times a teacher's work was arduous, now in the pandemic context, the situation has worsened” (Costa *et al.*, 2022, p. 5). In this regard, we reiterate a previous discussion by highlighting the deepening of the transfer of responsibility from the school system to the teachers, who then have to cover various institutional gaps. This has repercussions on their personal and professional lives in different ways, particularly concerning physical and mental health issues, as we will see later (Gasparini; Barreto; Assunção, 2005, p. 1).

When the pandemic began, her older son was in the 8th grade and the younger one was in the 3rd grade, both in Elementary School. They studied at the same school where Marusa worked. The older son, who is neurotypical<sup>6</sup>, began trying to follow his own school material and schedule on his cell phone, in the same way as his younger, neuroatypical brother. Both were able to do their school tasks without depending on their mother's supervision, but with difficulties due to being technologically limited. The only computer in the house was kept by Marusa for her work. She reports that this computer was not powerful and, consequently, did not always meet her work demands. It is clear that this modification of the teacher's residence into an environment for virtual work resulted in an uncomfortable readjustment. This only became more reasonable the following year, when it was possible to purchase another computer for the family.

Marusa reports that she often felt guilty for practicing motherhood in that way, without being able to more closely monitor her children's school life. In a text by Mariana Roiek Moreira for the page *Mães que Escrevem* (Mothers who Write) (2022), the author reports that a single mother feels guilt at all times, starting from the baby's birth. From that moment on, the mother always reflects on the decisions she makes, consciously or unconsciously. This guilt can also be present in the lives of female teachers, a hallmark of the teaching condition. In this regard, it is important to address

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<sup>6</sup> Neurotypical is the term used to describe people whose neurological functioning is aligned with socially expected standards. This concept refers to ways of being and thinking that are culturally valued and socially favored. It contrasts with neurodivergence, which encompasses people with distinct forms of neurological functioning, such as ASD.

the issue of guilt directed at Black women, a problem rooted in the structural racism and sexism present in society (Santos, 2020). It is noticeable that, throughout history, they are frequently blamed for a series of issues and negative stereotypes, which is reflected in the image they have of themselves.

Furthermore, during the pandemic, Marusa reports that she felt bad seeing the children in her building's condominium struggling with school. In light of this, she also assisted them to try to reduce the educational inequalities that were even more evident in that period. This relates to the desire of Black women who work as teachers in peripheral areas to play an active role in the education and development of the communities in which they are embedded (Santos, 2020).

A factor worth highlighting is that, according to the teacher's own analysis, she believes her children did not receive due attention because of the duties she took on as a teacher during the pandemic, especially during ERE. One example of these duties was the meetings, which were very draining for Marusa. In research conducted by Oliveira, Pereira Junior, and Clementino (2021), in countries like Uruguay, Costa Rica, and Colombia, it was observed that the rates of public Basic Education teachers who took on a higher workload to teach remotely reached percentages of 92%, 93%, and 94%, respectively. Several factors contributed to this: “[...] difficulty in adapting in-person activities to Virtual Learning Environments; lack of mastery of technological and digital media; difficulty in developing strategies to attract and motivate students” (Oliveira; Pereira Junior; Clementino, 2021, p. 7).

Bringing in other issues, we highlight that during synchronous classes, Marusa was online as a teacher while, at the same times, her sons were online as students of the same school, in different grades. We reiterate that one of the difficulties Marusa reported was precisely supervising them during class time at home and even participating in the school meetings held to provide feedback on her sons' situation.

Moreover, Marusa's neuroatypical son became very distressed about contamination. He watched the news, memorized the statistics, and worried about the increase in deaths. Often, the child would call his grandmother and ask if she would die of COVID-19. She also reports that her son would get desperate when she went grocery shopping, fearing contamination. The interruption of his therapeutic support



affected the child's behavior and, consequently, the organization of Marusa's motherhood.

It is observed that atypical motherhood requires more support, understanding, welcome, and use of various services, public or not (Guedes, 2021), an aspect that became extremely limited during the pandemic. In light of this, in some posts on her Facebook page, the interviewee pointed to the difficulties of being an atypical mother. In them, the teacher portrays how many functions are interconnected with atypical motherhood and how mental health support for mothers like her are fundamental elements for their survival and that of their children, mainly because, generally, atypical mothers are single mothers, as the fathers or spouses abandon them, as we highlighted (Guedes, 2021).

Thus, the great responsibility placed on the life of an atypical mother, both by society and by herself, brings high physical and psychological exhaustion, in addition to other feelings that may appear, such as a constant fear of dying before her child and of him/her being abandoned or becoming another statistic, related to rates of violence (Guedes, 2021). Therefore, it is fundamental to reaffirm the existence of these women, especially Black women, so that their issues are made visible.

Even with the demand for social distancing, translated by the recommendation "stay at home," the interviewee adopted a strategy to help her son become a little calmer: taking walks. Marusa would go out with her two sons and, for 20 minutes a day, they would walk together on streets near her building. She reported that it was a good time for the realization of motherhood and for bonding with them. However, she stated that, even in those moments, she was thinking about the classes she had to record or the plans she had to remake. She felt, more than before, that she could not disconnect from the school and her duties as a teacher.

#### **4 Work relations and emergency remote teaching**

For 10 years, Marusa worked at a small confessional school in the Venda Nova region of Belo Horizonte-MG. It was a well-regarded institution in the region with a great deal of credibility, established over 25 years ago. However, she reports that the school did not withstand the financial difficulties brought on by the pandemic period and, faced with gradual reductions in student enrollment, several professionals were

laid off, and those who remained were responsible for a larger amount of work to cover the absences.

Throughout the year 2020, according to Marusa's account, the school maintained a very honest relationship with the teachers who had remained on its staff. In frequent meetings, the topic of the school's financial difficulties was always addressed. At a certain point, the school indicated that it could no longer afford to pay the salaries. On that occasion, the principal called Marusa for an in-person meeting and explained that the employees were at risk of not receiving their due severance pay, as the school was close to declaring bankruptcy. Since Marusa was a single mother and the household's livelihood depended exclusively on her, the best course of action would be for her to be the first to be laid off in order to receive her labor rights.

On this issue, a survey conducted by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE, 2021) pointed to a significant increase in unemployment rates in Brazil starting in 2020 as a consequence of the pandemic. In about 20 states, the rates reached a record average of unemployed people, and with that, for the first time, less than half of Brazil's working-age population was employed that year. A publication in *Jornal da USP* (Capela, 2024), which discusses cases like this, highlights that “[...] mass layoffs do not occur to avoid financial crises, but as a result of the company's managerial strategy.” In the article, interviewee Maria Fonseca explains that “[...] there is a domino effect of smaller companies repeating what larger companies are doing (Capela, 2024).” In these contexts, “Often companies are profitable, but end up [...] laying off their workers to keep up with this market behavior where larger companies begin to do so” (Capela, 2024).

The teacher reports that she refused the proposal to be laid off, given that she had taken an oath to teach and, therefore, would not stop giving classes during that period. For her, as much as she needed the money – at one point, she reports having to get a basic food basket from the church because, on a teacher's salary, she could not always financially cover all household expenses – that oath was above other issues. In this regard, Sampaio and Marin (2007) discuss some analytical paths used to justify the precarity and depreciation of teaching work in Brazil. One of them refers to the understanding of teaching as a mission and a vocation, an aspect that socially unfolds into the devaluation of teaching, especially in relation to those who dedicate

themselves to the teaching profession and often do not have salaries commensurate with the tasks they perform and the overloads they bear in the profession. It is noteworthy that, at times, “devotion” (or excessive dedication) can lead to both mental and physical exhaustion for teachers – an aspect observed in Marusa's case. We hypothesize that her understanding of teaching as a “mission” may be linked to her religious dimension, especially as she is a Christian and a teacher at a confessional school.

At the school where Marusa worked, the decision to adopt ERE was swift. This happened in March 2020. On that occasion, in addition to sending materials digitally, the teacher was instructed to record classes lasting up to 20 minutes. This required a great deal of organization and dedication because, besides summarizing the explanations, she needed a setup for the recording to achieve its objective: reaching the students' learning. Silence was essential for the teacher to concentrate and for the quality of the recorded audio to be guaranteed. Marusa reports that she made the recordings before her children woke up, in a closed room. She bought a whiteboard to assist her, and over time, her older son began to help her. Her YouTube channel has about 250 videos recorded in 2020.

In May 2020, when the school realized that an immediate in-person return would not be possible, synchronous classes began. Three times a week, the teacher met with the students remotely. This dynamic culminated in a high demand for pedagogical strategies adapted to ERE, as, at first, the students were unmotivated, whether due to the progression of the pandemic or because they were spending about four hours a day in front of screens when studying on the computer. One of the ways teacher Marusa found to attract the students' attention was through the use of digital games that she created and sent herself. That's when she invented the Maru doll (Figure 1). Initially, it was a digital doll, and later it became a physical object that resembled her physical appearance, made with the crochet technique. On her Facebook page, the creation of the hashtag #marubonecaamigadaeducação (#maruthedolleducationsfriend) is noted, which, in this post, was associated with two others (#inclusão [#inclusion] and #professoraporamor [#teacherforlove]), reflecting her conceptions and perspectives. From Marusa's accounts, it is evident that ERE

required teachers to develop their own methods, in an additional effort not always recognized as compensated work.

Figure 1 – Maru Doll<sup>7</sup>

Ahhh gente, que fofos os ajudantes da Maru na história de hoje, não percam!  
#maruabonecaamigadaeducacao  
#inclusão  
#professoraporamor



Source: Research archive. Post by Teacher Marusa on Facebook (November 12, 2021).

Marusa recalls that there was a lot of pressure from the school's coordination to maintain order during classes. However, the teacher points out that there was significant intervention from parents and reports that most of them, upon seeing a schedule presented by the school and, especially, by the teachers, expressed fear that the work with all the book's pages would not be completed, which led to complaints. The families' perception that it was important to finish the entire book due to the high price of the material is noteworthy. In this sense, it was necessary to have a lot of "tact," in her words, since the parents did not want their children to be overloaded.

Regarding the presence of families in synchronous classes, the teacher recounted a situation she experienced in 2020, when a student's microphone was on and she overheard a question from the child's mother, who asked what the reason was for the doll chosen by the teacher for the pedagogical work to be Black. Marusa chose not to respond to the mother who, apparently, was not aware that she had been heard by the teacher and the class. The decision made was to save the comment to work on

<sup>7</sup> The words in the image can be translated into: "Oh guys, how cute are Maru's helpers in today's story, don't miss it! #maruthedolleducationsfriend #inclusion #teacherforlove".

with the class at another time. And so she did, by portraying issues of Blackness with the children using herself and the doll as a starting point. She says that one of the students did not recognize her as Black and said that she was actually brown. Regarding this, Marusa narrates that she worked with the students on her color, showing and reaffirming that she was Black and, therefore, the Maru doll was too.

Regarding Marusa's account, we first highlight her silence in the face of the mother's comment. Munanga (2019, cited in Mello, 2019) points out that this is one of the peculiarities of the discrimination process in the country. For him, "[...] the silence, the unsaid, [is what] confuses all Brazilians, victims and non-victims alike" (Munanga, 2019, cited in Mello, 2019). For the scholar, "Brazilian-style racism kills twice." There is a material dimension and a symbolic dimension, as he explains: "It kills physically, as shown by the statistics of the genocide of Black youth in our peripheries, and it kills by inhibiting the manifestation of everyone's consciousness, white and Black, about the existence of racism in our society." He also points out that what is lacking in Brazil is "[...] awareness of the problem's dimension [...], an obstacle to confronting racism in the country" (Munanga, 2019, cited in Mello, 2019).

Marusa's subsequent actions with the students, in turn, demonstrate the importance of having more and more professionals capable of discussing racial issues in the daily life of the school, from the perspective of an anti-racist education (Alves; Castro; Oliveira, 2023). The need to comply with Law No. 10.639 (Brasil, 2003), which made the teaching of Afro-Brazilian history and culture mandatory in the country's schools, is highlighted. Moreira (2013) emphasizes that the teacher is an essential element in the mediation between students and the cultural knowledge and content disseminated in and by the school. It is through their attitude and practice that the school acts and consolidates its own existence.

Still on this issue, an aspect to be highlighted in the teacher's account concerns her appearance. She reports the difficulty she still has in feeling beautiful and receiving compliments, which reflects the discussion by Queiroz (2019, p. 2), that "[...] the Black ethno-racial identity in Brazil is constructed in the midst of great racial conflicts. Carrying biological and cultural data of Black identity in one's body can lead to great racial conflicts, which are subjectively negative for the self-esteem of Black women." In this Brazilian historical and cultural process, Black women construct their



corporeality in an apprehensive movement that involves both rejection and acceptance, as well as denial and affirmation of the body. Furthermore, it is worth remembering that the figure of the Black woman, in many contexts, is still idealized negatively and doubly repressed, whether in relation to the issue of color or physical appearance, which are determinants in accessing spaces of power. Consequently, it is understood that, given the numerous challenges and problems faced daily by the Black population, the daily life of Black female teachers is marked by additional layers of oppression, “[...] because, in addition to having to live with inequalities in the teaching space, they have to endure suspicions regarding their professional capacity” (Moreira, 2013, p. 3).

Returning to data mentioned in the text, we emphasize that, among the female teaching staff in Brazilian Basic Education, the color white stands out when compared to Black teachers (Matijascic, 2017). This aspect, together with the racism, discrimination, and racial prejudice that cross the life paths of these women, ends up causing them, in a society marked by selectivity, racism, inequality, and injustices, to seek recognition as political-historical-social subjects (Moreira, 2013). The interviewed teacher, in her particular experience as a Black woman, an atypical, single mother from a peripheral area, also seeks this recognition and joins so many other women who face similar challenges.

Moving on to other aspects, regarding her health, Marusa observes that the physical distance from the students during ERE brought her emotional and psychological harm. After synchronous classes, she experienced tachycardia, malaise, excessive fatigue, and a feeling of going crazy. Furthermore, the new routine, for her and her sons, was a factor that contributed to her emotional and psychic vulnerability, with repercussions on her physical health. In 2019, Marusa's health problems, which included a state of depression, worsened and led her to have a heart attack. She reported: “the school told me: ‘you either stop, or you die.’ So I scaled back my routine a bit, which was already hectic because of the school and the boys and being a single mom at home and the very difficult financial life, and so on” (Marusa). With the pandemic, the teacher found herself once again overloaded and worried about the effects on her physical and mental health. She reports that a similar situation was

experienced by some of her fellow teachers, and that one of them gave up the profession.

Marusa says that there was, during the pandemic period, especially in the year 2020, a support group at the school where she worked. She states that the pedagogical director was a psychologist and understood that it was necessary for the teaching staff to have support during that period. Thus, some meetings were dedicated to conversations about mental health and the great demands made at that time, about the school's financial situation, and even about issues related to guilt, as the teachers were feeling responsible for the unsatisfactory results of the students.

Although this movement created by the school's management was very important for Marusa and for all the teachers who continued to work at the school, as it promoted a culture of peer support and provided some emotional support resources, it was not enough to completely assist the teaching staff in dealing with the pressure of teaching online, preparing educational materials while dealing with their own fears and challenges brought by the pandemic, which included the fear of unemployment. Therefore, regardless of this support, the teacher reported that there was an increase in stress and exhaustion levels, especially for the mother-teachers, who had to balance the demands of work with the responsibilities of caring for their children and managing family life in a context of social distancing and restrictions.

## **5 Final Considerations**

In this work, a case study, we sought to recognize the challenges experienced and faced by a Basic Education teacher—a Black woman, single mother, atypical mother, and from a peripheral area—in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil, with a focus on ERE. We acknowledge the existence of limitations inherent in a case study, as it does not allow for the generalization of the investigation's results. In this sense, new studies, including comparative ones, are necessary to expand and diversify the number of participants, with the aim of analyzing and discussing the consequences of the pandemic and ERE for teachers in their heterogeneity. We consider it fundamental to recognize that there are different contexts and realities that influence the subjects' experiences, an aspect that intersectional analysis allows us to highlight and problematize. Furthermore, there is an urgent need to deepen

discussions on policies for teacher appreciation that promote the improvement of the quality of life for Brazilian teachers.

The research made it evident that the transition to ERE during the pandemic resulted in an intensification of the workload for the research participant. Her account underscores aspects related to the historical and cultural baggage of exclusions that encompass gender, class, race, territory, generation, work, and many other intersecting variables. The challenges faced by the interviewee during this period are multiple, overlapping, and thereby intensified. They also reveal obstacles rooted in the Brazilian socio-historical and structural context, marked by sexism and racism. It is fundamental to recognize that these challenges are not individual but are the results of social systems and power structures that perpetuate inequalities.

We consider it necessary to give greater visibility to the demand for the promotion of public equity policies, debated and constructed from an intersectional perspective, which aims to guarantee a dignified life for poor Black women, single mothers, atypical mothers, and also for their children, their families, and communities. We do not want domestic workers, nannies, caregivers for the elderly, nurses, and teachers in Early Childhood and the initial years of Elementary Education, like Marusa, to become the first to face death in the event of a future pandemic – announced as a possibility by the Brazilian Society of Clinical Pathology (SBPC) (Lázari, 2024), for example – or at any other time. We continue in the struggle for the well-being of teachers, and for the lives of the poor and Black population in our country.

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