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## **COVID-19, Inequalities and Privileges in Brazilian Professional Education**

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**ABSTRACT – COVID-19, Inequalities and Privileges in Brazilian Professional Education.** This article addresses the issue of inequalities and privileges among Brazilian Professional Education students in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our objective is to problematize the difficulties of students' access to remote classes offered by the Federal Institute of Education, Science and Technology from the North of Minas Gerais – IFNMG. This study, in the light of Bourdieu and Passeron's concept of Cultural Capital (2018), when analyzing recent data from a technical report produced by the Institution, notes the persistence of an educational structure for reproducing social inequalities that also extends dramatically to the virtual environment, reproducing forms of domination and class privileges.

**Keywords: Professional Education. Inequalities. Privileges. COVID-19.**

**RESUMO – Covid-19, Desigualdades e Privilégios na Educação Profissional Brasileira.** Este artigo aborda a questão das desigualdades e dos privilégios entre estudantes da Educação Profissional brasileira no contexto da pandemia da Covid-19. O nosso objetivo é problematizar as dificuldades de acesso dos estudantes às aulas remotas ofertadas pelo Instituto Federal de Educação, Ciência e Tecnologia do Norte de Minas Gerais – IFNMG. Levando em consideração esse contexto, este trabalho, à luz do conceito de Capital Cultural de Bourdieu e Passeron (2018), ao analisar dados recentes de um relatório técnico produzido pela Instituição, constata a persistência de uma estrutura educacional de reprodução das desigualdades sociais que também se estende dramaticamente para o ambiente virtual, reproduzindo formas de dominação e privilégios de classe.

**Palavras-chave: Educação Profissional. Desigualdades. Privilégios. Covid-19.**

## Introduction

This article addresses the access to educational technologies in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic caused by the New Coronavirus, focusing on the problem of social inequalities in Professional Education, considering the exceptionality of a historical moment marked by unprecedented health, economic, and social crises in the contemporary world. We aim to problematize the precarious situation of students enrolled at the Federal Institute of Education, Science, and Technology of the Northern Minas Gerais – IFNMG –, conditioned by the crisis in remote teaching during the 2020 school year. Official information from a technical report produced by the institution of Professional Education shows that students' precarious access to technological tools, notably at the height of the pandemic, was asymmetrical, bringing out inequalities and social marginalization.

As we will see in this study, access to Information and Communication Technologies (DICTs) is closely related to the place of residence, receipt of government assistance, education level, and work activities. Thus, in addition to weakening the ties of students with Professional Education, the problem of inaccessibility to digital technologies, which gained importance during the health crisis caused by COVID-19, ended up operating as a mechanism for the reproduction of social inequalities, in the urgency of incorporating the virtual environment as a remote place for study and learning. In our view, understanding this issue is essential for planning the provision of remote education for Professional Education students.

Recent data from the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) indicate that 80% of the world's students, i.e., 1.37 billion children, and adolescents lack classroom classes due to the pandemic (Unesco, 2020). In this scenario, concerning Education, educational institutions worldwide are searching for technological solutions that mitigate the impacts of all kinds on students' lives due to the imperative of social distancing. While scientists and laboratories work to develop research and production in scale for the immunization of the world population, public managers and educational institutions continue to search for strategies to reduce the harmful consequences of this pandemic for school education.

However, it is essential to assess if the search for conditions, especially technological ones, to resume classes remotely is also configured as one of the countless exclusion ways students in poverty experience every day at school. In all circumstances, the assessment requires considering these individuals' living conditions, their possibilities, and technical skills in the face of technologies, internet access, and, if so, connection speed so that classes can be monitored by videoconference. In addition to the social context experienced, it is essential to identify students' expectations concerning studies and learning during social distancing. Thus, the search for answers of this nature is essential to try to reduce the distances that separate students with more significant

*cultural capital* (Bourdieu; Passeron, 2018) from those who, historically, have been excluded from expanded educational opportunities.

Our objective is to analyze the conditions and expectations of students in face-to-face courses at IFNMG concerning remote or distance studies in this context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This crisis is assumed as not affecting all students enrolled in this institution of Professional Education in the same proportion. There is an asymmetry in this emergency context, emphasizing the inaccessibility of those lacking primary technological resources. However, the material problem of access to educational technologies is associated with the sphere of symbolic goods, which interferes with students' expectations and forms of participation. The forms of capital, such as cultural capital, can be discussed considering qualitative differences in student behavior in the light of our interpretation of the report produced by the IFNMG. In this case, they imply the ability of students to distinguish themselves and the status acquired, greater accessibility, and ease of assimilation even in adverse social conditions, as occurred in a period of social distancing. This creates a win-win situation for some, to the detriment of those left behind during the COVID-19 pandemic.

From the document analysis, we proceeded to study the report prepared by IFNMG professionals from different areas and presented to its eleven campuses located in the north and northwest regions of Minas Gerais and the Jequitinhonha and Mucuri Valleys. This report deals with the conditions and expectations of students of the IFNMG face-to-face courses to carry out technology-mediated non-face-to-face activities. Thus, a survey was carried out with the students to, among other factors, identify those who do not have computer equipment and internet access. After data analysis, a technical report was built and presented to the school community. According to the IFNMG (2020b), this document deals with students' possibilities concerning the availability and technical, social, family, and psychological conditions to continue their studies in a non-face-to-face way mediated by information and communication technologies.

This analysis demonstrates that students have asymmetries concerning social, technical, family, and psychological conditions even in a public educational institution. Thus, for some of them, continuing their studies during the pandemic is configured as an over-effort, without enjoying the same opportunities and possibilities as others provided with primary technological resources, as if it were a problem of individual merit and school performance.

In the scope of Professional Education, cultural capital is understood as a form of technical and school knowledge, which ensures advantages for those with better social conditions. According to Pacheco (2020), the Federal Institutes collaborate to reduce inequalities by providing public education, free of charge, and recognized quality, with training itineraries that allow classes and social strata historically excluded from the market economy to continue their studies. However,

the close relationship between social inequalities and school inequalities is seen to acquire new forms of reproduction today, including in the Federal Network of Professional, Scientific, and Technological Education, notably with the increase in the information and communication system.

Placing our analysis on the daily experience of IFNMG students in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic beyond the mere census enabled us to detect a differentiated appropriation of cultural capital. To social inequalities, the school ends up adding its inequalities. In this sense, the analysis of inequalities is inextricably a problem of sociology and a problem of political philosophy (Dubet, 1994). They no longer form a unitary system but primarily constitute a set of increasingly specific tensions and problems, as seen in the research carried out by the IFNMG (2020b), requiring a qualitative approach to the data obtained.

The article is organized as follows: In the first part, we analyze the report that deals with the conditions and expectations of IFNMG students concerning remote studies during the period of social distancing caused by the COVID-19 pandemic; in the second part, we proceed theoretically to problematize the results of the report, linking Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital to the practical problem of social inequalities detected on the IFNMG campuses; next, we discuss the results achieved; and, finally, we present our final remarks.

Based on what has been exposed, we aim to understand how the characteristics linked to inequality's social origin and cultural factors are revealed in students' conditions and expectations during the COVID-19 pandemic. We also aim to analyze to what extent the effects of these inequalities or social differentiation divide this educational institution from the asymmetries identified in the context of remote teaching to Professional Education students.

## Characterization of the Technical Report

A total of 7,203 students regularly enrolled in face-to-face courses on all institution campuses participated in the survey carried out by the IFNMG. The sampling procedure used was non-probabilistic, with data collection by accessibility and individually. The students were invited to voluntarily respond to the survey, which was available between April 28 and May 18, 2020, by online access to the Academic System of IFNMG – Cajuí. The voluntary nature of participation and respect for the ethical guidelines that govern research with human beings were ensured. On average, 13 minutes were required to answer all the questions (IFNMG, 2020b).

According to the description of the technical report (IFNMG, 2020b), the following instruments were used to carry out the survey: 1. The Scale of Prospective Reactions to Distance Education (EaD): a questionnaire that measures the expectations of students of the IFNMG face-to-face courses concerning classes in remote or EaD modality

during the period of suspension of classes. It is based on a continuous 5-point Likert<sup>1</sup> scale (ranging from 1 = Totally Disagree to 5 = Totally Agree); 2. Questionnaire of Conditions for the Use of Digital Communication and Information Technologies: developed to verify the effectiveness of the classes in a non-face-to-face way, based on the expectations of the use of digital technologies; 3. Questionnaire of Skills with Communication, Sharing, and Videoconferencing Applications: developed to verify the student's familiarity to tools used in remote or distance activities, based on the expectations of using applications; 4. Sociodemographic Questionnaire: aimed at knowing and characterizing the sample and included questions such as gender, age, location, campus, course, participation in social policies, suspected or confirmed cases of COVID-19, among others.

Data were processed and analyzed using descriptive statistics of simple parameterization (frequency, mean, standard deviation, variance, standard error, and 95% confidence interval).

## Regarding the Results

Concerning the analysis of the results, in this article, we will focus on the general result, i.e., the one that characterizes the institution as a whole. We will only point out results by campus when these are worthy of attention, i.e., when a factor of a specific campus differs considerably compared to other campuses.

**Table 1 – Sample Representative**

Unit	Total Students (Source: Cajuí)	Number of respondents	Percentage	Sampling Error Margin
Almenara	783	498	63.6%	2.7%
Araçuaí	959	517	53.9%	2.9%
Arinos	975	734	75.3%	1.8%
Diamantina	352	339	96.3%	1.0%
Janaúba	279	277	99.3%	0.5%
Januária	2,233	1,440	64.5%	1.5%
Montes Claros	1,066	711	66.7%	2.1%
Pirapora	1,132	716	63.3%	2.2%
Porteirinha	200	187	93.5%	1.8%
Salinas	1,713	1,464	85.5%	1.0%
Teófilo Otoni	442	320	72.4%	2.9%
IFNMG	10,112	7,203	71.2%	0.6%

Source: IFNMG (2020b, p. 6).

Table 1 presents the sample representativeness of the survey, indicating the total number of students enrolled in face-to-face courses on each of the 11 IFNMG campuses, the number of respondents, the percentage of responding students compared to the total number, and the sampling error margin. The campuses are heterogeneous concern-

ing the number of students enrolled, using Table 1 as a reference. This varies from 200 students on the campus with the lowest number of in-person enrollments to 2,233 students enrolled in the largest campus, Januária-MG.

Regarding the number of respondents, the percentages vary from 53.9% (campus with the lowest number of respondents) to 99.3% (campus with the highest number of respondents). The percentage results of the respondents may indicate that the data collection did not reach those neediest students. This is either because of the difficulties arising from the (rural) housing area or because they did not have digital equipment and internet, which was essential for them to respond to the survey. One factor that may explain the results is that campuses whose majority of their students live in urban areas had a more significant number of respondents than those campuses that serve students living in rural areas.

According to the Academic System used by the institution – Cajui –, the IFNMG has 10,112 students regularly enrolled in face-to-face courses. Of these, 28.8% did not respond to the survey, which shows a sampling error margin of  $\pm 0.6$  percentage points.

### **Regarding the Initial Sociodemographic Descriptions**

The initial sociodemographic descriptions are essential for understanding the results of the technical report prepared by the IFNMG. These descriptions bring the percentage of responding students on each campus and of the IFNMG as a whole, gender (female, male, or other); the age; the housing area (rural or urban); the school category (integrated, technical, higher, or master's degree); paid activity (none, scholarship holder, trainee, civil servant, private employee, or entrepreneur); an option for worker respondents to indicate whether they continued their work during the COVID-19 pandemic; whether they are beneficiaries of the student assistance policy for the Federal Institutes; whether there is a need for psychological care; whether psychological care was sought; whether COVID-19 infection occurred, and, finally, if the disease infected any family member.

The results show that 55.4% of the responding students are female, 44.5% declared themselves male, and 0.2% defined themselves as other. The average age of students is 19 years, considering the range from 14 to 60 years. Regarding residence, 20.3% of respondents live in rural areas during social distancing, and 79.7% live in urban areas.

Most students, 50.3% of respondents, are enrolled in face-to-face higher education courses, followed by 38.9% in integrated courses, 10.8% in technical courses of the concomitant/subsequent modality, and 0.02% pursue postgraduate studies at the master's level. Attention is drawn to the fact that the higher the level of education, the greater the number of respondents, which makes us consider that the privileges in the education system may be directly related to the individual's ability

to verticalize their studies.

When asked if they carry out any remunerated activity, 84.3% of the respondents declared having no remuneration. The other 15.7% performed some paid activity, classified into scholarship holders (2.2%), trainees (2.0%), civil servants (3.4%), private employees (6.9%), and entrepreneurs (1.2%). These results demonstrate that most students enrolled in face-to-face courses at IFNMG only study. The technical report to which we had access does not indicate the school category of working students, making it challenging to understand whether adolescents attending Basic Education, a subjective public right in Brazil, need to reconcile it with their work activities.

Considering that 84.3% of IFNMG students dedicate themselves only to studies and have an average age of 19 years, we are dealing with a youth that attaches importance to Education that receives and seeks better living conditions through studies. Thinking about youth presupposes considering their dreams, their projects, their expectations. This is also why we are interested in taking as an object of reflection, as Carvalho (2020) so well points out, issues related to the very meaning of the school experience for these adolescents and young people in the context of the pandemic. Carvalho (2020) questions the symbolic resources that the school can offer to these youth who, from one moment to the next, found themselves impelled to face a situation that neither they nor anyone else could envision. How, then, could the older generations (including Professional Education professionals) take responsibility for thinking about the pandemic and invite the younger ones to do so with their own experiences and expectations? The author points us a path: “[...] in this sense, a crisis – a split between the answers we inherit from the past and the problems and questions that emerge in the present – can represent an invitation to thought and action” (Carvalho, 2020, p. 4).

Furthermore, for 11.8% of working students, the period of social distancing at school was not accompanied by social distancing at work. This shows that the search for material conditions of existence is even more pronounced for these working individuals, even in times of a pandemic.

Concerning student assistance, only 22.9% of the responding students are beneficiaries of this government public policy. It may demonstrate that educational policies aimed at guaranteeing the permanence of low-income students in federal public institutions are not broad enough to serve everyone who needs them. According to the IFNMG Management Report (2020a), the Student Assistance Policy consists of strategic actions to expand students’ possibilities for permanence conditions in the educational space and school/academic success. In addition to the activities mentioned, the IFNMG Student Assistance Policy Program, such as the Student Assistance and Support Program (PAAE), aims at students of face-to-face courses, with the payment of financial aid to students in a situation of social vulnerability. The objective of the PAAE is to help beneficiaries be able to meet basic needs – such as food,



transportation, rent, school items, among others – and, consequently, provide better conditions for the successful permanence of these students on their school/academic journey.

It is essential to highlight that, in 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the IFNMG opened two notices on an exceptional basis: one to select students to receive digital aid. Its purpose was to help contract the internet service financially, enabling the student to follow the school activities in this pandemic period. The other notice intended to select students to borrow tablets to be used to attend the curricular units offered through non-face-to-face teaching mediated by DICTs in the face-to-face courses of the IFNMG. Each campus of the institution used the selection criteria that best met the contextual conditions of their locations concerning the payment of digital aid.

However, concerning the students benefiting from the loan of tablets, the selection criteria were based on the results indicated in the technical report we proposed to interpret. The barma proposed by the *Committee to Combat the Pandemic Caused by COVID-19 within the scope of the IFNMG* was considered, which stipulated the classification criteria of the students contemplated, with the quantitative percentage of receipt for each IFNMG campus being different. On average, 30% of the total number of students benefited from equipment loans.

When asked about the need for psychological care, 95.2% of respondents said they did not need this professional support, and 97.7% said they had not sought this type of care during the pandemic. However, three critical issues need to be discussed here. The first is that this survey was carried out between April 28 and May 18, 2020, i.e., just over a month after the pandemic's start, which leads us to think that the psychological effects of the pandemic on students were still not so pronounced. Another factor worth mentioning is that the students were invited to voluntarily respond to the instrument, indicating that students in more vulnerable psychological conditions did not participate in this survey. Finally, it is necessary to consider the prejudices and taboos concerning the issue of mental health, which may have led many students to prefer not to expose themselves in this regard.

Concerning the descriptive *COVID-19 contagion by students and their families*, only 1.4% of respondents stated they had already had the disease, and 4.5% of their family members were infected. The survey shows a relationship between students and family members with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 and less internet access and technical ability to use DICTs. However, it did not correlate, for example, with infected people and income or the housing area, which could demonstrate an intimate relationship between these factors.

### **Regarding Access Conditions, Skills and Technical Ability with DICTs, and Regarding Skills with Communication, Sharing, and Videoconferencing Applications**

The first item evaluated concerning the conditions of access, skills, and technical ability with DICTs was students' daily time to carry out their remote activities. Hence, 34.4% declared they had no time available or only had up to 2 hours a day to fulfill their school commitments.

The second item relates to students' internet access conditions, including connection quality, stability, and speed, with many IFNMG students with little, almost no access or problematic connection. Thus, 33.7% of students enrolled in face-to-face courses at the IFNMG experience these issues. The Arinos and Januária campuses have the highest rates and are the most affected. Interestingly, both campuses have a rural vocation and have the highest numbers of students residing in rural areas. Also, according to the survey, students who reside or are residing in rural areas during social distancing demonstrate a greater difficulty facing distance studies, less internet access, technical ability to use DICTs, and less skill with communication, sharing, and videoconferencing apps. When asked if they had skills with digital platforms, which is essential for the institution to offer remote education, 21.1% of respondents indicated they lacked skills.

On the other end of the spectrum, 16.2% of students enrolled at IFNMG in face-to-face courses have unlimited access to the internet with a fast connection, and 47.5% have substantial skill or expertise in using digital platforms. Bourdieu and Passeron (2018) stated that these data demonstrate that cultural inequality's geographic and social factors are never independent because the chances of residing in a city increase as one ascends the social pyramid.

As for the possession of digital equipment, 12.8% of the IFNMG students said they did not have a smartphone or tablet, or they did but had no access to the internet. Half of the students, 50.6%, have a smartphone or tablet but have no access to the internet on the device, only when they are at home. Finally, 36.5% of students have a smartphone or tablet connected to the internet with memory available for applications.

Once again, it can be seen that the decision to offer remote education at the IFNMG, which can undoubtedly be extended to most Federal Institutes spread across the five regions of the country, must first go through ensuring the material and psychic conditions of all students. As far as Professional Education is concerned, this COVID-19 pandemic leads us to reflect that *internalizing*, as the law creating the Federal Institutes presupposes, requires a sociological look at the issue of inequalities, which are even more apparent as it is directed to the interior of the country.

When asked about the conditions to continue classes in EaD or remote mode, 6.4% of the students answered that they were not able

to attend any face-to-face subject; 17.1% declared that they could take only one at a time; 30% more than one and almost half of the students claimed to be able to attend all subjects. The report points out that *interest in remote or distance studies* showed the highest average among IFNMG students, indicating a willingness to continue studies through DICTs.

The analysis indicates that the *difficulties facing distance studies and the interest in remote or distance studies* are negatively correlated. In other words, the greater the difficulties with distance studies, the less interest in continuing studies through DICTs. The report also points out that the *difficulties facing distance studies* are negatively correlated with *access and technical ability with DICTs* and *skills with communication and sharing apps and video conferencing*. This means that not having access to DICTs and having low skills with applications accentuate the difficulties facing distance studies. For this question, the opposite is also valid, i.e., the results indicate that having greater access to DICTs can ensure greater skills with applications.

The main issue in this study is, especially concerning the provision of Basic Education, it is not enough to aim at the majority of students, generally those from higher social strata, with more significant cultural capital. Such provision should be offered to everyone since Basic Education is a right provided for in the Brazilian Constitution.

Therefore, although it does not point to specific factors, the IFNMG report confirms that most students are demotivated to carry out productive activities at home during a period of social distance, which does not depend on the difficulties or interests facing remote studies. Even if it is not possible to empirically establish a direct link with the phenomenon of demotivation, we can affirm that social, economic, moral, and emotional preconditions are determinant in the frame of individual behavior when considering the creation by the capitalist system of productive and competitive individuals in all spheres of life. Therefore, from this perspective of analysis, the failure of individuals from less favored classes – as is the case of most IFNMG students – can be understood as individual guilt.

### **Regarding Students' Expectations About Studies Facing the Period of Social Distancing**

Concerning the expectations of students enrolled in face-to-face courses at IFNMG about their studies in the face of social distancing, the instrument listed 20 items related to the theme. Respondents could choose between the options *no*, *maybe*, and *yes*. We will analyze those that best illustrate what we have discussed in this article, i.e., the issue of inequalities and privileges in Brazilian Professional Education.

For 51.4% of the respondents, there would be some kind of difficulty in carrying out their distance studies. If we consider the option *maybe*, 73.7% of IFNMG students believe they find difficulties in remote

teaching. Only a more detailed study that considered students' income could define the 27.3% of students who find no difficulty facing this new education format. However, the survey indicates that students benefiting from Assistance Programs or Scholarships have more difficulties facing distance studies than students who are not beneficiaries. In addition, the analyses also indicate that scholarship student or those who benefit from Student Assistance have less access to the internet and less technical ability to use DICTs than non-beneficiary students.

For 39.8% of the responding students, the environment at home does not allow them to concentrate on technology-mediated activities. This demonstrates that changing the school environment by the family environment can be unfeasible for a considerable part of the individuals who access the Federal Network of Professional, Scientific, and Technological Education. On the other hand, 39.8% of students declared that they had all favorable conditions for remote teaching with a very close percentage. Here we see the old dichotomy that, historically, has always separated the most privileged from the lowest strata in Brazilian Professional Education.

Another critical factor is the number of students who have to carry out household chores, preventing them from carrying out other activities. The survey showed that 11.9% of IFNMG students are in this situation. If we consider the option *maybe*, we will have 32.7% of respondents who are not fully available for remote studies. It is interesting to highlight that women are the main ones involved in a double journey of professional activity and studies, especially in a pandemic. For Bourdieu and Passeron (2018), in this unequal distribution of school chances, according to the social origin, boys and girls are, *grosso modo*, in identical conditions. While the disadvantage of women appears most clearly in the lower classes, the IFNMG survey did not specify this relationship.

In this same direction, another option concerned the reduction of the professional demands of working students during the pandemic period. For 24.4% of the students who work, nothing has changed, i.e., there has been no decrease in professional demands. If we consider the option *maybe*, 54.6%, or more than half of the respondents, find it difficult to reconcile work and study since they are part of a large group of the Brazilian population that continues to carry out their work activities with the same intensity as before the pandemic. Once again, the place of those in a permanent situation of social precariousness is explicit.

We will reflect on the percentage of students who continued their studies during the social distance regardless of the offer of remote education to understand the analysis of this technical report prepared by the IFNMG. Only 28.8% of students have an established study routine independent of the institution's classes offer. If we consider the options *no* and *maybe*, we have 71.2% of students who have difficulties establishing their study routine or are unable to do so. This question brings us back to the idea by Bourdieu and Passeron (2018) that, for some, learning is an arduous achievement, which is paid dearly; for others, a

heritage that embraces both ease and the temptations of ease. Furthermore, according to the authors, if social advantages and disadvantages weigh so heavily on school careers and, generally, on all cultural life, it occurs, perceived or unnoticed, as they are always cumulative, strongly linked to similar positions of their relatives in the social hierarchy.

Thus, understanding these students enrolled in IFNMG face-to-face courses highlights the debate on the social meaning of people from the most disadvantaged strata. Furthermore, it questions whether Professional Education institutions in Brazil have acted to reproduce social structures, privileging specific sectors of the population or if, on the contrary, they have acted, at least, to attenuate them.

For Veiga-Neto (2020), understanding how pandemics work is kaleidoscopic, which presupposes understanding the multifactorial nature of the phenomena that affect them: natural, social, and cultural. For him, this articulation does not occur only as a simple sum of this phenomenon but with sometimes synergistic interactions, sometimes antagonistic. Thus, the pandemic's complexity goes far beyond reality's immediate and concrete evidence due to its multifactorial nature. Time, space, angles, theories, and the position of the observer change all the time and resist any reductionist simplification.

Even knowing the complexity that comes from thinking about the consequences of the pandemic for Brazilian Professional Education, we risk pointing towards the future, based on the ideas by Marcos (2020), i.e., our autonomy must be oriented towards caring for the other for the mitigation of human vulnerability. According to the author, all this configures an ethic of self and mutual care in an intense and lively way and teaches us that we all depend on everyone else. It is mandatory for anyone before, during, and especially after this and any other pandemic.

### **Bourdieu's Concept of Cultural Capital in Educational Systems**

For Bourdieu and Passeron (2018), our educational systems, from Basic Education to Higher Education, remain marked by inequalities in access, permanence, and school performance. For all and of quality, the construction of a fair school is at stake. School, which is still the only way to access culture for most people, can no longer be allowed to be just one of the *evil flowers* of the new millennium.

For Bourdieu and Passeron (2018), the social origin of students appears as the most relevant differentiating factor, more than sex, age, and religious affiliation. In other words, it is cultural factors rather than economic factors that determine choices, the extension of schooling, and school success. It is in this sense that, for the authors, social preconditions become fundamental, enabling low or high cultural capital in the formation of individuals who live in the process of constant struggle for scarce resources.

According to Valle (2018), appearing as one of the main gears of social – and socio-professional – stratification and differentiation and

participating in the fabrication of school failure, the school acts in the reproduction of social structures through the production of mental structures that correspond to them, making a caste logic last under a facade of meritocratic rationality. Santos, Sato, and Klitzke (2014) emphasize that the individualistic bourgeois social world is composed of institutions, including the school, which perpetuate and legitimize the promises of modernity. It is, therefore, to the class character of school culture that Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron attribute a large part of the symbolic power exercised by economic, social, political, and cultural privileges in modern societies.

Proceeding with the analysis of the social practices of individuals having the Bourdieusian theory of cultural capital as inspiration allows us to understand and take individuals as they are, offering them the instruments required to apprehend them as necessary, because they need them, relating them methodically to the causes and reasons to be as they are. According to Bourdieu and Passeron (2014), the search for understanding the social conditions of existence of these agents allows us to understand the determined social formations, the power relations between the constitutive groups or classes of this social formation that place them in a dominant position, in the system of cultural arbitrary, the objective interests (material and symbolic) of the dominant groups or classes. Understanding these individuals means going against the idea, in the words of Bourdieu and Passeron (2014), of the naive illusion of *always-so* and substantialist uses of the notion of the cultural unconscious. It can lead to eternalization and, therefore, naturalize the signifying relationships that are the product of history.

Understanding what is happening in places such as educational establishments requires, according to Bourdieu (1997), bringing together separated individuals, conditioning them to cohabit, whether in ignorance or mutual incomprehension or conflict, latent or declared, with all the sufferings that result. It is not enough to give reason to each point of view taken separately. It is also necessary to confront them, as they are in reality, not to relativize them, allowing the game of crossed images to play to infinity, but, on the contrary, to bring out, through the simple effect of juxtaposition, what results from the confrontation of different or antagonistic worldviews.

Therefore, what was intended in this article, taking Bourdieu and Passeron as inspiration, was to understand the social practices of the agents in question in times of the COVID-19 pandemic, cohabiting them, confronting them, and elucidating them, if possible. These authors dedicated part of their academic lives to building the sociology of cultural practices in the field of Education. Resuming them in this research allowed us to analyze the significant problems arising from this pandemic for Professional Education.

By mobilizing concepts such as cultural capital and categories such as *inequalities*, relating them above all to the situation of students from the Federal Network of Professional, Scientific, and Technological Education, what can be seen is that the findings of both authors in



*The Inheritors: French Students and Their Relations to Culture* have not lost their vigor. For Valle (2018), our educational systems, from Basic Education to Higher Education, remain marked by inequalities in access, permanence, and school performance. It means that the school destiny of our children and young people is defined from an early age. Such destiny depends on the network attended (public or private), the residence (rural, city, downtown, periphery), the political and pedagogical engagement of administrators and education professionals, and the families' expectations concerning knowledge and formation.

In this sense, analyzing a public educational institution is even more imperative, as it is the one that the children of the working class can access. However, the opportunity of access is not enough. It is also necessary that these young people stay and complete their studies. Hence the importance of understanding students' conditions and expectations in the face of remote studies during this period of social isolation caused by the COVID-19. Problematising these issues raised in the technical report can contribute, still supported by the ideas of Valle (2018), to question the mechanisms of social reproduction sheltered under the veil of neutrality, meritocracy, and the democratization of education.

## Results Achieved

The phenomenon of inequalities is structurally and historically contingent. However, the specificity of the pandemic caused by the New Coronavirus, for most of 2020, gave social visibility to the most complex and multifaceted scenarios of the modern world. The pandemic had a decisive impact on the place, streets, homes, and the daily lives of individuals. However, school activities have become emblematic symbols of the pressing need for social distancing. With their regular face-to-face courses, educational institutions had to adopt the practice of remote teaching from one moment to the following, surprising students, teachers, families, and managers.

In this dramatic context, educational institutions end up being catalyzers of the reproduction of social inequalities, which are increasingly multiplied (Dubet, 2003). Furthermore, inequalities are known to lead to a loss of self-esteem and an unhappy conscience – which can be understood as one of the symptoms of student demotivation during this COVID-19 pandemic. This becomes perfectly possible in schools with a lack of investment in policies for access, permanence, and academic training of their students; in a school with numerous weaknesses related to access to educational technologies for all; in a school that, according to Bourdieu and Passeron (2014), produces illusions whose effects are far from illusory; finally, in a Professional Education that supports subjects who are distinguished by their cultural capital and which, in a veiled way, contributes to the reproduction of the established order. While none of this is new, in 2020, it acquired new social importance, evidenced by the pandemic.

In the sense of trying to understand how the characteristics linked to the social origin and cultural factors of inequality reveal themselves in the conditions and expectations of Brazilian Professional Education students in times of pandemic, we direct our gaze. Reflecting on the effects of inequalities or social differentiation is essential to perceive privileges where many perceive only opportunities, access, and universalization.

When analyzing the technical report prepared by the IFNMG dealing with the conditions and expectations of students of face-to-face courses regarding remote or distance studies in this pandemic context, we started from something concrete, i.e., a compilation of important information that gave us an overview, even if limited, of how the main involved and, in many cases, victims of this process are: students from socially vulnerable strata.

By stating that this crisis does not affect all students enrolled in this institution of Professional Education equally, we briefly want to say that the 28.8% of students who did not respond to the survey carried out by the IFNMG may be precisely those from the most vulnerable social strata. In other words, they are the students living in rural areas or the urban periphery, without internet access; workers who leave their homes every day in search of their material conditions of existence; perhaps they are women and mothers who have to face double shifts.

Even though most IFNMG students show interest in continuing their studies remotely or at a distance through DICTs, it is imperative to consider the conditions of access to the internet and DICTs, socioeconomic situations, needs, difficulties, (de)motivation, and influence of the home environment, decisive for the continuity and effectiveness of the studies of these individuals.

## Final Considerations

When analyzing the education system as a relatively autonomous institution, there is a risk of collaborating for the reproduction of the dominant culture and, in turn, having Bourdieu and Passeron (2018) as inspiration, this cultural reproduction can reinforce, as symbolic power, the continuous reproduction of power relations within society. Thus, the first step to breaking the reproduction of inequalities occurring, above all, in the school environment is to recognize the school as reproducing the established order. Its educational activities also build mechanisms that mask the relations of domination.

Bourdieu and Passeron (2014) argue that the selection of meanings that objectively defines the culture of a group or class as a symbolic system is sociologically necessary insofar as this culture owes its existence to the social conditions of which it is the product, and its intelligibility, to the coherence and functions of the structure of the signifying relations that constitute it. This is precisely what we set out to do: choose meanings that define the culture of IFNMG students, correlat-



ing them so that, from there, we can understand the structured structuring structures that constitute these meanings.

What seems clear to us is that despite the good intentions declared in the speeches of institutions and public agents invested with state authority, the way schools have faced this pandemic reveals the deep inequalities that mark access to education as a subjective public right. The conditions of existence are not given equally to all individuals. Therefore, the adoption of remote teaching modalities and strategies may reveal class privileges and may still not be configured as a correct strategy for Brazilian Professional Education.

The great challenge for Brazilian Professional Education, especially for the Federal Institutes, will be to think about the role of the school in community life and how public educational institutions can act in confronting inequalities of all kinds. If the pandemic has imposed a *new normal* on us, what is expected is that our return, whether in person or virtually, will be based on other paradigms.

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## Note

- 1 The Likert scale is a category scale used to identify the position of respondents – their attitudes and opinions – more precisely, as the response options go beyond the simple *yes* or *no*.

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