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A Pandemic Engagement:

Teachers' perceptions on their student's engagement during Covid-19

Master's thesis

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Abstract

Uncertain times guided this research. The Covid-19 pandemic stroke by surprise everything and everyone, forcing all that witnessed to adapt rigidly. This research used what beforehand could be described as a devastating event as a learning process. The focus lays on those changes that broke the chain of our commodities, more precisely on the adaptation of students and teachers to an abrupt deviation of their normal education procedures. Teachers and students from all school years had to teach and learn online, and although too soon for prognostics somehow proved to prosper from it. Through the lens of the dimensions of Student Engagement and the use of technology this research analyzed how those changes affected the teachers and their students' lives. The research has been guided by the following research question: How do teachers perceive their students 'engagement in online classes during the Covid-19 pandemic?

For this qualitative research project, a total of 11 teachers of primary and 2nd cycle from different districts in Portugal were interviewed. The interviews last an average of 50 minutes. The considered aged staff faced here with a challenge without precedents proved to be open to the subject, culminating into findings of both natures, revealing some pros and cons of this new online classes and lastly some prospects for the future of education.

Keywords: Students Engagement, Dimensions of Engagement, Covid-19, Online Education

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Resumo

Tempos incertos guiaram este estudo. A pandemia (Covid-19) atacou de surpresa tudo e todos forçando uma rígida adaptação a todos que a testemunharam. Este estudo utilizou o que antemão era descrito como um evento devastador como um processo de aprendizagem. O foco reside nas mudanças que quebraram as nossas comodidades, mais precisamente na adaptação dos estudantes e professores a uma mudança abrupta nos procedimentos normais da sua educação. Professores e estudante de todos os anos tiveram que aprender e ensinar online, um processo que levou algum tempo e apesar de ser muito cedo para prognósticos de certa forma provaram prosperar de tais adversidades. Através do foco nas dimensões do “envolvimento dos alunos” e o uso da tecnologia este estudo analisou como e que essas mudanças afetaram a vida destes professores e seus alunos. Assim a pergunta central a ser investigada:

O que os professores acharam do envolvimento dos seus alunos nas aulas online durante a pandemia Covid-19?

Para este estudo qualitativo um total de 11 professores do 1 ao 2 ciclo de diferentes distritos de Portugal foram entrevistados. As entrevistas demoraram uma media de 50 minutos. O considerado corpo envelhecido que enfrentou aqui um desafio sem precedentes mostrou estar aberto ao tema, culminando em resultados de varias naturezas, revelando prós e contras das aulas online e finalmente algumas perspectivas sobre o futuro da educação.

Palavras-chave: Students Engagement, Dimensions of Engagement, Covid-19, Online Education.

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I simply dedicate this thesis to all the teachers that supported me during the long and hectic process of this thesis, not only the ones that volunteered to the interviews but mostly to the ones that supported me behind the curtains namely Elina, Magda and Katri to them a humongous hug.

To all the teachers that swam against the swell so their student's future would not be compromised by a pandemic.

To Finland that helped shape the person that I am today.

To my family for being an infinite source of inspiration and to my dearest friends that barely see me.

To my love, my meNina.

In a word to Love.

Contents

1 Introduction	7
1.1 Students' evaluation.....	7
1.2 The Pandemic (context).....	8
1.3 Research Question.....	10
1.4 Pertinence of the study.....	10
1.5 A peek at the researcher's mind.....	11
2 Theoretical Framework	13
2.1 Engagement and its precedents.....	13
2.2 Dimensions of Engagement.....	14
2.2.1 <i>Cognitive dimension</i>	14
2.2.2 <i>Emotional Dimension</i>	15
2.2.3 <i>Behavioural Dimension</i>	16
2.2.4 <i>Agency Dimension</i>	17
3 Portuguese Educational System	19
3.1 Portuguese Curriculum.....	19
3.2 Context: Portuguese system of education.....	19
3.3 Decree-Law no 54/2018, July 6.....	20
3.4 Technology and education.....	22
4 Methodology	24
4.1 Ontology and epistemology.....	24
4.2 Content analyses.....	24
4.3 Description of the data.....	26
5 Findings	28
5.1 Education and Covid-19.....	28
5.2 How did the classes proceed?.....	28
5.3 Engagement and Online Education.....	29
5.3.1 <i>Behavioural dimension</i>	30
5.3.2 <i>Emotional Dimension</i>	32
5.3.3 <i>Cognitive Dimension</i>	35
5.3.4 <i>Agency Dimension</i>	39
5.4 Teachers views on the Decree-Law no 54/2018, July 6.....	41
5.5 Teachers and Technology.....	44
6 Discussion	46
6.1 Conclusion.....	51
6.2 Future research.....	52

1 Introduction

1.1 Students' evaluation

In schools there are teachers, principals, janitors, students, many other stakeholders and...grades. Grades although inanimate they play a major role in schools directly and indirectly. For instance, a student who achieves lower grades is automatically labelled has a failure or “futureless” if he or she does not apply him/herself in school. This label can have a snowball effect on student's futures. Grades represent the teacher's effectiveness to teach and consequently the quality of the school managed by the principal. This incessant search for better grades is shaping our education direction. Are we assessing effectively and efficiently our students/schools or facing them against the wall?

There is a wide variety of tools employed to assess, evaluate, measure students' success. The grading system is often quantifiable and is often supposed to meet national targets such as literacy and mathematics skills. These targets are tangible through standardize testing where students' dedication to their academic path it is put it into test. This idea sustains the concept that one size fits all. The needs of all students hardly meet the criteria and, as many critics have commented, grades are not a reliable way to adequately measure 'learning' and have a direct impact on students engagement (Sadler 2013; Schinske et al. 2014). Additionally, several studies have shown how hard is to develop intrinsic reasons for learning when students are merely focusing on grades. (Dahlgren et al. 2009; Demirel 2009; Tippin et al. 2012).

As an academic and passionate advocate of education, throughout my studies I have encountered many issues that schools face, some of which are being dragged for times and unfortunately times to come. As the sustainable agenda by Unesco shows issues of racism, gender equality and many others still need to be tackled. The 4th goal of the 2030 sustainable agenda focuses on an improvement of the “quality of education”, the 4.1 Target aims to guarantee to all “girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes”. In another study carried out by Unesco (2015) shows an estimated 617 million worldwide students from primary to lower secondary school were not achieving the minimum proficiency levels in the areas of reading and mathematics, “of these about two thirds were attending school but were not learning in the classroom or

dropped out school”. (Unesco, Special edition: progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals, 2019).

1.2 The Pandemic (context)

By the end of 2019, SARS-CoV-2 what would later be called the “Covid-19 pandemic” surged with its first human cases in Wuhan, China. The following 18 months were marked by combined global efforts to tackle this unprecedented deadly human pandemic. Some of the most common measures to suppress transmission included social distancing, personal hygiene and the use of masks. As the virus spread viciously worldwide during the beginning of the following year some of these measures were simply not enough to contain the faceless virus. Most countries were felt forced to close their restaurants, theatres, malls, etc.. including their schools jeopardizing not just the future of these economies but also the future of a generation of students. Solely in 2020, 1.5 billion students in 188 countries found themselves locked out of their schools. (OECD, The state of school education, 2021)

In Portugal the Covid-19 had its first case later than its neighbouring countries, the 2nd of March 2020 was the day that the first diagnosed case was confirmed. One of the reasons which helped contain the spread of this contagious virus was the early action of the government. Only after 2 weeks of the 1st confirmed case they declared a “state of emergency”, the first time ever in the history of Portugal’s democracy (Jornal publico Inês Chaíça 2 de Junho de 2020). Portugal together with Brazil were the only OECD countries that, rather than have remedial classes on weekends or special hours, decided to prolong the primary or secondary level academic year (2019/2020 and 2020/2021) to compensate any learning losses that may have occur due to the instability in education settings caused by the lockdown. (OECD, The state of school education, 2021)

The backbone of societal Education, in parallel with the countries’ economies, had to morph to adapt to these upcoming new challenges. With schools’ closed teachers had to quickly learn how to use technology to respond to the learning needs of the quarantined student population. Although the potential of technology in students engagement has long been recognized (Norris & Coutas, 2014) this unexpected reality unveiled some incongruencies of the Portuguese educational system. The objective of this present study is to understand to what extent this new reality impacted the teachers’ methodologies and consequently the engagement of the students.

Here lays my focus, above all discrimination issues (not less relevant), I aim with this thesis to gain a more in depth understanding of how the transition from in person teaching to online classes impacted the engagement, and achievement, of students. Russell W. Rumberger & Sun Ah Lim (2008) in their research highlight the association between dropout rates and student's engagement while defining engagement as "an important precursor to both dropping out and student academic achievement". (Russell W et al.,2008, p.6)

It is now well studied that student's engagement helps light their achievement, persistence and retention (Finn et al., 2006; Kuh et al., 2008) and consequently life opportunities. A study made by Klem & Connell, 2004, shows that 40% to 60% of high school students are "chronically disengaged". Furthermore in 2005 Albert et al on a national (American) survey concluded that of students between 14/15 years old only 2 in 10 boys and 3 in 10 girls were evaluated by their parents as highly engaged in school, Willms confirms a similar view in several countries around the world (Willms, 2003). Numbers that worry all the professionals involved in education field as low education attainment directly influences the future of these countries, but what does engagement englobes and how can it be accessed?

Formative evaluation is in vogue in our systems of education. For Bloom (1969) the purpose of formative evaluation was "... to provide feedback and correctives at each stage in the teaching-learning process" (Bloom 1969, pg. 48). Defining formative assessment as a process used by teachers to provide feedback to students to constantly adjust to their needs. One of the common critics on such type of evaluation is the purpose of such, these domain-independent strategies aiming to deconstruct a complex problem into a simpler form. It is useful in specific cases, when the nature of the problem differs from the learned one, such that the bounds of the domain are changed, the so learned knowledge becomes obsolete or no longer sufficient (Bennett, 2011). Furthermore, this type of evaluation takes it for granted that the teachers possess strategies and knowledge in the subject to respond to the students' needs with adjustable instructions (Hodgen and Marshall 2005). Additionally, Bennet describes this type of evaluations as "unintentionally biased". "Formative inferences are not only subject to uncertainty, they are also subject to systematic, irrelevant influences that may be associated with gender, race, ethnicity, disability... or other student characteristics." (Bennett 2011, pg. 17,18). Therefore, the question of how suitable this type of evaluation is for the current generation, are we meeting the students' realities, needs and aspirations, are we feeding the so portrayed 'banking education' as Freire (1972) described it. Such issues questions if a more holistic assessment is needed to better understand the students position in this story, perhaps a more "human" type of assessment where

not merely their cognitive involvement is scrutinized, would be profitable not only for the students but also for the teachers.

1.3 Research Question

As mention above with this study I aim to better understand the impact on the Portuguese education caused by the global Covid-19 pandemic, more precisely: How do teachers perceive their students 'engagement in online classes during the Covid-19 pandemic?

The study aims to document and analyse stories of Portuguese teachers from primary to second cycle (comprehending students ages between 6/7 to 12/13 years old) who were required to change their well-established methodologies to respond to the challenges of an unpredictable pandemic. I believe that their perceptions could provide a significant reflection of the true reality of teachers lives and opinions about what will hopefully be a onetime generation event.

1.4 Pertinence of the study

It is during these tender young years that the child strives for new social contacts outside of their family circle and they were deprived of those external contacts. This study aims to better understand the phenomena that hit by surprise the world on the beginning of 2020.

The present study gathers stories of eleven teachers from the basic education level in Portugal comprehending students ages of 6/7 to 12/13. This study provides personal insights of a reality without precedents, where the classroom settings, once taken for granted, were removed from teachers and students. This study aims to better understand the pros and cons of this event and perhaps learn from it to provide a better education for the present and future students. "It is the nature of our collective and systemic responses to the disruptions that will determine how we are affected by them." (OECD, The state of school education, 2021. pg.3)

1.5 A peek at the researcher's mind.

As a Portuguese citizen I lived most of my life in Portugal where I experienced most of my education. It is only in recent years I decided to embark in an adventure to broaden my horizons. An experience that it would change my life, but we will go back to Finland in later.

During my compulsory education I never felt great difficulties to succeed in school, good grades would come naturally without any great effort. I had a strong sense of belonging to the school, I felt accepted by my peers, impressed teachers with out-of-the-box answers. Nothing seemed to be impossible at that time, life seemed easy to me.

I came from a large family, socioeconomically speaking considered to be not in the highest ranks (the opposite), but more important, we were and are happy. One thing that inspired me to strive for a career in education was my family situation. My mother changed her life professional course just to answer my older brother's needs, from tourism to special education that altruistic woman is one of a kind. My older brother (4 years older) due to a doctor's mistake was born with some disabilities, although you would not notice anything wrong if you were next to him, it is not perceptible by the eye but more of a cognitive disability. Due to his undeveloped brain, he had a late entrance in school and had a couple of years retained in the same grade, by fate he ended up sharing his classroom with me his younger brother. Having a brother in the same classroom during my teenage years was a mixed feelings experience, for both of us. We shared the same friends, the same books and the same schedule. Things took time to settle, but soon or later we found our unique way, our way to share our teenage experiences.

Things were never easy for him at school and to avoid failure teachers sheltered him in a pre-decedent decree law of the 2018/54 (later explained in the thesis) that "protected" these students with higher learning difficulties. In practical terms he had easier exams, less and easier homework and a special follow-up by a psychologist, also in practical matters teachers would avoid spending a lot of time with him because the perceived support from the psychologist was taken for granted as the only thing he needed. Well, my sense of injustice tingled like a reason for a hero to born. My brother's sense of engagement was practically ignored by manipulating his grades to achieve the "desired" grades, his participation in class was almost nil and consequently his inclusion in the classroom slowly degraded.

My brother always looked up to me for the reason that I was a good student, I had friends, I was just a normal kid. It was at this time of my life strong opinions started to rise about education and purpose. I felt that it was my duty to help my brother in need, I reinforced his inclusion by almost forcing him to be more with our peers, I helped him with his homework... In a nutshell, after understanding his struggles, I understood my life's purpose, Education.

A few years have passed, and he looks back reminiscing those times as his favourite times of his adolescence, I felt complete when he confessed that to me. After a bachelor's degree in teaching practicum, I decided to aspire for more. I aspired to have perhaps a bigger impact in the world of education. I applied for a couple of universities here in Finland with the hope that one would support this dream of mine. So here I am, in a charming dark city called Oulu, doing my master's in Education and Globalization, here we study education policies, practices, research and much more and I am writing my thesis about engagement as a I feel it directly plays a major role in the students' lives.

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Engagement and its precedents.

The engagement definitions vary from different perspectives of the topic. Nevertheless, studies brought to light clear benefits of students' engagement but at the same time, due to the wide range of definitions, and sometimes clashing terms, the area is in need of some improvement/validation.

The term "engagement" is often mistaken by an antecedent term named motivation, especially when used by policy makers and institutions (Eccles & Wang, 2012) and whether both terms can or should be interchangeable (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). Nonetheless the prevalent understanding, across the literature, demonstrates some differences. Motivation is seen as the intent and intangible source that energises behaviour (Reeve, 2012; Reschly & Christenson, 2012), whereas engagement is an observable manifestation; energy and effort in action (Appleton et al., 2008; Eccles & Wang, 2012; Kuh, 2009; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). In other words, motivation is supposed to cause engagement (Connell & Welborn 1991), not the opposite, motivation is seen as necessary but not enough of a prerequisite for learning and achievement (Blumenfeld et al 2006). The problem that resides due to non-consent of a clear definition engagement is how to measure it or/and how to approach it.

Psychology in the past tended to separate thinking and feeling as separate faculties of the human being, nowadays the prevailing perspective tend to be seen as "inseparable, interwoven dimensions of human social life" (Forgas 2000, 4). Engagement then to portray a richer understanding of the individual's experiences is constituted by a number of different dimensions, compromising the different contributions that one can provide to a plausible definition. Engagement derives as the outcome of the relationship between the individual and the environment (Fredricks et al., 2004), providing a key insight of student's life, aiming to help and better understand the student's perspective to consequently design and improved interventions in a classroom appropriate to the need of the individual.

In the evolution of the concept engagement terms of "school engagement" and "engagement" were considered and finally the "student engagement" flourished (Appleton et al., 2008). In education, engagement refers to the extent degree of investment by a student in a learning activity (Skinner et al., 2009). In a simplified version Nystrand and Gamoran (1991, pg 284)

describes engagement as it “depends on what teachers and students do together . . . neither can do it alone”. This relationship has different dimensions to be taken into consideration, however hardly consensual, most of the literature portrays engagement as a meta construct of different components/dimensions.

2.2 Dimensions of Engagement

For this present study student engagement refers to a psychological multimodal construct that features the tripartite taxonomy elaborated by Fredricks et al. (2004) and a fourth designed Reeve & Tseng (2011) making a total of four distinct, though intercorrelated, dimensions. Namely, behavioural engagement encompassing the involvement of the student in the learning activities through class participation, effort, task completion and attendance; secondly emotional (or affective) includes the sense of belonging with the school, interest and enjoyment during classroom activities; third the cognitive dimension representing the strategies that the student, by self-regulation, includes in the learning process and lastly, and a more recent addition to the engagement field, is the agency dimension related to the personal input by the students in their learning process (Fredricks, et al., 2004; Reeve & Tseng, 2011).

For each one of these dimensions some indicators have been designed which reflect the features that define each dimension of student engagement. Some scholars stressed the need to differentiate indicators with facilitators (Skinner et al., 2008) however some researchers merge both (e.g. Appleton et al., 2006). The latest refers to contextual factors that may or may not influence the development of each dimension, scholars generally acknowledge that contextual factors i.e families, schools, and communities— are determinant to form their behaviours and educational performance (Jessor, 1993). However, this research recognizes both, having highest focus is in the indicators. The facilitators go beyond the scope of the present research, nevertheless, presented in the data analyses.

2.2.1 Cognitive dimension

In my literature review I found different traditions related to cognitive engagement with sometimes clashing terms. The concept stems from the motivational research combined with learning strategy use (Blumenfeld, et al., 2006). The first definition concerns cognitive engagement as a process of self-regulation, or being strategic (Christenson & Anderson, 2002; Wolters & Taylor,

2012), whereas the second describes as a process of mastering the academic material and desire for challenge (Corso, et al., 2013; Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Klem & Connell, 2004). The third, that is more align with this study, focusses its definition on the willingness to learn, setting educational goals and valuing and investing in the learning (Fredricks et al., 2004; Appleton et al., 2006; Finn, 1989).

For this study the cognitive dimension it is characterized as a psychological investment in the learning process, presenting metacognitive involvement through planning, monitoring, and evaluating one's thinking (Bundick, M. J., & Tirri, K. 2014). For a more tangible understanding of the data, presented here in this study, I adopted the two cognitive level analyses of Blumenfeld (2006). Blumenfeld divides cognitive engagement into two subtypes the "superficial cognitive engagement" englobing the use "memory and elaboration strategies" and the "deep level engagement" representing the use of these strategies to bridge new and old ideas (Blumenfeld et al 2006). Some authors express the difficulty of assessing such dimension due to the non-observable aspect, claiming nonetheless, that some assumptions could come to surface through "either inferred from behaviour or assessed from self-report measures" (Fredricks et al., 2004 Pg.10). Furthermore, Blumenfeld explains how teachers can encourage student's autonomy, "teachers can support autonomy by allowing students to make decisions about topics, selection and planning of activities, and artifact development" (Blumenfeld et al 2006, p.4).

2.2.2 Emotional Dimension

Emotional dimension, as briefly explained, is defined as the sense of belonging with the school environment (including the classroom) promoting feelings of interest, boredom, happiness, sadness, and anxiety (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). The context of the school plays a big role on these students' emotional engagement, for instance, the school size influences behavioural and emotional engagement. A study by Barker & Gump (1964) found that students' opportunities to participate and develop social relations were greater in small schools than in large ones.

The dimensions are intercorrelated, a clear example of correlation lies on the emotional engagement as is intrinsically related to students' academic performance by being an observable measure of changes in the behavioural and cognitive engagement translated in their persistence and resilience (Li et al., 2011; Wang & Degol, 2014).

Several studies already proved the strong link between academic attainment and emotional engagement. Finn (1989) claimed that alienation or feelings of detachment from the school community contribute to drop out. This theory has been supported by ethnographic studies, claiming adding emotional connection to the school community (including teachers peers and school staff) work as a protective factor that keeps at-risk children in school (Fine, 1991; Mehan, et al., 1996; Wehlage et al.,1989).

The emotional dimension indicators, englobes students' sense of connectedness to and interest in the academic content, leading to a sense of efficacy and confidence concerning to their academic experience (Fredricks et al., 2004).

2.2.3 Behavioural Dimension

There are different ways to define behavioural engagement, nevertheless the common agreement is that behavioural engagement is a critical mediator in the dropout process in the early years of schooling (Rumberger, 1987). The definitions spectrum is arranged from behavioural adaptation to the school protocol associated to the school rules i.e. compliance with school rules, school skipping and disruptive behaviours (Finn, 1993; Finn, Pannoza, & Voelkl, 1995). Such indicators can be seen in the attendance records, participation in school related activities, and daily observations by teachers. Another interpretation defines behavioural engagement as the actions and behaviours that students have when in a learning environment, for instance their effort, concentration, attention (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Skinner & Belmont, 1993).

The correlation between grades and behavioural engagement happens when teachers, whilst grading the students, take into consideration their behavioural development along the semester/year. "In addition, the association may be overestimated in the case of tests, which often assess memory and low-level skills, where simply doing the work and paying attention (indicators of behavioural engagement) may be sufficient for success. In contrast, behavioural engagement may not be a very good predictor of performance for assessments that require deep understanding of the material." (Fredericks, et al. 2004, p12)

For teachers, a way to enhanced behavioural engagement in their classroom, is simply by being clear about their expectations and consistently provide consistent responses (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Although the correlation may be overestimated, several studies support the positive correlation between behavioural engagement and school attainment

from elementary to high school students (Connell, et al., 1994; Marks, 2000; Connell & Wellborn, 1991).

2.2.4 Agency Dimension

This proposed tridimensionality by Fredericks et al (2004) has been validated empirically (Wang, et al., 2011) and is now quite commonly accepted among scholars in the field (Reschly, et al., 2012; Appleton et al., 2008). While scrutinizing these three well studied dimensions (Behavioural, Emotional and Cognitive) Reeve & Tseng raised a fair criticism about their limitations, they all capture the receptiveness of students towards the teachers flow of instructional activities, but lack on the students input on them (Reeve & Tseng, 2011, Reeve, 2012). These well sustained dimensions belittle, in a way, the complexity of student's active and transformative contributions/role in and outside of the classroom. The sense of agency is built upon our interactions with the surroundings, it is passed and achieved and at the same time limited through our complex relations with the others, or as Oswell put it, it "circulates around children" (Oswell, 2013, p. 268). This includes not just the interaction between peers but also with parents and school staff." Childrens' agency is not restricted to individual or group capacity, but it is exercised through the interconnectedness brought about in relations" (Raithelhuber, 2016, p. 103).

In my literature review I came across with different perspectives of Agency. In a more philosophical one, Agency is seen as peoples' will and skill to act upon one's life (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011) and to allow individuals to be autonomous in relation to their surroundings (Schwartz & Okita, 2004). Badura, in his Social Cognitive theory, highlights intentionality as the main feature of agency, reflecting the purposefulness of one's action.

The present study underlines some Priestley principles. According to Priestley et al. (2015) some of these approaches depict agency in a too static a way, portraying agency as an innate goal setting, independent of external stimuluses. In a more practically matter (Makitalo, 2016) argues that in a classroom, a student is considered to act agentically when they intervene and transform an education practice with his/her words or actions (Makitalo, 2016). Sen (2002) explains, "what is needed is not merely freedom and power to act, but also freedom and power to question prevailing norms and values. The pivotal issue is critical agency." (Sen 2002, p. 258)

Consequent to some criticism raised on this new dimension, claiming a need for more thorough research (Lawson & Lawson, 2012), Reeve (2013) ripen his concept. With this strengthened study Reeve (2013) acknowledged that these agentic actions of students do not necessarily enhanced learning conditions but rather promotes the relationship between students and teachers when a student led action renders “the learning environment to become more motivationally supportive” (Reeve, 2013, p. 581).

“For teachers a way to practice agency is by negotiation and renegotiation the conditions and the contents of their profession as active members of their society” (Vähäsantanen et al., 2008, p. 7). This definition portraits agency as what teachers do rather than have. In the case of Portugal one of the latest educational reforms, made in 2018, reflected on how important is to have a more inclusive education. This decree law (Decree-Law no 54/2018) consequently provided means for teachers to practice their agency. The next chapter goes in depth into one of the latest reforms of the Portuguese system of education to better grasp the direction of the Portuguese education.

3 Portuguese Educational System

3.1 Portuguese Curriculum

The Portuguese curriculum has endured many changes since the revolution of 74', post revolution period where the democratisation of Portugal started to have its first steps. Nevertheless, education is still being characterized by a centralized organization, in other words, the Ministry of Education is the responsibly identity that defines the subjects, the programmes, the objectives, contents and the methodological and assessment procedures. (Mouraz et al, 2013). Since the revolution and the admittance into the European Economic Community, Portugal's desire to become more global and multicultural, participating more in international conferences and international politics, in particular the Recommendations of the World Conference about 'education for all' in March 1990 (Mouraz et al, 2013)., helped paved the path to a more flexible and just curriculum.

Since then, the school curriculum retained national aims but is more nuanced to the aims of each local context, offering more meaningful targeting for the students and the teachers (Ault, 2008). Nowadays the curriculum has its pillars in two main concepts the "the profile of students leaving mandatory education" (PA) and "essential learnings". The latest refers to the common set of knowledge indispensable, relevant and significant as well as attitudes and abilities integrating a set of curriculum documents to achieve the PA which is "structured in principles, vision, values and areas of competences common to all schools". In the academic year of 2017-2018 (Despacho n. ° 6478/2017) the government created the "Project of autonomy and curriculum flexibility" allowing schools to manage their curriculums in a more flexible way to ease the achievement of the PA.

3.2 Context: Portuguese system of education

The compulsory education in Portugal is organized in different stages: 1st cycle (Primary school) from the of age 6 for 4 years, then to 2nd and 3rd cycle (middle school) for 5 years then the students make a big leap from 4 disciplines to 9 or more, and finally the secondary school (Highschool) from the age of 15 for 3 years, at this stage students can decide between vocational or a more academic education. The secondary education was added to the compulsory school years in the year of 2009. Another important factor to take into consideration is that the great

majority of schools in Portugal from primary to secondary schools are public (Santiago, et al., 2012).

Portugal – 2020/21

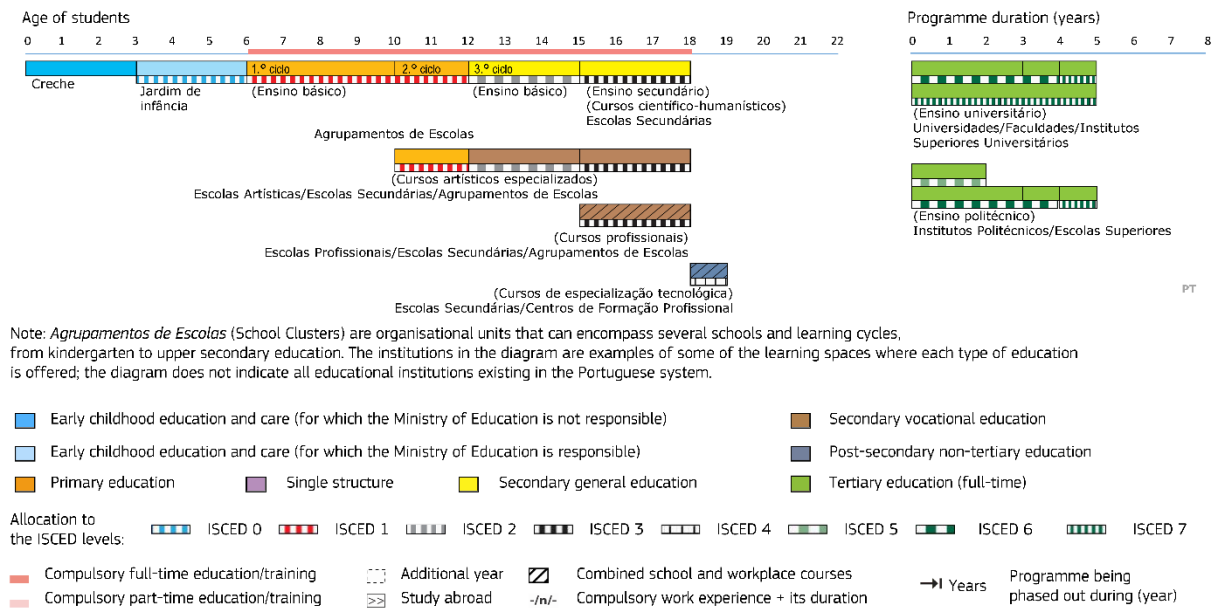


Figure 1: Source: Eurydice 2020/21

Age	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17			
Grade	Pre-primary education			1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	5 th	6 th	7 th	8 th	9 th	10 th	11 th	12 th			
Level/cycle	Pre-primary education			1 st cycle						2 nd cycle			3 rd cycle			Secondary education		
				Basic education														

Figure 2: Santiago, Paulo, et al. (2012)

3.3 Decree-Law no 54/2018, July 6

To better grasp the holistic reality of students in Portugal during the Covid-19 pandemic, after long talks with teachers, a document that was always present in our conversations was the decree law 54/2018. As a great representation of the direction of the Portuguese educational system in the past few years, although still in adaptation and implementation stages, this fairly new reform made some crucial changes to what the reality of Portuguese education is nowadays. I will proceed with a brief analysis of the decree law document published in the *Diário da República* n.º 129/2018, edition 2018-07-06.

As a program of the XXI Constitutional Government strategy for the education some changes occurred in the Portugal system of education. The government action supports a more inclusive education, where every student regardless of their “personal and social situation” can acquire a level of education and training to enable them an appropriate social integration. This in turn leads to more inclusive education and aims to ensure every pupil has a sense of belonging, participation and equity culminating in a greater level of social cohesion. (Decree-Law 54/2018)

Following UNESCO (2009) guidelines for inclusive education and aiming to meet the sustainable development objectives of the UN 2030 Portugal, after a long process, with a final disclosure in the Lisbon Declaration on Educational Equity, in July 2015 managed to march in the direction of a more inclusive education system. With the assumption “at the centre of the school activity are the curriculum and student learning.” (Decree-Law 54/2018), this law reinforces the educational community individual characteristics by mobilizing not just the teachers practices but all means at the school disposal so that all students are offered with equal opportunities.

The main features of this new law are “based on flexible curricular models, systematic monitoring of the effectiveness of the continuum of implemented interventions, the dialogue between teachers with parents or caregivers, and in the choice of measures to support learning, organized at different levels of intervention, according to the educational responses necessary for each student to acquire a common base of competences, valuing their potential and interests.” (Decree-Law 54/2018, Art 6). The new decree law ensures a continuous and integrated approach throughout the compulsory school years, which in case of Portugal is from the 1st until 12th, primary to secondary school (high school), normally between the age of 5/6 to 17/18.

This decree law envisions to respond to the diverse pupil’s education needs and potential through a focus on their participation in the process of their learning and school community inclusion. The principles that guides this inclusive education are Universal educability, meaning all pupils have the ability to learn and develop in their education experience; Equity, a guarantee to all pupils there is access to the necessary support to develop their potential; Customization, student-centred approach where, through a multilevel approach the pupils needs, potential, interest and preferences are taken into consideration; Flexibility, a reinforced flexibility of the curriculum allowing schools to organize their times and spaces and methodologies as well as practises and instruments according to the pupils singularities; Self-determination,

by supporting not only their needs but their interest, preferences, culture and linguistic identity, creating a favourable space to share and participate in decision-making (decree law)

The implementation of the following measures aims to ensure that all pupils have “equal opportunities in access and frequency of different educational and training offerings” (decreet law). The multilevel approach incorporates the implementation of three types of measures, identified in the decree as: universal measures, targeted to all students in order “to promote participation and improved learning” (Decree-Law 54/2018, Art. 8); selective measures, aimed to compliment the need for learning supports not addressed by universal measures; and additional measures, created “to respond to intense and persistent communication, interaction, cognitive or learning difficulties that require specialised resources of support to learning and inclusion” (Decree-Law 54/2018, Art. 10).

To facilitate the process of identification and assistance to the teachers it creates a multidisciplinary team that consist in variable and permanent members. The permanents are: One teacher that assists the director; three members of the pedagogical council and a psychologist.

3.4 Technology and education

In past years, the outstanding evolution of technologies baffled any user of such. From smartphones to high-speed wireless communications the world seems to know no barriers for these tools which have become part of our daily lives. The development of educational platforms, derived from the rapidly growth of these digital technologies, provided a wide range of tools for teachers and students to learn with. Sebastian et al. (2012) referred digital learning as the method that has most swiftly developed in the last years and characterized digital learning as the learning mainstream of the future.

Great benefits can emerge from the use of digital technology due to their multifaceted and malleable proprieties. The internet for instance, as an extensive free of charge resource could, for a new and curious user, be instantly perplexing because of its magnitude. However, with the right guidance it can be a tool that compliments any lecturer. If combined the practical and the current teaching trends of digital learning great advances and methodologies could come to surface. This great bridge between the traditional style of teaching and the use of the new digital technologies could be the future of education. One of the great benefits of digital learning, that

became so opportune during Covid-19 times, is the versatility in terms of time and space, englobing synchronous and asynchronous moments. Thousands of students who were constrained to their houses, for almost two academic years, had the possibility of continuing with their studies through platforms defined previously by the school. Some of these platforms also allow an easier way to track the students' progress, facilitating the teacher's intervention and interpretation of the student insight, leading to a more adjusted feedback, achieving a more student-centred learning (Kaklamanou et al., 2012). Furthermore, digital learning tends to be more visual with teaching materials covering media files like sound video and image than the traditional methods, generating a more attractive and lively content (Miyoshi et al. 2012). Moreover, digital teaching platforms provide interactive functions like "chat room" and discussion for more two-way communication between learners and instructors and among learners (Hockly, 2012), a feature that became to be crucial during the current situation.

In summary digital learning seems to be the most appropriate method to use during Covid-19 times. Although not everything depends in the capacity of this technological tools. During lockdown students and parents had to daily share their spaces at home, teachers had to allocate tasks to parents or guardians to help alleviate the sudden pressure and shift of education needs, this raised questions of how qualified parents are to support their children's education and how to instruct them into this new crisis. These and other questions were noticeably covered by the participants. Some seemed confident whilst others were reluctant about the benefits of online classes for this students group age.

Lastly, the present generation of young leaners depicted in this study, sometimes labelled as digital natives, seem to have reunited all the conditions to tackled some of the adversities that may have come to surface with the forced transition from the presential education to the online. This clear discrepancy of generations appeared to be evident during course of the interviews.

4 Methodology

4.1 Ontology and epistemology

The present study gathers stories from 11 teachers from all over Portugal to better understand the impact that the present Covid-19 pandemic had on these teachers and students lives. The exploratory nature of this study investigates, through the lens of the different engagement dimensions and use of technology, how the process of adaptation occurred and later reflects on the drastic transition from presential to online classes. Thus, the epistemology of this study lies upon the perception of teachers on the receptiveness of students to the digital transformation of their education.

The choice of primary and 2nd cycle teachers (students age between 6-11) seemed appropriate because most of the literature implications on the dimensions of engagement identified “early ages” as crucial in setting the stage for a healthy and engaged academic path. Nevertheless, this study acknowledges the different background and facilitators that may or may not influence these students lives embracing the ontological assumption that there are multiple realities.

4.2 Content analyses

Content analyses the term commonly used for quantitative analyses had its first steps in the 1950s when the first textbook on content analyses was made by Berhard Berelson defining “Content analysis is a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication” (Berelson 1952, p. 18). One of the latest developments of this concept (bringing in qualitative research) dates to 1980s by Mayring, in a longitudinal study with about 600 open-ended interviews leading to more than 20,000 pages of transcripts that consequently had to be qualitatively analyzed (Mayring, 2004). In content analyses a large body of qualitative data may be reduced, transforming it into a manageable set of data which is easier to interpret and to analyze (Smith, 2000).

Content analyses is a qualitative methodological analysis used to extract an intended information from the data collected (usually verbal) by systematically and objectively identifying specific characteristics of the data (Stone Dunphy et al 1966). The data must be impartially

analyzed by the researcher, yielding unbiased results, which can be utilized by other researchers in the future (Smith, 2000).

The methodology choice seemed obvious given the extensive feedback from teachers all over Portugal who were eager to voice their experiences by participating in this study. Content analyses scopes qualitative material “whether obtained from archival records, recording of naturally occurring behavior, or evoked responses (as from interviews or projective methods)” (Smith 2000 p. 2.).

The transcription occurred immediately after the interviews. I then moved onto to the next stage of analyses. I became totally familiar with every piece of research information generated by reading and listening the interviews multiple times and was then able to move to the coding phase.

The coding of the semi structured interviews was theory based on “deductive analyses” meaning “with prior formulated, theoretical derived aspects of analysis, bringing them in connection with the text.” (Mayring, 2004, p.4). In other words the data reflects a filtered analysis of reality specifically the perception of the participants (teachers) about their students’ development in the different dimensions of engagement during the Covid-19 pandemic. The coding was made with the help of the qualitative data analyses software named MAXQDA that provided tools to facilitate the thematization and visualization of the long texts. The coding process followed the sequential model of qualitative content analyses developed by Mayring. It undertook 3 levels of analyses; first the *Summary* where the vast text transcribed was reduced still preserving the essential content making the data more malleable and a posteriori in depth analyses; followed by the *Explication* level, here the explanation of the different coding is made together with clarification of the meaning of the codes and the context; finally the *Structuring* at this stage the units of analyses are determined and established within the theoretical framework, exploring some key examples from the data (Mayring, 2002).

From the coding process of this research, 382 coded sections were identified leading to 5 scopes of analyses namely Dimensions, 54, Technology, Exterior Factors and Identification (excluded from the study to preserve the anonymity of the participants). Figure 1 shows a creative coded map for easier visualization. All these steps culminated in a holistic analysis in the following chapter named findings chapter.

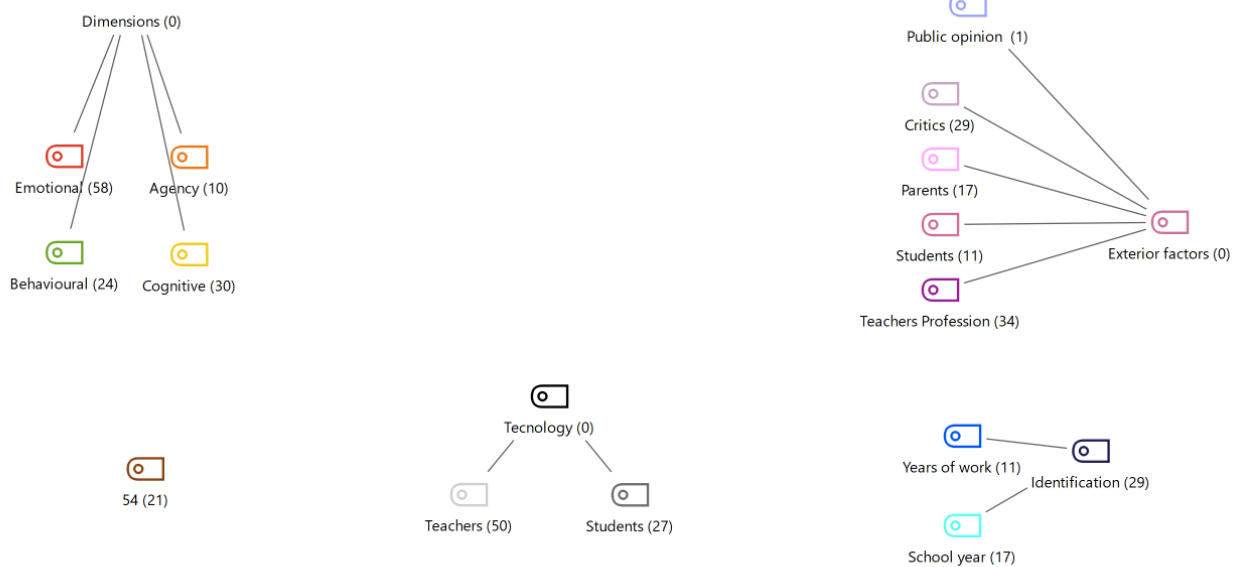


Figure 3: Creative code map

4.3 Description of the data

The semi structure interview sample of this study was chosen randomly, partially in a snowball effect, but always taking into consideration the saturation of the data where representation of the same school area was avoided in order to achieve a broader feeling of the event. The 11 participants, teachers in the public sector schools from 1st and 2nd cycle, all from different areas of continental Portugal and one from islands, were chosen to be part of this study. The interviews occurred via Whatsapp between 6th March 2021 and 6th April 2021 and were of an average of 50 minutes of duration. All the participants consented to the interviews being recorded and were asked to respond honestly to the interviewer’s questions based on their experiences. After a brief presentation by the researcher the interviews proceeded. To protect the anonymity of the participants and the integrity of the study, throughout the thesis they were referred as participant 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11 followed by a corresponding code to locate the text within the transcription of their interview.

In terms of transferability following Shenton (2004) principle, a through description of the data must be provided so the reader can determine “how far they can be confident in transferring to other situations the results and conclusions presented” (2004, p.70). So that could be possible,

a transparent analysis of the data was done revealing sometimes contradictory views, nonetheless painting a broader and in-depth picture of the current event. The reliability of my research was ensured by verifying with the participants the meaning of their words by contacting them after the interview to confirm their views.

For the current study different methodologies were considered, because of the broad definition of engagement. The flexibility of semi structured interviews greatly reduced limitations of expression from the participants, creating a comfortable stage for participants to share their thoughts and opinions on the subject. Using a semi structured approach, the participants felt relaxed and were able to express their opinions and insights on a still on-going event. In fact, the structured side of the interview derived from different surveys already existed. In designing the questions for emotional and cognitive engagement I used a widely validated instrument, Student Engagement Instrument (SEI) design by Appleton, et al (2006). The SEI has proven to be adequate to seize students' engagement at different schooling levels (Reschly, et al., 2012). For the behavioural dimension my definition derives from Fredericks et al (2004) and finally for the agency dimension the questions result from the ripen version of Reeve (2013). The interviews lasted in average 40-50 min, starting with some identification questions (omitted from the research), followed by 3 to 4 questions for each engagement dimension and concluding with an open question.

5 Findings

5.1 Education and Covid-19

The Education situation in Portugal, as in the whole world, had to adapt to this new reality, a contagious virus that took the world by surprise and quarantined many of us to prevent a bigger catastrophe. One of the consequences, of this still ongoing event, is the precautional distancing measures that we social human beings had to suddenly adhere to. This preventative measure changed our daily lives as well as politics, sports and finally education.

From 12th March 2020 the Portuguese government decided to suspend all presential classes a measure that would be reevaluated later on 9 April 2020 (diario de noticias ed 9 Abril). This shift from the presential to the online classes was very significant not just for students who had to say a temporary farewell to their schools and friends but also to teachers that had to adapt to this new methodology. In an “aged teaching staff, worn out, with many professionals in a situation of stress and burnout” as the General secretary of the National Federation of teachers (Fenprof), Mario Nogueira described in an interview a couple of months before the Covid-19 spread worldwide (<https://tvi24.iol.pt>), the adaptation was predicted to be hard to achieve . As the data of this study suggests, the great majority of the participants agreed that the aged staff played a major role while adapting to this online classes, even though this external factor goes beyond the scope of this study it is important to point this out as a determinant factor for the still current transition inevitably started in 12th March 2020.

5.2 How did the classes proceed?

Schools in Portugal are separated into school groups or clusters of schools, leaving the administration of each cluster freedom to choose for instance which platform to use in these online classes. This decentralized aspect brought to light a lack of technological uniformization and different schedules of classes. There were only A synchronous moments and B asynchronous moments and then each “cluster of schools” managed these moments in terms of time and platforms. In my personal case the synchronous moments were via Zoom and the asynchronous moments via Google Classroom...” (Participant 9, Pos. 10).

This synchronous and asynchronous moments mention by participant number 9 allude how classes were conducted for this 1st and 2nd cycle students. Synchronous moments refer to the moments where teachers would have the class with all the students and give per se the programmatic content and the asynchronous classes refer to the moment where students were left to work offline and later on sharing the results. Once again, as mentioned above, each school cluster would have different methodologies to approach this synchronous and asynchronous moments, here is the example of the participant 9: "...on the synchronous classes they had the learning moment at 9 a.m. and then I would guide them through the asynchronous work that they would have for the rest of the day, besides the guidelines within the platforms I would guide them on Zoom for the work they would have to do for the rest of the day, at the end of the day we would gather to clarify doubts, to consolidate, systematize any subject, to eventually make some correction of the work done in the asynchronous moments." (Participant 9, Pos. 62).

Additionally, participant number 6 provides a different approach: "In this 2nd confinement we were a bit criticized in terms of our strategy of school cluster. We decided for a different situation than the 1st confinement, because on the 1st confinement and mainly in lower grades such as 1st, 2nd and 3rd cycle the fact that we had 1/3 of synchronous and 2/3 of asynchronous moments I was this roughly the ratio, this led us to believe that students would get loose in terms of organizations of the asynchronous tasks, mainly those younger students with a lower power of autonomy. Now on this 2nd confinement we decided to maintain the regular schedule of presential classes, being able in synchronous moments to establish asynchronous moments, that means the students were required to maintain the connection while on the regular school timetable." (Participant 6, Pos. 40). In sum, the approaches would vary from school to school, but the general idea would revolve between synchronous and asynchronous moments, were the student would either learn with the whole class in synchronous moment or work alone during asynchronous moment.

5.3 Engagement and Online Education.

In the next chapter I will present the results of the interviews when focusing in the teacher's perception of students' engagement during online classes. As previously explained in the theoretical framework, this study's definition of engagement takes into consideration four dimen-

sions of engagement namely, Cognitive, Behavioural, Emotional and Agency. For each dimension on the semi structure interviews at least one question per dimension was, asked , followed by other questions that might be linked to the interviewee's answers.

5.3.1 Behavioural dimension

Behavioural engagement represents the various learning and academic driven behaviours, actions and attitudes, examples of such can be evidenced in the attending records the compliance with school rules, positive conduct, effort, participation, completing assignments (Fredricks et al., 2004). During my data collection this was one of the aspects that teachers focused on the most, students' behaviours and how they, the teachers, were generally lenient to the current situation. Throughout my interviews when my participants were asked if they felt a difference in terms of behavioural engagement the most common answer was unexpectedly a "no":

Participant 3: "I never had reasons to complain, they were always really participative, very active, attentive, whenever they had doubts, they would expose them, they were not shy. I did not notice differences in this aspect." (Participant 3 , Pos. 38)

Participant 1: "But in terms of behaviour properly said, no I cannot say I have spotted a flagrant change." (Participant 1, Pos. 31)

Participant 7: "No, in terms of behavioural no, there was no problems in terms of behaviour." (Participant 7, Pos. 48)

As these and other interview responses show, in terms of behavioural dimension the overall experience shows that students responded well to the challenge, some teachers went even further in a possible explanation for such, pointing out a possible reason for the good behavioural response:

Participant 10: "Because we are not in presential classes the behaviour of students happened to not dwell so much between poor behaviour and good behaviour and having to be called upon. Students are in their houses so then there was not so much rebellion and there was not so much work for the teacher as a regulator of behaviour." (Participant 10, Pos. 40)

Participant 3: "There is always a difference (between presential and online), but I found them to be more interested because there was not so many exterior stimuli..." (Participant 3 , Pos. 45-46)

Participant 5: “No, actually I do not know if it was because my students were good, but they behaved accordingly, I do not even recall an event that a problem or an improper behaviour occur.

Interviewer: In terms of presential classes the students were already like that in terms of behaviour?

Participant 5: In fact, no, sometimes they had some mishaps and they were more talkative, but notice that they are students relatively young with 10 years and the fact that they are at home and having a mother or a father supervising facilitated a good behaviour” (Participant 5, Pos. 48-50).

The data suggest that the context of home seems to be mediating fairly well student’s behaviour while having online classes, as if the fact that they were under “surveillance” of the parents is shaping their behaviour or as participant 2 put it: “... that vigilance or censorship per se, turns to be an obstacle here to their freedom of expression and their freedom of thought. (Participant 2, Pos. 46). On the other hand participant number 11 revealed a particular competence that was reinforced during the augmented presence of parents: “... after long talks with my colleagues, in relation to 1 year students where there was a need for a higher participation of parents, related to the development of reading the students from 1st and 2nd year profit a lot with that, because the parents were more present and could see that the teachers were not there to help and they had to compensate, on that matter they (students) evolved a lot, in terms of reading skills because the parents were more present and they would listen to their kids because they knew it was fundamental for their development of reading and writing.” (Participant 11, Pos. 64)

Parents are extremely important in children’s school experience as guides throughout the whole academic experience, therefore their cooperation can increase or decrease risk factors for disengagement and low achievement. The parents’ behaviours can have a profound impact on how their children perceive their perception of education, intellectual abilities and how they value it (Eccles et al., 2006). The importance of parents and/or students guardians is unquestionable, they are of the utmost relevance in their children’s education and, consequently in present times, crucial mediators of their education perception and as data suggests also students’ behaviour.

5.3.2 Emotional Dimension

Emotional dimension was by far the one that directly or indirectly the participants focused the most. Emotional belonging to school was shook during these Covid-19 times, students were physically deprived from being close to their peers and teachers from their students. School has a crucial role in society not just to educate students about maths or science but also to socially integrate these new “flowers ready to bloom”. It is during these tender young years that the child strives for new social contacts outside of their family circle and here they were deprived of those external contacts. Some scholars have claimed that alienation, or feelings of estrangement and social isolation, contribute to the dropout problem (Finn, 1989; Newmann, 1981). Similarly, Furrer and Skinner (2003) found that perceived relatedness to teachers, parents, and peers uniquely contributed to emotional engagement.

To engage in this dimension, I first asked the participants to describe how they perceive their relationship with the students, the somehow unanimity of the answers made a perfect bridge to the follow up question where participants were asked to reflect how online classes impacted their relationship. Their relationship was often described as “close as possible” (person 1,2,7,9,11) and aware that to achieve the aimed results there must be first a close relationship between teachers and students, “because when the students like us, the effort and the commitment are always different” (Participant 4). During my interviews the general feeling of my interviewees, independent of their age and teaching years, was a group of passionate professionals willing to “share their shirt if the student needs it” (participant 6). Furthermore, an aspect that was often mentioned was their relationship with the parents which was tested during this online classes period.

Participant 11: “I think the family context was fundamental for the students ability to surpass this special situation in school, because the students that I had in my class whose parents were not so involved and had no awareness of how important their involvement was, the students would come sharply prejudiced, because they would not send their homework, teachers would send emails so they would send the work but they would not even answer, all this derived from the family context. In this pandemic the involvement of parents was fundamental, and those who dedicated themselves (parents) to their children’s tasks their children gained from this experience others, where parents were not minimally motivated or educated, ended up being really disadvantaged” (Participant 11, Pos. 42)

Participant 7: "... and there were some cases where we had to reinforce both with students and parents about the importance of what we were doing, that we (teachers and students) are not on vacations and we should work as seriously as possible. That had to happen because not everyone was taking things seriously, mainly in the 1st confinement, now on the 2nd it is already a continuation of what we were doing so everyone is on the same page." (Participant 7, Pos. 58)

Nevertheless, the aftermath of the Covid-19 although a bit early for any prediction, most teachers confessed that their profession felt more valued by the parents "perception is different of our work, by having their children at home, I think that the so long mistreated image of teachers on this last years was... Interviewer: More valued? Person 7: I do not know if it was, but it least I have hope. I have a lot of feedback from parents that yes they reinforce that, they had no notion how hard our profession was..." (Participant 7, Pos. 84-86)

Some teachers even said that their relationship with the students were reinforced due to the constant connection that they needed to have: "My strategy was to demonstrate myself always available for what they possibly needed, I can say that I receive, even the last weekend, when I say "if you need anything just send me a message", I can say that all students have my personal contact, and in fact the fact that I demonstrated always available it got us even closer." (Participant 4, Pos. 28). "I think it made us even closer... Each one of us was alone and because they were 3rd and 4th grade most of the times they were alone, far from parents, we even created a closer relationship, because we all needed to talk, contact, socialise, because we miss that on a daily basis, I think maybe it made us closer, how we laugh together. I think it was interesting, not the ideal but an interesting experience (Participant 3, Pos. 27-30). And also, it deepen the understanding of each students individual situation: "I think yes, I think this situation of the distant learning could also help us teachers to understand some difficulties that some students may have, that is on the lack of family support that they may have in the resolution of some tasks, that now maybe we realize it more due to this distant learning, particularly in students with less resources and support from the parents side that demands from our side an intervention more timely and thoughtful so we can verify the needs that may occur." (Participant 6, Pos. 32)

In fact, students were deprived of their peers' company at least physically speaking, when asked how that reflected on the students most of the participants had a common answer, a word that only exist in the Portuguese dictionary "*saudade*", this word was interchangeable in my interviews, it means a deep emotional state of nostalgia in this case related to the school and by not being able to play with their friends i.e. "What they all say is that they have *saudade* from the

others...”(Participant 1, Pos. 27), “What I realized with my colleagues is that in fact they had the urge to go to the online classes to see their friends, to look at them and to talk a bit, I felt that need and *saudade* of being with their friends...” (Participant 11, Pos. 28), “I think they were a bit damaged, not in the way that they were mad at each other but on the way that they kept missing each other. I am positive on that aspect, that they are eager to get back together.” (Participant 3, Pos. 36). Another interesting point that came to surface in some interviews was the fact that some students preferred to maintain in the classroom to interact with their peers even after the class was over i.e. Participant 6: “...Even after the break between classes they would stay between them talking using the technologies, through the platform because of the need to establish contact that they were deprived due to the confinement situation” (Participant 6, Pos. 30), Participant 4: “Yes it is voluntary, the class ends and they can log out, but if they all stay it is because in fact there is a need for communication with each other.” (Participant 4, Pos. 41-42), Participant 10: “...and they would finish the synchronous sessions and there was immediately one (student) saying “let’s go to the other side”, and one day I asked and they said they would create another meeting online where they would gather, not all of them but some, and finish their tasks together” (Participant 10, Pos. 44-46) . This companionship is vital for students at this age, as presented in the theoretical framework, this sense of belonging with the school and acceptance by teachers and peers it is strongly linked with their academic attainment (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Although the adaptation to these new methodologies of education took some time to settle both from students and teachers, and the shyness and unawareness towards such platforms compromised the transition, now in this second confinement, online classes were already part of the daily basis of all the students, families and teachers. A unique outcome presented by participant number 6 that is a teacher but also the coordinator of class directors from the two schools of his school cluster, after meeting with all the class directors conclude that the fact the students were behind cameras revealed a uninhibited feeling from their social status:

“Interviewer: Teacher now I focus on the feeling between them, do you think by being deprived of physical contact between them that their relationship changed in any way?

“Fairly yes and mainly for one reason, students that were more shy to speak because they knew they were from a lower social status and sometimes with fear of being mocked when in the presence of other students with more cultural language, maybe the fact that they were online unblocked them a bit and made them interact more without shame and speak and participate in

a more spontaneous way. I think it was one of the silver linings from this Covid-19 pandemic that we hope, and nothing replaces the presential education and the interpersonal relationships established in the presential education, but it could be a source of a positive experience from both sides teachers and students.” (Participant 6, Pos. 36)

The emotional engagement seems to in some areas to be reinforced by the current situation as the feedback provided by the teachers explains. Although defined widely on the data as not the preferable way of teaching this age group, it seems to have opened different educational possibilities that after the dust settles, the learned outcomes i.e. the emphasized empathy on the students families background and the students relationships, will impact the direction of future endeavours of the education.

5.3.3 Cognitive Dimension

Although the interviews were in an open ending format the four dimensions were equally represented in the interview set of questions, leaving the interviewee an option to focus in the preferable underlined dimension but at the same time respond to questions from each.

One dimension that prevailed in the interviewees tendency to drive the conversation was the Cognitive dimension, as referred in the theoretical framework this dimension has its complications to access due to the non-observable aspect inherent to its own definition, nonetheless the participants were asked to reflect on their experiences during these unparallel times and opine how it was reflected in their students. Blumenfeld et al (2006)., divides cognitive engagement into two subtypes the “superficial cognitive engagement” englobing the use of “memory and elaboration strategies” and the “deep level engagement” representing the “use of elaboration and organisation strategies as students to connect new and old ideas” Blumenfeld et al (2006). Rather than mixing and presenting all the aspects of cognitive dimension (i.e.: Self-regulation, learning goals, investment in learning, psychological investment) I decided to use Blumenfeld’s two subtypes in my second phase of coding to help not just in terms of navigation throughout the data analyses but also to present here in a more compressible and comprehensible way.

Superficial cognitive engagement

When teachers were asked how online classes reflected in regard to the level of participation of their students their thoughts were not always consensuses. Some teachers stressed the context

(home) was not the most auspicious working place, i.e. "... in my opinion they were more inattentive, I always search activities that would captivate their attention but you know when we are talking and then the cat passes, the dog barks or the mother is in the kitchen making lunch and all that are stories that they share, in other words, it ruptures any activity that the teacher is trying to do..." (Participant 8, Pos. 56). Although, the great majority of the participants agreed that their student's participation did not suffer any slump but rather was linear in conformity with their presential education performance. Here are some examples of the answers from this question from the following question:

Interviewer: In terms of participation and interest in the classroom did you notice any difference?

"No, the students that participated in the school are the same that participate at home, that means, if you position everything in the scale the ones that used to do are the ones that continued to do, the ones that participated are the ones that continued to." (Participant 10, Pos. 51-52).

"The truth is that the ones that participate do it equally in one way or the other..." (Participant 1, Pos. 21)

"Not really, I think who was more participative was similar during presential and online classes." (Participant 7, Pos. 58)

The data suggests that there are no notable differences in terms of students' participation while comparing presential and online classes, some teachers went further and revealed that some students desire to participate even progressed during online classes:

"The autonomous fulfilment of students that already used to do their tasks in a normal classroom without any great problems maintain their attitude, that means they fulfil. Curiously some students that in a classroom were more resistant in class the fact that classes went online made them more compliant." (Participant 5, Pos. 66)

"I have some cases of more introverted kids that at home took a leap and participated more willingly, that means, maybe they were less conditioned by the physical presence." (Participant 7, Pos. 62).

"I think there was an improvement on the effort generally speaking...I think effort ended up being reinforced in this online classes, perhaps because of the distraction for some from some

factors that caused distraction are easier controlled or simply students are not willing to disturb during online class” (Participant 6, Pos. 46)

Online classes in terms of superficial cognitive outcomes seem, in most cases, not have oscillated so much in terms of performance. In some cases, students felt even more comfortable to participate. On the next chapter I will present the results of the deep level of engagement where students organizational strategies while investing in their learning tasks were discussed.

Deep level of cognitive engagement

For this level of cognitive engagement elements that could offer a representation of development related to the cognitive aspect whilst having online classes were pinpointed (coded). Competences such as autonomy and organizational habits were mentioned throughout most of the interviews, suggesting an influence of online classes on young students in a deeper level of cognitive engagement.

While dividing classes in two main moments, namely synchronous and asynchronous moments, it became unavoidable that students had to work by themselves part of the time during the asynchronous moments. Nevertheless, teachers decided to be always accessible in case any students had any doubt: “... even though I was not all the time present during the asynchronous moments I was online in the platform Teams, they would do their exercises and ask any questions, anytime they had any doubt they would send me a message and I would respond...” (Participant 3 , Pos. 60-61). So inevitably, students that were used to simply raising their hands to have a formative evaluation of their work on the spot, now had to predominantly work by themselves and afterwards wait for feedback. This shift of methodologies created an opportunity for some to develop their sense of autonomy i.e: “The students that had at home all the conditions to work, a good internet coverage, computer, a friendly and stable family environment and a bit of curiosity, effectively developed a lot of competences, that they maybe otherwise would not have.

Interviewer: Could you identify these competencies?

The autonomy, digital literacy while doing the tasks and responsibility.” (Participant 9, Pos. 81-84)

“Certainly, in the beginning the parents would give a hand, and it is normal since the kids were not use to digital learning, but I think the autonomy became really reinforced” (Participant 3, Pos. 65)

It is important to reinforce the crucial role of the parents’, participation in their childrens’ education during these almost two academic years. In the begging of this Covid-19 pandemic no one could foresee the duration of such consequent confinement, therefore in the last semester of the 2019/2020 academic year the adaptation was made slowly and teachers manly used email as a key source of communication and feedback between students/families and teachers:

“Initially was really complicated, for many reasons, not just because of the online classes but the whole adaptation necessary from the families and teachers. Initially parents, particularly in my school cluster, were not so comfortable in terms of technology and there was a need from the school to reinforce the information to the parents so they would understand that they needed to adapt and learn so we could...

Interviewer: respond to the challenge?

Exactly, and I think at the beginning it was really complicated, a lot of them (parents) would not even answer the emails, sometimes we had to insist with several phone calls so they would answer the emails, the beginning was really hard... from our side (teachers) there was a lot of insistence, a lot of emails, so parents would understand that there was a need for their feedback about their children’s works, that teachers would send tasks and that they needed to send it back, the begging was really hard”. (Participant 11, Pos. 6-8)

Adaptations were gradually made for everyone. In a positive and inspiring note when asked to reflect on what kind of competences these adversities were propitious to develop some answers were surprising:

A lot of autonomy, and I sent messages to the parents that it should be the kids to organize their work, to verify what they needed to do, what were the works they needed to send, following an orderly the plan because the plan has everything well structure so everything would line up. Of course, in the beginning parents helped a bit, its normal because kids are not used to these things, but yes, I think their autonomy ended up being highly reinforced with this experience.” (Participant 3 , Pos. 65).

“...After a conversation with my colleagues on how they felt their students experienced this situation... there are changes in their effort, interest and participation maybe because they started to value the school differently.” (Participant 6, Pos. 44)

These and other participants suggested that, after a somehow forced and hectic transition from live to online, unexpectedly some students improved with this style of education in areas such as organization, autonomy and participation. While reflecting on the importance of autonomy on the cognitive engagement, Blumenfeld defines autonomy as the opportunity that students have to take choices and have a significant role in their academic path (Blumenfeld et al (2006), similar to that which happened during the asynchronous moments when students had to plan the resolution of their activities by themselves. Furthermore, Blumenfeld explains how teachers can encourage students’ autonomy, “teachers can support autonomy by allowing students to make decisions about topics, selection and planning of activities, and artifact development” (Blumenfeld et al 2006, p.4).

In the next chapter the results of the dimension Agency will be presented, that goes hand in hand with concept of autonomy, “agency” in simple terms is the level of input provided by students.

5.3.4 Agency Dimension

This dimensional tripartite taxonomy elaborated by Fredricks et al. (2004) could not mirror a holistic perspective of the current situation. In times when your privileges as humans are being revoked for a common cause, your opinion and your actions are at mercy of those measures/contingencies. Students had to stay home to ease the spread of the virus, a generational event occurred during their childhood and without an alternative, they had to conform. What happens to the agency of kids when they are told to stay home? While scrutinizing these three well studied dimensions, Reeve & Tseng raised a fair criticism about their limitations. They all capture the receptiveness of students towards the teachers flow of instructional activities, but lack on the students input on them (Reeve & Tseng, 2011, Reeve, 2012). What happens to students’ inputs, or how this study frames it, how do teachers perceive their students ‘agency during online classes?

Although the definition of teachers’ agency seems vast in the literature, what seems to be the core idea is to offer teachers capacity to act freely to facilitate students learning (Biesta et al.,

2015) Teachers had their teaching skills and habits tested during the confinement. The methodologies once used did not match the needs of present situation as participant 3 clearly states: “It was a really abrupt change, we did not have much time to prepare, almost from one week to another it was really hard. The methodologies had to be completely modified, the planning of activities, the search for pedagogical materials, almost everything we had could not be materialized because it had to be online. Personally, this was hard and the correction of the exercises, how will I correct this and how I am going to send that, how do I do this? So, it was hours and hours and hours of extra work.” (Participant 3, Pos. 76). This situation required a level of creativity from the teachers to not only teach the conventional content but also to engage students in a reality they were not prepared for. With great effort and creativity teachers fought to elaborate motivational activities for students to follow. Nevertheless, students that were more comfortable with technologies even helped the teachers with some advice on how to manage the platforms, reinforcing the synergy between teachers and students: “Some yes, as a result some would provide input on how I should play the movie for example, because they could not listen or see.” (Participant 10, Pos. 85).

The online classes did not seem to be an obstacle for students to express themselves: “No, in a general way I think the students manifested their problems and what they were experiencing and if they liked it or not.” (Participant 6, Pos. 48). The young students, here faced with some adversities to their education, found a peculiar way to use the virtual classrooms to share their feelings and thoughts and cooperatively complete the tasks, as presented in the emotional dimension chapter, students would create extra rooms as soon as the class was over: “Even though it was a virtual classroom, afterwards they would go to small chat rooms and connect constantly between each other and that helped to maintain a closer connection and a more present connection, rather than just the classroom contact where they are more conditioned by only staring at their peers pictures but really not interacting with them.” (Participant 7, Pos. 44). Students after some adaptation felt comfortable to study through the computer not just in terms of preservation of friendships, but also in terms of expressing themselves, in exposing their thoughts and add some of their own individuality to the task on demand i.e: “... we always tried to program the activities so they would be motivating for students and sometimes because there were activities that they needed to use other resources from their homes, for instance recyclable materials, the parents who were more involved would even send more work than what we requested, and

sometimes we had an extra load of work to correct...” (Participant 11, Pos. 46), another example that we can see a clear eagerness from students to interact and to express themselves: “... sometimes they would send videos for instance the reading exercises for first year, they would have to read a passage from a book and send it to the teacher afterwards, and sometimes was interesting, in the middle of the video you would hear “oh teacher I miss you” or “I like this character”, so it was visible in between tasks they would end up somehow adding a personal touch to the task” (Participant 11, Pos. 60). The mere freedom to complete the task at home, whenever they would prefer until the end of the week, seem to lighten the weight of the task itself and even provide an opportunity to work on their autonomy and self-interest.

This initiative taken by students was hardly felt by many of the older students, namely 3rd to 6th year of schooling, whereas 1st and 2nd year were more dependent on their parents: “Students of the 4th year did not have any problems in contacting and explaining how they managed the activity, also, for those more attractive activities they would send videos demonstrating if they liked it and how they made it, now for the 1st year students it was more the parents that would send an email explaining if it was hard or easy.” (Participant 11, Pos. 60). Still on the 4th year students: “...the work although asynchronous they come to my room, because my room is always open during the day and I receive a notification, that means if he/she has a question, or he/she does not understand, or he/she cannot deliver his/hers work, whatever it is they already gain that autonomy to come to the classroom when they need it to clarify anything, to develop work or even to ask for more work. (Participant 2, Pos. 34). The reinforced relationship between the students and teachers through online classes underlines the pivotal aspect of agency that Reeve described as agentic actions of students do not necessarily enhanced learning conditions but rather promotes the relationship between students and teachers when a student led action renders “the learning environment to become more motivationally supportive” (Reeve, 2013, p. 581).

5.4 Teachers views on the Decree-Law no 54/2018, July 6

To obtain a more holistic perspective of how Covid-19 impacted the Portuguese educational system, there is a need to mention one of the latest reforms that helped shape the education of currently. The decree law homologated in 2018, advances a pedagogical model based to ensure an inclusive education for every student independently of their personal and social background, supporting the idea that all “students can achieve a profile of competencies and skills at the end

of their compulsory education career, even if they follow different learning paths.” (Ines Alves, et al. 2020 p.3), or in practical matters as participant 1 summarized: “... the 54 essentially came to legalize the valorisation, because it allows us to use the individual characteristics and their strengths in their evaluation.” (Participant 1, Pos. 41)

While having a multidisciplinary team at their disposal to help this identified-with-learning-support-measures student’s education, teachers during online classes found a way to divide his/hers attention equally to the whole class: “We created simultaneous rooms in various situations allowing students with certain interests to be working in one activity and other students that had more difficulties or with different interests to be working in other activities. Whilst the teacher would be visiting each room providing feedback to the activities that they were working on. It was one way that we found to meet students interests and their difficulties.” (Participant 6, Pos. 50).

The value of Inclusion encompassed in the legislation was covered by most of the interviewees i.e.:

“Doing an equilibrium in those synchronous moments that they had with the whole class and individual moments to treat their needs in terms of education, and then those synchronous moments with the class to work different competencies.

Interviewer: Like inclusion?

Exactly, in areas of expressions, science, appealing more to the orality, where they would feel more included and valued in any way, and they need those moments to improve on the missing content.

Interviewer: That comes with the assistance of the multidisciplinary teams?

Exactly, all coordinated, they had synchronous moments with all the team. “(Participant 9, Pos. 66-70)

Two of the interviewees were part of the multidisciplinary teams, providing a great insight into how these measures are put into practise ie.:

“When you get to know the student and for instance know that he/she is good in a certain area, an example just came to my mind: I have a student that draws really well, from that starting point I try to direct his learning process. This student that it has a lot of difficulties in writing I

am working with him on a book that he is writing, with his story and afterwards corrected by me and then he did the illustration of his own story. Concluding with the presentation of the book to the whole class. With this work I am developing his writing skills, reading and interpretation... and then his illustration of his story about his Hero.” (Participant 8, Pos. 61). The same participant shared another example of a student that had some difficulties in writing who had a passion for baking, so similarly to the previous example the teacher asked this student to present a recipe with detailed information about baking a cake of the student’s choice, working her writing skills but also when presenting to the class enhancing her inclusion competencies. As stated in the decree, inclusion plays a crucial role in integrating students into the school’s society and consequently in their academic improvement.

A participant described the online classes as a methodology that contributed with great opportunities for teachers to work more in favour of these students: “In one hand, because the online classes had a class schedule slightly reduced, it became easier for them (students) and consequently lot of them became more responsible. On the other hand, for me (teacher) it was also easier because I had more time to create adapted activities, because during normal presential times it was harder to have the necessary available time to have this special care and it happen that during online classes I had the time to create better materials like PowerPoints, something more expository...” (Participant 5, Pos. 96)

These changes affected students but also teachers experienced an increase in their work load, this opinion was unanimous mostly in terms of bureaucracy issues: “ Related to bureaucracy our country is flooded in bureaucracy for everything, even for the “54” it was terrible it did not benefit us it only gave us more work, It does not mean that students are not profiting from it and that the vision is wrong but in terms of bureaucracy it is awful; reports, charts, graphs it is a never-ending story.” (Participant 3, Pos. 86), “In terms of bureaucracy I believe we got worse...” (Participant 5, Pos. 104), “Related to bureaucracy we withstand, we quit doing so many things on paper but instead on the platforms and a lot of times as well in paper, meaning what it was supposed to be a “de-bureaucratization” became an increase of workload in the majority of the cases” (Participant 6, Pos. 56). These and other cases were highly vocal during the interviews, when expressing their disapproval associated to the workload that resulted from this reform.

5.5 Teachers and Technology

On the bright side, teachers had a chance to practice their agency. Although the definition of teacher's agency may vary, one commonly agreed idea is: developing teachers' capacity for professional action at their own discretion, in order to enhance student learning (Biesta et al., 2015). Throughout my interviews one common aspect that stood out was that teachers had to find solutions never used before to respond to the new challenges or as participant 3 said:

Person 3: "And so it was a lifetime of exploration and every day we would learn something, if one thing would not go as planned another other day it would, I had students telling me "Oh teacher you are always finding new things" and I said "Yes I have to" (Participant 3, Pos. 79)".

In this excerpt we have a participant with almost 30 years of profession exhibiting not just his struggle towards technology and a hope of a possible normalization but also, a constant flexibility to adapt his methodologies on behalf of his students' education.

When asked how the transition from presential to online was, a there was a universal opinion from multiple participants:

First, I will present two young (per se) participants with 14 and 9 years of teaching experience.

"I cannot answer as a whole, but yes a lot of us had difficulties sometimes related to the age, I am not saying the age is a synonym for inability to work with technologies but sometimes the older teachers close to retirement felt more difficulties" (Participant 1, Pos. 17).

"So we have a very aged educational staff, which makes it difficult, not just the change and being able to adapt to in this case a pandemic but other contexts, even at the level of strategies of education we have an educational staff really accommodated, really old, really fixed and that is difficult in these times of change, in new contexts that we have to pass from the immediate to other register it becomes an entropy." (Participant 2, Pos. 20)

Lastly two experienced participants with 38- and 33-years teaching experience.

"To start, me and computers never had a good relationship. I am more a direct contact, the touch, the dialogue, the expression kind of person, and I think through the computer most of it gets lost, there are good things, but I think in terms of education that does not work so well... Initially I had to ask help to my young colleagues that are more devoted and used to work in

these areas, and afterwards little by little I manage, and since then I have taught like I should via Zoom.“ (Participant 8, Pos. 22)

“Maybe not with easiness, there were some colleagues that initially had difficulties maybe some obduracy relatively to the usage of those means (technology), nonetheless in general they all managed to adapt at least to the basics...” (Participant 6, Pos. 20)

Furthermore, some other examples with more practical implications came to surface like “I have colleagues that do not even have a computer at home...” (Participant 4, Pos. 20), and in terms of handling the platforms: “My older colleagues were more reticent in the use of the platforms, they had more difficulties sometimes in the creation of documents or sharing the documents... becoming administrators of the meeting and blocking microphones...” (Participant 5, Pos. 19-22). These are just some examples of how abrupt and difficult the transition was felt in the general educational staff.

To tackle these upcoming needs of teachers, the Portuguese government provided training for the use of platforms and other educational tools. Nevertheless, some teacher preferred to learn with their peers how to manoeuvre within these new technologies: “... turned out to be a lot of exchanges and support between teachers... the older teachers were humble to the point of asking for help, and this was the reality...” (Participant 10, Pos. 34). Some participants decided to take those small courses and some others decided to learn amongst themselves: “No, it was trial and error and a lot of hours dedicated between colleagues, studying the platform (Zoom) so afterwards things would run smoothly with the students.” (Participant 6, Pos. 16). Overall, the transition was described not with ease but gradual, achieving the basic requirements needed to proceed with the student’s education mostly by the second school year of the Covid-19 pandemic 2020/2021.

6 Discussion

The present chapter aims to consolidate the findings of this study, bringing the existent knowledge and the stories here presented by creating a holistic analysis of the matter studied.

The Covid-19 times here represented in this study revealed to be the Cicerone of the still ongoing human experience. This virus that viciously spread without warning shaped our lives and perhaps the way we perceive our experiences. This study aims to better understand the impact that it had in education settings and ultimately have a qualitative answer to how the student's engagement changed (if so) through the research question: "How do teachers perceive their students' engagement during online classes?"

The journey of the shift between presential and online education was widely described by the participants as "abrupt and vicious" revealing some fragilities in the immutable way that we usually portrait education. For the Portuguese teachers where the staff is defined "aged teaching staff, worn out, with many professionals in a situation of stress and burnout" (Fenprof Mario Nogueira on an interview for (national tv, the transition was very hard in some cases leading to frustration and burnout. The time spent in front of a computer revealed to be saturating factor for teacher: "The burnout of teachers was enormous in terms of hours spent in front of the screen, because the students can be in asynchronous moments but the teacher has to always be available on the computer to any student that logs in and needs help with his/hers work, that is definitely one of the negative aspects." (Participant 6, Pos. 42). Additionally, the abrupt unexpected shift forced teachers to discover new methodologies in order to adapt to the new online classes: "It was a really abrupt change, we did not have much time to prepare, almost from one week to another it was really hard. The methodologies had to be completely modified, the planning of activities, the search for pedagogical materials, almost everything we had could not be materialized because it had to be online. Personally, this was hard and the correction of the exercises, how will I correct this and how I am going to send that, how do I do this? So, it was hours and hours and hours of extra work." (Participant 3, Pos. 76).

The government provided some basic training to tackle the lack of knowledge in these educational platforms such as Teams and Zoom. By the second academic year teachers had managed to sufficiently adapt their methodologies to an online education. Many participants stressed this event as a moment that brought together young and older teachers to fight for a common cause as many older teachers requested help from the younger colleagues to instruct them into these

unknown platforms: "... turned out to be a lot of exchanges and support between teachers... the older teachers were humble to the point of asking for help, and this was the reality..." (Participant 10, Pos. 34). Furthermore, students that were more used to these technologies helped teachers with some tips on how to solve some technical issues that may have occurred during the classes, these opportunities to practice their agency culminated in higher synergy between teachers and students an aspect that Reeve (2013) described as an outcome of agentic actions. These agentic actions of students do not directly enhance the learning conditions but rather strengthen the relationship between students and teachers, resolving into "the learning environment to become more motivationally supportive" (Reeve, 2013, p. 581).

The students were faced with a remarkable generational event and had some challenges to face., the absence of their friends and teacher's physical presence and an improvised classroom inside their homes. Whilst at home, students had to constantly negotiate their space with their cohabiting family, which played a major role in their childrens' education. Teachers relied on parents help to tackle the needs originated by this educational transition, the combined efforts were profitable for some students and not so much for others as the education level and digital literacy of parents were crucial for the good progress of the tasks/activities: "I think the family context was fundamental for the student's ability to surpass this special situation in school. Some of the students that I had in my class had parents who were not so involved and had no awareness of how important their involvement was, the students were disadvantaged, because parents would not send their homework, teachers would send emails so they would send the work, but they would not even answer, all this derived from the family context. In this Covid-19 pandemic the involvement of parents was fundamental, and those who dedicated themselves (parents) to their children's tasks their children gained from this experience. Others, where parents were not minimally motivated or educated, ended up being really disadvantaged." (Participant 11, Pos. 42). Additionally teachers that felt their students being supported by parents acknowledge some benefits i.e.: "... after long talks with my colleagues, in relation to year 1 students where there was a need for a higher participation of parents, which related to the development of reading the students from 1st and 2nd year profit a lot, because the parents were more present and could see that the teachers were not there to help and they had to compensate, in this situation they (students) evolved a lot, in terms of reading skills because the parents were more present and they would listen to their kids because they knew it was fundamental for their development of reading and writing." (Participant 11, Pos. 64). As an outcome derived from

the agency dimension interviews content analyses, students seem to be receptive to the instructions given by the teachers, some even providing some extra feedback to the classes. The perception of the teachers about these “natives of digital times”, after an adaptation phase, seemed to be comfortable learning through online classes.

Now proceeding to the emotional dimension englobing the relationships and sense of belonging with the school (and staff members), the outcomes varied from the parents influence and the strategies develop by students to stay in contact with their peers.

Parents found themselves in middle of a scenario where their presence would become crucial to the development of their childrens’ education. During the Covid-19 pandemic parents, as well as students, had to stay home to reduce the infection rate of Covid-19. Parents had important role in supporting the teachers work and in some cases the lack of experience and digital knowledge from parents impacted the student’s education attainment. As presented in the findings chapter, the dialogue between teachers and parents through the diverse spectrum of platforms was not always reciprocal, leading to a miscommunication between two critical components in the student’s education. Nevertheless, parents who were well involved in their children’s education had some positive outcomes, for instance, students from the 1st and 2nd year due to the constant presence of parents developed better habits of reading since parents were always there to listen (Participant 11, Pos. 64).

Students who were deprived of their friend’s physical presence were highly vocal throughout the whole online classes experience, feelings of nostalgia culminated in a higher value given to the school classroom. Students could only be with their peers through a camera, interestingly they found ways to respond to those adversities proving their willingness and competence in the digital world. Many participants share stories of their students’ creative ways to be with their peers after the synchronous moments, by creating a chat room using the educational platforms (TEAMS or Zoom) or a simple Facebook class group, students’ aptitudes regarding technology proved to be creative and up to date.

Furthermore, another aspect focused on the emotional dimension, was the relationship between teachers and students. During synchronous and asynchronous sessions teachers had to be available, consequently teachers felt their working hours sometimes more than doubled:

“It was triple the hours , I spent 10/12 hours sitting next to the computer, it was dreadful”. (Participant 3, Pos. 88)

“We have 9 hours of autonomous work, those 9 hours we distribute as we prefer and a lot of times if we are not extremely organized and competent in the digital area it becomes harder...” (Participant 5. Pos. 98)

On the other hand, the augmented presence of teachers in the students’ lives, represented by synchronous and asynchronous moments (student time working on task and in case needed talking with teacher for feedback), lead into a reinforcement of their relationship. Teachers became more aware of students’ individual difficulties and their families reality: “I think this situation of the distant learning could also help us teachers to understand some difficulties that some students may have, that is on the lack of family support that they may have with some learning tasks. Now maybe we realize it more because of distant learning, particularly in students with less resources and support from their parents, that demands from our side an intervention more timely and thoughtful so we can verify the needs that may occur.” (Participant 6, Pos. 32). The reinforced relatedness to these 3 groups (parents, teachers and students) contribute to a higher emotional engagement by students (Skinner, 2008).

Participants often define the parent’s involvement in the learning process as decisive during the Covid-19 pandemic. Some stress the suppression or “censorship” resultant from the parent’s presence as impediments to their freedom of expression, conditioning the behaviours of students. As an outcome of the behavioural dimension the general perception of the participants indicates a continuous and non-deviant behavioural engagement of students, students seem to be compliant with online classes settings and sometimes even more engaged: “Curiously some students that in a classroom were more resistant the fact when classes went online were more compliant.” (Participant 5, Pos. 66)

On the cognitive dimension, the perception of teachers was not so unanimous, some teachers felt their students were less engaged due to the possible distractions of their new working place others felt their students equally engaged in their task as in presential schooling. The results of the cognitive dimension analysis seem to be inconclusive, nevertheless the online classes created a space where students practised their autonomy and responsibility. In order to respond to the required tasks students had to plan by themselves when to and how do the tasks, providing an opportunity to improve in some competences that otherwise would not be so propitious: “The students who had at home good the conditions to work, a good internet coverage, computer, a friendly and stable family environment and a bit of curiosity, effectively develop a lot

of competences, that maybe otherwise would not... The autonomy, digital literacy while doing the tasks and responsibility.” (Participant 9, Pos. 81-84).

Lastly, to include all my participant’s students, a reflection on one of the latest reforms in the Portuguese system of education is required. As mentioned in the theoretical framework this decree law aims to ensure all students independently of their background are offered the same opportunities to learn, advocating that all “students can achieve a profile of competencies and skills at the end of their compulsory education career, even if they follow different learning paths.” (Ines Alves, et al. 2020 p.3). During my interviews this identified-with-learning-support-measures students were highly mention by the participants, students covered by this decree law had a different treatment during Covid-19. All students covered by these measures were eligible for a specific support to overpass the student’s needs, resources such as psychologists and special education teachers were allocated to support the needs of these students.

Two of the participants were part of these multidisciplinary teams providing a great insight on how these students have been taken care of, from extra synchronous moments with these specialists to individualized tasks/homework, the participants that integrate the multidisciplinary teams dedicated themselves during this pandemic to trying to create engaging activities for these students. To answer the educational difficulties of these students’ activities by involving their home education features were the main key, as the example provided in the findings chapter where the special education teacher asked the student to write a detailed recipe at her taste, exploiting the resources of her home including the knowledge of her family. This and other examples were provided, and they all had one thing in common, they all seem to allocate their interests to the task, as if the best tool to motivate a student with certain difficulties would be by focusing in their insights. Additionally, when teachers described their customized approach to these students they often focused on their agency as a vehicle to improve their grades. Furthermore, most of the participants stressed their opinion about the “terrible” bureaucracy that such decree law brought to light, nevertheless they were unanimous regarding the benefits this decree brought to students. (Participant 3, Pos. 86)

6.1 Conclusion

The obstacles exposed by the Covid-19 pandemic seemed to be a challenge for the aged teaching staff in Portugal, however with the support of young colleagues and the government a way was found to face the challenge. New ways of teaching emerged from these unparalleled times emphasising the resilience of these teachers and students desire to teach and learn.

This study analysed the present times through the lens of the dimensions of engagement, namely Emotional, Behavioural, Cognitive and Agency. The outcomes derived from the content analyses of 11 interviews to 1st and 2nd cycle of Portuguese teachers completed in the second wave (6 of march and 6 of April 2021) of the still on-going pandemic provided a clearer picture of the struggles faced by the educational community.

The findings vary from each dimension but certainly the pandemic caused shift of paradigm in education and revealed possible adaptations which could be made in future endeavours of education. The general view depicted by the participants defined this shift to be “not the most ideal for this group age of students” (ages comprehended between 6-11), although there was not a flagrant change in their engagement. Nevertheless, in some cases, some students embraced the challenge in a different way and even prospered with these new methodologies, leaving us with the question is online classes are the future of education? Additionally, values of autonomy, organization and independency were often mention throughout the data as reinforced during the school closures a finding that was also mention by the 2021 OECD report: “Effective learning out of school during the pandemic placed much greater demands on autonomy, capacity for independent learning, executive functioning and self-monitoring.” (OECD, The state of school education, 2021, pg.5)

The present study collected responses on the possible oscillations of the student’s engagement during a forced transition between presential and online classes, contributing to a richer perception of the events resultant from the Covid-19 pandemic. To conclude whilst a forced transition to online classes was required across the whole world values and strategies of education were reinvented. In case of the Portuguese system of education, or as the perception of the participants presented in this study, the transition was made progressively, although it is too soon for the aftermath the response seems to be appropriate and perhaps it opened new doors for the future of education.

6.2 Future research

Amid the current Covid-19 pandemic this study aimed to better grasp the event outcomes in the Portuguese education, the findings of this study indicate that in some cases online classes could represent the future of education by providing a space where students feel equal and comfortable to share. Further research is needed to consolidate the positive and negative aspects of online learning, adding valuable data to better understand the discourse by perhaps through a longitudinal study of a student group where the dimensions would take the main stage but also variables such as age and gender would be included.

During my research many avenues were considered but due to the current situation the context played a big role on the direction of the study. Nevertheless, one interesting idea that came to light was a visual construction of the dimensions, a tool that could help teachers systematize and categorize the engagement development of the student and perhaps pass on to the follower teacher as a complimentary information of the student evaluation.

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