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Play to aspire and create new realities

O brincar para aspirar e criar novas realidades

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Abstract

This paper discusses core principles such as play, collaboration, and agency that support the online workshops offered by the Global Play Brigade (GPB), an international community of activists from different areas, who got together to fight against the global crisis that threatened the world in so many ways due to the covid-19 pandemic. To exemplify part of the theoretical and methodological approach involved in the plan and, the workshop, as well as its goals and one of the sessions, will be described along with perspectives aligned to Spinoza, Vygotsky, Freire, and some other authors to promote understanding of how people can be affected towards social change. It is known that there are many facets to the current turmoil, so the GPB seeks to create spaces in which creativity and critical thinking can create possibilities for emotional support, development, hope, and action.

Keywords: Play, collaboration, agency, *affectus*

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Resumo

Este artigo discute princípios fundamentais como brincar, colaboração e agência que são base para os *workshops online* oferecidos pela Global Play Brigade (GPB), uma comunidade internacional de ativistas em diferentes áreas, que se uniram para lutar contra a crise global que ameaçava o mundo de diferentes maneiras devido à pandemia da covid-19. Para exemplificar parte da abordagem teórico-metodológica envolvida no plano, o próprio *workshop* e seus objetivos, uma das sessões será descrita juntamente com perspectivas alinhadas a Spinoza, Vygotsky, Freire e alguns outros autores para entender como as pessoas podem ser afetadas no intuito de mudança social. É notório que a turbulência atual apresenta muitas facetas, por isso o GPB busca criar espaços nos quais a criatividade e o pensamento crítico possibilitem suporte emocional, desenvolvimento, esperança e ação.

Palavras-chave: brincar, colaboração, agência, *affectus*

1. Introduction

The year 2020 dramatically changed the history of humankind. This fact not only refers to the impact of the coronavirus all over the world, but also turns the spotlight onto some open wounds caused by social inequality, which we have not yet been able to heal. This worldwide crisis made us face that what we have accomplished so far might not keep us away from so many kinds of threats to our existence. The only hope is to fight against opposing forces, such as racism, exploitation, violence, prejudice, and the like. We urgently need to stand up for the planet we live in and (re)think the ways we lead our lives as residents (Krenak, 2020).

Such need is one of the principles that motivated the Global Play Brigade (GPB)¹ to bring together artists, improvisers, educators, musicians, clowns, therapists, and other activists from almost 40 countries to offer free online workshops to people across the globe. Once ZOOM, WhatsApp, and Facebook were some of the technological tools that could connect people back in March of 2020, when the pandemic spread worldwide, these activists, better known as Brigadiers, launched a website with a vast list of activities available to anyone who was struggling to keep social distancing measures and somehow became related to the topics addressed.

¹ For further information: <https://www.globalplaybrigade.org/>

Since then, the GPB has offered free Play and Talk workshops in different languages and time zones around the world. As stated in the GPB Mission, these sessions offer people a chance to play, improvise, grow, and tell stories together. It is a place to share and listen to others while everyone is going through a crisis. From kids to adults, the GPB has tried to embrace people virtually, as that was not possible physically, in an attempt to experience joy, pain, reflection, creativity, and affection through play in a way they can change their immediate reality first, but also aim at long-term outcomes.

In Brazil, this happened with group *Brincadas*², an initiative that the LACE Research Group³ decided to launch when the researcher group leader, Fernanda Liberali, joined the GPB. Soon after, *Brincadas* became a Brazilian community that both offered support to educators, principals, coordinators, parents, and students in school contexts and provided food, medicine, and conversation to people in need. The group also provided other intervention services through national campaigns and international sponsors, such as donating masks and other personal protective clothing and equipment to health professionals, who had to fight covid-19, but did not have enough support from the government at that time.

LACE Research Group's actions derive from its fundamentals in Applied Linguistics (AL), an area of study that questions everyday attitudes to life through language and how it constitutes human beings and all their activities in social interactions. It is crucial for AL studies to take a critical stance towards social issues, building bridges with different areas such as Education, Psychology, Sociology, Philosophy, among others (Moita Lopes, 2006). The aim of AL is to combine new discourses and ways to create reality through multiple forms of saying, feeling, acting, that is to say, being in the world. LACE is also aligned to a socio-historical-cultural approach in a vygotskian conceptualization, which will be discussed in this paper.

Considering this scenario, two Brazilian Higher Education professors, members of the LACE Research Group, joined the GPB as Brigadiers, and decided to offer a workshop in which their college students could practice some English language skills and talk to professionals in other countries. These participants were also invited to discover what they could do towards

² For further information: <https://is.gd/6zBPTJ>

³ LACE stands for Language in Activity in the School Context. This Research Group is based at the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo, Brazil (PUCSP), which is led by Professors Maria Cecília Camargo Magalhães and Fernanda Coelho Liberali.

global collaboration, being mindful of the crisis everyone was going through simultaneously, though feeling it differently, at that moment. The workshop was held in July, gathering around fifteen participants on ZOOM, who shared their personal and professional experiences while playing and talking for an hour.

Based on that workshop, this paper aims to discuss some theoretical and practical concepts, namely collaboration and play, which are key to the GPB and thus essential to the session offered as well. Collaboration, grounded in the Critical Collaborative Research (Magalhães & Fidalgo, 2019), highlights co-authorship and co-construction among all the participants involved in a certain activity. In this play session, for example, participants mutually collaborated in the activities proposed by exchanging their own experience, interacting with the resources available, and understanding that the way everyone is affected by the diversity in the group is essential for collective growth.

Play (Vygotsky, 2001; Holzman, 2009), another key concept to this discussion, provides encounters in which participants have to deal with rules, the unknown in an online context, and some agency according to the conflicts raised in the session. As such, this paper discusses and exemplifies how participants could experience these principles, just as they were thought out in the workshop plan and later referred to by participants in certain moments in the session. By aligning these concepts to some of the testimonials, we can infer that play is a powerful intervention resource to create what Freire (1970) proposed as the viable unheard of, that is, the potential to transform reality.

As a core principle in the GPB, play aims at social change in a broad spectrum. Participants share their everyday life experiences while playing and expand them to a global perspective as well, through creativity and connection created in the workshops (Vygotsky, 2004). They are about hope, emotional support, and development as participants play and talk to find possibilities beyond the crisis. This approach in the GPB community seeks to offer opportunities to question, imagine, and create new realities as a response to dehumanization and the deterioration of ecosystems.

2. A collaborative perspective in the workshop

As the GPB launch happened on June 8, 2020, workshops started to be offered and Brigadiers could join any of the weekly meetings to exchange ideas, experience some improvisational games, play and performance tools or social therapy sessions themselves. This provided them with some emotional growth and support to carry on the activities and actions announced on the GPB website. During such meetings, Brigadiers also had a chance to partner with (an)other Brigadier(s) to discuss their plans for a session they decided on facilitating. In one of these meetings, two Brigadiers who worked as English professors in government owned colleges in the state of São Paulo, Brazil, decided to team up with another colleague in the same institution to offer a workshop entitled *Global Collaboration: What can young professionals do?*

The decision to offer such workshop was made in July, 2020, at the end of a difficult semester in which their students in areas such as Logistics, Human Resources, Commercial Management, Systems Analysis, and Business had not yet understood all the huge changes in their courses routines, let alone the uncertainty of the job market. Thus, the objective of the workshop was to help participants share their fears regarding speaking English online to a stranger as well as finding out what people were doing worldwide to deal with the crisis. Hopefully, this would help participants critically understand different views, take a stance and collaborate in whatever way they could.

The three Brazilian professors that planned the workshop invited young professionals⁴ from different areas to join the workshop as guests. Some of them were living abroad, so they could genuinely answer the question addressed in the workshop *What can young professionals do?* The other participants, mostly their college students who were intermediate learners of English, would take part in a play session. It would be quite different from their learning experience in class because, compared to their space of language practice, they would have more freedom and could take risks.

This context, prior to the workshop, is understood as collaborative itself, as it implies people working together and mutually supporting one another. Such an environment demands trust and dedication from each party to achieve a common objective shared by the group. These characteristics follow the philosophical trail, proposed by Spinoza (2003, IV, p. 9), which

⁴ Participants agreed to share their data according to the Research Ethics Committee. (CAAE: 34700720.4.0000.5482). October 15th, 2020.

says that when “(...) two individuals of entirely the same nature are united, they form a combination twice as powerful as either of them singly”. In this sense, the collaborative perspective implies engaging with others towards some common ground to enhance everyone’s potential for existence, that is, finding out ways to interact, which enable collective and individual growth.

In the Critical Collaborative Research (PCcol) (Magalhães, 2009) perspective, this movement is understood as intervention in practice, in which the participants involved are active in the production of knowledge. Also, PCcol highlights voluntary engagement, promotes critical participation and brings multiple voices to the research context. These multiple voices in collaboration trigger contradictions and tensions, which are essential to unleash critical reflection and possible transformations to the context. The confrontations that operate in the world of social relations can be justified in and by language, which is the central issue in AL studies. This collaborative perspective highlights an engaged attitude through shared work, built by the sum of efforts of those involved.

Considering all these issues, the workshop was organized according to some of the guidelines drawn up by the GPB community, namely:

- Opening Song.
- Greetings, GPB opening script and a brief orientation of ZOOM tools.
- Play/Talk session.
- Thanks and GPB closing script.
- Closing Song.

For this specific workshop the facilitators chose to offer a play and talk session in a way participants would feel more comfortable to use English in a combination of settings, rather than a one-hour lecture, which is not a GPB practice. However, there was a chance that such lecture would take place because of learners’ inhibitions, as the learners who were taking part in the workshop were not familiar with interacting with strangers in English. There were five interconnected activities that involved play and talk, so that core principles such as collaboration, affect, and agency could somehow be addressed in the talk and shared in the play settings.

This approach to the workshop considers the multimodal resources available on ZOOM, which enable interactions among participants such as audio, video, and written text in the chat. Revisiting Vygotsky (2004), intentionality is always present to the facilitator in a collaborative learning space because the facilitator is responsible for arranging available resources to encourage participation. In this session, for example, play and talk were the main forms of participation planned by facilitators, who were the professors that organized the workshop.

As a result, facilitators organized the sequence of activities, namely the opening and closing songs as well as the way play and talk were aligned to the topic of global collaboration. Thus, the young professionals who were guests to the workshop could relate to their personal experience and, hopefully, engage with others during the workshop – and after it – to start thinking of creative ways to increase their power of action. The idea was to create a space in which the group could expand their *conatus* as quoted by Spinoza (2003, III, Prop. VII), that is, the potential to improve and nurture one's existence.

3. Play as an intervention resource

In this section of the paper, we are going to describe the workshop as well as present and discuss some of the activities included, to exemplify the theoretical and practical concepts of collaboration and play. Figure 1 brings the poster that was used on the GPB website to promote the workshop in June, 2020.

Figure 1 – Workshop poster on the GPB website.



The poster (Figure 1) gives the names of the three professors that planned the workshop and acted as facilitators, during its course, as well as the names of the professionals who were invited by them to participate as guests. In total, eight professionals attended it. They were in Brazil, the USA, and Ireland at that time. One of these professionals was Kenyan, three were Brazilians living abroad, and four were Brazilians from different regions of the country. Given the international character of the workshop, which was open to whoever subscribed via the GPB website, English was the chosen language for interaction. Some of the activities in the workshop are presented and discussed in the sections that follow.

Find someone who...

The first activity was called *Find someone who*. It aimed at having participants find out who the guests were and also introduce themselves by asking questions to get to know one another. The objective of this activity was to highlight that using language is more than finding specific information. It allows us to start a conversation with a stranger, establish some kind of connection – by means of eye contact and facial expressions – and learn to select words that help us get to know people better, and thus feel more comfortable near them. To that end, facilitators divided participants in three breakout rooms and provided them with a table of the job titles, cities, and countries of the guests (see Figure 2). After receiving this information, the participants improvised questions to try and guess who was in their breakout room before the time set for that activity was up.

Figure 2 – Guests’ list shared in the workshop.

Ph.D. in Biomedical Engineering and Director at Fatec Mogi das Cruzes - SP/Brazil	Civil Engineer - Drogheda/Ireland	Master's Degree student in Space Technologies at INPE - São José dos Campos/Brazil	Ph.D. Assistant Professor at the University of Nebraska at Omaha - Omaha/USA
International Student - New York/USA	Certified Medical Assistant - Orlando/USA	Master's Degree student in Genetics and Molecular Biology - Campinas/Brazil	Social Media Analyst - SP/Brazil

When participants came back to the general room, they talked about who the guests they had met were and provided further information they found out. During this part of the workshop the facilitators also asked some guests to share their answer to the question: *Global collaboration: what can young professionals do?* so that they could broaden the discussion of ways to create reality through multiple forms of saying, feeling, acting, and being in the world.

The collaborative perspective (Magalhães & Fidalgo, 2019) of the workshop highlighted its virtual nature, i.e., an online meeting. As in meetings of this kind, participants need to deal with certain constraints to play, such as managing time, negotiating rules to reach the goal of the activity, listening carefully to others, sharing, and asking for information, they have to come up with strategies beyond the English language⁵ to interact. This happened first in the breakout room and then in the general room. This first activity worked as an icebreaker and was important because it set the scene to what was coming next in that play and talk session, that is, the sharing of information about oneself. Also, it helped participants realize meaning-making through the efforts the whole group put into the activity.

⁵ By saying “beyond the English language” we refer to the different semiotic resources used to produce and convey meaning such as gestures, facial expressions, and tone of voice. They are intentionally brought to interaction settings according to language users’ objectives as well as to some cultural, historical, and social agreements.

In that direction, Marx (1980, XVI, p. 378), when explaining the importance of collective work, affirms that the worker gets rid of the “limits of their individuality and develops the capacity of their species”. The social contact in a specific activity pushes participants to move toward a common goal, which enhances their capability of acting and achieving better results than they would, should group members act individually (Spinoza, 2003).

The vygotskian perspective, which underlines the action of the other in the action of oneself, was also present in this activity, as this perspective highlights collaboration as a space for the co-construction of knowledge. It is important to mention that there is no hierarchy in the roles played (Magalhães & Fidalgo, 2019), which tends to boost stronger interdependence and shared responsibility in the search for a common goal, a *sine qua non* condition for a successful collaborative work.

What's true about me...

In the second activity, called *What's true about me*, facilitators wanted all the participants – not only the guests – to have a chance to share information about themselves. To this end, all participants were instructed to cover their cameras and listen to a general fact about one of them, such as *What's true about me is that I like to wake up late*. Those to whom the information was true had to uncover their cameras, so they would be able to see who shared something in common with them. After a few rounds, participants felt more confident to connect to one another through their differences and similarities.

At first sight, this activity might seem too simple and just a pastime, but it actually set the scene for participants to get connected to everyone through their tastes and habits, giving them the opportunity to realize how diversity is present everywhere and how people might feel about it. In other words, it helped participants see that despite the disagreements that may arise, we have some common ground as human beings and, as such, a longing for respect. In this perspective, play becomes this powerful revolutionary activity (Newman & Holzman, 2002), in which participants reflect about themselves and others in their process of becoming (Liberali, 2019).

More specifically, this activity gave participants a chance to feel free to share whatever personal fact they wanted with the group and react to other people's facts by uncovering their

camera. Such gesture, or lack of it, clearly stated: “I’m like you”, “I feel you” or “That’s not me”, “I don’t do that”. In this manner, participants were exposed to different personal traits and expressed how they were affected and how those feelings were part of their subjectivity, while sharing that with others (Sawaia, 2018).

Questions and answers

The third activity involved facilitators inviting participants to ask further questions to anyone they were curious about or to simply comment on any aspect addressed during the workshop. Guests could also expand their answers to how they were trying to collaborate to others during the pandemic, in their professional setting. Excerpt 1 is a guest testimonial that illustrates the kind of talk participants had in the session:

Excerpt 1:

“We’ve been teaching online, but many of my students are struggling because they lost their jobs, so they don’t have money, they’re being evicted from apartments, so they don’t have some place to live, they’re going hungry, so I’m teaching, but I’m also helping my students find food, find somewhere to live, to find how to apply for unemployment benefits, so that they have a little bit of money. So, it’s been really hard here... and specifically because... there’s a big difference between the white people and everybody who’s not white and so my students of color, my black students, my brown students are also suffering more than my white students, which is very upsetting. So, just being very busy trying to help my students. I think of them as my family, so it’s hard to rest when my family is suffering like that.”

Following the two previous play activities, this testimonial seems to have brought light to real problems participants were facing. It somehow encouraged them to share experiences and react to all those stories and feelings that were being exposed. The careful listening, reactions of shock, support, and relief seen on the faces on the screen, during each of the testimonials, clearly showed how affected by them participants were.

The testimonial in Excerpt 1 seemed to have a particularly strong impact on all participants because the world had recently watched demonstrations carried out by the Black Lives Matter

movement⁶ in the USA. At the same time in Brazil, people were affected by the news of the death of Miguel⁷, a five-year old black kid, who had been left alone by his mother's employer before falling nine floors in a luxury seaside apartment. It was clear that this testimonial (see Excerpt 1) caught participants' attention as they nodded in agreement and displayed their surprised face while carefully watching or listening to each testimonial that was voluntarily shared in the group.

For college students and young professionals taking part in the workshop, that moment of conversation affected them somehow because they could relate to their own ups and downs while studying online, how the job market was dealing with the crisis in their area, and also how they were personally dealing with all those demands. Such reactions bring to mind the concept of *affectus*, in a spinozian perspective, that is, *affectus* is responsible for the transformation of the self through composing "joyful encounters with bodies" (Spinoza, 2003). Excerpts 2 and 3 are part of two other testimonials that show further how much participants felt at ease to share experiences during the workshop.

Excerpt 2:

"Life here changed a lot since March. I don't feel totally comfortable... going out and everything. We had such a hard time in New York, but I guess we could handle the situation a little bit better. We took it seriously, and we could flat the curve... My English classes were online like everywhere. It was a little bit difficult because I like the interaction with teachers and friends at classroom, I like to talk, and it was a little bit lonely because I couldn't talk to anyone, but I didn't have another choice. But life is getting back on track little by little, you know... and things will be better. I hope."

Excerpt 3:

"I started working with the coronavirus, doing research to find treatment for people. So, I have worked with chloroquine and ivermectin, which are two very famous drugs here in

⁶ For further information: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html>

⁷ For further information: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/12/brazil-black-boy-fall-death-racism>

Brazil, but they didn't work, so don't take chloroquine and ivermectin! Also, we're trying to find drugs that really work for that. It's very hard, you know, because we need to do the research for a long time to see if it works or not. So, that's it. I'm in the front line."

In Spinoza's Ethics, *affectus* are seen as the continuous variation of the power of acting, (Spinoza, 2003, III, Def. 3), generated by the *affectio* or modifications suffered in the body, whose effects are translated by *affectus*. Depending on the composition of relations among bodies, the *affectus* can be active, when it expresses the passage to a greater perfection (joy), or passive, when it expresses the opposite movement (sadness). The increase or the decrease in a person's power of acting (to be and act) - *conatus* - comes from encounters. Thus, encounters may broaden or reduce a person's power of acting.

The power of human action is grounded in encounters because it is related to the infinite possibilities of composition between the *affectus*. In other words, it is related to the potential to affect and be affected. In this sense, Sawaia (2009) explains that *affectus* is responsible for the union of powers in conceiving a single body and a single mind. This joining of power constitutes the collective political subject and the multitude, originated from people's desire to ensure better conditions for their existence towards a common objective that can improve the social benefit of the collectivity (Spinoza, 2017).

The change I want to see is...

The last activity in the workshop that will be described and discussed in this paper was named *The change I want to see is*. It was conducted after some questions, answers, and testimonials were shared in the group. During this activity, participants were invited to write, in the chat, the change they hoped for. This would be their final remark in the workshop. The idea was to explore their creativity using everything that was shared in the workshop. They were encouraged to express what they were looking forward to achieving personally or to seeing change in the world. They had a few minutes to reflect upon what they would say and, all together, entered their thoughts in the chat. All participants could see one another's posts and these were read out loud by one of the facilitators. Excerpt 4 illustrates some of the posts.

Excerpt 4:

“The change I want to see is...

...respect and love.

...no hate speeches.

...respect for science.

...respect for black lives and LGBTQI+ people.

...the increase of interdisciplinary work that contributes to people in general.

...respect for different cultures.

...improvement for housing systems.”

In terms of how participants wished reality was different, Excerpt 4 highlights some of the issues discussed during the workshop. Some of them were not even part of their immediate reality, but while participants were listening to them, they all were affected so that global solidarity and responsibility were shared, considering their expressions on the screen. After all, the whole world was living the pandemic at the same time and if they had not experienced those situations, they might have witnessed similar cases or at least heard of them.

The activities described above exemplify how GPB’s participants integrate play to a revolutionary cause aligned with the idea of a moving world in which they, when being affected and affecting others, can dialectically and collaboratively increase their powers of action (*conatus*) and develop agency. Motivated by mutual support and a more equitable perspective towards society, an activist agency can be created. According to Stetsenko (2017), confronting the inequality crisis by expanding what is predicted in the *status quo*, can guide people towards co-creating history, and society simultaneously to their own transforming agencies.

Liberali (2020) points out that constructing social change is mandatory for an effective transformation of the unfair contradictions that seem to be expanding in our reality. What participants experienced in the workshop described here is meant to help them engage in more politically and ethically driven activities. The inevitability of such engagement demands taking a critical stance towards values and whatever it is one aspires to do. The process of self-development takes place as the world changes and both events affect one another. As such, there is an urgent need for the building of agency for social transformation beyond the everyday reality that tends to keep people apart.

4. Final remarks and way forward

In response to the global pandemic, GPB can be understood as an international community whose collaborative bias, in spinozian language, has affected partners in different areas and routines, striving to encourage transformative actions worldwide. This movement entails the understanding that it is crucial to overcome oppressive situations in favor of the common good. This means exploring possibilities to face reality and actually doing something about it. This activist stance recognizes that social change is urgent and dependent on political and ethical engagement, which criticality becomes the key to justice, more equitable living conditions, and well-being globally.

Within this context, this paper presented an initiative carried out by the GPB community, which was an online play and talk workshop offered as one of the monthly events of the group. It discussed and exemplified the theoretical and practical concepts of collaboration and play that are two of the fundamental concepts to this international group. The workshop entitled *Global collaboration: what can young professionals do?*, seems to align these two concepts in its organization plan and in the workshop itself, highlighting the intent to transform realities brought about by the covid-19 pandemic, which, in turn, seemed to inflame other major social problems.

Participants from different professional areas and backgrounds got together to play and talk about their lives during the crisis and their desire for better days. The sequence of activities in the workshop challenged participants, who were studying English in college, to use such language in a critical perspective. That means to understand real life situations and share their points of view based on their own and other people's experiences. The English language was one of the resources in this multimodal context, in which facial expressions, laugh, gestures, sounds, and written texts were all used to establish a connection among participants.

Such connection was also enabled by play, which creates a collaborative space for participants to overcome immediate obstacles in terms of communication and, more importantly, refer to broader contexts and think of viable possibilities for their existence. Through play, the overcoming of obstacles can be sustained in a collective experience that involves increasing everybody's potential towards social justice. Play becomes an ongoing

reflexive and practical exercise to deal with otherness, its conflicts, and our inherent impulse to move on, which are constant and vital in human development.

By facing the world the pandemic created, the GPB community stands up for global collaboration in its multiple facets. The workshops, as the one focused here, try to engage participants in social transformation through *affectus* (Spinoza, 2017) generated in play and talk sessions. They seek to conceive new realities by means of discussion as well as a range of creative means, such as imagination, improvisation, and performance. It is a movement to fight against those forces that push back the possibility of coexistence, which is, after all, the combination of everything that constitutes the self and what enables us to be.

In Freire's perspective (1970), the viable unheard of can be traced in some active movements in communities, for example, as the GPB and in other programs that expand those principles to local needs such as *Brincadas*, the way that LACE Research Group ressignified GPB's principles in the Brazilian context. This aspect also exposes the multidisciplinary vein of AL, which has been the theoretical and methodological framework for LACE over the years. It is crucial for this group to align language research to social engagement as a part of the continuous learning process everyone's in, but also as a provocative and responsive action towards individual and collective transformation.

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Conflict of interests

(X) *The authors declare they have no conflict of interest.*

Credit Author Statement

We, José Carlos Barbosa Lopes, Daniela Vendramini-Zanella, and Valdite Pereira Fuga, hereby declare that we do not have any potential conflict of interest in this study. We have all participated in the study conceptualization, methodology, data analysis, and editing. All authors approve the final version of the manuscript and are responsible for all aspects, including the guarantee of its veracity and integrity.

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