

Original Article

# Social Occupational Therapy, pandemic, and interculturalities: thematic workshops in the context of international student mobility<sup>1</sup>

*Terapia Ocupacional Social, pandemia e interculturalidades: oficinas temáticas no contexto da mobilidade estudantil internacional*

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**How to cite:** Andrade, R. R., & Galvani, D. (2023). Social Occupational Therapy, pandemic, and interculturalities: thematic workshops in the context of international student mobility. *Cadernos Brasileiros de Terapia Ocupacional*, 31(spe), e3403. <https://doi.org/10.1590/2526-8910.ctoAO260734032>

## Abstract

**Introduction:** The Covid-19 pandemic triggered profound changes in people's ways of life, with significant impact on the forms of socialization and teaching-learning practices. **Objective:** To present the experience of creating and developing intercultural thematic workshops. They were part of a set of welcoming actions and teaching of Portuguese to international students linked to the Student Program of the Graduation Agreement (PEC-G) of Federal University of Sao Paulo (Unifesp), coordinated by teacher of languages—Portuguese as a Foreign Language (PLA)—and social occupational therapy. **Method:** The critical interpretation of the experience, its ordering and reconstruction were guided by the perspective of the systematization of experiences (SE) proposed by Oscar Jara Holliday. The fieldwork involved two perspectives: analysis of field diaries with records of occupational therapy interns between April and October 2020 and a conversation circle with foreign students. **Results:** Four interdependent axes of analysis were thematized, presenting perceptions and reinterpretations of the initial moments of the pandemic and its effects in Brazil, specifically in the contexts of migration and higher education. **Conclusion:** This study provides interdisciplinary, intercultural, and multilingual reflections on social occupational therapy actions in the context of mobility for the purposes of study and internationalization of higher education, as well as analysis technologies developed in times of social distancing and weakening of support networks.

**Keywords:** Occupational Therapy, Immigration, Education, Universities, COVID-19.

<sup>1</sup> Article approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee – nº 91829418.9.0000.5505.

Received on Aug. 11, 2022; 1st Revision on Aug. 19, 2022; Accepted on Mar. 29, 2023.



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## **Resumo**

**Introdução:** A pandemia de COVID-19 desencadeou transformações profundas nos modos de vida dos sujeitos, com reverberação significativa nas formas de socialização e nas práticas de ensino-aprendizagem. **Objetivo:** Apresentar os resultados da experiência de criação e desenvolvimento de oficinas temáticas interculturais vinculadas ao acolhimento e ao ensino de português de estudantes internacionais junto ao Programa Estudantes Convênio de Graduação (PEC-G) na Universidade Federal de São Paulo (Unifesp) coordenado por docentes do curso de letras — Português como Língua Adicional (PLA) — e de terapia ocupacional social. **Método:** A interpretação crítica da experiência, seu ordenamento e reconstrução foram guiadas pela perspectiva da sistematização de experiências (SE), como proposto por Oscar Jara Holliday. O trabalho de campo envolveu duas perspectivas: análise dos diários de campo com registro das estagiárias de terapia ocupacional entre abril e outubro de 2020 e a realização de roda de conversa com os estudantes internacionais. **Resultados:** Foram tematizados quatro eixos de análise, interdependentes, que refletem percepções e releituras sobre os momentos iniciais da pandemia e seus reflexos no Brasil, especificamente no contexto da migração e do ensino superior. **Conclusão:** Pretende-se contribuir com reflexões sobre ações em terapia ocupacional social em contexto interdisciplinar, intercultural e multilíngue no âmbito da mobilidade para fins de estudo e da internacionalização do ensino superior, bem como analisar tecnologias desenvolvidas em tempos de distanciamento social e enfraquecimento de redes de suporte.

**Palavras-chave:** Terapia Ocupacional, Imigração, Educação, Universidade, COVID-19.

## **Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered profound changes in the individuals' ways of life, with significant reverberation in the forms of socialization and teaching practices, mainly in periods of greater need to maintain social distancing concomitantly with the rise of the economic crisis in the country and its developments. This article presents research results of a dissertation work in the context of numerous challenges faced in the initial period of the pandemic.

The research here mentioned proposed to systematize the experience of creating and developing intercultural thematic workshops held between April and October 2020. These actions were part of the program, coordinated by teachers from the Literature Department - Portuguese as an Additional Language (PLA in Portuguese) - and social occupational therapy program, aimed at welcoming and teaching Portuguese to the group of international students linked to the Graduation Students Agreement Program (PEC-G) at the Federal University of São Paulo (Unifesp). The activities were part of the curricular internship program in social occupational therapy, which needed to be reinvented in the face of the new demands that were imposed during the pandemic, its effects on daily life and the impossibility of face-to-face meetings.

The critical interpretation of the experience, its organization and reconstruction were guided by the perspective of systematization of experiences (SE) as proposed by Holliday (2006). The fieldwork involved carefully reading the field diaries with the interns' records during the mentioned period and carrying out a conversation with the international students, mediated by the student-researcher, in addition to the analysis of documents related to the program.

It is intended to contribute with reflections on actions in social occupational therapy in an interdisciplinary, intercultural and multilingual context within the scope of mobility for study purposes and the internationalization of higher education, as well as to analyze social technologies developed in times of social distancing and weakening of networks of support. The systematization of experiences can collaborate with subsidies to improve the reception of international students and internationalization policies in higher education.

### **The Welcome and Teaching Program of Portuguese as an Additional Language at Unifesp - PRÉ-PEC-G**

PEC-G is an internationalization program that offers places in Brazilian Higher Education Institutions (IES in Portuguese) to students from developing countries with which Brazil maintains educational, cultural or scientific-technological agreements. The PEC-G is developed by the Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MRE in Portuguese) and Education (MEC in Portuguese) in partnership with public – federal and state – and private universities, and proposes to select international students, preferably between 18 and 23 years old, with high school education diploma, to carry out undergraduate studies in the country. Currently, 69 countries participate in the program: 29 from Africa, 25 from Latin America and the Caribbean, six from Asia and six from Europe.

Created in 1965, PEC-G has been governed since 2013 by Decree No. 7,948 (Brasil, 2013), which also requires that students pass the CELPE-BRAS Portuguese Language Proficiency Exam in advance. For students from countries where this exam is not offered, there is a requirement to participate in Portuguese as an additional language courses in Brazil. This moment of student mobility came to be known as PRE-PEC-G and is developed by Brazilian IES accredited by the MEC.

In this context, each university develops a different program and, although it recognizes the promotion of local policies for international students, sensitive to the process of cultural insertion in university daily life, the literature on student academic mobility has problematized the absence of specific public policies for reception and permanence (Galvani et al., 2022; Bizon, 2013) For this analysis, we highlight the institutional insertion of PRE-PEC-G students in universities. A significant part of the students is inserted in the condition of extension agents, as was the case at Unifesp, others as special students, which has significant impacts on daily life and access to student permanence policies.

Unifesp joined the PRE-PEC-G in 2019, being the only IES in the State of São Paulo to offer the Program in this period. It received English-speaking and French-speaking students from the Caribbean (Jamaica and Haiti) and African countries (Benin, Democratic Republic of Congo, Republic of Congo, Gabon and Morocco),

who would primarily undertake graduation in Unifesp courses, but also in other EIS in the State of São Paulo (Galvani et al., 2022).

The program involved offering a course in Portuguese as an additional language, coordinated by professionals in the field of humanities and a series of extension activities and training in dialogue between occupational therapy, humanities and international students. It is a challenge for IES to produce internationalization actions that favor the reception of international students in order to contemplate a long process of crossings and transitions that begin well before their arrival in Brazil.

In Brazil, a certain daily learning pressure to achieve proficiency in Portuguese, as they must take the CELPE-BRAS test after about eight months of study, marks the international students' daily life. According to the decree that governs the program (Brasil, 2013), each student has only one chance to take the test, if he does not reach the required proficiency level, he loses his place in the university and must return to his country of origin. Students also need to deal with the transition between countries, cultures, ways of teaching and learning, among other unique challenges.

In the health crisis context that emerged, in which face-to-face contact between individuals became limited to prevent the spread of the virus, the challenges of insertion into a new society intensified, making the need to develop reception and care strategies latent, which would allow the expansion of social and support networks.

There are few studies specifically addressing the PRE-PEC-G, and those publications are more recent. The greatest centrality is in the theme of the curriculum, learning processes in cultural immersion and analysis of teaching materials (Carvalho, 2019; Farina, 2021; Eiro, 2020). There are also studies focused on welcoming actions in the context of PRE-PEC-G (Lima, 2021; Cruz, 2018), in addition to concerns about the methodology for teaching Portuguese. However, studies and reports on PRE-PEC-G during the COVID 19 pandemic have yet to be identified.

The focus of the reflection is on student mobility, especially African and Caribbean, the challenges for institutional reception and the potential for interdisciplinary and intercultural actions, in the context of the inseparability between language, culture and reception (Galvani et al., 2022).

## **Thematic intercultural workshops in the practice of social occupational therapy**

With the objective of meeting the exposed demands, Unifesp's PRE-PEC-G proposed the creation of a space for meeting and facilitating socio-cultural exchanges between international and Brazilian students. "Interculturalidades" (interculturalities), the name given to this group of students, was intended to provide welcoming spaces, strengthening networks and exchanging knowledge through meetings between participants in the format of virtual thematic workshops. The workshops were inspired by popular education and based on the perspective of social occupational therapy, which has:

[...] developed theories and practices with different social groups, focusing on the issue of access to rights and citizenship. As a practical-professional action strategy, it has developed and used resources, social technologies and

participatory work methodologies based on intersectional and interdisciplinary actions, seeking to offer protected spaces for coexistence and belonging (Silva & Malfitano, 2021, p. 3).

The formation of this collective dialogues with critical interculturality in human rights education. For Candau (2016), the intercultural perspective reinforces the need to identify and value the differences of sociocultural groups in our societies as a constitutive part of democracy, aiming at the disruption of power relations built in the hegemony of Western culture.

Therefore, social occupational therapy is inspired by critical interculturality, involved with projects and methodologies that favor the deconstruction of ethnocentric practices, in this case, in dialogue with the need for decolonization and democratization of Brazilian higher education (Carvalho, 2020).

The intercultural approach, in conjunction with the psychosocial model adopted by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), was presented by Sylvia Dantas in a recent publication. Bringing the debate to everyday dimensions, it invites us to think about the concrete psychological implications of the contact between different beliefs systems. Thus,

Changing countries imposes on migrants the need to adjust to a new location and learn new social codes, as their way of acting no longer corresponds to their surroundings. You have to deal with multiple losses, as the person leaves behind family, friends, work, physical environment, language, social norms, known places and social memory. What used to be part of the routine becomes a daily challenge (Dantas, 2022, p. 36).

The research and experiences carried out together with the Núcleo Metuia – Social Occupational Therapy/USP - and the Núcleo Amanar at Casa das Áfricas were foundations for training and raising awareness in dimensions of human mobility, especially within the African continent and between Africa and Brazil, such as imaginative horizon of possibilities and life projects (Barros & Galvani, 2016). The need to understand and face the violence of selective receptivity in the context of recent immigration remains urgent. In this way, we join the struggle of other researchers and leaders of black and immigrant movements, who have long dedicated themselves to mobilizing efforts to face the intersection between racism and xenophobia and in the face of processes of disqualification of the African continent (Kaly, 2001; Rodrigues, 2014, Samba Tomba, 2018).

Along this path, social occupational therapy perceives, as part of the challenges, building culturally sensitive activities (Barros & Galvani, 2016) that favor the deconstruction of historically constructed hierarchies between cultures and ways of life and take a position in the face of racism.

The development of the thematic workshops involved the recognition of the plurality of cultures that make up our societies, in which the cohabitation of differences is subject to emerging conflicts (Barros et al., 2007). In the context of human mobility, these conflicts can unfold in situations of cultural disqualification and violence expressed through racism and xenophobia in its different forms.

In this context, for the social occupational therapy, the perspective of constant review of the notion of activities stands out. As Barros (2004) suggests, it is an indexical concept, a term borrowed from linguistics, to reinforce the notion of incompleteness; therefore, they acquire multiple meanings perceived by all who share the experience. As a process of interlocution and dialogue, actions in social occupational therapy “[...] become social spaces for cultural and relational negotiation, production or facilitation of the person’s participation in collective life, in the elaboration of life projects and in the feeling of belonging [...]” (Barros, 2004, p. 92).

With Freire's popular education, the workshops are perceived as enhancing communication and dialogue, and we are inspired by Freire (1977, p. 69), for whom education “[...] is communication, is dialogue, insofar as there is no transfer of knowledge, but a meeting of interlocutors who seek the meaning of meanings”.

In this way, the invitation to the occupational therapy interns was to become facilitators of the workshops. Inspired by the intercultural perspective, as summarized by Candau (2016, p. 47), the intern-facilitators produced continuous reflective exercises, together with the team, in the field diaries and during the workshops, in order to denaturalize and make explicit the network of stereotypes that “[...] populate our individual and social imaginaries in relation to different sociocultural groups [...]”. This perspective is combined with what Dantas (2022, p. 35) guides as an “intercultural professional posture” in order to avoid ethnocentric tendencies.

This article is the result of a Dissertation Work whose main objective was to discuss the impacts of social distancing resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic on interpersonal relationships, building networks and solidarity in contexts of vulnerability to which newly arrived international students were exposed. to Brazil. In addition, it sought to analyze how the thematic workshops impacted the life trajectory of the students involved - PRE-PEC-G and occupational therapy interns - in the actual internship period (March to October 2020); to understand the contributions of the intercultural meeting and reception proposals developed through dialogue between youths; understand the attribution of meanings to the constitution of space as a facilitating mechanism to expand support networks; understand the challenges and developments involved in making the remote meetings possible.

## **Method**

This is a qualitative research with a comprehensive perspective and inspired by Gobo (2003), through which we seek to deconstruct our data, conceptualize and recompose them in an original way, in the search for a balance between creativity, scientific rigor and theoretical sensitivity.

Data construction was based on the systematization of experiences, as proposed by Oscar Jara Holliday. According to this author, it is the

Critical interpretation of one or more experiences that, based on their ordering and reconstruction, discovers or explains the logic of the lived process: the different factors that intervened, how they relate to each other and why they did so. SE can contemplate the narration of events, the

description of processes, the writing of memories, the classification of types of experiences and the ordering of data (Holliday, 2006, p. 84).

By assuming this reference, it was intended to apprehend what was experienced in the thematic intercultural workshops from a historical reconstruction from the group facilitators' (interns) point of view of in dialogue with the analysis of the experience of international students as individuals who engaged in the construction of this meeting space in times of social distancing and countless uncertainties. Thus, the research process sought to critically interpret the results and recognize the knowledge of the subjects of the experience (Holliday, 2006).

The systematization was carried out in two perspectives. The first perspective was the preliminary analysis of the field diaries produced by the pair of interns between March and October 2020. These diaries contained two different types of records: descriptive notes, with objective notes on how the workshops went – participants, generating themes, introduction strategies to the themes, tools used in the meetings to overcome language difficulties, themes that emerged; and intensive notes, to subjectively capture the meanings and sensitive impressions of each one during the meetings (Guzzo et al., 2019). In addition to the careful reading of the diaries, seeking themes for reflection that were repeated and highlighted as the meetings took place, the information was reorganized in a table responding to the following parameters: date of the meeting, number of participants, objectives, theme approach, key ideas and tools used.

This first phase of analysis, in dialogue with the research objectives, was a reference for elaborating triggering questions involved in carrying out conversation rounds with international students. The triggering questions were also prepared based on concerns discussed with the team of teachers and other interns and extension workers who later assumed the role of facilitators of the intercultural thematic workshops.

The conversation round was the strategy chosen to build a narrative in dialogue with international students. The format, already known by all and re-signified in its realization at a distance at that time, was conducted with the intentionality of triggering questions, in dialogue with the research objectives and with a systematic record, seeking to build meanings to the experience. It was configured, then, as a methodological instrument, for weaving memories, connecting present, past and future, by revisiting the common experience (Moura & Lima, 2014). In this way, shared thinking is privileged, favoring the construction of a dialogic practice that culminates in the meaning of events.

The conversation round took place in November 2020, remotely, mediated by the Google Meet platform and lasted two hours. The invitation was open to 12 PRE-PEC-G students entering in 2020 and eight of them participated. The round was recorded in audio and then transcribed.

The analysis was based on careful reflexivity of the narratives, produced in the form of a field diary and as a result of the transcription of the conversation round, and guided by the theme, as proposed by Fontoura (2011), in which the researcher:

assumes the role of collaborator with the meanings emerged in the research, delimits the corpus of the analysis, raises contextual units, themes and assumes

the role of interpreting the data dialoguing with the theoretical references that inform the research in question. (Fontoura, 2011, p. 63).

The trigger for the analysis was Carvalho's statement (2020), interculturalize to decolonize higher education, converging with a critical reading of the need for democratization of universities, recognized, despite multiple efforts, as monocultural, monolingual and monoepistemic spaces. The analysis is based on the intercultural perspective (Carvalho, 2020; Dantas, 2022; Candau, 2016), on the notion of support networks and interdependence (Freire, 2011; Galvani, 2015) and seeks to establish relationships between the legislation that governs the PEC -G (Brasil, 2013) with the dimensions that significantly affect the students daily lives. Still, it emphasizes the constant need to make explicit the selective receptivity of Brazilian society in relation to immigration and the confrontation with racism and xenophobia. (Faustino & Oliveira, 2021).

In this way, four axes were thematized which, articulated, intend to contextualize, discuss and analyze the experience. They reflect perceptions and rereading about the initial moments of the pandemic and its consequences in Brazil, specifically in the context of migration and higher education.

### **Intercultural thematic workshops: reconstituting a story**

The thematic workshops took place once a week with an approximate duration of 1h30min to 2h, in a virtual, synchronous format, initially between March and October 2020 – the time interval in which they will be analyzed, consistent with the moment when the global COVID-19 pandemic broke out and the period of the author's professional internship. However, they continued to happen until December 2021, facilitated by other interns and extension workers after positive and constant evaluations, recognizing the process and results of this research as benchmarks.

As mentioned, when composing Unifesp's PRE-PEC-G program of activities, the workshops aimed to build virtual spaces for interaction and reception for international students, in dialogue with students in occupational therapy internships who assumed the role of facilitators of the workshops. These interns were mobilized by themes that unfolded from the intercultural meetings between young people, in the production of emergency distance actions that favored the construction and expansion of networks, in the reflection of the intercultural dimensions of everyday experiences and in the improvement of the new language. Therefore, cultural exchanges tailored the power of meetings, giving them meaning and contributing to reduce distances and mutual lack of knowledge (Barros, 2004).

Along the way, this collective of interlocutors was composed of social occupational therapy interns, the course's Portuguese teacher, PRE-PEC-G students entering in 2020, extension workers, in addition to other guests (PEC-G students newly admitted to universities and project coordinators).

The digital platform used for The Meetings were held through Google Meet. This platform, in addition to favoring indispensable contact through the microphone, camera and via text messages, enables screen sharing, allowing the reproduction of audiovisual media: images, music, films and texts. To ensure understanding among students, it was

essential to think about digital technologies that would work as a foundation for communication, especially at the very beginning, when Brazilian Portuguese was completely unknown to international students.

A central dimension that unfolds from this report is the learning of Portuguese and language barriers as challenges for the practice of social occupational therapy in multilingual spaces. Thus, to ensure that all students were aware of the discussions, priority was given to simultaneous translation from Portuguese into French/English through the website Nice translator. During the meetings, this translation was no longer necessary due to the students' familiarization with the language. The dimension of language is transversal in our analysis and will be resumed in a few moments.

Learning Portuguese was a meaningful factor for the collective of international students, given the need to pass the proficiency exam that would define their entry into higher education (Brasil, 2013).

Recognition of the workshops as a space that helped improve fluency in Portuguese was one of the dimensions of the experience highlighted by international students in the conversation round. Therefore, this recognition, combined with the possibility of meaning of everyday experiences in intercultural friction, were narrated as the main target of interest when engaging in the workshops. Learning and improving Portuguese in the midst of social distancing has become even more urgent and difficult, and the workshops were identified as an opportunity to practice the language and understand different contexts of life in Brazil through weekly and synchronous meetings, essential in the initial stage of arriving in a new country.

Each meeting in the workshops was guided by a theme. The generating themes varied according to the needs and interests of the participants and, at times, of the team itself, which required support for issues that required mediation. At each end of the meeting, the facilitators provoked the group to suggest new themes, which even came from themselves. The group reached a consensus on the schedule of the next topics to be discussed, as well as the format of the debate, discussing the digital technologies that would be used and who would lead the topic.

Thus, three generating themes were constructed in this interlocution: the first referring to the context of the pandemic and its consequences in daily life (access to emergency assistance, health recommendations, updating of Brazilian policy), another related to the context of migration and the PEC- G (legal aspects of migration in times of pandemic, emergency financial measures, access to public health) or linked to the history and cultural practices of different countries (festivals, values and customs, political conjuncture, ethnic-racial issues).

In the lack of sociability between language teaching, culture and reception, interdisciplinarity also occurred in the effort to articulate the themes of the workshops with the pedagogical program of Portuguese as an additional language course, above all, seeking to enhance common projects, in an interdisciplinary dialogue with the pedagogy of projects (Galvani et al., 2022).

The debate around the article "Workshops on Activities, Dynamics and Projects" proposed by Lopes et al. (2011) was inspiring, as this technology is understood as enhancing the capabilities of individuals who make up a collective as the workshops are developed with them, aiming at social transformation. The dialogue underpinned the perspective in which the workshops were built, fostering the desired exchange between

the participants in line with the technological resources inherent in distance meetings. In this format, the production of knowledge is shared based on the convergence of knowledge from each individual, who have his or her own history, values and notions.

The notion of the richness of differences (Candau, 2016) and the conflicts arising from their confluences also served as a basis for the reflections associated with the construction of dialogue between individuals belonging to such diverse sociocultural cutouts (gender, race, ethnicity, language, class). Despite the differences, two common elements were perceived as facilitators of rapprochement: the joint context of higher education students, even if in different stages, in addition to being about the meeting of young people and, therefore, the interaction between peers. In the pandemic, access to the university's physical space was compromised, which opened up space to feed the imagination of what it would be like to compose this scenario, reliving it through the memories of those who had already experienced it and, also, in the expectations and curiosities of those who arrived.

These allied perspectives were the common thread of the various spheres involved in the workshops, which culminated in the feeling of belonging of all students to the collective and to this imagined university, in a continuous exercise of reinvention of presence. The notion of belonging that was perceived in the collective will be resumed and discussed later.

### **Impacts of the Pandemic in the Context of Human Mobility and Higher Education: Social Occupational Theory and the Expansion and Strengthening of Social and Support Networks**

The COVID 19 pandemic and the forms of protection and preservation of life affected different social groups in different ways. The closure of the university and the need for social distancing — specifically for international students who had recently arrived in Brazil, coming from Gabon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Republic of Congo, Senegal and Jamaica, without understanding the language and with little repertoire in relation to their rights and Brazilian culture — meant the impossibility of accomplish one of the main objectives of the program, that is, the exercise of cultural immersion.

The urgent scenario that required conducting classes and other activities remotely meant, for many, the use of cell phones as the only way to stay connected. The specific condition of an extension student made it impossible to access some university policies, both emergency - access to computers and data for the internet, and facilitators of student permanence - guarantee of the University Restaurant (R.U. in Portuguese), scholarships and housing assistance.

The lack of the R.U (University Restaurant) (meal for R\$2.50) during the two years it was closed had a great impact on international (and Brazilian) students. Unique research and monitoring of PRE-PEC-G students identified young people's lack of experience in cooking their own food, in addition to financial repercussions in the face of the pandemic and cultural differences in the way of eating. Mediation for access to emergency assistance was fundamental in some situations due to the lack of a specific protection policy (Pereira et al., 2022).

The economic impacts were also significant, with a variety of problems that emerged in the context of the pandemic in different countries. For example, with the closure of services and the illness of family members, there was a certain moment when families had difficulty sending money to Brazil. In the period when these issues were intensified (first half of 2020), in the midst of dialogue in the workshops, the facilitators identified demands related to housing, food and livelihood conditions in general. In this way, they articulated with the team and the students themselves a mapping of these factors in view of the absence of a specific protection policy and the requirement of the legislation that governs the PEC-G: that each student has a financial guardian and the prohibition of exercising paid activity (Brasil, 2013). Therefore, due to this impaired contact with family members and/or financial guardians, in addition to a cold front in the state of São Paulo and other difficulties linked to the interruption of services (access to banks, stores, etc.), an emergency action was taken to distribution of basic food baskets and warm clothing, also consolidating the only face-to-face contact between the author in question and the students.

The virtual environment circumscribed in the use of digital technologies consequently showed barriers that can compromise the access and quality of participation of individuals, since it depends exclusively on the Internet connection. The lack of resources needed to monitor remote meetings, such as the lack of adequate electronic equipment or the instability factor in Internet access, revealed the socioeconomic inequality that a large part of the population is subjected to (Godoi et al., 2020). In addition, the place where the student was made a difference in the way the interaction was established, often affected by external noise that made listening, speaking and continuous participation impossible.

The development of support networks and qualified listening to the demands related to the migratory context were perceived by the international students as a motivation to participate in “Interculturalidades” group. The workshops were identified as a favorable space to meet new people and make friends in an environment different from that established by the Portuguese course classes, constituting a welcoming space and perceived as a safe place to share worldviews.

The perception of the expansion of networks was also due to the recognition that the approach of the collective surpassed the barriers of synchronous meetings, expanding relationships and bonds through conversations and meetings beyond the time-space of the Workshops, resuming the feeling of belonging and identification with the formed group.

### **Internship in Social Occupational Therapy in Times of Pandemic and in an Intercultural Context: Ethical and Methodological Challenges**

Impacted by the crossings of the pandemic, students and teachers needed to answer the following questions: Should the professional internship in occupational therapy continue? In what way? What parameters guide us to answer this question?

The ethical political commitment with the extension actions and the groups that participate in them mobilized the need to reinvent the presence in a context in which the only meeting alternative was mediated by technological resources of distance interaction, such as WhatsApp, Google Meet and audio calls.

Absolutely opposed to distance learning in occupational therapy graduation course, we understand that the maintenance and reinvention of emergency activities in a remote environment were essential both for the reception of international students recently arrived in Brazil, especially in a context of lack of specific protection policies, and for theoretical-practical training in the field of social occupational therapy.

The challenges were numerous. An issue that deserves attention when thinking about the difficulties involved in the use of Digital Information and Communication Technologies (TDIC in Portuguese) is the overload of tasks concentrated in this media, which, linked to an emerging context of a pandemic, generated tiredness and emotional exhaustion in students to carry out their tasks. This factor interfered with the intensity of participation and attendance of international students in the Workshops (some of them ended up absent from the meetings and/or had difficulty communicating), but also of the team itself, which also needed to reinvent forms of solidarity, relays, welcoming to the maintenance of the actions.

Another challenge is the habit of this immersion in the use of TDIC in an emergency way. Lack of practice can offer resistance and shyness (choosing to be away from cameras and opening microphones to speak, for example), which added to financial, linguistic and Internet access difficulties, pose obstacles to remote interaction (Godoi et al., 2020). Although there was some resistance to the fluidity of the debate by international students in some meetings, it was evaluated in the conversation round that the workshops motivated those who were more introverted and afraid of communicating to express themselves little by little, demonstrating comfort in doing part of the collective that was structured despite so many physical barriers.

During the conversation round, international students indicated that it was important for the facilitators to point out and correct mistakes made when expressing themselves in Portuguese. This led to reflections on the best strategies to encourage participation, acceptance and expectations of improving Portuguese.

When analyzing the experience from the perspective of the intern-facilitators, it was noticed that, in addition to the “intercultural professional profile” mentioned above, the effort to be present (in the workshops, in the telephone calls and in the qualified listening of singular demands), even at the distance, was essential to strengthen bonds of trust and build a sense of belonging. Therefore, facilitating intercultural workshops meant venturing into unknown territories and creatively relying on technology to be present.

The reflective exercise of becoming an occupational therapist intending our ethnocentric training, whether in supervision, in team meetings or when assessing projects, was the foundation for collectively taking risks.

Based on that, facilitating the intercultural workshops represented the interlocution in the agency of the generating themes, the construction of strategies and resources that facilitate the meetings, the apprehension of demands expressed by the collective of students, building contents that dialogue with the PRE-PEC-G course, provide a welcome space when arriving in a new country in the midst of a health crisis, improving and strengthening bonds between participants and even mediating conflict situations.

Faced with such a plural group, different trajectories and social markers sometimes clash and cause tension, revealing the need for constant negotiation.

In this sense, it was challenging to mediate conflicts in a context of such diverse cultural repertoires and in the context of dispute over narratives, during the COVID 19 pandemic, in which a scenario of disinformation, infodemic and disinfodemic intensified (Falcão & Souza, 2021).

The context required a constant commitment from everyone involved to update guidelines and protocols in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, care with information sources in the face of *fake news*, in addition to the exercise of conflict mediation in these narrative disputes. In this sense, the intercultural workshops were privileged spaces.

### **Discoveries, Enchantments and Discomforts in Spaces of Cultural Negotiation: Social, Cultural and Affective Exchanges**

The interns' perception of the learning process and collective awareness of the diversity of cultures became significant during the meetings. When someone from the collective brought elements of everyday life, traditions and customs, the word circulated and each one pointed out how this aspect was carried out in their own culture, contributing to the richness of what was being shared.

By becoming aware of the reality in joint construction with the other, even more so when dealing with the approximation of little-known cultures in Brazil and which, not infrequently, go through processes of disqualification, popular knowledge is composed that, when added to the systematized and technical knowledge, walk in the construction of multi-epistemic spaces so necessary in Brazilian universities with the elaboration of more critical knowledge (Freire, 2011). The exchanges provided by the workshops made it possible to acquire this knowledge, its material and symbolic meanings. The trend of visibility of different sociocultural groups with a merely descriptive and tourist focus is demystified and the critical, political, constructive and transforming character is included; thus weakening the notion of asymmetrical power relations between cultures, the processes of legitimizing inferiority and stigmatizing stereotypes (Candau, 2012) commonly associated with African societies.

The intercultural meetings between young students favored new connections, deconstruct stereotypes, approach and raise even more awareness about dimensions that cross migration issues and their challenges for occupational therapy. From the perspective of the interns, the assessment was that, in addition to the development of a repertoire in social occupational therapy, the experience was capable of creating affective memories in which both marked the academic trajectory and impacted the students' lives.

As for the social, cultural and political exchanges themes that were established in the intercultural workshops, there were different perspectives and reverberations from the international students' point of view. The interest in learning about the topics discussed and knowing more about new cultures and societies (Brazilian and from the countries/regions of origin of the colleagues) were elements that encouraged participation and were topics that generated debates in the workshops. One student evaluated that the meetings were informative, making her come out "enlightened" from all of them. With this comment full of sensitivity, it denotes such richness and affection mobilized in the meetings, where the feeling of listening to the other while talking about his own trajectory creates new meanings and marks a joint and unique history for this

collective of actors. In addition, it elucidates feelings of comfort and belonging in being part of this interlocution.

The Brazilian political situation and that of other countries in Africa and the Caribbean were one of the discussion points between students (border nations came to know the current political plan, as in the case of Congo and Gabon, for example). In the record of the conversation round (Andrade, 2021, p. 45), this dimension was expressive:

Only through conversations during meetings can we learn a lot about each other's culture and points of view in the political and social spheres. Also, during some meetings we talk about our culture, we show pictures, we share stories about life in our country.

I learned a lot about politics in Brazil and other countries in Africa and I got a chance to share my Jamaican culture with other people as well.

I discovered that one of the typical dishes from my country (Gabon) called "feuilles de manioc" is the same as that of my colleague (from Congo) only with a different name, "saka-saka".

This impact still needs to be better dimensioned in further research, as well as the possibilities of capillarization of such initiatives in other spaces of the university and its surroundings.

It is worth mentioning that, as the most significant generating theme in the view of international students, the debates around racism stood out, which had started in the period close to the end of the internship and the period that comprised this analysis.

From the perspective of international students, the surprise of experiencing and recognizing the violence of racism in Brazil. The narratives were almost unanimous in relation to the expectation of Brazil being "*a welcoming country for immigrants*" and the need to debate and critically know the history of the constitution of Brazilian society. Further research will be able to deepen this theme from the experience of PRE-PEC-G at Unifesp.

Faustino & Oliveira (2021, p. 203) invite us to reflect, in dialogue with extensive literature, on the selective receptivity to immigrants in Brazilian society, in the light of colonial history, slavery and the whitening policies that guided immigration in Brazil. They argue that "*racialization exerts influence on the social markers of difference and exclusion to which different groups of immigrants will be received in Brazil.*" Therefore,

The racialization of xenophobia is expressed by the distinct "dehumanization" and "demonization" of foreigners that is not limited to aporophobia and/or professional training, but rather by the up-to-date maintenance of the old anti-black (and anti-indigenous, in some cases) racial sieve that, even in a context of clear borders opening for workers from different origins — qualified or not — offers unequal accommodation conditions (Faustino & Oliveira, 2021, p. 204).

The PRE-PEC-G reinforces the need for actions to combat racism in the universities environment. It is worth remembering that, although affirmative policies have diversified and expanded access to higher education, universities are still monocultural, monoepistemic and monolingual spaces with a white majority, especially the faculty (Carvalho, 2020).

## **Final Considerations**

This article sought to contribute, based on the analysis of experiences, to the challenge of creating social technologies through dialogue and knowledge exchange to strengthen networks in a period of immersion in the global health crisis caused by COVID-19. In the midst of the scenario of social distancing as a central way of coping with the transmission of the virus, reflection was made on the meanings of the experience in the design of new emergency strategies, restricted to the virtual environment, to guarantee the maintenance of the meetings in the reception program and teaching of Portuguese language, engaging international students, interns and extension agents.

The survey results reflect the impacts of the pandemic in the context of student mobility and can collaborate with subsidies for programs to welcome international students.

We recognize the contributions of technologies in social occupational therapy for welcoming and intercultural mediation in the context of an unprecedented economic, social and cultural crisis. In addition, contemporary topics such as representations of Africa, racism, xenophobia, religious intolerance and gender inequality, interconnected with the history of migrations in Brazilian society, require reviews in the teaching of occupational therapy and engagement for social transformation in a scenario of escalating authoritarianism and closing borders.

Experiences such as the PRE-PEC-G can give rise to transformations in higher education, inspired by critical interculturality, with horizons for building a multicultural, multi-epistemic and multilingual university.

## **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank all the staff and students who engaged in teaching, extension and research activities.

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### **Author's Contributions**

The authors worked together at all stages of the preparation of this article. All authors approved the final version of the text.

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