

School Dynamics in the Face of the Challenges of COVID-19: Echoes of a Pandemic

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Abstract

The entire world recently experienced a coronavirus pandemic that brought with it the disease known as COVID 19, and this, in turn, a social confinement that lasted approximately 18 months between 2020 and 2021. The situation was so severe that the way things were done had to be rethought in all areas, including education. This paper presents the results of a qualitative study that aimed to identify the main changes in school dynamics in the face of the challenges posed by COVID-19. The unit of analysis was made up of teachers and directors of an official educational institution that focuses its services on early childhood and basic education. Among the results are the transcendental changes in the roles played by the actors of the basic education system to respond to the needs and demands that emerged in the time of confinement.

Keywords: Educational community, COVID 19, School challenges.

Introduction

The years 2020 and 2021 remained in the collective consciousness as the years in which almost everything stopped, or at least in which almost everything changed. The new coronavirus discovered at the end of 2019 and causing the disease known as COVID 19, altered the way things were done and many of the activities were paralyzed or suspended in time, leaving the inhabitants of the planet immersed in such an atypical scenario that until then was only possible in the stories of cinema. Global economic, social and health systems were threatened, and some even collapsed, even in the most developed regions and countries.

In this context, education as one of the central axes of society was also affected, and although it did not stop or paralyze, it did have to rethink the way in which the processes and sub-processes of teaching and learning take place.

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As happened with many industries, businesses and places of recreation, in order to prevent the spread of the virus that caused the pandemic, in this part of the globe schools and universities were closed in a determined effort by governments to protect the health and lives of children and young people in training processes at all grades and levels of formal education. There was a drastic change of scenery. From that moment on, the new physical space for learning was the students' own homes and the whole process would be mediated, as far as possible, by new technologies and communication platforms. And beyond questioning whether we were prepared or not, the answer to which seems obvious, we will stop to think about and describe the new roles that the main actors in the educational process had to assume.

First, let us remember that education is a complex system, understanding complexity, in Morin's (1995) terms, as "a tissue of heterogeneous constituents inseparably associated [...], which presents the paradox of the one and the multiple [...], it is the fabric of events, actions, interactions, feedbacks, determinations, chances, which constitute our phenomenal world" (p. 32). In order to understand education as a whole, it is necessary to recognize within it the convergence of systems, mediations, actors and roles, which adapt with the evolution of social dynamics and the demands that represent enormous challenges and challenges. Today we can affirm that schools did everything in their power to react in a timely manner to the situation of the COVID 19 pandemic. Logically, there were successes and also situations of improvisation, but the important thing in this balance is that there was always the willingness to maintain the continuity of the educational service.

The response given by the schools reflects their ethical commitment to guarantee education taking into account their social responsibility in the formation of the citizens of the present and the future, as well as to contribute to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal number 4, according to which all governments of the world and their actions must "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (UNESCO, 2015, p. 20).

Within this context of pandemic, confinement, continuity of processes, challenges and challenges, we will then take a look at the main changes in the roles of educational actors within the response given to the atypical situation, highlighting that some were maintained, others were adjusted and others were incorporated in their entirety. We will focus on the new roles assumed by parents, students, teachers, school leaders and education regulators. Start.

Method

The study was defined under the hermeneutical historical paradigm, which seeks, among other things, the understanding and interpretation of social phenomena at a given time. The data collected were qualitative in nature through interviews that were applied to teachers and directors of an official educational institution in the city of Barranquilla, Colombia.

Results

Below are those that, according to the lens of the participating subjects, were the main changes that occurred in school dynamics and scenarios to respond to the needs brought by the strict social confinement of COVID 19. The information will focus on the new roles adopted by members of the different levels of the educational community, such as parents, students, teachers, school administrators and the bodies that regulate education.

Parents

In general terms, parents have the obligation to give their children a good education, making them educated in values, respectful of others, their environment, and social norms

that ensure a good coexistence. In addition, they must facilitate their entry to school and "must dedicate time to their homework, either by helping them, attending to their clothing, their diet, socialization, their schedules and their school supplies" (Domínguez, 2010, pp.3-4). That is to say, a strong commitment from parents is expected towards everything that involves the correct education of their children, which is complemented by the fact that, apart from the demands of the schools towards the parents, there are the demands of the children towards the latter and here "the role of the parents is to help the children in their homework, that they motivate them and give them love and support, that they attend meetings, that they worry about their problems at school" (Domínguez, 2010, p.4), among other substantial obligations.

For the most part, the previously described profiles of parents did not change with the COVID 19 pandemic, but they did have to be readjusted and adapted to the new scenario of the school from home, where the living room, the dining room or the children's room became the classrooms and the parents were called to assume a much more direct role. often as intermediaries between teachers and students, i.e. their own children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews or other school-age relatives.

We could say that the role of helper of the school processes was maintained, but it was exacerbated by the need and habit of the students to have a tutor figure. Many parents inadvertently ended up replacing that image of the teacher and were able to experience with their son or daughter, in a direct way, what the teacher experiences daily with 30 or more children or young people. Obviously this can be seen from two sides: on the one hand, he had more time to relate and communicate with his son or daughter, but at the same time he verified on his own that the functions carried out by teachers in schools are not as simple as many people believe.

On the other hand, the rarefied environment worldwide due to the pandemic and the permanent threat of the disease produced by the new Coronavirus, turned parents and guardians at home into the source of emotional support that reassured and explained to children what was happening in the streets and that the media were responsible for disseminating widely.

Another of the situations that parents had to cover was the adaptation and implementation of the new scenarios at home to receive classes and develop academic activities. We talked about meeting the need for available technological devices, such as computers, tablets or smartphones, that would allow them to enter synchronous meetings with professors and classmates. In many households this was not a major problem, but in others with serious limitations in terms of their economic income, it was a huge concern. There were cases of households with two or three children in virtual classes and who had only one technological device. The big question was: Who is given priority for use? It was a breeding ground for family conflict if the situation was not resolved adequately.

In the three situations described, the response of the parents was according to the possibilities of each one, and many positive aspects remained from the experience and others that merit an even deeper reflection, both on the part of the protagonists, as well as on the part of researchers and members of academic communities.

Students

Students are the central axis of the entire teaching-learning process, since the entire machinery of the school revolves mainly around them and their training. They are the *raison d'être* of educational institutions, which prepare a whole system of interactions between many other elements, actors, strategies and resources to seek, and in the best of cases achieve, the true transformation that leads to society having subjects capable of living with themselves, with their environment and with their fellow human beings. and at the same time that they can respond and propose solutions to the needs that arise.

This is why, according to Jiménez (2014):

... Over time, education has been reformed with the aim of achieving better results in terms of performance. This is done so that the student can really learn and apply it in their personal and work life, and not only to take an exam or pass a course, but to go further by using reflection, learning to be critical, to investigate and of course to propose. (p.1)

The above is conceived in contexts of physical attendance at schools, but what are the new roles that the pandemic assigned to children and young people who are part of the education systems? What have been the new requirements for these trainees, regardless of their age and their degree and level of education?

Let's start by saying that many students surely felt that from one day to the next they had been abruptly torn from one of their usual favorite settings: school, where in addition to learning new things they have the opportunity to interact with their teachers and classmates, and with other people, such as the transporter, the school guards and cleaners. etc. One day they woke up and were told that they could no longer return to this place of varied adventures and that there was no telling exactly when that would be possible. Surely for many this news was frustrating. In any case, the new reality had to be faced and that generated expectations.

In spite of everything, within the framework of all the above, the situation of preventive isolation declared by the COVID 19 pandemic brought with it new requirements for students, which are described below:

a. They had to be more self-taught. The fact of working in virtual contexts or with printed work guides meant a greater demand on them for reading, writing, and their cognitive and metacognitive abilities.

b. They achieved a greater development of technological skills, which, for many, before the pandemic, were limited to interaction on social networks. The strategy most used by schools and universities to guarantee the continuity of the educational service was the one that involved mediation by technological devices, so students had the perfect scenario to acquire and/or enhance their computer skills. For example, they are now more familiar with the use of interaction platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet or Microsoft Teams, and all the tools they put at their fingertips.

c. They further developed their audiovisual learning style. ICT-mediated educational processes brought with them the use of class videos, tutorial videos, synchronous and asynchronous classes, Virtual Learning Objects – OVAs, and activities such as the analysis and creation of digital content, among others.

It was often said that after the COVID 19 pandemic the world would never be the same again. This seems like one of those catchphrases that are said without much reflection, but when we take a look at what the new roles that students had to assume meant for education, we can think, with many arguments, that school and everything that happens in it is the scenario that had the greatest impact on the new ways of doing things. The funny thing is that the tools were already there before the pandemic, but the lockdown helped them become more visible.

Teachers

Like students, teachers are a key player in the educational process. The pedagogical work falls on them with more emphasis, because they had a complete training process in teaching and teaching and learning theories. In addition, they have the vocation to guide the new generations in the achievement of their goals and are able to design and apply strategies for their pupils to build knowledge for themselves through meaningful experiences and interaction.

For the Ministry of Education of Chile (2019) "The role of teachers implies not only the responsibility of transmitting the knowledge of the discipline they teach, but also the commitment to form and develop attitudes, values and skills that aim at the integral

development of their students" (online), and this is complemented by its General Education Law, in Article 2, when it states that teachers contribute to the process of training students "enabling them to lead their lives fully, to live together and participate in a responsible, tolerant, supportive, democratic and active manner in the community and to work and contribute to the development of the country" (National Congress of Chile, 2009).

There are many functions assigned to teachers, but these, in general terms, are based on the following aspects:

Create an appropriate atmosphere in the classroom to help the student solve complex problems, emphasizing successes more than mistakes; Help the student to accept the challenge presented by any problem; Allow students to construct their own procedures, guiding them with timely feedback, without providing a solution; and Provide a framework in which discussion, thinking, exchange of ideas, and any process that helps to learn from the experience is encouraged. (Ruiz, 2018, p.6).

With regard to the last aspect, it is necessary to point out the importance of the development of students' thinking, since through this the transformation in them is more evident. And not only thought as something generic, but all its typologies, such as the critical, the creative, the innovative, the logical, the systemic, and all those that have been defined by science and academia. For example, it is clear that teaching critical thinking "can contribute to the formation of autonomous subjects, capable of making their own decisions and proposing solutions to the problems of their environment and society in general, which can mean a greater degree of satisfaction" (Villalba, Ortiz & Collante, 2017, p.210). And in this task, the work of teachers is fundamental, without a doubt.

But what new roles did the COVID-19 pandemic bring to teachers? Surely many, and below we will detail some of the most important:

to. Experts in the use of ICTs. It is well known that in recent decades the use of technologies to facilitate or stimulate teaching and learning processes has gained a lot of strength, but, even so, throughout the 21st century many teachers saw it as an option, that is, something that could or could not be used according to the interests and strengths of each one. But the COVID 19 pandemic changed the lens and all teachers, of all grades and levels of schooling, were forced to implement these tools in their practices.

This change of perspective on the part of teachers was necessary because, as Hernández (2017) states:

The impact of ICTs within the knowledge society has brought great changes, with respect to form and content, the effect has been massive and multiplying, in such a way that the sense of knowledge has permeated society in general, and one of the great implications and modifications is education. (p. 329)

As one of the many changes left by the pandemic by the new Coronavirus, teachers in Latin America, like their students, are now more familiar with the use of useful interaction platforms for synchronous and asynchronous encounters.

b. Content designers. This role of teachers is one that was accentuated by the pandemic. Teachers had always designed activities and materials for pedagogical use, but new circumstances challenged them to produce them in greater quantities and in two different formats: print and digital. Printed to serve those students who had very limited access to technologies, such as in rural contexts or in communities of high social and economic vulnerability. Or even, in urban schools as a complement to digital work to make students feel a little more encouraged because it's what they were used to. And the digital format to meet the requirements of the technology-mediated classes in the contexts where this was possible.

c. Creators of new ways of approaching evaluation. The forms of interaction implemented within the framework of the confinement implied new evaluation strategies in line with the

demands that emerged due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For the teachers it was a challenge, because the evaluation aims to identify the strengths and difficulties, both in teaching and learning, in order to make the necessary adjustments in the process and therefore it is required that it be given with conditions that really show the degree of appropriation and construction of knowledge by the learners. It should be borne in mind that, in general terms, the evaluation:

... It offers possibilities to strengthen and consolidate learning, as well as the achievement of objectives or purposes in any field of study. The evaluation makes it possible to show which are the priority needs that must be addressed and, from the educational perspective, it must show congruence between knowledge and performance, this formula is the one that can direct education towards the so-called quality. (Fernández, 2018, p.1)

d. Curriculum reformers to ensure that they respond to the demands of the pandemic. One of the characteristics of school curricula is their flexibility, which allows them to adapt to the demands of the environment and thus be able to meet the needs of their community. In this sense, Massimo, Operti and Tedesco (2015), cited in Chuquilín and Zagaceta (2017) state that "the curriculum is considered an articulating axis of the expectations and demands raised by society and the learning and development needs of students" (p. 115).

The creativity that characterizes teachers allowed them to face these challenges and their actions were key for students to have the continuity of the educational service in times of pandemic, meeting the goals established by the different governments. In conclusion, each one responded according to their possibilities and the conditions of their school and their community, and a common factor was the interest in continuing to work for the quality of education, which "must be evaluated through the evidence of indicators of transformation of society" (Correa de Molina, 2010, p. 90).

The Managers

Regarding the main role of teacher directors, Freire and Miranda (2014), in the theoretical clarifications of a research carried out in Peru on the role of the principal in the school: pedagogical leadership and its impact on academic performance, state that:

The principal, as the main person responsible for school management, plays a central role in articulating, conducting and facilitating a series of processes within the school. The quality of schools depends on the quality of the management team, as long as its members exercise effective leadership, which influences the motivations, skills and working conditions of teachers, who, in turn, will shape pedagogical practice in the classroom and, consequently, student learning (p. 12)

And Gimeno Sacristán (1995) broadens the perspective a little more when he speaks of the duality in the functions of the principal, "not only insofar as he combines this exercise with that of teaching, but also insofar as he must reconcile administrative responsibilities with the functions of stimulating the development of higher quality teaching and, consequently, to exercise educational leadership." (p. 23). But whether in functions related to pedagogy or those related to administrative ones, the role of principals played a transcendent role in the time of uncertainty caused by the COVID 19 pandemic.

Among the most significant challenges faced by school principals in many schools throughout Latin America during 2020 and 2021, in the shadow of the new Coronavirus, were:

to. Ensure 100% coverage, i.e., create the conditions to minimize dropout rates caused by the pandemic. That is, to encourage parents not to withdraw students and students so that they would not lose their enthusiasm for learning and remain connected to the school.

b. Distribute financial resources in such a way as to meet the usual needs of educational institutions, such as maintenance and payments for professional services, such as those generated by the new methodology for providing formal educational services, including

the reproduction and distribution of printed pedagogical material for students with limited or no Internet access, or those who lack technological devices to attend to technology-mediated activities.

c. Have policies and actions in place to preserve the health of students and their families, following government guidelines. This implies projecting the return to face-to-face classes in a scenario where the life or integrity of any of the actors who attend school is not risked. To this end, managers must implement disinfection mechanisms and comply with all biosafety protocols.

d. To monitor and accompany teachers so that the educational processes meet their goal from virtuality in the same way as from face-to-face learning. This is one of the roles inherent to teaching directors, but in times of pandemic this demand became even greater.

The entities that regulate education

To better understand the role of the entities that regulate education, we will begin by quoting the sole paragraph of article 77 of the General Education Law of Colombia, which establishes that "The departmental or district Secretariats of Education or the agencies that take their place, will be responsible for advising on the design and development of the curriculum of the state educational institutions in their jurisdiction" (p.17). That is to say, these entities and their equivalents in Latin American countries support the work of the Ministries of Education, from which they take the guidelines for their actions and which are the ones that allow them to accompany educational institutions, as a link of great relevance within this entire multilateral and multidimensional process.

From the above, it can be deduced that the roles of the government entities that monitor and assist educational institutions were mainly focused on the following actions: accompanying schools to achieve the objectives and goals that have been described as part of the functions of the members of the educational community; reducing the threat of the shadow of school dropout caused by preventive social isolations or confinements; ensuring the economic, human and material resources so that schools could continue to offer their service with quality; design and ensure compliance with policies to safeguard the health of students and their families; and finally, to ensure that even in times of uncertainty, education will continue to be the answer to many of society's demands.

Conclusion

The years 2020 and 2021 represented a great challenge for all the actors involved in the education system, as parents, students, teachers and administrators, among others, were forced to rethink their roles and functions to respond to the atypical and uncertain scenario caused by the threat and presence of the new Coronavirus. which brought with it the disease baptized as COVID 19. The ability of each of these groups to react depended to a large extent on the conditions of each school and the characteristics of its environment, so we can speak of a heterogeneous response that served to ensure that the provision of the service was not paralyzed or suspended anywhere in Latin America.

All this experience leaves several points that can be the object of reflection. For example, what will be the configuration of the roles of the main actors of the school in the post-pandemic period? What are the characteristics of the so-called new normal that occurred after the return to face-to-face classes? Do the different levels of the school have a new awareness of the importance of health issues? How wise were the decisions made in the field of education to face the pandemic? What was the level of appropriation of the new roles imposed on each of the members of the educational community? Regardless of the answers to the above questions, it can be said today that the school will always meet the demands that are placed on it from any field, since, in the face of this scenario of

confinement and pandemic, it had the ability to shape itself and guarantee the continuity of the educational service, demonstrating that it is a strong pillar within society.

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