

# TEACHING CHALLENGE IN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS OF COLOMBIA IN TIMES OF PANDEMIC AND POST-PANDEMIC

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## ABSTRACT

In times of crisis, opportunities, innovations and new learning are generated, the human capacity to adapt, overcome vicissitudes or decline is manifested. The purpose of this essay is to expose, from a reflective viewpoint, the role of teachers in public institutions in Colombia during the pandemic caused by COVID-19 during the years 2020-2021 and the return to face-to-face teaching. In retrospect, a review was made of the accompaniment and commitment assumed by the teacher to overcome the obstacles and assume the work during and after the crisis generated by this global event, which revealed even more the conditions of inequality, violence, mistreatment, monetary and multidimensional poverty that children and young people live in our country, deprived in at least one of the following aspects: education, health, housing, nutrition, sanitation and drinking water. Considering the facts presented, it is necessary to rethink quality public education for all, to redefine the social function of the school, the purposes, structures and curricular processes. Likewise, it is necessary to revalue the role of the teacher and identify the deficiencies of the students not only in the development of competencies, but also in the emotional and social development, generating strategies from the family-school action that allow correcting the affected learning. In effect, the need for educational transformation was made visible, taking up innovative experiences in classroom practices, in order to strengthen and continue improving the teaching-learning and school coexistence processes. Understanding the possibility of building the educational system in a better or different way, based on principles of equity, inclusion and equality, is the challenge for the humanization of education.

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## INTRODUCTION

The teacher as a guide, counselor and facilitator of the teaching, learning and school coexistence processes, is called to exercise leadership, propose and assume from his training and experience problems presented in the educational context at national, regional and local level. Faced with the appearance of COVID-19, the confinement measures adopted by the Colombian government and the definitive closure of educational institutions as of March 16, 2020, the need arises to face and take actions to guarantee the right to education of students, continue the educational process, avoid desertion and contribute to their well-being and that of their families.

In the midst of structures limited by poverty, social exclusion, economic crisis, lack of investment in physical and technological infrastructure and educational resources in public institutions in Colombia, the deficit that the State has to guarantee and attend to one of the fundamental pillars of social development: education, became evident. Therefore, teacher leadership allowed to adapt and assume the educational process in pandemic and post-pandemic, as an act of collective construction from the uniqueness of the contexts and their communities.

## CORONAVIRUS, CONFINEMENT AND CRISIS IN EDUCATION

With the appearance of the COVID-19 coronavirus, the world once again experienced a public health situation that generated uncertainty, fear, crisis, death, but also challenges, leadership, innovation and transformation, making human potential and ingenuity visible. In recent decades, we have heard of infectious and contagious diseases, which attack the population, being controlled by health systems and the scientific community. Faced with the emergence of new diseases, man has developed alternatives and solutions to defend and preserve life. BBC News World, considers the five most relevant infectious diseases in recent years:

1. Influenza, the best known and most lethal, occurred in 1918. It is known as the “*Spanish flu*”, a global pandemic that reached many corners of the world, infected some 500 million people, causing between 17 and 50 million deaths. It is believed that the virus mutated and migrated from pigs to humans, influenza is a recurrent infection and continues to claim human lives.
2. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 2. HIV/AIDS is a virus that is transmitted to humans through zoonosis, it is similar to a virus that attacks other primates, and there are several strains that are sexually transmitted. In primates it does not cause

immunodeficiency, but there is evidence that the virus was present in people who sold and consumed monkey and chimpanzee meat in central West Africa, although at the beginning the human organism was able to fight this infection. However, the frequency of infection mutated into a lethal virus, and since the 1980s more than 30 million people have died.

3. Mad cow disease, as the name suggests, affected cattle exhibit erratic walking, lack of muscular coordination and abnormal behavior including anxiety, nervousness, frenzy and aggression. The first case occurred in the United Kingdom at the end of the 1980s, it is believed that the cattle became infected by eating products that contained remains of creatures that had the disease. The first case in humans appeared in 1996, it manifests with progressive loss of the ability to think and move, eventually they cannot see, speak, or feed themselves. The mode of transmission is not proven, but it is believed to be through the consumption of contaminated meat.
4. SARS, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, is considered the first pandemic of the 21st century. It originated in China in 2002 and surprised the world by the speed with which it spread from continent to continent. Laboratories identified it as a new strain of coronavirus, found in mammals that mutated among humans, believed to have been transmitted by cave bats to civet cats. The mortality rate was 10%; the pandemic was brought under control in 2003 with quarantine and restrictions on travelers from affected areas.
5. Ebola preceded the current COVID-19. The world went into crisis with Ebola hemorrhagic fever, cases have been known since 1973, but the strongest occurred between 2014 and 2016 and originated in West Africa reaching countries such as the USA, Italy and Spain. It had a high mortality rate, it is believed that the virus comes from a fruit bat and is transmitted by direct contact with body fluids of infected animals.(WHO, 2021).

It appears that COVID-19 started in December 2019 in Wuhan (China). It is a contagious respiratory disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, which has no specific treatment, but can cause death in people with underlying diseases (diabetes, hypertension, dyslipidemia, obesity, heart failure, autoimmune diseases and other pathologies). This disease has crossed borders worldwide, being declared a global pandemic on March 11, 2020 by the WHO. According to the data, it has a lethality rate of 4.5%, affecting mostly elderly people. Not all infected persons present the general symptoms, which makes its spread easier, the most common being cough, fever, difficulty in breathing and loss of taste or smell. Transmission is by liquid particles from an infected person,

expelled by coughing, sneezing or talking. The measures to avoid contagion are: self-care, social distancing, use of masks, permanent hand washing and vaccination with any of the available biologicals (Castro L, 2020).

The challenge is not over yet, many new strains of the virus have appeared, more and more contagious, but less lethal, and the biologicals created in record time by the different laboratories seem to be successful. Countries continue to have infected people, but with fewer cases of mortality. In response to WHO recommendations, President Ivan Duque Marquez declared a health emergency on March 12, 2020, in order to reduce the spread of COVID-19 infection and preserve the health and lives of Colombians. By Decree 457 of the Ministry of the Interior of March 22, 2020, as a public health measure, the population went into mandatory confinement from March 24 to April 12, 2020, and classes were suspended in all public and private institutions. At first it was believed that the confinement would only last a few months, but time proved us wrong and after 2 years we are in the process of returning to “*normality*”, facing new challenges, in addition to the existing ones. (Ministry of the Interior, 2020).

In the confinement as raised by Baxter and Franco (2022), according to UNESCO data for April 2020, 90% of students worldwide, about 1.6 billion children and young people, were affected by the closure of schools and universities. In Colombia the closure was maintained until July 2021, approaching about sixty weeks, a situation that generated controversy in the face of the repeated calls for a gradual and progressive return announced by the Ministry of National Education (MEN). Parents, administrative staff, managers and teachers represented by the union leaders of the Colombian Federation of Educators-FECODE, opposed this decision, due to the infrastructure conditions presented by the official educational institutions, administrative and cleaning staff, drinking water, provision of toiletries and biosecurity elements for compliance with the protocols.

The information presented at the end of 2021, by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), shows that, in Colombia, 88.4% of educational institutions were fully open, which benefited 7,070,145 (71.1%) children and adolescents who attended classes. Although it must be recognized that all students had not returned to normal academic attendance and the alternation modality was implemented, establishing maximum capacity in classrooms and voluntary attendance due to fear of contagion (UNICEF, 2021).

In this sense, one of the crises evidenced is related to the perception that society has of

education and school, vindicating the formative role and the social function they represent for individual and social transformation, which takes on importance to defend it as a public good, inclusive, of easy access and quality. In the study by Baxter and Franco (2022), educational institutions, in addition to offering knowledge, provide spaces for coexistence, interpersonal relationships and social interaction for the development of socioemotional competencies, as well as food, psychological and health services, habits and values aimed at the holistic formation of human beings in the contexts of a community.

When moving from face-to-face to virtual classes, teachers assumed the technological and pedagogical challenge that arose and, as educational actors, joined efforts to guarantee the right to education, generate alternatives and help children, adolescents and young people to remain in the educational system. Abadia (2020), argues that virtuality is not viable in most public schools in the country, where 80% of children and young people study, mainly for two reasons: first, the lack of access to technological tools in the homes of students and second, the lack of digital skills on the part of teachers. The lack of experience of teachers in the use of technological tools increased the difficulties to respond effectively to the teaching-learning processes. Likewise, rectors of public schools in the country consider that 48% of teachers do not have the technical and pedagogical skills necessary to integrate digital devices in teaching.

### **Teacher's role in pandemic**

There are initiatives that exercise global leadership and give importance to education as a fundamental right, as established in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (2005), Article 26: *"Everyone has the right to education"*. Following this guideline, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) considers education as a human right for all, which allows transforming lives and facilitates access to education, which must be accompanied by quality. It also states that, as an enabling right, education is a powerful tool that allows children and adults who are socially and economically marginalized to escape poverty and participate fully in the life of the community. With the current ideal and under these premises, political, economic and social changes have been achieved in the search for sustainable development and lasting peace. (UNESCO, 2020).

Accordingly, the Political Constitution of Colombia (1991) Article 67 states: *"Education is a right of the individual and a public service that has a social function; with it, access is sought to knowledge, science, technology, and other goods and values of culture"*. Understanding this

precept, the MEN proposed to continue with the school process of children and adolescents, through the strategy “*Digital Learning: Content for everyone*”, launched nationwide since March 16, 2020, with more than 80,000 free resources in pedagogical material, video classes, miniseries, podcasts and resources for managers, teachers, parents and caregivers to know and implement in the academic and socioemotional accompaniment at home. The strategy is complemented with the production and transmission of educational content on television and radio, distribution of printed materials and the promotion of distance communication between teachers and students.

Educational institutions articulated these tools to the curriculum and the population that had access to the Internet was able to connect and make use of them; the opposite was the case of students and families who did not have the technological resources or who, living in rural areas, did not have connectivity or cell phone signal to communicate, being relegated to the use of printed material and without permanent accompaniment. According to, Garcia and Kairuz (2020), the learning gaps caused by inequality in access to virtual education are particularly relevant in a context such as Colombia’s, by 2018 50.8 % of households in municipal capitals had a computer at home (desktop, laptop or tablet) and in rural areas the tenure is 9.6 %. 78.1 % of Colombians have a smartphone, although only 29.2 % use mobile internet. 50.7% of the 7,334 Colombian households that do not have internet state that the main reason they do not have access to this service is because it is too expensive. (Garcia Ruiz & Kairuz Correa, 2020).

The teacher in pandemic assumed the abrupt change of the educational scenario, adjusting from their possibilities, particular conditions in their homes to continue with the teaching-learning process virtually, avoiding failure and school dropout. According to Abadia (2009), not being familiar with digital technologies or media is called digital illiteracy, a phenomenon that can occur due to lack of access to resources, but also due to the difficulty of learning how to use the new tools. In a short time, teachers had to set up spaces for virtual classes, acquire technological equipment, Internet access and permanent platforms with their own resources, turn their homes into classrooms, generate innovative strategies, comply with the curriculum and provide students with meaningful learning experiences, thus contributing to their academic success (Abadia Alvarado, 2020).

By increasing their efforts, teachers have empowered themselves with new technological tools to reach students (platforms, tablets, cell phones, whatsapp, among others). In Colombia, 76% of managers state that the number of existing digital teaching devices is insufficient, and only 24% reported having an effective learning support platform available. In addition, 23% of teachers

in public schools are older than 60 years, in correlation, the older they are, the greater the difficulty in the management and use of ICT. According to (Andrade, et al., 2021) 79% of educators had no previous training or experience in the use of digital tools, 21% received some training. Some 76.9% have trained on their own and only 34% of teachers have participated in trainings offered by the Secretariat of Education and 8% by educational institutions. In the presence of the fourth industrial revolution and the emergence of COVID-19, it became evident that the education provided in state schools is lagging behind in the appropriation of technological tools, even the basic ones, to favor student learning.

Colombia has high rates of inequality, extreme poverty and hunger. Figures presented by the Planning Department (DANE), show that by 2020, from 17.5 million citizens located in the poverty line in 2019, it went to 21 million people in this condition and 7.4 million were located in the extreme poverty line. Undoubtedly, the teacher continued to strive to overcome poverty barriers, minimize school failure and dropout, achieve collective learning in a new scenario, maintain motivation, encourage students who lost interest and did not have the resources, given the difficult economic situation of many Colombian households, directly affecting the school and the teaching job. (Andrade Oliveira, Pereira Junior, & Clementino, 2021)

The excessive workday, due to the school-home merger in the same place, virtual classes, the effort to maintain the link with students and the increase in work, allocating more time to the development of material, reading, correction and feedback of school activities, meetings, communication with students and parents; directly affected the health and welfare of teachers. In this regard (Andrade, et al., 2021) states that the most frequent illnesses or discomforts presented by teachers during the pandemic are: visual fatigue 82.6%; work stress 76%; headache 61%; cervical contracture 43%; heaviness in both legs with 33.9% and with a lower percentage of voice fatigue 19.7%. Teaching is one of the professions most prone to the development of psychosomatic diseases and to the increase of occupational hazards. Consequently, excessive workload, inadequate spaces for virtual work, lack of active breaks, increased exposure to stress and other diseases. As stated by Fecode (2020), there is also an *“increase in the health of teachers due to work overload, work harassment and stress, which have increased mental health problems and other occupational diseases”*, a situation that harms the well-being of teachers and their families.

### **Role of the teacher in post-pandemic**

With Directive No. 016 of October 9, 2020, the MEN establishes the guidelines for the

implementation of the educational alternation plan. After a long time of confinement, tension, anxiety, grief, pressure and debate about the lack of physical adaptations in educational institutions, administrative, technical and biosafety conditions, the return to the classroom was gradual and progressive, reaching full attendance at the end of 2021.

Just as there was fear of the contagion and spread of COVID-19, the long time in confinement generated wear and tear, fatigue and deep desire in students, directors, teachers and parents to return to the classroom, showing that presence is irreplaceable in education. The return to educational institutions has made it possible to recognize that from their uniqueness, children, adolescents and young people were able to adapt and return to the classroom with hope. In the same way, the impact and alterations manifested in other students is the reflection of processes that were not developed, for which the teacher's performance is required to meet the socio-emotional needs of students during and after confinement.

Stress, anxiety, depression and exhaustion threaten the mental health of teachers and other members of the educational community. The economic crisis and the confinement measures increased conflicts, mistreatment and abuse within the home, extending to the school environment. The increase of aggression to resolve conflicts in school spaces, shows that it is necessary to establish new forms of relationship based on respect for diversity, tolerance and assertive communication, educating for life. (Mena & Puga, 2019) considers a fundamental aspect the psychosocial support to guarantee the individual well-being of teachers, managers and staff of educational institutions, considering that to the extent that they feel emotionally well, they will have better capabilities to perform accompaniment to students and families when required, allowing to strengthen the school climate for learning and healthy coexistence. (Berniell, et al., 2021).

After two years in classes behind the screen or a printed guide where instructions were followed, one of the challenges faced by the teacher is to bridge the gaps in the maturation and learning that students present. The opportunity to learn through play, considered as a pedagogical principle for socialization, exploration of the environment and other elements provided by the educational activity guided by the teacher, diminished in children in early childhood and elementary school, limiting the experience of meaningful experiences that favor their holistic development. *“Play constitutes one of the most important ways in which young children gain essential knowledge and competencies”* UNICEF (2018). Scientific research has considered that the most important period of human development is from birth to eight years of age, since it allows enhancing cognitive,



emotional, social competencies, physical and mental health, structuring a solid foundation for adult life. During this period, the child begins to act as a member of society, develops activities and bonds outside the family group, takes into account rules at school and in the practice of games and sports, appropriates contents proposed by his or her culture, shares and lives in community.

The effect of the pandemic on student learning requires making adjustments to the PEI, the curriculum, generating didactic options and a more flexible evaluation system, adapted to the new school dynamics. Therefore, initiating the pedagogical transformation implies taking up the innovative experiences of virtuality, collaborative work among teachers, communication and the permanent support of the family. For Berniell et al. (2021), countries must redouble their efforts to improve the capabilities of teachers, not only to use technology in teaching, but to innovate, experiment and adapt curricula to overcome the academic gap of affected learning, from the individuality of the students. (Berniell, et al., 2021).

## CONCLUSIONS

The transcendence and value of education expressed by international and national organizations in laws and documents, is blurred in reality, since the purpose expressed in guaranteeing the right to education, as a fundamental right and enabler of other rights, is not achieved.

During and after the crisis generated by the pandemic, the problems of the education system worsened. The power of education to change the world inspires the transformation of social reality and the overcoming of barriers, lessons that the pandemic leaves to governments to assume the commitment with political will, allocating the necessary resources and efforts to reduce social inequality and guarantee public and quality education for all.

In Colombia, the map of the enormous technological gap was drawn. In the big cities, some private educational institutions adapted quickly to the circumstances, had equipment and excellent connections. In contrast, in public, urban and rural institutions, difficulties still persist, and investment in technological infrastructure and training by the Colombian state is necessary. Educational institutions need adaptations in the physical plant with the technical conditions for face-to-face activities to be developed in safe and healthy environments, with access to permanent drinking water, ventilated classrooms and enough space to avoid school overcrowding.

The recognition of the teaching work in pandemic and post-pandemic from trial and error,

with the purpose of attending, overcoming, advancing and providing solutions to the difficulties that arose and continue to arise, allowed parents to know firsthand how difficult it is to “teach”, even when conditions are not the best, for which it is necessary to strengthen the bond of the educational triad student-teacher-parent.

The time students spent working at home, without adequate interaction with their peers, teachers and other members of the educational community, generated a series of gaps, not only in learning and development of competencies, but also in their physical, social and emotional growth.

Finally, it is necessary to innovate the teaching and learning process, diversifying the spaces, the didactic strategies, the formative evaluation approach, strengthening the family-school collaborative work, in order to achieve significant learning that favors the development of basic competencies in the students.

During and after the pandemic, the teacher was able to propose solutions that allowed not only to overcome the situation, but also to come out of it stronger, envisioning from the pedagogical experience and his role as mediator, a better future for education and humanity.

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