

# THE UNEXPECTED OPPORTUNITY FOR THE EDUCATIONAL FIELD ARISING FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC. A HOPEFUL OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE

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## RESUMEN

This article aims to trace the main challenges faced by educational systems during the gradual and progressive return to face-to-face study after two years of home study due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The review is based on the period from March 2020, corresponding to the beginning of the confinement derived from the COVID-19 pandemic, to the current June 2022, which is the time in which this document was elaborated. Forty-five articles in Google Scholar, Scopus, Redalyc and Scielo published in English, Spanish and Portuguese were reviewed and their relation with the proposed topic was determined with key expressions: “*Post-pandemic education*”, “*Education after COVID-19*”, “*Challenges of COVID-19 in education*”. The choice of the articles that shaped the discussion is based on a data matrix elaborated from the articles reviewed and for their production the fundamental features of the process prior to the return to face-to-face classes such as connectivity, socialization and mental health were taken into account. The results suggest that educational systems, after the worst of the pandemic, have the opportunity to review their essential postulates and generate adaptive processes with the potential to produce a revolution in teaching in educational centers.

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The analysis and review seeks to offer an alternative view to the already known hopeless discourse that assumes that all efforts to educate remotely during the confinement were unsuccessful and that suffering this crisis leaves us with no lesson.

**Keywords:** Education, pandemic, challenges, remote education, face-to-face education.

## INTRODUCTION

In Colombia, the Ministry of National Education by means of Directive 05 of June 17, 2021 instructed the Mayors, Governors, Secretaries of Education, teachers and directors of all educational institutions in the country on the gradual and progressive return of students taking into account the protection and capacity measures in order to give continuity to the educational process in a face-to-face manner. Recently, already in 2022, the Ministry of Health determined that as of May 15 the use of face masks in school environments would not be mandatory. This, among other restrictions that are no longer in place in many parts of the world, indicates that health authorities consider that the most difficult part of the COVID-19 pandemic has passed and it is time to assume normality and recover pre-pandemic conditions, although perhaps nothing will be as it was before.

Thus, from the beginning of the confinement, it was foreseeable that the changes in habits and social isolation would end up affecting the general well-being of the students. An early study by Paschke et al (2021) demonstrated the increased incidence of psychological stress in the nuclear family with notable consequences in emotional dysregulation and increased procrastination in at least one third of parent-child dyads. The study also reviewed sociodemographic risk factors and other aspects such as time spent at home, economic concerns and family tensions.

Vogel et al (2021) through a study with a pre-COVID baseline and two time points after the security measures (social distancing and confinement) found a decline in both physical and psychological well-being in children aged nine years and older and adolescents when comparing perceptions of these two health indicators in the months prior to the pandemic. This supports the fear that the psychosocial effects of COVID-19 are no less severe than the other symptoms.

Also, younger children, aged 6 and 7 years, suffered health impairment, emotional difficulties, and behavioral impairment as reported by Kurz et al (2022). In addition, the researchers, although with a limited sample size-362 children-found that sleep patterns,

physical activity, or previous interests in books were not affected, although “*weekly screen time*” did increase considerably. They predicted health problems following the pandemic, although they were inconclusive regarding possible gender differences.

According to the World Bank (2020), the impact on the learning and educational trajectories of children, adolescents and young people was unequal according to different countries and continents, different purchasing power or gender. In some countries, girls are excluded from education for socio-cultural reasons, and, with the closure of schools, the burden of household chores fell unevenly on them, preventing them from staying in school in the long term.

Educating in pandemic, all from home, was a challenge in which it was possible to replace the school thanks to the fact that we live in the era of social networks and the internet with a hyper-connected world. It is true, not everyone had the same experience, and the pandemic was directed at the underprivileged, threatening to widen even more the already existing gaps. This circumstance made even more pessimistic the premise that, upon returning to the classroom, we would find that our students would be severely impaired in their social and even cognitive skills.

Fortunately, the development of e-learning in the last two decades, together with the advent and generalization of social networks, alleviated to a great extent the difficulties of studying from home. The pandemic forced teachers to resort to remote education, perhaps never explored by them. And this imposed new rhythms since this education, like others, demands careful preparation and design to anticipate educational needs and student expectations.

In addition, as Rapanta and Cantoni (2013) found, for e-learning it is required on the part of the teacher the development of empathy, of his speech and the assumption of roles as relevant components in the preparation of classes. With the COVID-19 crisis, educational institutions, students, parents and teachers were suddenly immersed in remote education and such skills became more important.

On the other hand, the pandemic not only disrupted health, economics, and in part our character. It also produced gaps and increased some of the existing ones such as school dropout or dropout. The report: “*EDUCATION IN PAUSE*”, prepared by UNICEF (2020), estimated that 3.1 million children and adolescents in Latin America and the Caribbean would

not return to school after the pandemic. The same document reports that in 18 countries, secondary education would suffer a decrease in the probability of completion from 56% to 42%.

In this same report, UNICEF insists that, although the reopening of schools depended on each country and was based on epidemiological criteria and indicators and socioeconomic and public health indicators, it should be a priority for governments. And the same agency urges that the safe return to the classroom should be planned with a view to recovery and with the overall objective of laying *“the foundation for new and improved education systems that are more relevant and equitable for today’s world, as well as more resilient to future crises”* (p. 23).

The World Bank Group Education 2020 reported that the closure of institutions had direct educational costs such as disruption of learning, increased learning inequity, and reduced attachment to school. In addition, the economic crisis resulting from the pandemic indirectly impacted educational attainment with increased dropout rates, increased child labor, child marriage, transactional sex, and lower educational investment by parents.

UNDP LAC (2020) in a UNICEF report, states that the first impact of the pandemic on students is the loss of learning that can have a long-term effect and that it estimates, as of August 2020, a one-year delay in learning. Predictably, this loss has been more acute in the most vulnerable and in this play an important role the fewer opportunities for connectivity of families with lower incomes and less dedication of their parents in the academic accompaniment at home.

The reopening of schools, which began in Latin America with Uruguay, seems to be a box of surprises. For almost two years, education in schools and universities was done virtually with very advanced and effective means of communication in some cases and not very efficient in others. In general, the assumptions about what it would be like to return to the classroom were always expressed in terms of pessimism regarding the qualities of the student who would return to the classroom.

A notable proportion of the forecasts regarding the return to face-to-face attendance in schools were based on the fear that the capabilities of our students had been weakened; a smaller portion of these premonitory ideas announced the advent of students who could be more responsible and empowered in an attitude of self-learning. This in terms of the student.

For the educational field, only a few visionaries ventured that the crisis could bring something good. And it is this almost marginal opinion that has perhaps received less attention, not because it is less interesting, but because it is less visible. This article proposes precisely to make a theoretical review of the assertion that post-pandemic education carries with it a burden of opportunities to improve educational systems. Addressing such a proposition implies recognizing the capacity for resilience and the development of new skills in the face of adversity that we humans have. It is another side of the coin to the facile criticism and the hackneyed platitude that the pandemic brought only bad things.

## **METHODS**

The descriptive review process was based on a search of Google Scholar, Dialnet and Scopus databases based on the criterion of choosing those with the greatest significance with respect to the intention of the study. A descriptive exploration was made of articles relating the variables “*education*”, “*challenges*” and “*post-pandemic*”. A total of 45 articles were submitted for review and the languages for which the digital search was carried out were English, Spanish and Portuguese. Among these, the analysis was limited to those that were most relevant to the general idea of the challenges of post-pandemic education.

Information was extracted from the reviewed publications and processed in order to obtain meanings of the text fragments and their meaning in terms of their contribution to the topic of the study from the interpretative paradigm approached by the authors. An Excel template was created and in it the findings were organized on the categories related to the interest of the review such as: Middle education, remote education, post-pandemic, educational challenges and return to face-to-face. In this matrix the publications or researches were classified with their authors and the interesting statements for their propositional richness with respect to the topic.

## **RESULTS**

During the time of the home study, the physical and mental health of students and families was affected at the same time that financial anxieties increased hopelessness. Screen time increased substantially, although it does not appear to have affected children’s and youths’ sleep habits or engagement in other interests.

The common view was that the pandemic disaster would result only in wasted effort. At the beginning of the confinement after the establishment of remote study, some voices from academia and from the common knowledge predicted irreversible loss of learning and

instability of the educational system that should be restored with the urgent return to face-to-face classes and to continue as before the pandemic.

In contrast to this expectation of returning to “*normality*” and “*as before*”, the review found that there is a strong philosophical and sociological basis for the COVID-19 calamity to represent an important opportunity to renew education, which does not only refer to making teachers more digitally competent, but also implies an educational transformation that starts with regulations and state support and reaches all the actors involved in education.

For families, who have opened their eyes to their important role in the education of their children, the new times impose new or previously neglected commitments to the school and to their children. The performance of parents and their rediscovered self-perception as important educational actors will move many of them to persevere in supporting their children in their education. In general, the viewpoint of governments, the media and teachers on their own role in education will also have undergone advantageous changes.

Socially, the impact of the pandemic was uneven, but this conjuncture also revealed some inequalities that had been neglected and the consequent urgency to eliminate them. In the latter sense, it is also an opportunity that has emerged from the crisis. Countries, now with a new social conscience, are faced with the need to reduce gaps and inequalities.

These opportunities, which run the risk of being missed, imply a change in well-established paradigms and may be met with resistance. Even before this global mishap, we were already indebted to education and some of the sustainable development goals in education, agenda 2030, were in arrears in many developing countries. This reason and the lack of determined and lasting commitments from governments jeopardize the implementation of innovations that education requires.

## **DISCUSSION**

The return to the classroom after one of the greatest recent social disasters in current history has marked educational systems to such an extent that it is possible that the new stability will be different from what it was before the COVID-19 pandemic. In the meantime, while teachers, educational authorities and students are getting used to the new normal, everyone is in a novel process of adaptation and growth. The most pessimistic omens while we suffered the most severe of the pandemic announced the return of a student impoverished in their cognitive and motivational conditions with a high dependence on connectivity devices

and hindered socialization processes.

Thus, when students began their return to the classroom after two years of studying at home, teachers and administrators home study, teachers and administrators were able to confirm many of their predictions, but also observed other outcomes and circumstances that were not anticipated. So educators now had to face the challenges of teaching in post-pandemic times and with that they will surely have to adjust their practices for the new public that is now accustomed to digital media.

These new dissonances in education together with the strong socio-economic gaps neglected by the state and the lack of public policies, not only reveal the lags of the pandemic, but also reflect the weaknesses of a state system with promises of quality education with social justice or opportunities that were neglected or postponed and were exacerbated by the pandemic.

Teachers also expressed the need to rethink their pedagogical practices, including the use of technology as an alternative tool that adds value to the teaching and learning process. But the greatest concern was centered on the student and in fact the first opinions of the teachers upon receiving their students back regarding their psychosocial and cognitive skills were generally demoralizing. The teachers evidenced situations of apathy, lack of interest, lack of motivation, lack of knowledge of authority, technological dependence, although with the passage of time and after experiencing adaptation processes it is likely that these deficiencies will improve.

During the pandemic, education had to be imparted with the new digital modes and generated an additional demand within families, as stated in her thesis as a journalist Maria Fernanda Savigliano (2020): “*many adults had to add to their daily tasks to be constantly present to assist their children*” (p. 5). And she adds that this inevitably led to new inequalities in which households with greater time availability, ample space in their homes and parents with a high level of education had better opportunities for accompaniment and this was of better quality compared to that of families living in overcrowded conditions and parents with a lower level of education.

Inevitably, in the face of this new untimely way of doing things, criticism ensued. Maria Elisa Bongiovanni, coordinator of the EDUCREA group, quoted by Maria Fernanda Savigliano (2020), said “This is a lost year. Technology-mediated education in the country

today only demands evidence of compliance, and not meaningful learning. It is evaluated that the student complies, but not that he/she learns, that he/she thinks. For this, it is necessary that they have a direct link with the teacher, that they see each other's faces, that they feel part of it, that they feel involved in the learning process, it is necessary to enable exchange. All these are aspects that remote education does not fully contemplate" (p. 14).

Regarding the role of parents in this context, Elisa makes a difference between those who were present, who accompanied "*as best they could*" the educational process of their children and those who, perhaps less favored by the circumstances, delegated this responsibility to the system.

And here Elisa also warned about the return to school: "*next year will be another year of challenges; leveling between those who sustained school continuity at a distance and those who were totally disconnected from the educational system*" (p. 14). He explains that the real challenge is to prevent the gap between high and low sectors from widening and, consequently, students from vulnerable households lacking technological resources and with parents without sufficient educational level, would be irremissibly displaced or excluded.

These pessimistic views on teaching and learning during confinement gave way to the reality of the return to face-to-face teaching. And all assumptions are in the process of being contrasted with the stubborn reality as time permits. For now, the young people have shown that not all the concerns they had about returning to the classroom after two years at home were experienced as anticipated, or at least not with the severity expected. To a large extent, these are shown to be progressively overcome in the attempt to return to normal school life.

It is understandable that until before the pandemic, teachers had generally underestimated some of the features that make up the student environment and the student's context. In many cases all student life was centered in the classroom or, at most, the adjoining areas. The crisis uncovered the little importance given to social life and interaction in the planning of practices and added an essential component in times of confinement, which is the digital dimension. Undoubtedly, rooted in the lack of the latter, educational inequality increased in the pandemic.

When returning to the classroom, the priority was to recover learning in order to avoid lasting consequences on the opportunities of children and youth. In its report "*COVID-19: Impact on Education and Public Policy Responses*" the World Bank Group Education (2020)



specifies this priority. In addition, the report indicates several measures to achieve the purpose ranging “*from improved classroom assessments to more focused pedagogical methods and curricula*”.

Once in school, it is therefore necessary to accelerate learning. The World Bank (2020) predicts that, following the pandemic, the views of the media, parents and teachers, as well as the government and other educational stakeholders will have changed about their own role in the educational process. Parents are likely to understand the importance of working with schools to improve the education their children receive. Teachers will recognize their own unresolved digital limitations and understanding of the digital divide will improve. It will also happen that many inequities will be revealed more visibly and with it the urgency to reduce them.

On the sociological side, Morin quoted by Rodriguez (2020) warned that “*The general and gigantic crisis provoked by the Coronavirus must also be seen as the virulent symptom of a deeper and more general crisis of the Western paradigm*”. Inevitably, the new paradigm touches one of the vital nerves of society, the education system. From the lessons learned will come the new primer on how we must face education in the new times. Perhaps there will be new ways of working in the classroom, such as reconfiguring teaching practices and generating greater empathy and assertiveness in interpersonal relationships, while at the same time bringing new technologies into the educational process.

Families will play a decisive role -as they did during the pandemic- in the recovery of learning. The interaction between student and family has been recognized and capitalized to a great extent by educational establishments that seek to involve the family in the institutional processes and dynamics that are sensitive to their participation. But even with this expectation, Novo and Prada in 2016, found that communication in from school to family is limited to one way. And, on the other hand, the family focuses mainly on the needs of their children. This asymmetry must be corrected and this means rebuilding the School-Family relationship.

For Zhao (2020) the COVID-19 crisis, beyond the damage it has represented, is an opportunity to rethink education that should not focus on the unspecific imperative of “*improving education*” but be concrete to answer the questions “*what*”, “*how*” and “*where*” to learn in the process that schools should live in order to reinvent the education that we should expect after COVID-19. In the same vein, Zhao asserts that the SAR-CoV-2 pandemic outbreak, while affecting all aspects of human life by destroying norms, patterns and routines,

as well as disastrous revelations of the worst in humans and their organizations, offers an opportunity to question the traditional and rethink norms and institutions.

Zhao highlights the school as one of the institutions affected and which can be restructured. He states that the crisis is an opportunity to reinvent education, since educational institutions were conceived in times when our understanding of learning and its actors was completely different, just as it was different with regard to society and the economy. A crucial point for his reasoning is the pause in schooling, caused by confinement. For him, this pause is an opportunity. And that opportunity is particularly rare and special: Educational leaders and governments can rethink education and the way it has long been delivered during times of relative normalcy.

In terms of needed changes, Zhao, Y., Watterston, J. (2021) specify three major changes centered on: Personalized Curriculum, Student-Centered Pedagogy, and finally, instruction that leverages the strengths of both synchronous and asynchronous teaching. In addition to the above, as reported in an article in *El Tiempo* (June 7, 2020), researchers at Peking University found that, in terms of the use of technological means for remote learning, short sessions of between 15 and 30 minutes are more effective. From this follows a questioning and reflection on how effective are our current educational models in which students spend many hours in the classroom with little rest.

So, elementary schools, high schools, and universities alike, should reimagine what education should look like. Zhao, Y. (2020) in his article *“Tofu is not cheese: rethinking education in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic”* raises a recurring complaint about how Education as a field, compared to others such as Medicine or Agriculture, has not progressed in the same way. This is possibly due to missed opportunities to propose relevant changes in Education and the pandemic and remote study time provided an occasion that is perhaps being wasted.

In the same article, Zhao postulates that we must reconsider what is worth teaching and learning. At the height of the pandemic, the pandemic forced the cancellation of important exams so that the pressure to *“teach to the test”* was slowed. Some college admissions took into account evidence in addition to or different from that of standardized tests. These and other no less valuable reasons signify for Zhao the need to promote what he calls *“global competencies”* which he defines as those that *“enable the knowledge to understand global interdependence, the global economy, global problems and global conflicts, as well as the*

*desire and ability to take action to bring positive changes to the world for all human beings to live in peace and share prosperity.”*

The World Bank Education Group (2020) agrees that the crisis should be taken as an opportunity to rebuild education systems that are stronger and more equitable than before. As early as the pandemic, the World Bank advocated that planning for a better future should begin now, i.e., in the current pandemic time. Moreover, with proactive vision and action, real growth can be generated from recovery.

In the specific case of Colombia, Luz Karime Abadia Alvarado, co-director of the Economics of Education Laboratory (LEE-Javeriana University in Colombia), says that it is important to keep digital tools involved in a transversal way in the curricula because this allows them to be more innovative and efficient in teaching and learning. For her, this measure has proven to boost school performance and reduce school dropout. She also postulates that Colombia has the possibility of designing effective public policies to involve digital technologies as it is usual in the best educational systems and for which it is necessary to extend connectivity, train teachers and provide schools with technological tools.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Throughout its existence, the human race has shown a remarkable capacity for adaptation and recovery in the face of threats and dangers, and by virtue of this talent the species has overcome crises, whether natural or created. In the same way, the products of human culture have been modified to face challenges, as in the case of the most recent pandemic threat, COVID-19, to which modern institutions reacted accordingly.

The world, faced with a discouraging panorama in the face of the unthinkable event of the pandemic and with the evident structural problems of the global economic model, together with the deficiencies of a deficient modern system of social protection, initially reacted with a weak response to the coronavirus pandemic.

For the education sector, the impact of confinement has caused damage that will take time to be rectified, in terms of loss of learning, psychosocial effects and the interruption of educational trajectories. This is in addition to other less obvious implications.

The arrival of the pandemic and its impact occurred at a time when education in some countries was being rethought and faced various problems and new challenges. It unleashed

an abrupt interruption or stagnation in the different areas of the educational context, which was compelled to seek answers to try to neutralize the damage. The predominant pedagogical challenge required minimizing the negative repercussions of school closures.

The COVID-19 pandemic taught us that we must be ready to reinvent ourselves permanently, that it is a modern duty to be prepared to face the challenges of adaptation. This social and, particularly, educational readjustment implies paradigm shifts in favor of new ways of learning from virtual, blended or face-to-face learning and from autonomy and self-learning.

Family life was unexpectedly disrupted by the pandemic. For the first time, there was a total closure of educational institutions, and the home schooling model was adopted. This led to a sudden change of practices in the traditional education system and almost no one was prepared for this. Abruptly, from one day to the next, routines and daily routines were altered with the imperative migration from face-to-face to remote digital.

And these new difficulties added to existing shortcomings. Before the pandemic, many countries were far from meeting Sustainable Development Goal 4, which commits the world to ensuring “*inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities*”. Proof of this debt is that up to and including 2020, universal quality schooling at the primary level had not been achieved in many countries. Before the pandemic, 53% of 10-year-old children in low- and middle-income countries could not read or understand simple text as reported by the World Bank (2020).

The fateful event that impacted global health also revealed the pressing need to implement new technologies. The generalization of the use of digital platforms to achieve continuity in the training process and not to stop the purposes of education. Despite this, the paralysis of the face-to-face educational process and the shift to the virtual environment intensified inequalities and widened social gaps even more. The educational landscape was depressed, and a series of unresolved challenges were postponed.

Even with this, the educational system became a fundamental element during this crisis and unleashed the participation of different sectors of civil society as well as fostering alliances to strengthen state decisions with the consequent achievement of minimizing educational bias. And this participation and altruism was occasionally consolidated in the purchase and donation of mobile equipment and the contracting of connectivity plans. Given the force of

circumstance, in many cases classes reached those remote areas where it had been almost impossible to maintain the schooling process.

It is worth noting that if the educational systems already reflected inequalities associated with rhythms, forms, teaching methods, availability of didactic material, technology and infrastructure conditions, the pandemic brought to light existing socio-economic inequalities in households. Housing conditions, limited access to public services, low-income levels, use of technology and connectivity, as well as the cognitive resources of parents and adult caregivers were some of the factors that conditioned the pedagogical continuity at the time of the suspension of face-to-face classes. These issues are so important for a full understanding of the opportunities and difficulties of the education sector that they justify once again the recurrent claim of building a quality education policy.

Although, at least in appearance, technology and remote teaching seemed to be the solution to the urgent need to preserve and guarantee learning from home, it brought a new role for parents as forced companions to mediate between the screens and the students regardless of the disparity of tools and skills to carry out the formative process together. With this, less prepared or busier parents were unable to provide quality accompaniment.

The family environment was affected and the alliance between family and school became more imperative to achieve educational work from home. Being immersed in a full-time coexistence, distributed between telework and pedagogical accompaniment, some family dynamics were altered.

At the policy level, the pandemic has left the challenge of reviewing, identifying and delimiting the problems caused by it. It is unfailing for educational authorities to elaborate a framework of needs and possible alternative solutions, considering the social contexts in order to plan the processes of continuity, recovery and reinvention of the prevailing educational model.

From this approach, it is natural that teachers are called to carry out a process of analysis, reflection and reinvention of their practice with the incorporation of strategies such as the inverted classroom, hybrid models and the use of technological devices that enhance and dynamize the transformation of pedagogical practice. Following this example, all institutions should join efforts to mitigate the consequences left by the pandemic and improve the existing problems in the school environment before, during and after it.

The pandemic hit society and opened our eyes. It would be foolish not to pay due attention or not to take a lesson and continue as before it. The state agencies in charge of social welfare and education have before them, open the front door, the entrance to a future world with better prevention and better response capacity. Since globalization predisposed the development of pandemics, alliances and collaboration must emerge from it in order to mitigate them and the problems derived from them.

Overall, a joint effort will make it possible to uproot learning inequity, minimize the digital divide and improve the situation of disadvantaged places within the Colombian education structure to ensure inclusive, equitable and quality education with lifelong learning opportunities for all (UN, 2015).

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