



Research and Analysis of Schools Closures Response in the Americas (RASCRA) - 2020

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY - February 2021

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The suspension of face-to-face classes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic profoundly affected the educational systems of the Americas. The countries of the region made enormous efforts to guarantee the continuity of learning. However, these efforts were limited by the challenges presented by the context and the unequal initial conditions of access to infrastructure and other resources.

The present document is an initiative of the British Council Argentina in partnership with the Varkey Foundation, and looks at actions taken during the pandemic by governments and schools, with a view to identifying, from the perspective of stakeholders in the education system, lessons learned and the pending challenges for 2021, as well as reflecting on post-pandemic education. Specifically, this research covers primary and secondary levels of 11 countries in the Americas, these are: **Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, the United States, Mexico, Peru, the Dominican Republic and Uruguay.**

The analysis consisted of a methodological triangulation of quantitative and qualitative instruments and analysis techniques such as literature and document reviews, interviews, surveys, and focus groups. 63 interviews were carried out with government leaders, teachers, academics, unions and third sector organisations, more than 5000 surveys of teachers from the different countries analysed, and 11 focus groups with 67 teachers participating.

The report is organised into 6 chapters: (1) Government initiatives, (2) Support to students; (3) Teacher responses to the crisis, (4) The link between school and family, (5) Management: decision-making in the face of the unprecedented, and (6) Experiences in focus.

1- Government initiatives

The unequal access to electricity, technological devices and the internet in households was taken into account when designing the emergency responses. Many of the measures taken to expand the digital infrastructure and make educational content available were achieved through alliances with private companies, social organisations, community groups, and non-educational public agencies. The teachers surveyed identified that the efforts to carry out these measures came from both the ministries of education and educational institutions.

The use of educational platforms or online repositories, educational applications and software for videoconferencing were implemented in contexts of moderate and high technological maturity. In contexts of limited technological maturity, television and radio teaching strategies were used. While teachers adopted the former, the latter, according to the survey, were less used in their teaching. As to the effectiveness of the proposals, this was independent of the format, with teaching quality being instead more fundamental. However, there is still no evidence to conclude whether these statements also apply in the current context of crisis and the consequent emotional impact of the prolonged time of isolation.

The unequal access to connectivity across the world was highlighted and perceived as a limiting factor. Those interviewed agree that it is essential to guarantee access to connectivity and review educational practices, the curriculum and teaching goals to train digital citizens. At present, although schools are not fully-equipped for this purpose, they represent for children and young people a place with the highest probability of access to the internet compared to their homes (UNESCO, 2020).

2. Support to students

The transition from face-to-face to remote education was accompanied by curricular adaptation or adjustment. In addition, issues related to prevention and health care have been incorporated, and socio-emotional skills have become more central to pedagogy. Distancing between teacher and students and the consequent transformation of teaching meant learning technologies would take a leading role. The data from the teacher survey indicated that only 3.4% of teachers consulted did not carry out any type of curricular adaptation.

Regarding assessment, adjustments were made, such as unifying the 2020-2021 school years, and suspending or rescheduling national and international exams scheduled for 2020. This was done because of doubts related to the reliability and the equity of results, given the wide differences in the reality of each student in the context of the pandemic and the variation in factors that affected their educational experience. This chapter outlines proposed alternative initiatives and goes into depth on the role of formative assessment and its ability to respond to the challenges that arose during the crisis.

In terms of tools for monitoring and follow-up, these are a pending challenge. In general terms, the information available relating to learning outcomes, as well as the risk of school dropout, has been obtained through estimates at the school level. Therefore, the development of measurement and diagnostic instruments is evidenced as necessary to plan a return to class focused on supporting students. It will also be necessary to develop remedial policies for the negative impact that the closure of schools has had due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Teacher responses to the crisis

This chapter presents a review of remote teaching resources, strategies and practices developed by teachers in the Americas during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The data produced by the survey show the importance of digital and audiovisual resources that the teachers themselves created. In turn, among the strategies considered most effective, were those that made it possible to give personalised attention to the needs of students and those that included a socio-emotional aspect. Teachers had to make changes to their usual practice to achieve greater effectiveness in remote teaching. This promoted reflection on traditional ways of teaching, and on the importance of student-centred teaching.

Actions to strengthen teacher professional development and provide support to teachers, from both ministerial and institutional levels, focused on updating content for socio-emotional education, developing technological skills, and providing other specific

training. Training was delivered online. In most cases, this involved presentations by experts. To a lesser extent, workshops were given, which allowed for greater interaction with content and between experts and participants, with teachers receiving feedback. On the other hand, opportunities for exchange of good practice between teachers were made available, provided or promoted by educational institutions, ministries, universities and third sector organisations. These opportunities for knowledge exchange were most valued, according to the survey.

Three major changes for the future were identified by educational leaders in the region: the need to carry out structural changes to initial teacher training; a new teacher profile with competencies for remote teaching and establishing support systems for teachers in schools in vulnerable contexts.

4. The link between school and family

The closure of schools meant that students stopped meeting their teachers in the classroom and had to continue learning from their homes. In this context, the need to establish alternative communication channels to face-to-face arose, in order to maintain the link between school and students. In the face of this new reality, the role of the family became central since it was fundamental to sustain pedagogical continuity, especially in the case of younger students who did not have sufficient autonomy to manage their own learning. Access to resources available to children and families at home became important, as well as the educational level of the adults in charge of caring for the children. This has restarted the conversation about the role of the family in education and the link between schools and families in order to sustain learning.

The feeding and caring functions of educational institutions were also highlighted. The efforts of schools and governments in the provision and distribution of food became more evident. Faced with the economic crisis that accompanied the health risk, schools became a socio-emotional and nutritional support centre for many families. The increase in interactions between teachers and families, which became part of everyday life, also generated a reevaluation of the teaching role by families.

Overall, it was observed that the suspension of face-to-face classes represented an opportunity to strengthen the bond between school and family, a bond that should continue and be further strengthened in the future, for the benefit of learning and well-being of students.

5. Management: decision-making in the face of the unprecedented

In an unprecedented and uncertain environment, management teams had to adapt and provide increased support to both institutional and pedagogical management of schools. This resulted in new challenges and demands arising from the health emergency, which in turn implied an increase in responsibilities and tasks. In particular, school leaders and management teams were key to supporting teachers in the transition to distance education. The results of the survey of teachers in the region place school authorities in second place (27.6%), after their fellow teachers (51.8%), as their main allies during the transition to distance learning in this period.

It is observed that many school leaders have seen their decision-making powers expanded given the need for the system to provide contextualized responses to achieve pedagogical continuity. This has had different effects on school communities depending on the degree of support from government authorities and the existence (or not) of clear guidelines, and according to the leadership skills and strategic planning of each school leader. On the other hand, it was agreed that the decision-making process and the decisions themselves were adjusted and adapted as the school closure period was extended.

Also, due to the need for contextualized responses, in some cases there was an increase in communication and collaborative work between technical teams from ministries and schools. In some cases, managers and teachers were involved in the assembly of pedagogical material to respond to the emergency context and / or consulted in decision-making at ministerial level.

To sum up, it was verified that in different countries of the region management teams have played a key role during the period of school closures. There is clearly a need for support and continued training to help with effective decision-making in schools, as well as the desire from school leaders that their voices continue to be heard in the development of educational policies.

6. Experiences in focus

Although there is still not enough information regarding student learning and the effectiveness of the programs and policies implemented in different countries, the analysis of selected experiences in focus and perception of the teachers who participated in focus groups, allows us to glimpse some significant points.

- Those programs or initiatives that have a long-term vision gave a more contextualized and meaningful response to the closure of schools.
- The greater diversification of strategies or comprehensive proposals had greater reach and outreach to students.
- Initiatives that promote collaboration spaces and the construction of professional learning communities were fundamental for the support, development, and training of teachers.
- Countries that were digitally prepared and had clear objectives prior to the pandemic were able to face the closure of schools without great difficulties