PERSPECTIVES OF FORMAL EDUCATION WITH CHILDREN IN THE FACE OF COVID-19: THE CONTEXT OF CHIAPAS

PERSPECTIVAS DE LA EDUCACIÓN FORMAL CON INFANCIAS ANTE EL COVID-19: EL CONTEXTO DE CHIAPAS

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ABSTRACT: This article recovers the narratives of preschool and elementary education teachers in Chiapas, Mexico, through which describes and analyzes how educational processes are developing with children of rural and indigenous communities in the pandemic. The teachers narrate their personal and teaching experiences as complex, impregnated with negative emotions, as well as the difficult interactions with parents in the negotiation of formal educational practice to develop at home, and report social inequality and its impact on children's educational attention.

Keywords: Teaching experience. Childhood. Covid-19. Rural and indigenous education.

RESUMEN: Este artículo recupera las narrativas de profesorado de educación preescolar y primaria de Chiapas, a través de las cuales describe y analiza cómo se están desarrollando procesos educativos con infancias de comunidades rurales e indígenas a partir de la pandemia. Los(as) profesores(as) narran su experiencia personal y docente como compleja, impregnada de emociones negativas, las interacciones tensas con padres y madres en la negociación de la práctica educativa formal para desarrollarse en casa, y denuncian la desigualdad social y su repercusión en la atención educativa de niñas y niños.

Palabras clave: Experiencia docente. Infancias. Covid-19. Educación rural e indígena.

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ARTICLES I CRIANÇAS, INFÂNCIAS E PANDEMIA

Introduction

The global pandemic situation during the year 2020, caused by Covid-19 has generated transformations in several areas of public life. The educational systems and, in general, the institutional educational practice have suffered alterations in their continuity since the physical presence routine has been broken and this was the traditional form of interaction in the school, and tele-educational models have been arranged massively for children (PLASCENCIA, 2020), institutionally designed from the educational public policy as standardized models. Given this view of uncertainty and disadvantage for several children, the conditions in which educational processes occur and the participation of the actors in these processes should be explored; such is the case of teachers at the basic level, preschool and elementary education. We must not lose sight of the fact that even though technological intermediation is proposed, the subjects do not disappear and must subordinate the technologies to the processes of subjectivation and not the other way around. We must recognize the child who is on the other side at home (MAGGIO, 2020, p. 17).

There is an urgency of research regarding education and the Covid-19 ranging from studies on digital tools, models, effectiveness of tele-education, curriculum adaptation, students and teacher welfare, and others (ÁLVAREZ, 2020; EXPÓSITO; MARSOLLIER, 2020; LLOYD, 2020; MARTÍNEZ; GARCÉS, 2020; MÉRIDA; ACUÑA, 2020). There is a generalized agreement about the situation in Latin America that people in rural and indigenous areas due to their precarious conditions and social exclusion from public services (health, education, housing, basic sanitation), have been among those most affected by of the pandemic (CEPAL, 2020; BRAGATO; RIOS; BERNARDIS, 2021; CORTEZ; MUÑOZ; PONCE, 2020; OLIVEIRA et al., 2020). In other areas of the world this structural inequality is repeated (GEBEYEHU, 2000; VIVANCO, 2020).

In addition to the physical and public policy conditions, there is racism, discrimination and structural violence related to the lack of public health attention in the indigenous population (BRAGATO; RIOS; BERNARDIS, 2021; CORTEZ; MUÑOZ; PONCE, 2020). There are even subregistries and erroneous interpretations about what happened in the communities in Covid-19 times for Chiapas.

In an early epidemiological study of the pandemic in Mexico, the results showed, in terms of lethality, that the indigenous population was the most affected by Covid-19 (MUÑOZ; BRAVO; MAGIS, 2020). In terms of what happens in Chiapas, Rus (2020) recounts how the indigenous situation is described in the face of Covid-19 from external and peripheral visions, without delving into what it is seen or felt in the phenomenon from within: "What does seem clear is that there is, in Chiapas, a serious rupture of trust between the indigenous communities and rural communities in general, in relation to the State" (RUS, 2020, p. 18). In other words, there is an exclusion space that prevents joint participation in addressing a problem. Other recent research on Chiapas alludes to the invisibility of the contexts characterized by ethnic, linguistic and socioeconomic diversity, where the official models of attention in formal education, rather than pointing out the attention to diversity, aggravate the social inequality (MÉRIDA; ACUÑA, 2020).

There are general characterizations on Chiapas as a state with lags and social inequalities in several fields of public life; among them, those of housing, health, security and education, which have and will directly impact the educational field facing diverse affectations in the current pandemic context, which accelerate "expulsion processes" in the financial capitalist society (SASSEN apud MAGGIO, 2020), and are exacerbated in indigenous contexts.

In addition, due to the aforementioned structure of inequalities and the digital gap in times of pandemic, the world context must be seen as critical and complex because of the diversity of ways in which it is expressed, according to the place we occupy in the structure of inequalities; whether by ethnoracial, gender, class or age issues, and the meanings we give to our capacity of action, it requires us to consider a "must

be" (DUSSEL, 2020). Therefore, the following idea is endorsed: "the must-be of education as: to influence social transformations which benefit us collectively, which would entail to guarantee equal access rights" (BARROS, 2020, p. 6). This issue, complex in its approach and resolution, demands at least the observing of local practices to learn how it is being responded and from where, as well as identifying how the rural and indigenous education can be supported: How to make it possible in the current context of the pandemic which obliges us to virtuality? How to create or mediate processes about the common and collective good, when that gap exists structurally? One way to approach, within this recognition of diverse childhoods, is from educational actors.

This pandemic situation obliges us not to forget each other, and to configure mixed processes in education: thoughtfully and creatively integrating virtual spaces with on-site spaces, which we must also reinvent. It has drawn attention to how distance education models are integrated in contexts with high social inequality, as in the case of Chiapas (MÉRIDA; ACUÑA, 2020; PLASCENCIA, 2020; 2021b). The conditions of educational centers are deficient and represent a challenge for public policy. In some previous research (PLASCENCIA; NÚÑEZ, 2020) on the conditions of preschool educational centers in Chiapas, particularly in the coastal region, we noted the precariousness (LOREY, 2006) in which preschool education develops; from limited or lack of equipment to teacher disqualification in teaching competences, and the lack of infrastructure for the development of distance education (PLASCENCIA, 2021b). Given this rural education situation in Mexico, we wanted to inquire about the teaching experiences during the pandemic. Also, the study focused on the ways in which teachers solve everyday situations in order to give continuity to their teaching activity.

Children, in their position as users of formal education, depend entirely on the actions of adults. Notwithstanding the active role in their learning and in organizing themselves to collaborate, from their contexts, the mediation of teachers is crucial, but with a strong urgency to change the way we look at them: "Children are the south of the virus. As always, they, the creatures, cannot speak out. Neither in that" (MASSÓ, 2021, p. 6).

Contextualization of Children in Mexico and Chiapas: General Statistical Data

According to recent data from the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI, 2020), the majority of people in Mexico live in urban areas (79%), compared to 21% in rural areas. There is a population dispersion to be highlighted, since these rural areas contain 185,234 localities, compared to 4,189 urban ones. The rural area is defined by INEGI (2020) when the population of a locality is less than 2,500 people. This datum is relevant, since there are localities with over 2,500 inhabitants that could be better understood as rural areas. On a national level, there is a clear growth of urbanization, as the number of people living in these areas increased from 43% in 1950 to 79% by 2020. Currently in Chiapas, a region in southern Mexico that borders Guatemala, 49% of the localities are urban and 51% are rural. Linguistically speaking, in Mexico, the National Institute of Indigenous Languages (INALI, 2008) states that there are 364 languages or variants, with 68 linguistic groupings. Twelve indigenous languages are spoken in Chiapas, with a speaking population of 1,459,648 people over 3 years of age (28% of the population of this entity).

Children between 0 and 15 years of age represent 34% of the population of Chiapas. Children from age 3 are expected to be in school since preschool (3 to 6 years old) and elementary education (6 to 11 years old) are compulsory in Mexico—together with secondary education (12–14 years old), which form basic

education. Preschool and elementary education are offered in one of three services: general, indigenous and other community courses; and the organization can be unigrade (one teacher per grade level) or multigrade (one teacher teaches more than one grade level). In Chiapas, the poverty situation for children under 18 years of age was the most severe in the country. Additionally, half (49.6%) of Mexico's children and adolescents live in poverty. Finally, according to the National Institute for the Evaluation of Education (INEE, 2019), children and adolescents "in rural communities face problems of access, school retention and the quality of the education they receive, which is highly inequitable and reproduces the cycle of poverty"; in addition, there are deficiencies in rural schools in practically all areas of education: technological infrastructure, infrastructure and maintenance of premises, materials to support learning and others, due to systematic discrimination in education policy.

The Methodological Approach

Through a qualitative-quantitative approach, a closer look was taken with teachers of basic education, preschool and elementary school. The objective was to learn about their teaching experience during the pandemic, and from there to try to understand the educational situation developed during that period. A questionnaire (PLASCENCIA, 2021a), self-administered online using a Google Form, was designed for this purpose. Participation was voluntary and the questionnaire was answered anonymously.

Closed-answer questions were asked, related to the educational actor's formative and work context: about media, tools, devices and time to develop their teaching practice and children's attention, and the perception of their own and children's health status. The questionnaire also asked for free narration based on the following items: 1) write down your teaching experience during the pandemic (how you have worked), 2) write down how you have felt during the pandemic, 3) write down your opinion about the education of children during the pandemic, 4) write down parents' comments related to the educational process during the pandemic; and 5) write down your opinion about the (state and national) Ministry of Education's strategies and proposals to assist the educational process during the pandemic. Here, we collected their narratives and therefore, we insistently resort to the teachers' own writings.

A total of 102 teachers participated (79% female and 29% male). All participants were Spanish speakers, and additionally, some of them reported speaking Tseltal, Mayan, Tojo-lab'al, and English. The teaching practice develops in elementary level (66%) and in preschool (34%). Regarding the school organization, 71% mentioned being part of a full organization school, and 29% in a multigrade school.

As for the positions held at the school, 86 are teachers, 11 school authorities, 2 advisors, one principal in charge, one zone supervisor, and one Community Leader Education.

Voices on Teaching Practice in Pandemic: Echoes on Childhood

In the autobiographical accounts, reflective processes are expressed, ranging from introspection and their own emotional status, to the impact on their teaching practice and on children's communication and attention as user subjects of this process. Closed responses showed the use of booklets and WhatsApp as the main means to develop teaching practice, but it was done indirectly through parents mainly. In addition, half of the teachers did not live in the same community where they teach, which, together with the absence of telecommunication devices or networks, made direct and permanent contact with children difficult.

The narratives allude to the fact that there was daily activity disruption, and that at first, how to proceed or what to do was not clear. The experience is transcribed from issues related to their own organization, their own performance, and they also discuss the responsibilities of the (state and national) Ministries of Education, and how these did not consider the rural area, and design public action strategies for urban areas. Therefore, they narrate their teaching situation as "complicated".

The narrators, as in all autobiographical writings, position themselves from their own experiences and thus, some comment that formal education in remote communities during the pandemic was null or lacking, and understand that institutional strategies for adapting material were designed only for cities and not for rural communities or populations. There is an insistence in the writings that the pandemic had a negative effect on those without economic resources. Particularly, rural areas are seen as a territory affected in the usual process of formal education, given that devices were not available (computers, televisions), there is no connectivity (internet), the time allocated for working with children by parents was limited by work activities, or simply, there were no parents involved in the process or, even if they were, they did not know how to deal with the situation. In fact, some teachers directly reported that there was no clear parent intentionality in supporting children.

There is a tension between their own fears and fears of the pandemic, with what they must do out of obligation or pleasure, and what is imposed on them by school authorities and parents. In addition, there is pressure and stress to comply, but the students' environmental poverty makes it difficult. Several participants narrate the tiredness, fatigue and stress from managing such a situation.

Some centered their narration in themselves, in their own difficulties, in their organization and planning; others in parents, and the interaction with them, or on the complication in technology use, and the complexity of the situation for everyone. Some narratives focus on resources, on adapting material, mainly booklets and printed materials, attending school to deliver those booklets. The experience of teachers who had online activity (very few) expressed it as a growing learning experience where they became gradually more competent. This virtuality, that helps continue communication as related by a teacher, contrasts with a larger and collective *corpus* of stories where miscommunication prevails and which are usually referred to in the narratives:

> Really complicated. I had no communication with my students for many months since they do not have any kind of technology to be able to communicate at a distance, I could talk a few times with the education committee. When we were given the opportunity to assign homework occasionally, I did it, but it is really difficult to work that way with the children. I do not know if they have learned something or not, all of this is stressing. (S68, female, 14 years in service, rural preschool, multigrade, indigenous, public, Chiapas)

This story describes the distances between the provision of means and their absence, and the dependence thereon, of the type of care for children during the pandemic. The experience is also described as a transgression of time and space, which reconfigures the relationship with children, now integrating parents and at a distance. There is an overlapping and transposition of functions between family and home, and a sense of heterogeneity that prevents the articulation of activities to achieve common and collective objectives. The following story tells likewise, the encounter of the teacher's microstories with the families, and with her own family:

> It has been really complicated because each household has lived a different reality, a lot of unemployment, diseases, food shortage, etc. I meet families in which the parents do not know

how to read or write and therefore do not know how to support their children. There are also parents who, despite my insistence, have not wanted to do anything and there is no way to force them. I have felt pressured by my superiors to hand in grades for children who I do not even know if they are still in my group, if they went to another school or what happened. They have not communicated and that worries and stresses me. I feel that I support them as much as I can, even on the psychological side because sometimes they communicate with me to tell me about the personal problems they are facing and thus neglect their children. In addition, I am also a parent and it has been very tiring and exhausting for me to take care of my daughters and my job at the same time. I have been stressed out because I do not want to neglect my daughters' education, but I do not want to abandon my students either because they need me. Nobody thought about us teachers who are mothers, wives, daughters and in the pandemic time the least we had left at the end of the day was that.... time. (S11, female, 10 years in service, elementary school, public, urban, Chiapas)

Each family circumstance also determines the level at which teachers can intervene. The shortcomings of some families make it impossible to develop a uniform education. Another element was the negotiation of the educational situation since parents did not automatically assume the role of formal educators, even though they were formally in charge of children in their role as daughters and sons. Between mothers and teachers there were dialogue and conflict encounters to establish participation modes:

Personally, at the beginning it was very difficult because parents did not want to accept the booklets, alleging that education and schooling is the teacher's responsibility and not theirs. However, it is well known that we must also have parents' support so that students have good results in terms of their learning (S15, female, 1 year in service, rural elementary school, multigrade, Chiapas).

Thus, parents' integration into the educational process should be solved, and then, devise ways to follow up, in this context of inconsistencies.

Inequality and Other Elements of Disarticulation of the Teaching Process

Teachers relate the difficulties they faced and the impossibility of working equally with each family due to their responsibilities. Thus, an explicit denunciation of parents in the process is added, and some others report it as a challenge, as they show the process in which they must appropriate the content in order to communicate it to their children. Thus, the parents' integration in the formal process had a deontological component, demarcating their obligation *sine qua non* for the formal educational situation to occur. Among the participants there are situations that emerge from an antagonism inherent to social inequality. While some are able to synchronize virtually with their students or their parents, others do not even have the means to do so, due to the degree of marginalization of their families:

It has been very complicated, especially being in a very marginalized community where people do not have access to different forms of communication. People in the community do not have television for the children to at least watch the *Aprende en Casa* [Learn at Home] classes, nor

> do they have cell phones to communicate with them and the students. (S30, female, 3 years in service, elementary school, indigenous, Chiapas)

The media issue is well illustrated by the impossibility of using the Internet because there is no good signal in the rural community.

> It is a bit complicated, since not all the children arrive to school and each one goes at their own pace, in addition to the fact that there is no free internet or good signal in the community. Therefore, the communication with parents and students has been almost null, so we had to elaborate booklets selecting the content and donating the copies. (S4, female, 4 years in service, rural elementary school, public, Chiapas)

We talk about the period of adaptation to the use of new technologies and teaching habits. Once established, they followed that route. That is to say, the adaptation to how to teach also implied the adaptation to oneself. In addition, we worked with those we could (children, parents and materials). In the teaching experience, parents are integrated as actors in the process, with whom they had communication, either through phone calls or using digital messaging, such as WhatsApp. The majority of the narratives regarding the relationship with parents describe it as complex since they were not involved. Others mention that it was precisely in this pandemic situation that they received the most support from these educational actors, and some others comment that although there was the intention to support, they did not have the training tools to do so.

Feelings During the Pandemic

The adjectives used and said spontaneously to define their emotional situation are polarized towards emotions considered negative. The definitions and attributions towards their own emotional state were: frustration, stress, vulnerable situation, despair, worry, fear, anguish, tiredness, helplessness, insecurity due to disease spread, sadness, anxiety, annoyance, exhaustion, demotivation, uncertainty, pressure, depression, dissatisfaction, crisis, lack of control, disbelief, weariness, discouragement, uneasiness, disillusionment, mixed feelings, desolation, devaluation of teaching work, restlessness, boredom, confusion, fear, paranoia, overwhelm, decay, mood swings and work overload. The pandemic can have a transcendental impact on adults as well as on children and adolescents (GALIANO; PRADO; MUSTELIER, 2020), and the cultural context in some cases created confrontation between their own perspective and that of the community where children live.

> Concerned, anxious and a little sad. The community is governed by customs and traditions, so they do not use the hygiene measures established by health authorities, so they expose themselves and expose us as teaching staff. (S4, female, 4 years in service, rural elementary school, public, Chiapas)

Few teachers mention, in addition to negative emotions, some positive ones such as hope, faith, optimism and enjoyment. Some narratives start from a difficult situation and go to a situation that improved, and for others this time was pathologizing, sickening. Also, at the same time, people do not believe in the pandemic in some communities.

Children during the Pandemic

Teachers make continuous references to the need for socialization among children, and the teachers. They consider that although content could be learned, other essential aspects could not. Other discourses have a situation of disagreement and encounter; however, in spite of the lack of formal learning, and the fact that they do not interact with their peers, they seek to achieve equally important learning experiences related to love and care for the environment. Disruption can be understood as a transitory time, in which this will pass and return to the previous form:

> Undoubtedly it has been very difficult for all the children... There are many who find it difficult to learn even in face-to-face classes, and now, working from home where they can get distracted or may not have the help from parents due to lack of time, parents often get stressed with the children and they may even be present in family problems. School is not only about learning content; children need to interact and socialize with their peers. (S2, female, 7 years in service, urban elementary school, public, Chiapas)

And a complication due to the type of preexisting peculiarities:

> Well, the most affected are the students in indigenous communities because most of them do not have the necessary means and resources; as teachers we try to support them in their education to the extent of our possibilities and putting ourselves at risk at the same time. And I know that there will be a lot of educational lags or dropouts, but we will struggle and work to overcome this situation. (S102, Tseltal female, 24 years in service, rural elementary school, public, indigenous, bilingual, Chiapas)

That is to say, within the structure of inequality, indigenous children are the most affected, but there is an intention on the part of the educator to compensate or reverse this situation as much as possible.

Parents Related to the Educational Process During the Pandemic

Families are desperate because they cannot help their children as they would like, they feel that their children are not learning. Some parents engage, some intermittently, and some not at all. Some narratives report that parents do not have the skills, knowledge or means for their children to learn. Children do not obey them and do not want to do the activities. Parents do not have the time, do not have the patience, have little interest in helping, do not know how to help and cannot (because they work). There is an emotional reaction from parents, a discomfort for not understanding the new situation at first. Some parents, according to teachers, have reported that it has been complicated, their children are bored and overwhelmed. They are not learning because they are not teachers, they do not know how to teach, they feel alone and abandoned, they do not know how to support them, and they want to go back to school but are afraid of disease spread.

Other narratives allude to the fact that children do not learn in the same way. They need more support in certain subjects, there is too much homework, there is little support, they have not learned, and it has been a lost year. As well as teachers, parents feel frustration, apathy, disinterest in their children's

education, desperate for them to go back to school, sadness, hopelessness. They are tired, some are not committed. There is a relationship, sometimes tense, between teachers and parents, as the latter comment that teachers are not doing their job, they are not working. The specific group of parents of a given teacher also shows distances and differences. Some have the means, support or maintain communication, others do not. The economic situation of disadvantage is evident, as parents comment that they do not have enough money to pay for telecommunication services or to acquire material, and sometimes it is not only because of money, but also because of the disqualification in teaching strategies.

Strategies and Proposals of the (State and National) Ministries of Education to Address the Educational Process During the Pandemic

There is an incessant and circular repetition of the narratives exposed by teachers, where they comment that in communities (referring to the rural area), classes on TV do not work, that the course followed by the educational authorities was "Bad. Rural schools are left aside" (S102, female, 21 years in service, rural elementary school, public, multigrade, Chiapas). Therefore, education and the measures adopted by the educational authorities were poor. There is no adaptation to the context, they did not consider the social inequality gap; even in urban areas there are low resources. And some comment that those would be correct strategies if everyone had the same opportunities:

> It was discriminatory because, once again, they closed their eyes to not see the educational inequality that has always prevailed in the country and in the states, especially in the indigenous communities. The pandemic has more clearly demonstrated the inequality in infrastructure, the lack of internet services, computer equipment, the exaggerated enrollment of students attended by one teacher, the lack of safe water services, sewage system, the lack of teaching materials, especially in indigenous schools and even more at the preschool level; the lack of human resources, such as physical education, art and music teachers, and sitters in the case of preschool. (S50, tojoabal female, 21 years in service, preschool, indigenous, Chiapas)

There is an insistence in the narratives on the decontextualized strategy adopted by the government for distance education, especially for rural, indigenous and some urban areas that do not have the means; and in fact, the narrative of this teacher is completely related to the reiterated national diagnoses made by the National Institute of Evaluation for Education during the period of 2002–2019.

Final Considerations

The narratives of individual teachers' experiences allow us to understand a collective script through which they honestly express their concern about the alteration and disruption of formal education since the pandemic, and the effects it has on children and themselves. In the same way, tensions and resistance among the various actors are observed, as well as the aspects of negotiation to delimit the responsibility of educating children, which for this purpose, are the territory of the school and the home. In this educational intention there are attributions for parents' responsibility to integrate them into a formal educational model, without training for such purpose. That is to say, there is a complexity for the management of contents

and also for their didactic instrumentation with children, as well as the tacit and explicit disregard for the attention of children.

Teachers publicly denounce the failure of the homogenization of formal educational processes, as they impede the understanding of the actors in community contexts. They reiterate the structure of inequality, discrimination and deprivation present in rural and indigenous areas; and they mark it as a denunciation and factual impossibility. In other words, they establish the inadequacy of public educational policies in the administration of methodologies for the attention of diversity, but also express the complexity that rural and indigenous areas entail in themselves, due to their marginalization and historical displacement from public policies, under the premise of the establishment of unique and homogeneous models of development, thinking in urban actors or colonial epistemologies. The map of emotions narratively drawn comes from the alteration, from their negative emotions. Knowing the point of view of these actors helps us question the political position of children in our contemporary society, and the efforts made to attend to them in an official manner. But it also gives us an account of the real concerns that teachers assume with respect to child care, and their affective and axiological involvement with teaching.

Diversity must be assumed as a fundamental premise of educational planning, and the historically disadvantaged relationship of rural and indigenous peoples must be identified and transformed.

Authors' Contribution

Availability of research data

Data will be provided if requested.

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Note

1. The Ministry of Public Education in Mexico implemented three stages of emergency attention for the development of the school cycle, called *Aprende en Casa I, II, III* [Learn at Home I, II and III].

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