Editorial

Education and culture in times of Covid in Ecuador

Educación y cultura en tiempos de Covid en Ecuador

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this article is to identify how the current educational system in Ecuador, as well as the world crisis of the Covid-19, propitiated a divergent path to the established traditional education in reference to the need of a distance modality supported by the new information and communication technologies, derived in the so-called online education, and with it, the new trends and formative needs that it demands to the new educational actors, teachers and students, to reach an adequate coupling in the teaching-learning processes mediated by technology. The aspect of cultural development is necessarily grafted in the

conditioning factors of the new proposal, as an element of relevant importance that, as a transversal axis, supports the training for an effective insertion of the country's education in the so-called global village, which requires the management of various pedagogical, technical, technological, scientific and social skills in favor of an effective intercultural and global action, in a country that by its own characteristics is multicultural, multiethnic and plurinational.

Key words: Covid; Education; ICT; Pandemic; Virtual.

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este artículo es identificar cómo el actual sistema educativo en el Ecuador, así como la crisis mundial de la Covid-19, propiciaron un camino divergente a la educación tradicional establecida, en referencia a la necesidad de una modalidad a distancia que apoyada en las nuevas tecnologías de la información y comunicación, derivan en la denominada educación en línea, y con ello, las nuevas tendencias y necesidades formativas que requieren los nuevos actores educativos, docentes y estudiantes, para alcanzar un adecuado acoplamiento en los procesos de enseñanza-aprendizaje mediados por la tecnología. El aspecto del desarrollo cultural se inserta necesariamente en los condicionantes de la nueva propuesta, como un elemento de relevante importancia que, a manera de eje transversal, atraviesa la formación para una efectiva inserción de la educación del país en la llamada aldea global, que requiere del manejo de diversas competencias pedagógicas, técnicas, tecnológicas, científicas y sociales en pro de una efectiva acción intercultural y global, en un país que por sus propias características es multicultural, multiétnico.

Palabras clave: Covid; Educación; Pandemia; TIC; Virtual.

1. Introduction

Culture and education are fundamental elements to achieve greater peace and the development of our countries in all senses: human, social, economic, productive and technological. International educational research has shown that "each additional year of basic education strengthens a person's skills and abilities, which in turn increases his or her productivity and earning capacity…" Therefore, improving the quality and access to education constitutes strategic goals for the country with important long-term social and economic impacts", even more so, when Ecuador is one of the signatory countries of the World Declarations of Education for All[1] (Jomtien 1990, Thailand[2]), but continues to have drawbacks in an education for all.

In spite of this, qualitative and quantitative deficiencies continue to be observed at all educational levels. One of the consequences of this problem is the large number of young people and adults who are unable to complete secondary education due to multiple social,

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1   https://www.humanium.org/en/world-declaration-on-education-for-all/

2   https://bice.org/app/uploads/2014/10/unesco_world_declaration_on_education_for_all_jomtien_thailand.pdf

economic, technological and personal reasons, and for whom a quality face-to-face or "online" compensatory education offer is restricted and not always available in public schools.

In this context, the advance of New Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) is opening new possibilities for education. However, the profile of online study programs tends to be elitist due to several factors: on the one hand, educational programs using state-of-the-art information technology are generally carried out by private for-profit institutions or are aimed at the university and graduate level, with extremely high costs for the majority of the Latin American population.

It is also worth mentioning that the current state policy has exempted the subject of computer science from the curriculum, an aspect that shows an incompatibility between the scientific and technological development of contemporary society and the basic and secondary educational proposal of our country. This aspect derives in the computer illiteracy that students acquire when they emerge from the state secondary education and is evident when they enter the labor or higher education system, which sometimes must face this lack through courses, especially with regard to distance and online education.

In addition, the use of the Internet for efficient online education is oriented more to personal social communication activities than to educational uses, and there are few personnel and educational institutions dedicated to research and serious application of ICTs for educational purposes.

This results in a situation of a growing digital divide, especially for disadvantaged social groups. Therefore, the development of quality virtual academic programs at affordable prices is essential, especially those aimed at low-income, vulnerable sectors with less access to technology, such as sectors of diverse nationalities and indigenous natives[3].

This modality of quality online studies, economic and with scholarships, has been implemented by the "Colegio Virtual Iberoamericano" (https://cvi.edu.ec) since 2004; this online educational project will give the possibility of finishing basic and high school studies to those sectors of the population that traditionally have been neglected by the public educational system for reasons of distance, work, age, disability, economic or discrimination of any kind.

More and more young people are forced to drop out of school, also because they leave the country for migratory reasons and face hostile environments in which they have neither the right to claim education nor the economic possibility of obtaining it.

This situation is generating an increase in school dropout rates at all levels and will have immediate and future repercussions on the social and economic situation of migrants by reducing the real capacities to access better jobs.

With the arrival of the pandemic caused by COVID-19, the world had to adapt to new educational modalities to carry its processes, at the individual and social level; under this situation, teaching made its way in the midst of uncertainty, fear and the ravages of the

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3   Source: SIISE - MCDS 2008 Note: The Peoples and Nationalities correspond to the Awá, Chachi, Epera, Tsáchila, Ai Cofán, Secoya, Siona, Huaorani, Shiwiar, Zápara, Achuar, Shuar and Kichwa nationalities and the Manta-Huancavilca-Puná people.

pandemic to adapt traditional courses to the "online" modality. Many had not even known this modality, others lacked the strategies to be able to develop and design them, and several without a clear methodology in their classes, being the role of the teacher much more challenging in this context where we have to:

> "Think didactics as a way to install the debate about the problems of teaching, the difficulties of the teaching job and the student's task, from a perspective that focuses on training, education and didactics" (Diaz Barriga, 2009, p. 311).

Educational institutions entered into a shock forcing them to act immediately, with processes of pedagogical containment for students at all educational levels, making their way through the crisis with virtual (online) accompaniment, of which it will not be known until a few years, what results they will yield. The recording of these activities at a time of crisis leads to an understanding of the context in which the events arose and the response mechanisms that many teachers generated from the crisis, which has certainly allowed the search for:

> "the creation of better conditions for learning based on the stimulation of positive motivation, the relationship between knowledge aimed at producing deep learning and facilitating the transfer of learning by orienting teaching to the consideration of authentic problems of everyday life that are, in fact, always interdisciplinary (de Camilloni, 2010, p. 66).

University education in a new scenario

The new scenario in which education has been placed by the pandemic caused by COVID-19 is shaking families, institutions and the very lives of teachers and students. This unforeseen crisis has put human life at serious risk with an impact that is affecting all spheres of existence and the whole world.

The critical situation we are experiencing has led to the collapse of what was known as normality: personal and family behaviors, institutional customs, etc., have had to be modified. The crisis has meant isolation, paralysis, uncertainty, rupture, fear, restriction of one's freedom of movement, communication and relationships.

The forms of communication among peers, work modalities, affective expressions, family relationships and even funeral rites had to be transformed; not only that, but thousands of people have had to die in absolute loneliness and without saying goodbye to their loved ones. This experience has provoked anxiety, anguish, bitterness and fear in millions of people.

The crisis caused by this pandemic generated a worldwide economic downturn, affecting developing countries the most. Evidence of this is the return to poverty of many families who had moved into the middle class in the last decade. According to data from the National Institute of Statistics and Census (INEC), in September 2020, the unemployment rate reached 6.6% nationally, having as effects on many people, including young people, the loss

of faith in God, in institutions, loss of the meaning of life, dreams and desire to overcome. The virus has demolished ideological, economic and power securities and has brought back fear.

On the other hand, this crisis has brought down the quality of many educational institutions at all levels, revealing the great limits of education and challenging us to rethink our own functioning in the context of the opportunities offered by the new communication technologies. Along the same lines, the university has had to face new technological, didactic, andragogical and unprecedented challenges of immediate competences.

For the vast majority of young people going through higher education, the impact of this crisis made them feel a lack of certainty, fear, distrust in the future and lack of employability. According to INEC[4], around one million young people, between 21 and 30 years of age, do not have adequate employment.

Several of them are young people with high-level postgraduate degrees, unemployed and dependent on their parents. This reality threatens the hope of the new generations, but also questions the model of training professionals that are being promoted; in particular, more oriented towards employment than entrepreneurship. This worsens if we look at the data showing that the health crisis has increased the processes of exclusion and marginalization (Farfán 2020, p. 4).

Thus, the confinement caused by the pandemic COVID has become a fundamental challenge for teaching. Education itself has changed by opening other spaces different from those we were traditionally used to; in fact, change is constituted as a constant in today's education:

> "Education systems across the world are working to react to the unexpected outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. By April 9, 2020, 188 countries have taken steps to implement nationwide closures of educational and learning institutions, whether kindergartens, schools, vocational colleges or universities" (UNESCO, 2020, p. 3).

Currently, educational practice requires generating didactic processes that allow the student to adapt to the new normality and meet the requirements of institutional and national curricula, taking into account that it is not only the teacher who is obliged to generate adaptation processes, but also that students must adapt to these new ways of interacting in the educational process:

> "Students have also had to make an effort to adapt to what for many of them are new formulas for teaching and learning" (UNESCO, 2020, p. 19).

In Ecuador, during the context of the pandemic, public policies have had to be structured to contribute to the reduction of the spread of the virus, prohibiting face-to-face classes throughout the Ecuadorian educational system. On the other hand, teachers and students, in the face of the serious crisis caused by COVID-19, had to adopt new teaching-learning

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4   Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos (National Institute of Statistics, Ecuador)

methodologies in order to respond to curricular criteria that were not foreseen before the appearance of the health crisis, even limiting components that make it possible to generate quality education, such as the practical component.   .

2. Supply and demand analysis

The World Bank report on poverty in Latin America mentions the following: "Latin America and the Caribbean suffer the highest repetition and dropout rates in the world [18]. Half of the children who start the first year of school never finish the fourth year. However, the pandemic produced an increase in online university careers [5], it also resulted [16] in low academic performance, both factors associated with the likelihood of belonging to the low-income sector." "Research evidence reveals a complex relationship between health and academic performance. Studies show a significant correlation between academic performance and health problems such as mental illness, depression and anxiety, vision and oral health problems, asthma, teenage pregnancy, malnutrition, obesity, chronic stress, unsafe sexual activity, unhealthy eating, physical inactivity, substance abuse, aggression and violence, promoting an unpeaceful social community"[5], this being the situation of life today in Ecuador.

With the "pandemic" (2020) 150,000 students dropped out of school in Ecuador alone, expecting to lose 90,000 during 2021[6] and 31% of girls do not finish high school[7]. Another cause of dropout is the lack of interest because most public schools do not have motivating pedagogical methodologies. If we add to this statement that authoritarianism and psychological mistreatment of students is a constant in thousands of our rural and urban schools, it is easy to understand the condition of intellectual poverty in the country and therefore another reason for the flow of Ecuadorian emigrants to more developed countries.

Concluding, in Ecuador, school children between 6 and 12 years of age number approximately 1,639,528 and only 66.8% complete their primary studies; when reviewing the statistical data on secondary education, the figure changes substantially since, out of a population of 1,556,383 between 12 and 18 years of age, only 22% complete secondary education. This leaves 1,213,978 Ecuadorians out of the educational system. These alarming data confirms what was previously stated by the World Bank [8], in relation to the levels of education and poverty in Latin America and Ecuador.

3. Environmental impact

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5   https://www.primicias.ec/noticias/sociedad/clases-abandono-desercion-escuelas-covid/
6   https://www.primicias.ec/noticias/sociedad/clases-abandono-desercion-escuelas-covid/
7   https://borgenproject.org/tag/girls-education-in-ecuador/
8   https://borgenproject.org/tag/girls-education-in-ecuador/

The environmental impact, in terms of the use of renewable and non-renewable natural resources, is almost null because the project[9] "Online Virtual Education System" via Internet does not use elements that generate waste or residues.

The entire academic process, that is, the study resources used such as: guides, books and other bibliographic material, are stored in the Virtual Classroom System or Educational Platform[10] via the Internet, avoiding the use of paper and the unnecessary generation of waste.

The effect of ICTs on the environment is positive in the different social spheres because it facilitates "the realization of videoconferences, cyber teaching, online events and virtual communications, which generates a decrease in expenses and travel times of people, which has a direct impact on the reduction of fuels"[12] as well as the means of transportation; thus, the new teaching-learning format reduces energy consumption and pollution from the moment the resources are used in situ, that is, from home or office.

The benefits offered by ICT for the environment go hand in hand with the identification of the demands of the time, so that new ways to reduce the harmful effect on the environment appear. Currently, there are sustainable means such as: the cloud or efficient servers for information storage, task loading in virtual classrooms, classification of unnecessary tasks for institutions or companies, non-duplication of data and awareness of the reduction of the environmental impact caused by ICTs[12]. These solutions are considered environmentally friendly as opposed to the use of traditional information resources.

It is worth mentioning that another significant contribution of the Project[4] are the Degree Theses, conceived as Social Management, Cultural Tourism and Sustainable Development Projects, oriented to the preservation of the ecosystem, the social environment and quality cultural management, strengthening elements of local cultures. Several of these projects have received financial support from various international organizations.

4. Cultural management

Implicit in the national education system is a limited vision of what constitutes Cultural Management, which is expressed in the norms, practices and attitudes that regulate the relations between the different sectors of society and the native nationalities. Likewise, there is no clear vision of the role that culture can play in the country's democratic cohesion processes, i.e., the importance of preserving the natural, cultural, tangible and intangible heritage, identities and other cultural manifestations.

This vision is part of the traditional reductionist conception of culture that is limited to "disciplinary practices", as well as to a whole set of values that do not recognize identities, diversity and respect for "otherness". The canons of this type of traditional, unidirectional and excluding culture are reproduced in the current educational system, homogenizing behaviors, indifferent to the multiple cultures and nationalities that exist in the country.

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9   https://www.cvi.edu.ec/
10   https://moodle.org

In addition, the Ecuadorian teaching profession, especially in public education, has been losing the leadership space obtained in past decades, among other factors due to the decrease in resources allocated to education and the economic crisis that has not only hit the family economy of teachers, but has devalued their own practice. Lacking opportunities for training, developing their interest in knowledge and creative activities, they are unable to assume a critical position prone to change. Most teachers have not had the opportunity to appropriate culture as one of the key elements of the educational process, nor have they been provided with the necessary tools to do so.

On the other hand, the Ecuadorian State has not always assumed education and culture as a crucial State policy capable of generating human capital as a strategic factor for the country's development. Under these conditions, the knowledge gap (cultural, scientific and technological) becomes even wider, and the capacity to accumulate cultural capital capable of competing in the context of globalization, more distant.

It is also worth mentioning the excess of bureaucracy in basic and secondary education, an aspect that wears out teachers immersed in a system that occupies most of their time in planning and structuring evidence of all kinds in reference to their teaching management activities, significantly weakening their pedagogical, investigative and formative praxis, the consequence of which is suffered, without remedy, by the students.

The system also suffers from an excess of pretension of solutions to Special Educational Needs at the classroom level, in which the teacher has to influence and face competent situations in medicine, nutrition, psychology, psychiatry, social work, computer science, law, conciliation, among others.

Certainly, there have been several attempts that have involved the Civil Society to place the concern for education in the National Agenda through the "Consulta Educativa Siglo XXI"[11] and later, the generation of innovative spaces such as the "Contrato Social por la Educación"[12] or the "Foro de Ex Ministros de Educación y Cultura" (Forum of Former Ministers of Education and Culture), which have sought to draw attention to the need for education which have sought to draw the attention of the State and society as a whole to the importance of education and culture.

In addition, efforts have been made by the population itself to raise the educational and cultural level of children and young people in unfavorable circumstances: lack of previous cultural capital, lack of libraries, difficulties in financing the permanence of young people in the regular school system through scholarships.

Culture and education have become an important part of the concerns of public opinion, largely due to the increase in social, ethnic and gender demands that have led to an understanding of the role that education and culture play in the processes of formation of national identities and the construction of democracy.

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11   https://www.21c-learning.com/consulting/

12   http://contratosocialecuador.org/images/publicaciones/cuadermos/6.pdf

However, there is not enough clarity on how education and culture can be part of public policies and educational processes, and even what should really be understood by education and cultural processes in a contemporary society, such as ours.

Nor has there been a concern to form a high-level group of experts capable of reflecting on these issues and designing policies in these fields. It is hoped that the pressing political processes that Ecuador is undergoing and the new perspectives in this field will be a fertile ground for orienting education and culture towards excellence. Studies should be widely implemented with a modality mediated by educational information technology through the Internet (e-Learning) that allows autonomous study, adaptable to the times and places, available to students, anywhere, at any time and under any weather conditions.

An online educational system with technological applications for teaching, personalized follow-up and means of verification, control and evaluation of learning from a constructivist socio-critical pedagogical perspective, must be present in all corners of the country through technical online education and the training of new teachers.

5. An additional element

What is and what is not the "online" modality of virtual learning? In general, online courses are digital educational events prepared with resources and activities that are usually incorporated into an online course management system, also called "educational platform", to design interactive and cooperative activities between students and teachers within the system.

There are basically two types of platforms: LMS (Learning Managing System) to work with small groups of up to fifty participants, preferably less (25), and MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) that can work with up to 100,000 students, certainly with a different methodology. The resources used such as forums, assignments, collaborative study groups, videos, images, surveys, infographics, questionnaires, exams, among others, inside and outside the platform, are used to carry out activities that lead to generate participatory discussions, develop case studies, perform reflective analysis in an exchange of methodological techniques to achieve an environment of "action-reflection-action".

It is desirable to enable students to discover and develop knowledge, induced and facilitated by the teacher, through appropriate techniques, as opposed to covering memorized material.

The preparation and influence of the teacher to motivate students through methodologies that include active activities and especially formative assessment processes [6], such as problem and project-based learning [7, 8, 11] with inquiry activities [1, 9, 14], is important. The graphic line is also of crucial consideration because we want to motivate the learner with images, videos and other resources, taking care not to turn the module or course into a circus.

Finally, what is not an online modality? It is definitely not the traditional videoclasses through videoconferences in real time, so widespread today; these can be used to clarify

concepts, address concerns, or specific situations, i.e. real tutorials in what we could call 'office hours of students' [2]; nor is it a repository of endless documents to read and videos beyond the ten minutes, as I observe in several university courses and even less a long series of "talking heads" on video conferences.

The educational virtual classroom has to be a body of 'human' teachers dedicated [10][15, 12, 17, 23] to their students' learning.

Some advantages of e-Learning:

1.   Highly collaborative and interactive learning.
2.   Use of emerging and advanced technologies.
3.   Increased use of collaborative skills for learner-centered strategies.
4.   Development of competencies for online learning.
5.   Overcoming the digital divide.
6.   Learning with ICT tools.
7.   Time management.
8.   Tutor intervention at any time of the day, every day.
9.   Constant feedback.
10. Encourages teamwork.

It is observed that the "pandemic" limited the use of educational platforms [3] because of the widespread use in real time of video classes, so in order to fulfill everything mentioned in this paper, one more element is missing, which is the instruction of teachers with a solid and quality system of training courses through an actual online methodology; not one or two courses, I would suggest at least six of them, up to a maximum of twelve; a list is presented below:

List of suggested courses:

1.   Distance education
2.   Group processes for online communication
3.   Instructional systems design
4.   Distance services for the learner
5.   Online learning techniques - theory
6.   Online learning techniques - laboratory
7.   Online evaluation strategies
8.   Communication technologies and distance learning
9.   An introductory adventure to HTML
10. Fundamentals of statistics
11. Research Methodology
12. Individual evaluation project

6. Conclusion

As a conclusion, we would like to highlight that a solution to the above mentioned problem, being one of the main problems in Ecuador, the Region and other countries suffering the same situation, will be the implementation of online schools, in addition to preparing excellent teachers for this modality, with several online technical courses, systemically well designed, as mentioned and pointed out. Advanced evaluation methods must also be improved towards more formative models with respectful, humane and creative environments.

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