

Between instrumental reason and applied social engineering: the Latin American educational response to Covid-19

Entre la razón instrumental y la ingeniería social aplicada: la respuesta educativa latinoamericana ante el Covid-19

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ABSTRACT

The sudden arrival of the pandemic caused by the new coronavirus showed the most visible face of Latin American societies, so marked by their ancestral rejection of the economic and commercial development models imposed by neoliberalism, and so historically aggrieved by local governments that have failed to respond to their legitimate aspirations for equality, inclusion and human development. In this contextual framework, education is subject to new contradictions, categorically exposed when it is demanded to maintain its status quo, without considering the precarious conditions of infrastructure and technological equipment with which the academic dynamics were developed at all educational levels. On this argumentative basis, an analysis is presented on the response of governments to the health contingency, particularly in their educational strategies, centered on the massive use of information and communication technologies, and three categories of analysis are considered: the institutional educational response to the pandemic, the role of teachers in the state's response to the crisis and the social perception of the implementation of educational strategies designed by governments; all of the above framed in the Latin American context.

Keywords

Latin America; health contingency; educational proposals; social reengineering; instrumental reason

RESUMEN

La súbita llegada de la pandemia provocada por el nuevo coronavirus mostró el rostro más visible de las sociedades latinoamericanas, tan marcadas por su ancestral rechazo a los modelos de desarrollo económico y comercial que el neoliberalismo impuso, y tan agravadas históricamente por los gobiernos locales que no han sabido dar respuesta a sus legítimas aspiraciones de igualdad, inclusión y desarrollo humano. Ante este marco contextual, la educación se ve sujeta a nuevas contradicciones, expuestas categóricamente al momento de exigirle mantener su statu quo, sin considerar las precarias condiciones de infraestructura y equipo tecnológico con las que se desarrollaban las dinámicas académicas en todos los niveles educativos. Sobre esta base argumentativa, se presenta un análisis sobre la respuesta que los gobiernos mostraron frente a la contingencia sanitaria, particularmente en sus estrategias educativas, centradas en el uso masivo de las tecnológicas de la información y la comunicación, y se consideran tres categorías de análisis: la respuesta educativa institucional a partir de la pandemia, el papel de los maestros ante la respuesta del Estado frente a la crisis y la percepción social sobre la instrumentación de las estrategias educativas diseñadas por los gobiernos; todo lo anterior enmarcado en el ámbito latinoamericano.

Palabras clave

América Latina; contingencia sanitaria; propuestas educativas; reingeniería social; razón instrumental

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Introduction

Despite the fact that “the unsatisfaction of educational needs in Latin America is as long as its own history and expresses the social inequities and deprivations manifested in the region” (Escribano-Hervis, 2017, p. 5), the history of Western education has been characterized by its habitual attachment to traditional teaching and learning norms, which, to a greater or lesser extent, have been adapted to the social, political and cultural changes experienced over the last five centuries (Lázaro-Pulido, 2018; Ginestet and Meschiany, 2016), particularly since modernity (Torres, 2001).

Thus, the principles of a comprehensive education, supported by the different disciplines of human knowledge and the ethical baggage necessary for coexistence within societies, remained untouched until the arrival of the 21st century (Ovelar-Pereyra, 2004; Alvarado-Dávila, 2005; Ortega-Ruiz, 2018). Even their utilitarian sense, rooted in pragmatism and functionality, had a profound influence on the educational ideology, which endowed societies with a sense of security and allowed them to advance until they consolidated a practically doctrinal hegemony, from which the social imaginary of professional competencies for life is sustained today, erasing the conceptual and operational limits that distinguish each of these fields of human development. In this regard, Guzmán-Marín argues that:

Towards the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, contemporary socio-educational contexts are revolutionized due to the impulse, expansion, consolidation and global imposition of the competency-based education model, generated from the experiences of corporate labor training. And despite the fact that this educational model has permeated all levels, modalities and dimensions of the educational systems of the globalized world, its establishment has not been exempt from multiple contingencies (2017, p. 109).

The operationalization of educational policies was always shown as a given point and ready to be used, with curricular and didactic guidelines that accompanied each proposal, nuanced locally or regionally, in order to provide it with the sense of belonging that, in each case, was demanded by those who normatively found themselves in charge of its deployment: school managers, teachers and students. The model based its success on a fine camouflage that allowed it not to be perceived as an imposition.

However, the sudden presence of the pandemic caused by Covid-19 drastically modified the social scenario, affecting its main dimensions: economic, political and cultural (Neidhöfer, 2020; ECLAC, 2020a). The instability had diverse consequences, but none as immediate as education. In the face of the institutional chaos caused by quarantine (in some cases voluntary, in others compulsory), countries paid greater attention to the economy, by virtue of the great commercial interests under which the individual and collective development of nations is determined. Paradoxically, and despite its substantial importance, the education sector was overlooked.

This is the context in which this article is presented, which proposes a critical and reflective approach to the Latin American reality, supported by three categories of analysis: the institutional educational response to the pandemic, the role of teachers in the State's response to the crisis, and the social perception of the implementation of educational strategies designed by governments.

Development

The state in the face of the crisis

While some countries in Europe and Asia decided to terminate their school cycles at all levels at the beginning of the pandemic caused by Covid-19 (El País, 2020), the response of Latin American governments to the health crisis was framed within the old aspirations of improvement and social commitment that have guided educational models for a little over sixty years. The fact of disrupting the sense of continuity and linearity of academic programs at all levels represents a contradiction that compromises State policies, strongly linked to the ideal of gratuity, quality, relevance and solidarity established in their normative and legal frameworks.

The right to a public education that benefits all citizens is the last commitment that any president would like to annul. Under this premise, what seemed most logical was to sustain the narrative of the “new normality”, under the precepts that dictate that what had been done so far in education was adequate, which guaranteed that it would not be affected by migrating to the non-presential model (Vásquez, 2020).

Although the questioning from academia pointed out the problems that had to be faced, both at the institutional operational and sociocultural levels, where insufficient resources and the training deficit of teachers and students were highlighted (without excluding the institutional inertia within the educational institutions), the guiding strategy opted to exploit the use of information and communication technologies (ICT), which transformed them into new and renewed models of education.

Under a panorama of infallibility, omnipresence and functional radicalism, in Latin America the State authorities issued instructions to operate a great technological machinery, which from virtual platforms and digital resources would transfer, neatly and integrally, the study programs and their thematic contents,¹ migration that meant, on the one hand, a great logistical effort by teachers, who with the best spirit and under their traditional commitment to serve followed the instructions, not without facing serious difficulties when moving the classroom to the spaces of their own homes. For its part, the State developed propaganda programs in order to clarify to society the effectiveness of this strategy.

As had happened at other times, particularly with the advent of technocratic education, dominant in Latin America since the 1960s, success was assumed with the use of ICTs, so that failures were attributed to the institutional actors themselves: academic officials, teachers and students, who were in charge of making this emerging alternative education project effective. The fact of omitting the influence and determinism of the new teaching and learning ecosystems was translated as the expression of the new hidden curriculum of this “new normality” in education.

Another phenomenon that appeared suddenly, and which was surreptitiously considered, was the extensive existing technological gap (Sierra and Ledesma, 2020; Díaz-Coria, 2020; Bustelo, 2020; Agüero, Bustelo and Viollaz, 2020), which evidenced, among other things, the insufficiency of States to align themselves with one of the major referents of social and economic development in this century: connectivity and, with it, access to a cognitively inclusive globalized world. The availability of the means and sources of information is the fundamental basis of any virtual education project, in any of its modalities, which has been underestimated in almost all countries.

According to ECLAC-UNESCO data, published in August 2020, in 29 of the 33 countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, strategies were established to provide continuity of studies through various distance modalities. Of these, a total of 26 countries implemented e-learning models, where 24 established distance learning practices in offline modalities,² including 22 countries in which distance learning was offered in both modalities (online and offline), with only four that opted for exclusively online modalities and two only with offline modalities. It is worth mentioning that among the online distance modalities, the use of asynchronous virtual learning platforms stands out, used in 18 countries, while only four countries offered live classes (Bahamas, Costa Rica, Ecuador and Panama). In this area, 23 countries broadcast educational programs through traditional media.

As can be seen, this is a socio-educational problem whose core lies in the level of technological development prevailing in each country. The inequalities are not only of substance, such as the logistics of academic work (design, coordination and operation of inputs, materials and human resources), but also of form, such as the technological support needed to operate effectively.

Universal access to technologies and connectivity do not guarantee quality education; however, they represent an important causal reference. From this perspective, it is necessary to assume that the development (and even the simple adoption) of technological solutions in Latin America is subordinated to structural factors, among them, “a heterogeneous productive structure, a labor market with a marked informality and precariousness, a vulnerable middle class, a weakened welfare state, a deficient digital infrastructure and socioeconomic restrictions to access and connectivity” (ECLAC, 2020b, p. 2).

In order not to highlight these conditions, which from many angles were interpreted as discriminatory and elitist, the response of governments was quite simplistic: to ensure continuity in the process of student progress, that is, to guarantee their school approval, either openly or through teacher intervention strategies.

The common denominator of this process was not to consult teachers and specialists, who were practically forced to generate their own spaces for analysis, reflection and proposals, through their networks, academies and interest groups, from where they raised their voices to discuss, theorize and expose innovative and conclusive ideas, derived from their experience and educational knowledge.³

The role of teachers in the face of the State's response to the crisis

Characterizing the conditions in which teachers in Latin America perform their teaching function may be an idle exercise, since their situation is something that has been widely documented in recent decades (Escribano-Hervis, 2018; Delgado, 2018; Inter-American Development Bank, 2020a). What is relevant is to confront these realities with the abrupt modification that involved migrating to the physical spaces of their homes, many of them not designed for these new functions (Cross, 2020; Pais, 2020). From this perspective, it is necessary to understand that the effectiveness of ICT is not something that is manifested with the simple acquired mechanical mastery, but in assuming its conception as an educational medium, which entails the acquisition of a conceptual matrix that is proper to it in order to, at least from these minimum margins, design the strategies and didactic actions that are needed.

Understanding that ICTs are a cultural realization (Coll, Mauri and Onrubia, 2008; Villarruel-Fuentes, 2019) and not only a set of devices with a lesser or greater degree of operational sophistication, implies focusing on the motivations and social representations that accompany their efficient adoption. Cyberculture, as it is now called (Quiñones-Bonilla, 2005), is also the expression of symbolisms, communication codes and rituals of coexistence or interaction, which are expressed in the uses and customs, habits and rules of conduct that define a worldview of the world in which one lives.

In this context, the impositions for the use of ICT can explain the degree of resilience shown by teachers in the face of what they understood as a coercive measure, insofar as it was a set of actions, attitudes, customs and values imposed that were discordant with the principles of the dominant school culture. When they were conditioned to its exclusive use, their response was one of rejection, opposition or resistance, and rarely of acceptance. The clearest evidence was shown in their perseverance to sustain their usual routines of teaching performance, especially at the didactic level, particularly those associated with evaluations (UNESCO, 2020b; Bilbao-Quintana and López, 2020).

Needless to say, the Latin American teaching community was not prepared for the paradigm shift from a face-to-face model to a distance model. Even less so the students, who, despite being qualified as digital natives, had to overcome serious technical and methodological problems (without discarding the emotional and psychological ones), in search of the best ways of interacting with teachers. Regarding the use of ICTs, Matamala and Hinostroza (2020) report that “research has shown that adolescents and young people have a rather limited use of these tools” (p. 2), so that “their digital competencies are precarious” (p. 2).

This last aspect reveals yet another problem that, while not new, was exacerbated by the physical distance: communication between teachers and students, a practice that was altered to the point of compromising the educational process, especially in the formative aspect. The redefinition of their traditional roles implied going from being a teacher to becoming a facilitator or virtual mediator of the learning process; while the student left behind his role as a co-participant in this process to become a learner who manages his new knowledge, who interacts synchronously and asynchronously, and who interprets and constructs, instead of just assimilating ideas (according to Freire). Knowing whether this was the case implies studying this phenomenon in depth, a subject accessible to educational research.

How important is it to make sure that the states' strategy worked? This, of course, will not be the subject of research in educational systems, and there will even be some who do not wish to place it on the table of public debate. It is more conciliatory to look at the “hard data” of the phenomenon, such as the number of students who achieved connectivity, the number of teachers who used a certain digital platform or the number of students who accredited their online courses. From the government's perspective, it is more profitable to show what only they can officially document.

The psychological, emotional, family and even physical conditions present in teachers during this recent period remain to be resolved. Alvarez-Mendiola (2020) describes it clearly when he points out that:

The pandemic has many aspects that affect our daily lives. The most evident is the rupture of work and school routines, and of the social bonds that work and educational spaces foster day by day. Confinement itself produces unfamiliar situations that consume our psychological reserves, our capacity for tolerance and patience (p. 6).

The human condition of teachers is also a dimension of the educational process. It is essential to recognize that human beings teach and learn with their whole being.

The social perception of the implementation of educational strategies designed by governments is a key factor in the educational process

What were the implications of the impact of the pandemic on family dynamics, particularly on the role of the family in education, and to what extent did society as a whole understand the meaning and intention of continuing school cycles despite the health contingency? These two questions can, by themselves, contribute with their answers to the clarification of what education represents for Latin American societies, burdened for decades by serious problems of poverty, insecurity, unemployment, discrimination and vulnerability (United Nations Development Program, 2013; Organization of American States, 2015; Global Education Network, 2020), all of them considered “exogenous factors of the education system” (Marcela, 2013, p. 38).

Despite the great cultural differences in each Latin American region (González-Terreros, 2009), their uses and customs, and regardless of their legislative frameworks and historical developments, there are common denominators that can be interpreted in the light of the circumstances experienced in the recent past.

With an educational backwardness clearly identified by the average schooling documented in each country, as well as with the evident functional illiteracy of the economically active population (Martínez, Trucco and Palma, 2014; Llorente, 2018), the expectations of finding in the social environment (and specifically in the family) the necessary elements to promote the creation of new spaces for academic development are limited. In the short term, the minimum indispensable conditions were not generated to promote adequate environments for learning from home.

The main concerns during the pandemic were oriented towards solving the economic problems generated by the productive paralysis of the business and industrial sector, not towards safeguarding the effectiveness and relevance of educational systems. In general, education became a secondary issue on the political agenda of Latin American states.

There are estimates that point to a massive school dropout rate (Inter-American Development Bank, 2020b), especially at the upper secondary level, which in some countries will mean a new setback in their aspirations for social development. Even the budgets allocated to the educational and scientific sectors will be reduced due to the need to attend to human and social survival. Austerity will affect educational programs, which will strengthen the use of ICTs as a resource that is not only efficient, but also economical, to the extent that it reduces the current expenses of schools, while promoting the use of free virtual platforms and making teachers and parents responsible for the academic success of their students and students under their tutelage.

Thus, the large social groups face the problem of the pandemic from different positions and once again the priority of culture is questioned. Faced with this challenge,

other questions can be raised: do the indispensable cultural contexts exist to face a long-term contingency, to what extent are societies ready to assume the commitment of their own educational instrumentation, and are governments prepared to cede their educational leadership in this way? It is not the same to think of education from institutionalized school environments, as it is to conceive it in dispersed, technological and changing social environments, where the variables that explain the educational fact are so diverse that it is almost impossible to explain them in their individual effect, let alone in their interactive or additive effect. Traditional formal education succumbs to the weight of non-formal and even informal education.

Who will assume the responsibility of attending to the curricular and didactic design required to analyze, from the virtual, these new educational tasks? The most chaotic scenario would have to do with avoiding this commitment and pretending that the face-to-face can automatically transmute to the non-face-to-face. Or, to assume under a naive realism that the triad of education (educational administrators, teachers and students) will be able, with their worn-out methodological and conceptual tools, to undertake the task of transforming education towards the non-classroom, sustaining the discourse of effectiveness and relevance of competencies for life and work and, even, of the narrative that speaks of the ethical and formative sense of institutionalized education.

Conclusions

It is a paradoxical issue that when Latin American societies seemed to have found the answer to many of their main problems, the questions under debate suddenly changed. Without warning, the globalization of the Covid-19 pandemic showed its most severe effects, and new technological and cultural, but above all ethical, dilemmas emerged to dictate local and regional agendas.

In the midst of a growing social turmoil caused by a serious global crisis, the level of response of Latin American states was ambiguous and equidistant. While some still deny the impact that the pandemic will have on communities in the medium and long term, others succumb to an avalanche of misinformation. This makes it clear that the knowledge society is only a slogan publicized by the major interest groups, who intentionally confuse the term information with knowledge.⁴ It is clear that society has a large capital of information at its disposal that, in most cases, it does not know how to discriminate for its efficient use; however, it is also necessary to consider that “an increase in information reduces the quality of knowledge”, as stated by De la Peña, Hidalgo and Palacios (2015), based on what was postulated by Shannon and Weaver in their mathematical theory of communication. This is related to the educational level of the people and not only to access to ICTs.

The voracious and thoughtless consumption of information leads to an era of enlightened neo-literacy. Without the meta-skills for deep and critical thinking, much of the information received is assimilated without further analysis or reflection, resulting in expressions of a confused knowledge that is reproduced through social networks. It is evident that Latin America was not – and is not – prepared to manage this new crisis.

The resistance of large social groups to heed the indications given by health authorities is necessarily due to these conditions. Naturally, human beings tend to reject or ignore what they do not understand; hence the delay in flattening contagion curves and avoiding outbreaks. What makes us think that this will be different in schools? It is necessary to remember that traditionally, schools tend to reproduce sociocultural patterns.

In this regard, in many Latin American countries, the return to face-to-face school activities is planned for 2021, although there is no certainty in this regard. Beyond the strategies designed for the above, it is important to emphasize that the well-being of school communities must be ensured. The question is how long will it be possible to justify the continuity of school cycles by attributing everything to the use of ICT, framed by a technocratic model of education. The risk is that these narratives become, based on political wills, the new meta-narratives of the 21st century. In the words of Asselborn (2015), these are “technocratic engineerings that end up indoctrinating the same historical process of transformation” (p. 61).

Under these premises, it is possible that this condition of certainty is located in a still distant horizon. While this is happening, several aspects must be considered:

- 1) Immediately address the deficit shown in connectivity and the evident digital divide, as well as the technological and digital gap between teachers and students.
- 2) If the above is not achieved, it is essential that remote non face-to-face education, supported by non-digital technological support (television, radio, etc.), has real educational content supported by didactic strategies, and that capsules of a purely informative nature are discarded.
- 3) Promote quality teaching, based on the honesty and integrity of teachers, not only on their technological and digital literacy.
- 4) Avoid standardizing the means and forms of virtual teaching work, since they only limit the interaction between teachers and students; it should be remembered that the working conditions of both are changing and diverse.
- 5) Ensure continuity in learning, not in the study programs, at least while new curricular proposals are being designed specifically for virtual development.

- 6) Consider the possible scenarios of psychological and emotional damage, derived from non-classroom school work in social isolation, both for teachers and students.

What should be clear to governments and educational authorities is that once the moment of confusion has passed, it is no longer worth to maintain an argument loaded with assumptions, as happened in most countries. Now the deficiencies with which the educational crisis was dealt with are public knowledge and there is too much at stake to hide it with justifying statistics. The academic performance of students in Latin America was already worrying before the pandemic, and pretending that nothing happened at the end of the last school year is something that transcends the political to the realm of ethics and morality. The determining factor should be to leave no one behind, and to avoid at all costs institutionalizing new forms of discrimination and abandonment. In the medium and long term, simulations will only aggravate the problems.

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¹ For more details, see the report “Seguimiento a la situación educativa y respuesta ante el Covid-19 en América Latina y el Caribe” published by UNESCO (2020a), dated 18 May 2020.

² Some countries broadcast educational programmes by traditional means of communication such as radio or television, actions understood as forms of offline distance learning.

³ As an example, you can consult the Ibero-American Network of Teachers, the Ibero-American Network of Communication and Scientific Dissemination, among others, whose results are currently available online for consideration.

⁴ For more details, see the study reported by López, 2010.