The role of teachers in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

Systematization of teaching practices in Uruguayan public education

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United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Uruguay
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Contents

Introduction

The first case of COVID-19 was detected in Uruguay on 13 March 2020. That same day, the national government declared a state of health emergency and, three days later, the closure of public and private schools. Around 855,000 pupils in preschool, primary and secondary school stopped attending in-person classes; this situation caused an urgent concern among the education authorities to establish a contingency education plan in order to overcome the barriers caused by the pandemic.

In this scenario, UNICEF, Plan Ceibal and ANEP deemed it relevant to analyse the educational process, this time from the perspective of its protagonists: teachers and their pupils. In this context, many teachers used their creativity and enthusiasm to adapt and modify their teaching practices in order to maintain educational continuity for their pupils, through new formats that involved other rules, ways of teaching and educational challenges, including emotional and personal elements.

The following systematization gives an account of these teaching practices in public primary and secondary schools with the aim of documenting, systematizing and sharing experiences, thus making it possible to ensure continuity of educational processes. Lessons learned showing how it was possible to continue learning processes virtually are also identified so that these experiences can be incorporated into pedagogical practice. The study highlights the varied and diverse strategies that teachers have used to maintain relationships with their pupils and protect learning processes.

In order to analyse the practices set out below, it is essential to consider the timeframe within which they occurred. These experiences took place in the context of two scenarios: the first with no in-person school attendance but with distance learning (scenario 1), and the second involving a staggered return, combining in-person attendance (in small groups with reduced timetables and social distancing measures) and virtual classroom environments (scenario 2).

The various educational practices presented are organized into three main groups: 1) practices focused on the teaching and learn-

ing process in the class group; 2) practices developed as educational projects in the school; and 3) practices that transcend the school (e.g. inter-institutional or departmental experiences).

The educational context in Uruguay

Over one million students attend formal education in Uruguay, whether at the preschool, primary, secondary or tertiary level, i.e. approximately 30 per cent of the country's total population. Of these, 95 per cent live in urban and 5 per cent in rural areas.

The State plays a leading role in the national education system. Public enrolment accounts for 85.2 per cent of pupils at the preschool, primary and secondary levels. Furthermore, educational coverage is universal in the age range theoretically corresponding to primary education (6 to 11 years) and practically universal up to the age of 14, declining from the age of 15 , especially among the most vulnerable adolescents.

Although 98.7 per cent of adolescents between 15 and 17 years of age have completed primary school, this is not the case for secondary education. Among those aged 18-20 years, 77.8 per cent completed basic secondary education in 2019 and, among those aged 21-23 years, 43.4 per cent completed higher secondary education.

In Uruguay, ANEP plans, manages and administers the public education system at the preschool (4 and 5 years), primary (6 to 11 years), secondary (12 to 18 years) and teacher training levels.

When it comes to creating virtual teaching and learning strategies, it is essential to analyse the capacities that were already in place in the country before the global COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, it is relevant to highlight the existence of **Plan Ceibal** since 2007*,* a public policy that aims to ensure equal opportunities for pupils in the National Public Education System in terms of accessing information and knowledge. Plan Ceibal provides each child entering the education system with a laptop for personal use, plus free internet connection.

In addition to providing laptops, Plan Ceibal has developed several educational platforms. The most widely used is the content and resources platform for education and learning (CREA), a virtual, interactive, flexible and accessible educational platform that offers Uruguayan teachers the possibility of organizing their classes, managing content, assigning tasks and carrying out assessments and ex-

ams. It also offers pupils, families and teachers in public schools the possibility of interacting via videoconference. Other platforms used are the adaptive platform for mathematics (PAM) for primary and secondary school pupils, and Matific, a fun platform with mathematical content for preschool and primary school pupils.

The first case of COVID-19 was detected in the country on 13 March 2020 and the national government, which had taken office 13 days prior, immediately declared a health emergency, closed borders with countries declared at risk, and urged the population to stay at home. A day later, the government announced that **in-person classes would be suspended** throughout the country, in a school year that had begun barely a week earlier.

On 22 April, rural schools gradually began to return to in-person education. This gradual process of reopening rural schools continued until 5 May and, on 21 May, it was announced that the entire education system would **return to in-person classes** in three stages: 1 June, 15 June and 29 June.

The return was not organized by levels, as in other countries, but rather prioritized dimensions such as regional density, pupils' educational vulnerability, and completion of educational cycles, always taking into account the health conditions of schools and geographical areas.

ANEP defined the phases of return and that this process would be voluntary and gradual to begin with and then compulsory from October on. It issued health protocols according to the health authorities' guidelines and scientific advisors as well as the main general guidelines. Programmatic guidelines and technical criteria for the return were defined by the councils for each educational level, largely driven by technical inspections.

For the **process of reopening classes**, ANEP designed a series of documents and internal circulars providing guidance for middle management and school officials that focused on the health needs of pupils and their adult carers.

- Protocol for resuming activities in rural schools
- Protocol for protecting ANEP officials due to the spread of COVID-19

- Protocol for reintegrating students into schools
- Protocol for action in positive cases of COVID-19 among ANEP officials
- Validation procedure for officials in risk groups
- In the context of the new in-person education: challenges of distance education, strategies and tools for teachers and educational communities
- Circular 2. In between: building proximity remotely
- Circular 3. Opening windows to empathy to continue distance education
- Circular 4. Nourishing, interweaving, entwining
- Circular 5. Key principles for 'doing' school: the return to in-person education

Systematization of educational experiences in the context of COVID-19

EXPERIENCES BY CLASS GROUP	
New ways of learning and new ways of teaching on CREA	Fifth year of Escuela 108, a full-time school in Solymar Norte, Canelones
Proposed artistic experimentation using the stop motion technique	Liceo 65, a secondary school in the Ituzaingó neighbourhood, Montevideo
Diary of a pandemic with Anne Frank	Liceo 4 Manuel Oribe, a secondary school in Paysandú
School for everyone, every day	Escuela 366, a school in Paso de la Arena, Montevideo
EXPERIENCES IN SCHOOLS	
Digital media and networking to support the pedagogic approach for pupils with motor disabilities	Escuela 200 Ricardo Caritat and Motor Disability Resource Centre, Montevideo
Yo me animo (I'm up for it). Group of peer facilitators who support the link between students and teachers	Liceo 49, a secondary school in the Punta de Rieles neighbourhood, Montevideo
Institutional projects, and team, family and community work to develop an educational approach for preschool during the pandemic	Jardín 346, a full-time preschool and APRENDER ("Priority Attention in Settings with Relative Structural Difficulties") in Casabó, Montevideo.
EXPERIENCES THAT TRANSCEND SCHOOLS	
The radio programme La radio y la escuela. Un libro nos une (Radio and school. A book brings us together)	Pedagogic and didactic support centres for rural schools (CAPDER) in Lavalleja
Changes in community teachers' work in the department of Cerro Largo	Community Teachers Programme (PMC) in Cerro Largo
Supporting and strengthening teachers in the use of digital media	Educational Technology and Ceibal Centre (CTEC), Salto and CTEC, Paysandú
Radio as a space for learning and strengthening	Liceo 47 (a secondary school in Montevideo), Liceo 1 (a secondary school in Sauce) and Escuela 83 (a school in Colonia Rubio)
Supporting mathematics, the COVIR-2020 Project (Virtual Classmates 2020)	Maldonado Departmental Liceo and Liceo 3 (two secondary schools in Maldonado)

Analysis of and reflections on the experiences

During **scenario 1**, when in-person attendance was suspended, practices used several channels: classes on educational platforms (mainly CREA), different videoconferencing systems, WhatsApp groups, YouTube channels, radio programmes, social media, blogs and email. Students who did not have access to the internet were given printed materials.

Virtual classes created on platforms mostly took place on CREA but there were teachers who used Edmodo or Google Classroom, and one institution programmed and created its own educational platform.

The use of different videoconferencing means (CREA conferences, Zoom, Google Meet) was also widely practised.

In **scenario 2**, when in-person classes resumed on 29 June, practices were modified because groups had to be divided in order to comply with the protocols. The spaces created in the previous scenario were not abandoned but in-person participation was added as another educational activity. In other words, work continued in multiple spaces. The challenge for teachers was to find ways to avoid duplicating planning and for each space to have its own meaning. Teachers called the models of working mixed or hybrid and, in some cases, a 'flipped' classroom modality was mentioned.

Scenario 2 required physical school spaces to be reconfigured, coordinating the occupation of spaces, their cleanliness and ventilation, as well as available materials.

In terms of the platforms offered by Plan Ceibal, various types of pedagogical content were generated and curated on PAM, Matific, open educational resources (OER) and digital libraries, etc. There was also support for teachers to use technology in education. In primary education, the role of Ceibal's dynamic teachers was highly relevant.

Teachers pointed out **strengths** in the practices implemented in the two scenarios: educational continuity; 'having Plan Ceibal' (equipment, connectivity and adaptations that Ceibal offers to enable persons with disabilities to use computers); use of images, audios and videos to cater for different learning styles, which some

identify as possibilities for the Universal Design for Learning (UD-L);asynchrony in terms of adjusting to different time availabilities; work in teacher teams; support for families; use of technology for educational purposes; development of teachers and pupils' skills in the use of technology; creation of digital educational resources; curatorship of online educational resources and educational applications; motivation of students and promotion of independent work; and professional development of teachers.

The difficulty that was most commonly mentioned by teachers was the pupils' lack of internet connection. In contrast to the strengths, some **difficulties** were encountered. These included pupils who were unable to work independently, demotivated pupils and families who did not support their children (e.g. some believed that 'it was a lost year', others did not believe that their children could learn remotely and others were unable to overcome the difficulties associated with the pandemic, in terms of unemployment or poverty).

Also noted among the difficulties were the amount of time it took to adapt to the new working and assessment methods, and the time for training, reading, and testing of options.

Teachers mentioned that there were feelings, experiences, anxieties and 'emotional factors' that made everyone's lives difficult during the pandemic. This was addressed, shared and, in some cases, analysed as a theme. Spaces for emotional education were created: to identify what was happening, their feelings about it, and ways of expressing it.

When learning remotely, pupils were at home trying to carry out tasks set by the schools. This incursion of the **school space** into the domestic one presented new challenges.

One of the symbolic elements of the school space in primary education was the tunic, used by teachers to demarcate the school space even virtually, during synchronous meetings or in videos that they recorded and sent to their students.

As well as space, there was a strain on the **school day** due to the situation experienced in 2020. This was extended due to connection emergencies when schools were closed. Teachers and students extended their days, practising and trying to respond to the new forms of organization.

These new educational spaces and times demand new rules of coexistence.

Some of the practices included breaking with the **class groups typical of graded school,** separated by subject in secondary education. Groups of teachers from the institutions worked together and working groups were created within schools: by cycles, pairs, interdisciplinary groups of teachers, etc.

Teaching practices were also coordinated across several schools.

Coordination spaces formed a cornerstone of the teaching work in 2020. These meetings offered training, peer support and joint planning. Those who produced joint work stressed the value of peer support and teamwork.

Various **existing roles in the education system** had to be reshaped over the year. This study notes the changes made to the roles of community teachers and the staff of the Directorate-General for Preschool and Primary Education's CTECs. Also worthy of note is the work of secondary school teachers who scaled up and virtualized their activities in order to connect with families and the community. The supervisory role of school inspectors was redefined. Work was done on a strategy to support and stimulate teachers' collective activities.

Work with families and the community was strengthened through several of these experiences. Households were incorporated into academic activities at the various levels of education and in the various educational modalities taken into account in this work. In some cases, family mediation was a priority, such as in early childhood or in the case of students with disabilities. In primary and secondary schools, relations with families were understood as relevant to maintaining pupils' educational trajectories during 2020.

The economic and employment situation of many families was included as content in the curriculum of some institutions.

The **link with social and community organizations** was another area of work during 2020.

It should be noted that work with families and the community was already taking place before the pandemic but was subsequently strengthened.

With regard to **curricular aspects**, the year's experiences were incorporated into communication spaces. Family time was used to read, listen to the radio, plant, experiment or play, and these experiences were shared in class. Content related to the pandemic was also added (disease prevention, hygiene practices, geographical location, human rights, and access to health and education, etc.).

One more element raised in several of the experiences collected was an approach to class topics that was based on making challenging proposals that brought reflective processes into play.

Moreover, the flipped classroom methodology was incorporated, a method that has been developed considerably in scenario 2 (return to in-person teaching), and in which the students themselves shared ways solving the tasks set by their teachers with their peers.

Another characteristic was the use of new sources of information.

Play was also central to many of the proposals and, in addition, teachers mentioned it as one of the strengths of the work done in 2020.

According to the testimonies collected, **assessment** was a critical issue in scenario 1 because teachers set tasks to find out what pupils had learnt but became swamped in trying to mark them, especially as they were trying to get feedback to the students as soon as possible. To overcome this, some teachers were able to come up with assessment strategies: assessment in multiple formats (written, video, photo and audio); providing feedback in shared spaces such as forums so that it reached all students; and, where possible, using assessment activities with automatic feedback (multiple choice, true/false, etc.) making CREA, peer marking or self-assessment possible.

As well as formative assessments, there were summative assessments but these were given different characteristics. Conceptual rather than numerical assessments were sought; these would show achievements rather than weaknesses and be positive and constructive.

Key actions to promote virtual education and blended learning

1 Promote multiple platforms (WhatsApp, email, telephone, video calls, etc.) to include more students and their families but, at the same time, encourage the use of official platforms such as CREA, with pupils' and teachers' records and processes.

2 Coordinate between all educator teams working with pupils so as not to overload them with fragmented tasks and in order to promote interdisciplinary activities.

3 On the educational platforms, the plan is to develop an agenda that families can understand, so that they can keep track of the educational process, and to add dates to activities and areas of work. Investigate ways of making the organization of virtual classrooms more user-friendly.

4 Use platforms to present and record topics and student feedback: written, oral, visual, audiovisual or animated texts.

5 Keep a record of activities, allowing students to catch up and not feel they had missed an opportunity to keep up with the class.

6 Support pupils to gradually achieve autonomous use of virtual classrooms. This is especially relevant for those who are re-engaging. This support can be provided through videoconferences, promoting study routines or contacting families.

7 Propose challenging, thought-provoking and interactive assignments and assignments that incorporate elements of play to sustain pupil participation.

8   Stimulate the sharing of the lived experiences of their families, recording the pupils' experiences. Find a space for expression in education, which is key in such difficult times.

9   Encourage and promote the building and strengthening of relationships with and among students. This provides emotional support, enhances well-being, and enables continuity and the collective construction of learning.

10   Create virtual discussion spaces (asynchronous forums or videoconferences). Enrich learning spaces and strengthen reflection spaces for teams of staff and for pupils and their families.

11   Encourage pupils to produce audiovisual materials and share them with their peers. This allows for greater ownership of educational content.

12   Agree upon rules of virtual coexistence. The framework of this new way of learning is key when it comes to setting out its forms, content and assessment. Many families need these explanations in order to be able to prioritize these spaces as educational, endorsed and systematic.

13   Curate applications and educational content on the internet in order to share with families and teaching staff, who often do not have the time to share and optimize resources.

14   Think about ways of operating in blended learning: hybrid formats, flipped classroom or developing other possibilities.

15   Rethink spaces with health criteria, but not forgetting pedagogical criteria in the definitions to be taken.

16 Incorporate virtual teacher coordination in order to create a dynamic and operational space.

17 Virtual formats and the use of platforms offers new opportunities that enrich learning, such as the creation of spaces for reflection in thematic groups; the possibility of receiving contributions from actors outside the school (talks by experts on different subjects); and the search for training and support, among others.

18 In order to re-engage students, classroom teachers' work needs to be combined with that of other teachers in the system, combining virtual strategies with territorial strategies, and coordinating with families and other community actors.

19 Think of strategies that make it possible to carry out formative assessments, as well as conceptual and non-numerical summative assessments emphasizing achievement.

20 Use hybrid formats to enable educational continuity for students who, for various reasons, have to stop attending classes in person.