



Education and Social Inequality: Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Public Education System in Honduras

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Abstract: The pandemic caused by COVID-19 has made visible the precariousness and inequalities faced by education around the world. The purpose of this article is to analyze the impact of the pandemic on the public education system in Honduras, one of the countries with the greatest inequality worldwide. To meet the objective, the paper is structured in four sections. First, the reality of Honduran society and its education system is described. In a second section, the actions proposed by government agencies towards training processes in times of crisis are specified. Third, the challenges that the Honduran education system must face are detailed. Finally, some alternatives are proposed with the purpose of continuing in the teaching-learning process.

Key words: social inequality; Honduras; poverty; educational systems

Educación y desigualdad social: El impacto de la pandemia COVID-19 en el sistema educativo público de Honduras

Resumen: La pandemia causada por el COVID-19 ha visibilizado las precariedades y desigualdades a las que se enfrenta la educación en todo el mundo. El presente artículo tiene como finalidad analizar el impacto de la pandemia en el sistema educativo público de Honduras, uno de los países con mayor desigualdad a nivel mundial. Para cumplir con el objetivo, el trabajo se estructura en cuatro apartados. Primero, se describe la realidad de la sociedad hondureña y su sistema educativo. En un segundo apartado, se especifican las acciones propuestas por los organismos gubernamentales hacia los procesos formativos en tiempos de crisis. En tercer lugar, se detallan los desafíos que debe enfrentar el sistema educativo hondureño. Finalmente, se plantean algunas alternativas con el propósito de continuar en el proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje.

Palabras clave: desigualdad social; Honduras; pobreza; sistema educativo

Educação e desigualdade social: O impacto da pandemia de COVID-19 no sistema público de educação em Honduras

Resumo: A pandemia causada por COVID-19 tornou visível a precariedade e as desigualdades enfrentadas pela educação em todo o mundo. O objetivo deste artigo é analisar o impacto da pandemia no sistema público de educação em Honduras, um dos países com a maior desigualdade mundial. Para cumprir o objetivo, o trabalho é dividido em quatro seções. Primeiro, é descrita a realidade da sociedade hondurenha e seu sistema educacional. Em uma segunda seção, são especificadas as ações propostas pelas agências governamentais para processos de treinamento em tempos de crise. Terceiro, são detalhados os desafios que o sistema educacional hondurenho deve enfrentar. Por fim, são propostas algumas alternativas para continuar no processo de ensino-aprendizagem.

Palavras-chave: desigualdade social; Honduras; pobreza; sistema educativo

Education and Social Inequality: Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Public Education System in Honduras

In April 2020, Honduras was identified as the nation with the highest COVID-19 lethality rate in Central America (National Autonomous University of Honduras [UNAH], 2020). The arrival of the pandemic to Honduran territory has uncovered a series of needs in the educational, economic, and health fields. In the country with the greatest inequality in Latin America, the collapse of the precarious health system was rapid. During the first weeks, the health system had only 130 intensive care beds and around 100 mechanical ventilators (Honduran External Debt and Development Social Forum [FOSDEH], 2020b), considering a population of over nine million inhabitants (National Institute of Statistics of Honduras [INE], 2019) and a GDP per capita of 2,574.9 (World Bank, 2020). There was also a rapid increase in the number of infected patients (Ministry of Health, 2020) and the approval of a remittance of approximately \$3,240.12 million by the government (FOSDEH, 2020b). In addition, there is criticism about the transparency in the management of funds by the public administration; in particular, the focus is on overvalued purchases of medical supplies (National Anti-Corruption Council [CNA], 2020a, 2020b).

As in other countries, Honduras has taken actions in the educational field as a way to mitigate the effects of the pandemic on the population. Worldwide, as a measure to prevent the spread of the virus, it was decided to close millions of educational establishments (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2020; Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020; Viner et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). Honduran educational authorities, following these proposals, decided on March 12, 2020, to indefinitely suspend face-to-face activities at the Pre-Primary, Primary, Secondary (Decree No. PCM-018-2020, 2020), and Higher education levels in order to conduct distance learning classes through the use of technological devices (Espinoza, 2020).

The changes in the ways of accessing education have led to a series of government proposals to mitigate the effects of the pandemic. The purpose of this article is to analyze the impact of COVID-19 on the public education system in Honduras.

The Reality of Honduran Society and its Education System

Honduras is one of the countries with the greatest inequality in Latin America. A large part of the population survives on less than two dollars a day (Hernández Oré et al., 2016; Michel & Walker, 2019). Honduras' Gini coefficient (52.1%) is higher than that of other Central American countries (Guatemala, 48.3%; Costa Rica, 48.0%; Nicaragua, 46.2% or El Salvador, 38.6%; World Bank, 2018), denoting a state of excessive vulnerability (Hernández Oré et al., 2016). In addition to the inequality measure indicated by the Gini coefficient, there are high poverty rates in the country.

Currently, around 68.8% of people are living in poverty and 44.2% in extreme poverty (FOSDEH, 2018). These rates are high when compared to other Central American nations such as El Salvador at 34.5%, Costa Rica at 16.2% and Panama at 14.5%. Similarly, these rates are high compared to Latin American countries with greater land area and population. For example, Brazil has a rate of 19.4% and Chile has a rate of less than 15% (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean [ECLAC], 2019). Likewise, 69.3% of people reside in rural areas (FOSDEH, 2018), where more than half of families considered poor and two-thirds of those living in extreme poverty are located (Hernández Oré et al., 2016).

Regarding the Human Development Index, Honduras is on the list of countries with Medium Human Development at 0.623, surpassed by most Central American countries (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2019). This situation has repercussions on education, since the school dropout rate is one of the highest in the region at 49.2%, compared to El Salvador at 33.5% and Costa Rica at 23.6%. In addition, the net secondary school attendance rate is 49.9%, lower than El Salvador at 62.3% and Costa Rica at 77.4% (Inter-American Development Bank [IDB], 2018).

To the above indicators, we must add that Honduras has faced a series of structural problems related to high rates of poverty, unemployment, inequality, corruption and violence. It is important to mention that in 2009 there was a coup d'état driven by existing power groups in the country. This situation aggravated the crisis in which Honduras is immersed, which has become evident during the pandemic. The current regime has governed mainly for a small oligarchic faction headed by the Armed Forces (Shiple, 2016). It has also promoted the establishment of neoliberal measures in order to privatize health and education (Sosa & Almeida, 2019). Because of these difficulties, some residents have made the decision to emigrate en masse to the United States and other countries in search of a better future despite the dangers they may face on this difficult journey (López Recinos, 2013; Moreno, 2018; Sosa & Almeida, 2019).

Regarding the education system, it is structured into four levels: Pre-Primary, Primary, Secondary and Higher. The first three are supervised by the Ministry of Education, with around 18,089 establishments nationwide, which concentrate 1,718,616 students in public schools and 313,977 in the private sector (Ministry of Education, 2017a). University education is directed by the National Autonomous University of Honduras by constitutional mandate (Decree No. 131, 1982). Nationwide there are 21 higher education institutions, of which 6 are public (Department of Higher Education, 2017).

At all levels there is a deficit in coverage and equity which causes many children and young people to be excluded (Calderón, 2011; Paz-Maldonado, 2018; Ministry of Education, 2017a). Most establishments nationwide are in deplorable conditions (Paz-Maldonado, 2020), since they do not have adequate infrastructure, electricity, drinking water, wastewater management and internet connectivity (Ministry of Education, 2017a). Similarly, there are still around 8,420 single-teacher and 4,066 two-teacher schools, particularly in rural areas (Central American and Caribbean Initial

Literacy Network [REDLEI], 2019). In addition to these limitations, schools accommodate a large number of students per classroom. In pre-primary education a teacher attends to 40 students, in primary 36 and in secondary 12 (Ministry of Education, 2017b). Therefore, considering current circumstances, the massive return to face-to-face activities is a risky proposal. However, the Ministry of Education plans a semi-presential and voluntary reopening of public and private schools by the end of 2021 (Ministry of Education, 2021). This measure has been strongly criticized by various sectors, as there are no guarantees to implement such action. However, in the country some educational centers have returned clandestinely (Estrada, 2021a).

Government Proposals for Education in Times of Pandemic

In Pre-Primary, Primary and Secondary education levels, the decision was made to carry out educational activities through applications such as WhatsApp in order to have greater contact with families. Through this means, teachers sent messages, audios and videos on the different subjects along with instructions about the work that students should do (Paz-Maldonado et al., forthcoming). This has been the main communication channel between teachers and students. In Honduras, approximately 90% of teachers only have a mobile phone. This situation limits the design of teaching strategies, as this technological device is not the most suitable for preparing materials and reviewing assignments (Observatory of National and International University Education of the Francisco Morazán National Pedagogical University [OUDENI UPNFM], 2020).

Government strategies were also established to enable teaching through television programs broadcast on various channels in the country, mainly on state channels in order not to cancel the 2020 school year. These programs have prioritized the themes of the different subjects that are part of the Basic National Curriculum (CNB) (Ministry of Education, 2020). However, only 25.8% of teachers use this medium to continue the educational process, given that 81.2% make phone calls to students' families and 74.8% communicate via WhatsApp (OUDENI UPNFM, 2020).

In addition, the Ministry of Education implemented the program “We Want You Studying at Home,” which was aimed at developing teaching through digital media, without taking into account the lack of internet connectivity for students. Subsequently, the focus was on “digital educational transformation” through the purchase of 200,000 tablets equipped with educational texts and internet connection, but the agreed amount was not acquired. Likewise, these do not have what was promised. What some teacher union leaders have called a new act of corruption (Estrada, 2021b; Medina, 2021; Zelaya, 2021).

Regarding Higher Education, it was suggested to continue with educational tasks through institutional virtual platforms, email, video calls through digital applications such as Zoom and WhatsApp. However, students were affected by the lack of access to these resources because income decreased by 53.6% in most university households, as a result of the job suspension of some family members (Institute for Economic and Social Research of the National Autonomous University of Honduras [IIES-UNAH], 2020).

In general, the agencies responsible for administering the education system considered continuing educational activities at all levels through distance learning. However, these provisions were questioned by the inhabitants when considering them as exclusionary measures, since most students do not have technological devices or internet connectivity to continue the educational process in this modality. Only 16.5% of households have a computer and 92% have a cell phone. Likewise, 55.9% have a radio recorder and 77.2% have a television. In addition, access to the internet is not within the reach of the entire population, as only 39.4% can access it (INE, 2019).

Challenges for the Honduran Public Education System

So far, there is no concrete information on how and when the pandemic will be eradicated globally. As a reference, a study conducted in the United States affirms the need to maintain total or partial social distancing until 2022 (Kissler et al., 2020). This has implications for the opening or closing of schools, as well as face-to-face classes in higher education.

In some countries around the world, the reopening of schools has been promoted, not without criticism from families who say that the economy is being prioritized over the health of their children (Cavanagh, 2020). Implementing this measure in the Honduran context is dangerous, since the same conditions do not exist as in countries with high economic development and social security policies. It is also dangerous considering schools become an expansive network of contagions (Vogel & Couzin-Frankel, 2020).

From this perspective, continuing to develop academic activities is one of the great challenges facing the education system in Honduras. Despite having broad legal support to address the various educational areas, there is a lack of public policies that make it possible to face structural problems through a more inclusive vision (Paz-Maldonado, 2020), considering the current health crisis. In the case of the education system, no new public policies were created to mitigate the effects of COVID-19. Taking into account that in the Honduran context prior to the global emergency, these educational policies were already scarce. The State has little technical capacity to establish public policies and limited resources in seeking their implementation. Therefore, Honduran education is constantly threatened by globalization and privatization. International organizations, non-state actors and cooperation agencies are largely managing the political priority agenda for the entire nation (Edwards et al., 2019, 2020; Morales Ulloa & Magalhães, 2013).

Therefore, during the pandemic, priority has only been given to the National Risk Management System (SINAGER). This body intensified its work throughout the territory, implementing various actions as stated by law (Decree No. 151, 2009), in order to prevent the increase in infections. However, the measures established have been questioned by Hondurans and various national institutions (CNA, 2020a, 2020b; FOSDEH, 2020a, 2020b).

The Honduran education system must consider a long period of non-face-to-face classes. In that context, and in order to develop educational processes that were scheduled to be conducted in person, it is necessary to face a series of challenges, including:

Facing inequality in technological access and internet connection. It is crucial to achieve a reduction in inequality of technological access to provide educational coverage to all students enrolled in different educational establishments. Therefore, given the circumstances faced by the population in the Honduran context, distance classes represent an increase in the educational gap. However, one of the main options to reduce inequalities is to implement distance education based on radio and television at the Pre-Primary, Primary and Secondary levels, since inhabitants have greater accessibility to these media. Therefore, constant support from the government administration is necessary. Teaching teams must have the supplies and devices that allow them to continue with the teaching process.

In addition, Honduras has the highest cost of fixed broadband in relation to the monthly GDP per capita compared to the rest of Central American countries. This situation mainly affects university students because they continue the teaching process through applications and platforms that require the use of the internet. Regarding households that have a computer and have internet connectivity, Honduras occupies one of the last places, only surpassing Nicaragua (Sunkel et al., 2014).

Human relationships and recreational activities. Educational centers have been characterized as sites that encourage coexistence and allow the development of bonds. They also facilitate the

practice of recreational activities that are difficult to carry out in other environments, particularly sports activities. Social isolation has meant that students at different levels of education leave this daily dynamic behind.

Educational level of parents. In Honduras, the illiteracy rate is approximately 13% and the average years of study of the population are 7.7 (INE, 2018). In public schools, especially those located in rural areas where most parents cannot read or write, this becomes worrying when education comes to depend on families.

Use of technological means by families. The main channels of communication between teachers and students in the context of COVID-19, specifically in the first levels of Pre-Primary, Primary and Secondary education, are carried out through technology that sometimes cannot be handled by family members due to poor training and familiarity with it. To date, there are no exact data on the number of students who have not had access to the means established to continue with the educational process. However, according to the Ministry of Education, around 225,000 students dropped out of school in 2020, although some analysts argue that this figure rises to 700,000 and 900,000 students (Sánchez, 2021).

Economic and food factors. In Honduras, most of the economically active population is immersed in the informal economy. On the other hand, the business sector has decided to suspend thousands of employees from their jobs (FOSDEH, 2020a). This action has affected working university students, since approximately 4% have lost their jobs, generating a 100% reduction in their income (IIES-UNAH, 2020). These measures have caused a decrease in income and therefore a lack of food in most Honduran households (IIES-UNAH, 2020).

Proper use of resources and technological means by teachers. It is crucial that educational institutions at all levels provide constant advice to teachers to optimize the use of technological resources in teaching work, allowing them to serve students in their different learning spaces.

Implement new forms of evaluation. The management teams of educational centers at different levels should enable teachers to use different methods to evaluate educational activities. However, practical and clinical subjects in higher education have been limited, since the technological tools and applications used in distance education cannot replace procedures performed in such spaces. Therefore, reinforcing theoretical aspects during this time of distance education could be very helpful (Flores-Girón & Paz-Maldonado, 2021).

Promote emotional bonds. As a result of the structural problems faced by the Honduran population, which directly affect education, it is necessary to carry out a pedagogical practice that favors human relationships. At different levels, educational centers should opt for teaching that allows teachers to maintain links of emotional support with students and not only demand the execution of previously scheduled educational actions.

Develop inclusive education. Educational inclusion has been proposed in different national and international regulations as an element of attention to diversity (Paz-Maldonado, 2020). However, policies are needed to enable the implementation of inclusive actions aimed at vulnerable groups that are part of the Honduran education system (Paz-Maldonado, 2018). It is necessary to translate materials for those groups that speak a different language and adapt various formats that facilitate the learning of students with disabilities at this time of crisis.

Prioritize teachers and students at all educational levels in vaccination processes. To date, Honduras is one of the countries with the fewest people vaccinated against COVID-19, as it depends mostly on donations. In this scenario, it becomes unavoidable for teachers and students to be considered as priority groups in vaccination days in order for them to be immunized in view of a possible return to teaching establishments.

Improve infrastructure conditions and guarantee the operation of all basic services in educational centers. It is urgent to allocate real budget items to remodel teaching establishments and ensure that each one has the basic services for the development of face-to-face educational processes. During this period of distance learning, a large part of public centers have deteriorated even more due to lack of

maintenance. They have also been used for multiple purposes such as: shelters for victims of Hurricanes Eta and Iota, care rooms for infected patients, COVID-19 vaccination days, delivery of new identity cards, and political elections. Therefore, thinking about returning to classrooms implies conditioning and rebuilding educational establishments, as a minimum guarantee, after disuse for the purpose for which they were created.

Possible Alternatives

Prioritizing the nutrition of children is essential to continue with the training process. Since classes have continued to be taught remotely, school meals should continue to be offered at each school or at the point closest to students' homes. Provisions could be delivered weekly to all students in order to reduce the food shortage in Honduran households and guarantee food security. University students can also benefit from food scholarships and government loans that enable the acquisition of basic supplies.

Reducing inequality of access to the internet should be among the priority objectives for the government and school administrators given the high cost of this service in Honduras. Through agreements with internet service provider companies, a series of scholarships can be offered consisting of the delivery of technological devices and data packages. Thus, students who do not have such resources would be on equal terms (in that regard).

Considering the particularities presented by each student is needed to implement strategies that enable their participation in the educational process. There are students who have difficulties accessing the learning spaces designed on institutional platforms. Therefore, it is essential to adapt the didactic programs to the new forms of teaching, prioritize content, make training activities more flexible, use different evaluation methods, and reduce school days.

Promoting training using playful components in different educational spaces is recommended. By using educational strategies that incorporate games and creativity, the emotional effects of quarantine can be reduced. Implementing this type of strategy will require special teacher training at different levels of education.

Adapting practical learning activities (related to agriculture, crafts, drawing and performing arts at different levels of education) to the resources available at home is another viable alternative. In the case of physical education, schools can send weekly workout plans for students to do at home. Likewise, the transmission of online exercise classes would help maintain good physical and mental health and prevent overweight (Rundle et al., 2020). On the other hand, attention must be paid to those spaces that require classroom practices, particularly in university degrees that train education professionals.

In different countries around the world, clinical teaching spaces, particularly those belonging to the Health Sciences, have made a rapid transition to synchronous and asynchronous online formats, from content development to ways of assessing learning. In Honduran public universities, it is recommended to reinforce the theoretical component of the different clinical subjects. In a possible return, the practical component will be addressed by caring for emergency patients and through scheduled appointments complying with high biosafety standards (Flores-Girón & Paz-Maldonado, 2021).

It is essential to create public policies to support vulnerable groups that are part of the education system, such as students belonging to Indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants, diverse sexual orientations and with disabilities (Paz-Maldonado, 2018). These policies will have to consider aspects related to educational coverage, technological devices and tools, internet connectivity, educational materials in various formats and their translation, in order to reduce exclusion and promote the learning of these groups.

In view of a possible return to teaching establishments, teachers and students at different educational levels should be a priority group in the vaccination processes currently being carried out

in Honduras. Likewise, it is imminent to remodel the infrastructure and guarantee the operation of all basic services in educational centers.

Final Considerations

The current pandemic has emphatically shown the precariousness of the public education system in Honduras. Most teaching centers are in total abandonment by government authorities. Existing inequalities are normalized, in such a way that there is often no astonishment at the calamity in which Honduran society unfolds.

The Honduran education system must face a series of challenges ranging from continuing distance learning to considering the economic and food factors of each household. As a result, a significant number of students are being excluded from teaching-learning processes.

It is possible to carry out multiple actions that reduce the impact of structural problems and this new crisis caused by COVID-19. Therefore, political will and good management of public funds are required for the purpose of improving the living conditions of Honduran society. Some of the proposed alternatives can be achieved through the creation of public policies aimed at all social sectors and a government administration with greater transparency. However, at this historical moment, state institutions do not have acceptance and credibility, since there is a lack of rule of law and various corruption scandals have arisen in recent administrations.

In short, the Honduran education system is at a complex crossroads. On the one hand, the teaching process must continue at all levels. In addition, the Ministry of Education is committed to reopening schools in the midst of one of the most critical moments due to the progressive increase in infections. On the other, it is essential to continue maintaining quality learning despite not having adequate conditions to do so. In this way, a variety of actions are demanded that consider in particular the current situation of all families and their possibilities, which allows them to support Pre-Primary, Primary, Secondary and Higher Education students in another type of modality that requires supplies that they do not have.

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