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Effects and Current Situation of the Pandemic on Basic Education in Ecuador

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the educational effects and current situation that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on public basic education in Ecuador, administered by the Ministry of Education, from a qualitative perspective. It uses a bibliographic review technique, using the open data portal, the institution's website, and related studies as its main sources of information. Its results include a decrease in the enrollment rate compared to previous periods; the implementation of the "Let's Learn Together at Home" plan; and then the prioritized pre-pandemic curriculum synchronously online. Based on studies conducted in Latin America, it is estimated that learning losses over 14 months of school closures would range from 72.5% to 88%. To date, there is no concrete evaluation like those conducted in Argentina and Panama, nor any actions aimed at reversing their results. Finally, opting for distance education would have reduced these percentages among the most vulnerable child populations.

Keywords: Basic education; pandemic; learning losses.



INTRODUCTION

After the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, it called on different countries to take preventive measures to reduce its impact and consequences. In Ecuador, on March 16, following the issuance of Executive Decree #1017, the national government declared a state of emergency as its main strategy to control the pandemic and decreed the closure of public services, including education.

In addition, the pandemic brought about changes, especially in the field of education at all levels, and basic education in Ecuador was no exception. How to face the challenge? This was the question that demanded new answers from the educational authorities at the head of the Ministry of Education (MINEDUC).

Never before has the world faced such a complex epidemiological situation, which has highlighted the enormous difficulties of all systems, primarily in education (Argandoña et al., 2020, p.4).

In this process, the first step was to suspend classes as of March 12, 2020, to prevent contagion in educational spaces, and within the MINEDUC, preparations began for the institutional response to migrate from face-to-face education to an online proposal.

The transition from face-to-face education, characterized by daily face-to-face interaction within educational institutions between teachers, administrative staff, and students, was temporarily put on hold, and a new proposal was about to be born. This article aims to analyze the impact that the emergency plan proposed by MINEDUC to address the COVID-19 pandemic had on basic education in the country and the current outlook.

METHODOLOGY

The current research is qualitative in nature and uses the bibliographic review technique, which, as mentioned by Gómez-Luna et al. (2014), is applicable to any relevant



topic and starts by defining the research problem, which is aimed at analyzing how MINEDUC faced the COVID-19 pandemic, what measures it took chronologically, and what their impact was on basic education. From this, important and relevant information on the issue was sought, and once organized, the respective analysis was carried out.

The focus of the research is on the response of the Ministry of Education in addressing the pandemic in the field of basic education. The main sources of information were the institution's open data portal, from which secondary data were collected that were an official expression of the impact that the health emergency had on the country, the institutional website, the national multipurpose household survey conducted by the National Institute of Statistics and Censuses (INEC, 2021), and the portal capacito.educación.gob.ec/covid.19. This information was then linked and analyzed with articles from the Google Scholar database, indexed journals, and documents from international organizations linked to the field of education that tracked and monitored the impact on the different actors in the education system.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In Ecuador, at the beginning of the pandemic, the 2019-2020 school year had ended in the coastal region and was still ongoing in the highlands. According to MINEDUC (2020), on its Open Data portal, there were 4,195,330 students in the system, in the type of ordinary and intercultural education, which includes early childhood, basic, and secondary education levels.

At the start of the new 2020-2021 school year in June, during the first year of the pandemic, the enrollment rate reported in the system was 4,112,085 students. In other words, compared to the previous year's figure, 83,245 students dropped out of the education system during the first year of the pandemic, corresponding to 1.98% of the enrollment for the previous school year.



In this regard, the urban level saw a reduction of 81,808 students, representing 2.5%, and in the rural level, the dropout rate was 1,437 students, representing only 0.16%. Contrary to expectations, the highest percentage of dropouts from the education system occurred in urban areas, which, compared to rural areas, were better served by internet connectivity services.

In this context, MINEDUC, with the collaboration of various national and international sources of support and the important contribution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), proposed the so-called Emergency Curriculum, under the name: Educational Plan: "Let's Learn Together at Home"; as an instrument contextualized to the reality of the country, which prioritized the achievement of learning objectives and key content to be developed in the following 2020-2021 school year; and defined as its main objective:

To maintain the continuity of students' educational processes, guiding the work of members of the educational community in the different offerings, modalities, and services, in a way that allows for emotional support, the development of learning, and attention to diversity in the context of the health emergency caused by COVID-19 (MINEDUC, 2020, p.6).

The MINEDUC emergency curriculum was a proposal for the education system as a whole, with a global perspective aimed at covering the levels of early childhood education, basic education, in its sub-levels of elementary, middle, and high school, and high school. Its structure was based on a central idea or guiding theme, selecting information on COVID-19, coexistence, ideas that change the world, democracy, care for nature, interculturality, human rights, and citizenship. Based on these, teachers were given learning objectives to achieve and, through the educational process, values to develop and



emotional support content to incorporate, which were considered important to work on given the pandemic environment.

The sole proposal to work on the emergency curriculum and set aside the usual curriculum would have been a serious institutional mistake, especially for the country's children in elementary and middle school, whose structure only proposed a general idea linked to the emergency caused by the pandemic, to which the emotional support content was well suited. and seven very general, non-emergency-related central ideas, which did not require emotional support content and could be addressed at any other time.

Therefore, based on this initial exercise, the incorporation of teaching sheets was proposed as an annex to the emergency plan. These were digital texts that revisited the prioritized curriculum with an emphasis on the development of communication, mathematics, digital, and socio-emotional skills at the basic general education level, but now establishing project development as the sole methodology.

The emergency curriculum initially proposed by MINEDUC gave way to the teaching sheets, as a base document that allowed, as far as possible, the prioritized curriculum to be resumed in a synchronous online format using Microsoft Teams, proposed under a project-based methodology. This decision was communicated to parents via the web portal , with a start date of August 11, 2020, prior to the diagnostic process, indicating that children would receive teaching sheets with predefined projects.

In addition, they were asked to keep a record in a portfolio, as the only means of evaluation and approval for the grade, which was proposed as the final product. And as support for families to continue the educational process, a guide for students and accompanying families was posted on the same link, along with digital resources for seven projects to be worked on from August 11, 2020, until the end of the school year.



Teachers, on the other hand, used the same link to download digital texts with recommendations for working with the worksheets for each grade of basic education. It was made clear to them that the tools for carrying out their educational work during the pandemic were the prioritized curriculum, already known to them, and the emergency curriculum. The latter was considered the minimum basis and the former the maximum horizon to be developed during the school period.

Although teachers were told that the methodology was project-based learning, it was clear that in practice this was not the case. During the pandemic, it was very difficult to generate active participation in groups, stimulate collaborative work, and integrate different subjects from these spaces, which are characteristic of this type of active methodology.

Probably, the emergency state in the country and around the world led the Ministry authorities to believe that the solution in these limited educational encounters was to integrate most of the disciplines that made up the curriculum, where the project-based learning methodology fit like a glove.

In the teaching files, the assessment indicators were not linked to the execution of the projects in the grades themselves, even though these were the main input for passing; rather, they were linked in a generic way to the learning objectives, which even included an English indicator, seeking to align with the competencies set out in the prioritized curriculum.

Finally, the proposed educational plan set aside the emergency curriculum, relying instead on the pre-pandemic priority curriculum and promoting its implementation theoretically through project-based learning. In practice, however, the methodology was not applied, nor did it achieve the desired integration, and it



ended up prioritizing the completion of the various activities established for each grade in the projects for student approval.

Regarding whether the prioritized curriculum worked, in family groups that were able to access educational training, academic literature on the subject states that: Virtual education during the pandemic did not allow access to meaningful learning, much less autonomous learning (Aguilar, 2020). And, in the discussion Adaptability in education in times of Covid-19 held in July 2020 by the online radio station of the Salesian Polytechnic University (UPS), it was stated that the online system was working better in the private education sector.

According to periodic monitoring of households carried out by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and MINEDUC (2021), in October and November, 70% of students said they were learning less than before the pandemic. In addition, learning gaps widened. In private education, 58% of students receive more than four hours of classes per day, while in public education, only 9% of students had access to a similar number of hours, which already marked a wide gap in learning.

The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC, 2022) mentioned that it was very difficult to realistically assess the impact that school closures had had on education, although various organizations had made projections about the consequences of this crisis.

The World Bank (WB, 2021) reports that at the beginning of 2020, Latin American and Caribbean countries were already experiencing low levels of learning, with an estimated 51% of children in the region unable to read and understand a simple text at age 10, falling into the category known as "learning poverty." In Ecuador, the percentage of "learning poverty," understood as a category that measures reading comprehension at age 10, reached 63%, but the same organization later estimated because of the pandemic, this could have grown to 74.5% in the country.



In addition, the World Bank (2021) stated that a study prepared for Chile, considering the implementation of various mitigation factors such as distance learning, access, and the capacity for independent work, learning losses could reach 42% of what should be assimilated in a school year during six months of educational closure, and if this were extended to 10 months, the loss of learning could reach 88%. In Colombia, learning deprivation was estimated at 75% during a period of three months of distance learning and five months of hybrid learning. Simulations carried out in Chile with students in the lowest income quintile during this same period mention possible learning losses of 95%, with public sector students being the most affected.

These reference studies lead us to believe that the learning outcomes of the prioritized curriculum with an emphasis on communication, mathematics, digital, and socio-emotional skills proposed in Ecuador, in the synchronous online modality at different levels of basic education, will be equal to or even higher than the 88% and 95% learning losses for one school year achieved in Chile with a 10-month closure period, when educational establishments in the country were closed for 14 months, without any mitigating factors.

In addition, Acevedo et al. (2022), when evaluating the learning gaps that the pandemic may have left behind using data from different surveys in some Latin American countries, reviewed the repetition variable to assess the delay during 2020, finding that Ecuador was a special case, as it eliminated non-promotion in public schools.

For the following school year, 2021-2022, when the country was still facing the pandemic, according to MINEDUC (2020), its open data portal mentioned that the enrollment rate in the Ecuadorian education system had recovered, with an increase of 2,429 students, representing a growth of 0.06%. In line with previous trends, the recovery in enrollment rates was also higher in rural areas.



On May 24, there was a change of government in the country, marking the end of Lenin Moreno's term and the beginning of a new administration led by Guillermo Lasso, which also brought new authorities to the Ministry of Education.

From the outset, the new government's main focus was to tackle the pandemic through vaccination. In the field of education, the new school year continued with classes via Microsoft Teams, However, the " " (I am a student) curriculum was replaced by the normal curriculum, which is based on the principles of critical pedagogy, considering students as the main protagonists of the teaching-learning process, and designed to promote skills with performance criteria, seeking to enable students to mobilize and integrate knowledge, skills, and attitudes based on specific contextualized situations.

How to harmonize the normal curriculum from a synchronous virtual modality, seeking to reduce learning losses, which were noticeable in the educational field and supported by different international studies, was an unanswered question and only represented a measure to maintain educational continuity with the hope of returning to face-to-face classes soon and with the pending task of evaluating the level of learning losses.

Until then, the educational environment was characterized by students with 53.2% national connectivity, supported by Microsoft Teams, and developing the usual curriculum, but now virtually, without the necessary teaching experience for its implementation or the implementation of factors to mitigate learning losses, the high percentage of which was sure to be repeated.

Furthermore, in pedagogical terms, ECLAC and UNESCO (2020) point out that virtual education carries the risk of losing the face-to-face link between teachers and students, which we believe occurs at all educational levels. In the field of basic education, this



phenomenon creates an urgent need for high levels of coordinated support from parents or caregivers in order to achieve learning objectives.

The ECLAC-UNESCO report (2020) states that of the 33 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, only four opted to offer synchronous online classes, including Ecuador, while the remaining 29 used distance learning. This was done either by using asynchronous virtual learning platforms or by broadcasting educational programs through traditional media such as radio and television. In addition, Sánchez (2022) notes that the pandemic highlighted the shortcomings of education systems, most of which failed to ensure quality education.

In order to evaluate the educational proposal implemented by MINEDUC, it is necessary to review an initial decision, which was to start with synchronous online classes, a decision that was also taken by the Bahamas, Costa Rica, and Panama. Was this the most appropriate option for the population? Did the educational population have the necessary technological equipment (desktop or laptop computers) to receive online education in real time?

The figures from the national multipurpose household survey, conducted by the National Institute of Statistics (INEC) in December 2018 on a probabilistic sample of 12,060 households nationwide, including urban and rural areas, showed that by 2020 only 25.3% of households had a desktop computer, 31.3% had a laptop, and 12.7% had both devices. At first glance, the figures allow us to estimate that out of every 10 households, approximately only 7 had technological equipment for the family to use in their educational training, without being able to estimate how many of these devices were enabled to use Microsoft Teams, or which of these households were linked to public or private education.

The percentage of households nationwide with internet access in 2020 was 53.2%, meaning that of the 7 that had the necessary technological equipment in the best-case scenario, only approximately 3.5% could connect to the internet from home to continue their



academic education, while the other half was forced to contract the service, depending on their economic capacity. The remaining three households, which did not have equipment, had no choice but to use devices such as cell phones with plans or prepaid cards to maintain their children's education, with the limitations that this implies when used as an educational tool, and to distribute connection time depending on the number of children.

From the perspective of the country's level of technological equipment and access to internet service, it seems to us that launching MINEDUC's educational proposal in synchronous online mode was not the most appropriate decision, as it limited its educational reach from the outset.

This information was corroborated by surveys of the situation of students, families, and teachers during the pandemic conducted by UNICEF and MINEDUC (2021) in October and November, with a sample of 5,909 households nationwide, which mentioned that of the students who continue to study virtually, only 2 out of 10 have a personal computer or tablet.

In this regard, it has been mentioned that:

Educational training occurs in a fragmented manner in settings where more than three people need to access their learning environments. However, the lack of resources forced parents to set up shifts for accessing the virtual platform, denying others the possibility of continuing their studies normally. Such conditions have psychological effects on parents, students, and teachers (Aguilar, 2020, p. 219).

Cedeño-Solórzano et al. (2021) have reported that inequality in access to educational opportunities via digital means has widened pre-existing gaps in access to information and knowledge. In addition, ECLAC-UNESCO (2020) has mentioned that the type of connection also affects the quality and opportunities that students have in their educational process, since connecting from a phone is not the same as connecting from a computer. Similarly, UNICEF



(2021) states that students from the poorest households are at risk of falling even further behind in their education compared to those who have been able to access online education.

Murillo and Duck (2020) have mentioned that among the groups most affected are students and families of lower socioeconomic status, for whom the right to education is only realized through public education, along with children with disabilities. This is corroborated by the World Bank (2022), which mentions that the pandemic not only deepened inequalities but also affected the most vulnerable groups.

Current situation in the post-pandemic period.

Abizanda et al. (2022) states that one of the main challenges for the education sector at all levels and for the governments in power is to use all the resources at their disposal to restore education once the pandemic is over.

Therefore, after the pandemic ended, other studies began to emerge on learning losses in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). The World Bank Group (WBG, 2020) mentions that a study in Sao Paulo, Brazil, reported that during the pandemic, students learned on average 27.5% of what they would have learned in face-to-face classes, with learning losses reaching 72.5% and the risk of dropping out of the education system tripling. An assessment of fundamental skills among students who do not acquire fluent reading skills increased from 52% in 2019 to 74% in 2021. In Mexico, a study conducted in two states with students aged 10 to 15 showed significant losses in reading and mathematics at the fundamental learning level.

In response, the GBM (2020) proposed that LAC adopts a learning recovery agenda aimed at restoring enrollment levels, prioritizing fundamental subjects in recovery programs, and individualized teaching as key strategies to fill the learning gaps left by the pandemic.

In this difficult scenario, on January 18, 2023, the Ministry of Education organized a meeting entitled "Recovering Learning after the Pandemic," which featured keynote speeches



and interactive talks, with the presence of delegates from international organizations linked to education. The meeting proposed as priority commitments the recovery of learning, the reintegration of children who have dropped out of the system, and the training of key stakeholders. However, to date, there is no evidence of a diagnosis, a concrete action plan, or an evaluation of its results by this governing body for education.

In this regard, it is important to mention that LAC countries such as Argentina and Panama did do their homework with the support of UNESCO Chile's Latin American Laboratory for Assessment of the Quality of Education (LLECE), which assesses the learning of third and sixth graders, which in our country would correspond to the fourth and seventh years of basic education in subjects such as mathematics, reading, and science. and produces a regional comparative and explanatory study (ERCE) approximately every six years on the progress of education in the region.

And against all odds, UNESCO (2025) presents Argentina's results in the post-pandemic ERCE, which are significantly higher than the performance achieved in the 2019 assessment in reading and mathematics tests, both in third and sixth grades, where it even exceeded the regional average. In the case of Panamanian students, their results also showed a significant improvement, as reflected in Table 1.

Table 1

Comparative results of pre- and post-pandemic ERCE assessments in reading and mathematics in Argentina and Panama conducted by UNESCO.

Country	Reading 3rd grade	Reading 6th grade	Math, 3rd grade	Math 6th grade
Argentina 2019	689	698	690	690
Post-pandemic Argentina	714	708	722	699
Panama 2019	659	652	654	645
Panama post-pandemic	682	681	676	652



ERCE Region Average

2019	697	696	698	697
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Source: Own elaboration (2025)

Among the aspects investigated in the 2025 ERCE questionnaire related to the context of the pandemic, important factors that probably support the results achieved are highlighted. Regarding the strategies implemented by educational institutions in both countries, these include curriculum prioritization, which was reported by 84% of teachers in Argentina, the implementation of new forms of teaching, and attention to the emotional well-being of their students.

Regarding teacher commitment, in Argentina, 81% of teachers mentioned having adapted to new ways of teaching, dedicating more time to providing pedagogical support and time for class preparation. In Panama, the flexibilization of pedagogical practices stands out.

Table 2

Comparative results of ERCE assessments of pre- and post-pandemic social-emotional skills in Argentina and Panama conducted by UNESCO.

Country	School self-regulation	Empathy	Openness to diversity
Argentina 2019	49.0	50.5	50.5
Post-pandemic Argentina	47.5	48.6	47.5
Panama 2019	49.27	49.21	48.28
Panama post-pandemic	48.13	48.34	47.33

Source: Own elaboration (2025)

However, in terms of the results obtained in the assessment of socio-emotional skills categorized under the variables of school self-regulation, empathy, and openness to



diversity, both countries scored lower than in the ERCE assessments (2019), as shown in Table 2.

How can we understand that the results achieved in the learning achievements dimension in the post-pandemic period are higher than those of the assessment carried out in 2019 in the pre-pandemic period, and that those corresponding to socio-emotional skills have suffered a setback in both countries? One interpretation is that these affective skills are developed and cultivated through constant interaction with others, which was interrupted by the total or partial closure of face-to-face classes during the pandemic.

Without social interaction, there is no development of social-emotional skills, and it even tends to slow down the levels previously achieved by students in their relationships with their peers. In this vein, according to UNESCO (2024), social-emotional skills are achieved throughout life in different contexts and interactions, with face-to-face schooling being a key source for their development.

CONCLUSIONS

The first year of the pandemic marked a dropout rate in the country's education system compared to the previous school year, and contrary to expectations, the highest percentage was in urban areas compared to rural areas, whose rate showed a slight recovery in the following school year.

In terms of technological equipment, the country's access to internet service was not ideal for implementing the Ministry of Education's proposal for synchronous online education, as it limited its educational coverage from the outset and ended up affecting families with lower socioeconomic status.

Given the lack of local studies on the learning outcomes of the prioritized curriculum with an emphasis on competencies proposed by the Ministry of Education in Ecuador and subsequently the normal curriculum, it is estimated that learning losses are



similar to or higher than those achieved in Brazil with 72.5%, Colombia with 75%, or Chile, which reached 88%; and 95% in public sector students; during a 10-month closure, when in the country the period was 14 months with a gradual return.

When projecting the educational results of the pandemic in the country's public sector during these two consecutive periods of school closures, it becomes clear that the path taken has not been the most appropriate; improvisation has set the tone for the state's responses; and existing information on technological equipment in households was not used to evaluate decisions.

We dare to think that distance learning, as used in Argentina, using mass media and prioritizing curricular competencies by level, although when proposed to the country they may have seemed more modest and less ambitious compared to synchronous education, would have reduced the high rates of learning loss that are likely to remain among the most vulnerable children and increase the educational gaps with other economic sectors.

It is to be hoped, and it would be appropriate, that the educational authorities, in addition to the meeting held, promote studies that allow these harsh projections, left by the presence of the pandemic in the public basic education sector, to be assessed with certainty; or at least develop medium- and long-term leveling plans aimed at overcoming its effects, such as those carried out by Argentina, Panama, Brazil, and Mexico; However, to date, no initiatives in this direction have been seen.

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