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DEEPENING INEQUALITIES AND WEAKENING THE PUBLIC IN SCHOOLS

POLICIES, TECHNOLOGIES, AND "TASKIFICATION" DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC IN MEXICO

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RÉSUMÉ

Cet article traite les effets de la fermeture des bâtiments scolaires au Mexique pendant la pandémie de coronavirus. Il est basé sur des recherches effectuées dans 36 écoles publiques et analyse des documents politiques et des entretiens avec des enseignants, des étudiants et des familles. On soutient que certains des enchevêtrements à long terme entre les politiques, les configurations locales et les inégalités ont été approfondis et actualisés avec de nouvelles formes de bureaucratisation et la « taskification » du travail scolaire, reproduisant ainsi les inégalités entre les familles, appauvrissant les apprentissages, et affaiblissant potentiellement la légitimité de l'éducation scolaire.

MOTS CLÉS

Éducation et pandémie – Mexique – Inégalités – Relations État-société – Travail scolaire

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the effects of the closure of school buildings in Mexico during the coronavirus pandemic. It is based on research in 36 public schools, and analyzes policy documents and interviews with teachers, students, and families. It argues that some of the long-term entanglements between policies, local configurations, and inequalities were deepened and updated with new forms of bureaucratization and the 'taskification' of school work (travail scolaire), thereby reproducing inequalities between families, impoverishing learning, and potentially weakening the legitimacy of school education.

KEYWORDS

Education and pandemic – Mexico – Inequalities – State and society relationships – School work

Introduction

As in many other countries, in Mexico the Covid-19 pandemic brought the closure of school buildings. The measure forced 37.7 million students and 2 million teachers to work from home, and it lasted longer than in many European countries, starting in March 2020 and formally ending in August 2021 but with absenteeism still high in late 2021. To ensure the continuity of schooling, public policies relied heavily on TV, radio, and digital learning platforms. Yet most students connected through their cellphones (INEGI, 2020) and remote education tended to be more local and dispersed than what the broadcast streaming and central coordination had initially foreseen. While these local arrangements are linked to complex social dynamics of state institutions and social configurations that predate the pandemic, we would like to argue that during the pandemic some significant shifts took place, which deserve further scrutiny, such as the intensification of trends toward the individualization of school work, what can be called the bureaucratization and "taskification" of pedagogies, and the weakening of the public dimension of schooling, all of which we will discuss below.

We examine these shifts and continuities through a study of 36 public schools in Mexico, in which we interviewed teachers, students, and families to document their experience during the pandemic[1]. With a qualitative design, we consider the interactions between educational policies, technological infrastructures, pedagogical traditions, and inequalities in different localities. The focus on the intersections between technical infrastructures and pedagogies is grounded on a socio-material, ecological approach to education that takes into account the assemblages between humans and non-humans (Latour, 2005; Gourlay, 2015; Dussel, 2018; Alirezabeigi, Masschelein & Decuypere, 2020). Our research asks how teachers and students from disadvantaged urban and rural schools interacted with remote educational arrangements, and the effects of these arrangements on school work or travail scolaire, an analytical category we borrow from

1 The research, "Reception, experiences and practices of the policy strategy "Aprende en casa" during the COVID-19 emergency. Studying heterogeneity," was a collective project led by the Pedagogical University of Mexico and in which one of the authors was a principal researcher.

Barrère (2003, 2018). We assume that all practices are situated and contextual, and can thus not ignore the specific political, social, and technological environments of remote emergency education.

Schools were selected considering their location (in 12 states or provinces from northern, central and southern Mexico), school level (one preschool, primary, and secondary school for each state), and socioeconomic background (marginalized urban, semi-rural or rural, at least one of each per state). During fieldwork, we interviewed 39 teachers, 29 school principals, and 21 parental figures (only one male) in-depth, and had extensive discussions with one key informant in each state (school inspectors or state officers). The content of the interviews was organized in grids with a multiplicity of dimensions and analyzed through a close reading focused on the links between "political imaginations, rationalities, technologies, infrastructures and agents" (Savage, 2020, p. 328) and "the subtle and contingent mechanisms of power and knowledge production" in daily practices (Simons et al, 2009, p. vii). We also collected 202 records made by students (short audios or videos and written texts), prompted by an exercise in which we asked them to talk, write about or draw their school experience addressing an imaginary friend. We reached the students through their teachers and therefore had no access to those who were disengaged from schools.

Due to confinement, research was conducted remotely, through different platforms such as Zoom, GoogleMeet, Jitsi, and WhatsApp; in spite of the limitations of distance and of our sample of schools, the narratives and materials that we recorded allow for a form of access to, and visibility of, the experiences of several actors during the pandemic in Mexican schools.

In the first section of the article, we introduce some long-term trends of the Mexican educational system, looking at the entanglements between state policies, local configurations, and inequalities. We claim that state policies have been successful in transferring to the communities the costs of school expansion and maintenance, in a regressive distribution of resources that punishes the poorer. In the second section we look at educational policies during the pandemic, particularly the program Aprende en Casa, and their interactions with

a heterogeneous and unequal sociotechnical infrastructure, which enhances the regressive character of the previously described transfer of costs. In the third section, we analyze the pedagogies developed in these conditions, looking at the "taskification" and bureaucratization of school work or travail scolaire[2]. Our concluding remarks focus on those aspects of the entanglements among policies, infrastructures, and pedagogies that have been brought to light by the pandemic in highly unequal societies with a potential weakening of the legitimacy of public education.

Educational inequalities in Mexico in *the longue durée*

The effects of the pandemic in schools have been compared to earthquakes, wars, and revolutions, stressing the quick and abrupt change that the health emergency brought. However, we argue that there are also continuities, particularly in terms of long-standing inequalities and state-society relationships, and that some of these inequalities have deepened during the closure of school buildings with its concomitant loss of the school as physical public space.

Educational inequalities are part of a broader picture of long-term social inequalities. From the mid-twentieth century to the present, the Gini coefficient and other measures of inequality show, for Mexico, noticeably worse results than those of other Latin American countries such as Argentina or Colombia (Campos, Chávez and Esquivel, 2014). In terms of school enrolment, despite the growth experienced in the last decades, Mexican education still falls behind the region's average, particularly at the preschool and upper-secondary school levels (IIPE-UNESCO, 2021).

Public policies to alleviate educational inequalities have tended to focus on access, i.e. the creation of new schools in underprivileged areas or direct allocation of resources through scholarships (Blanco, 2020),

2 We discuss this notion in the third section of the article. The translation of 'travail scolaire' into English is not simple, as 'schoolwork' tends to refer to school assignments. Barrère's use of the concept links it to work done in the school, that includes but also exceeds the notion of tasks or assignments, and relates it to shifting political and cultural debates around the ethics and value of work, i.e. the shift from the Protestant ethics of work to the hedonistic view that is prevalent in late capitalism (Barrère, 2018).

and they have been conceived as actions impinged on social actors that are external to state operations. Yet, the boundaries between state and society have been more "elusive, porous and mobile" than discourses of and about the state lead us to believe (Mitchell, 1991, p. 77). Recent state theories have underlined this porosity, allowing us to consider the relative "weakness" of specific states not as signs of a perennial underdevelopment, or chronic corruption, but as the result of complex historical processes that cannot be measured against an evolutionary standard (Migdal, 2001 ; Gupta, 1995).

In Mexican education, the porosity of the distinction between state and society has been directly connected to the state's limited capacity to redistribute resources in favor of the least advantaged. Local societies have tried to make up for what the state will not. During the twentieth century primary schooling reached most of the Mexican population. At the same time, and contrary to the principle of free education enshrined in the Constitution, in many rural regions (where educational infrastructure has been the worst and least stable, and the literacy rates and the number of years of education completed have been the lowest in the country), parents have often paid fees for public schools, and adults in local communities have contributed their resources and labor to build or repair school buildings or teachers' lodgings. Parents and teachers have emptied their pockets to pay for school materials, and in some cases teachers and local authorities have raised donations from local residents. These local efforts have had regressive effects, as the burden on the poorest is greater (Acevedo-Rodrigo, 2019 ; Rockwell, 1994, p. 171).

By the 1990s, the strength of this generally informal but often crucial support by local societies, not just in rural areas but also in marginalized urban settings, was not overlooked by savvy federal reformers, who turned such support into a formal component of targeted social policies. With the ostensible aim of democratizing policy implementation, civil society's active participation was encouraged, including once more, for example, local residents' free labor for building schools or basketball courts (Bascones, 2002). Dressed as 'new' forms of social participation, inequalities continued to be reproduced. Nowadays, new public management policies have meant diminished school budgets and the need to tap into parents' (and particularly mothers') resourcefulness for

things as basic as repairing windows. Families organize raffles, food selling, film projections and all manner of activities on a regular basis, with the whole community invited to contribute with a fee (Gómez Tagle, 2017).

By highlighting these continuities we suggest that from the late-nineteenth to the early twenty-first centuries, and in spite of the levelling discourse of the 1910 revolution, the Mexican state has had a low-capacity fiscal infrastructure and limited social provision but an ability to appropriate society's efforts and to present outcomes as the success of state policy. This works out cheap for central government and the wealthy, but dear to impoverished rural and urban populations, who pay a high price for very modest progress (Acevedo-Rodrigo, 2019, pp. 675-676).

The weakness of public infrastructures is partially compensated by the political power to mobilize social resources. As shown below, the experience of teachers, students and parents during the Covid-19 pandemic may be seen as yet another instance in which Mexican civil society's efforts became crucial in a context of chronically underfunded public education. For teachers in pandemic conditions, inequalities were palpable. The closure of schools and the need for children and youth to study from home was perhaps the most glaring regressive mechanism : the public space of the school was lost and with it, the opportunity for a more level playing field for the students. In what follows we give examples of the interaction of technological infrastructures and forms of school work that speak to the persistence of these same patterns of state/family relationships.

Centralized policies and heterogeneous infrastructures

The closure of school buildings in Latin America led to different arrangements that went from the actual deschooling of some groups to the intensive use of platforms and social media (CEPAL, 2020). In Mexico, the government launched a string of policies to address the challenges brought by the pandemic. First it extended the Easter break, hoping that the pandemic would soon be over, but as it became clear that the emergency would not be short, it launched the program *Aprende en Casa* [Learn at Home] and signed agreements with Google

and Microsoft to give teachers and students access to their email and learning platforms and to provide short training on digital tools. As a consequence, around 50% of the teachers (937,000) and 30% of the students (11.5 million) created new email accounts in these platforms, and over 500,000 teachers received training from the tech corporations (Secretaría de Educación Pública, Boletín 290, 2021 ; Torres Hernández, 2020). These figures reflect the huge advance of private tech corporations into public education, but in the context of the health emergency this privatization has mostly escaped criticism and been presented instead as a good market solution for the state's deficiencies (see Cone et al, 2021, for a similar analysis of five European countries).

From April 2020 to the end of 2021 *Aprende en Casa* produced over 175 programs a week for preschool, primary, and secondary school students, and included radio programs and digital materials as supplements. The strategy of privileging TV as the media through which educational content would be delivered assumed that the TV broadcast would be friendlier and more accessible for low-income families, who only have access to internet through mobile phones with limited and expensive data. Also, educational TV sounded like a good strategy as there is a solid tradition in Mexico in this area, with the *Telesecundaria* being a well-established modality that receives one third of secondary schools' enrolment and has over 50 years of accumulated experience.

There is no doubt that the effort to produce educational materials for remote teaching was impressive, and that government officials worked day and night to support the continuity of school actions. In a bulletin issued in late 2021, the Mexican government reported that the program had produced 12,385 educational resources for TV, 1,854 radio capsules, and registered 574 million visits on its portal. One noteworthy development in an educational system traditionally monolingual and structured around racist hierarchies was the fact that the TV and radio materials for mother tongues (*Lengua Materna* in the curriculum, which since 2017 can be either Spanish or an indigenous language) were translated to 32 indigenous languages (Secretaría de Educación Pública, Boletín 290, 2021). The work with community radios in indigenous languages was also remarkable.

However, these strategies were not as successful as their designers wanted them to be, for reasons that show the entanglement of infrastructures and pedagogies. One important limitation was that the technological infrastructure was insufficient, unequal, and in several cases obsolete, including analog TV equipment that could not receive digitalized streaming. Connectivity was limited : it was not always affordable, and when it existed, it could be unstable, or simply lost to power cuts. Figures show access to computers and connectivity in Mexico is lower than in some other Latin American countries (Cohen and Mata-Sánchez, 2021 ; Limón-Vázquez et al, 2020).

Not only connectivity but the type of digital device that families owned became relevant, as they allowed for a great disparity of uses. It was clear that digital inequalities were not a clear-cut gap, with some fully included and others in complete exclusion, but a sinuous and multidimensional process with a dense topography (Burrell, 2012). In November-December 2020, the Institute for National Statistics completed a survey on the availability of technological devices and connectivity in households with school-age children : smartphones accounted for 70% of the devices available for primary and secondary school students, and laptops were the dominant media only in higher education. Even when they had a TV device at home, just 6.7% of primary school students reported to use TV as the main medium to take classes. Additionally, the percentage of ownership or exclusive use of a digital device was low. In primary schools, 74.6% shared the device (mostly smartphones) with other members of the family, a figure that decreased to 52.6% for secondary students. That is, most primary and secondary school students did not have a device for their exclusive use for school purposes. Only in tertiary education were the students with exclusive access to their devices the majority of their age group (67.7%).

This heterogeneous and unequal technological infrastructure severely constrained students' possibilities to continue studying from home, particularly in school levels with more complex academic requirements. It is not surprising that during the pandemic the highest dropout rates (5-7%) were in the 13 to 18 age group (lower and upper secondary), who had limited access to desktops or laptops (25.5% in

lower secondary and 44% in upper secondary) and had to share the device with other members of the family (INEGI, 2020).

The characteristics of domestic spaces directly impact remote education. Schooled at home, students shared small rooms with siblings, parents and even relatives. Teachers reported several cases in which families were interrupting lessons, or children felt ashamed of speaking out because they were heard by their relatives. The lack of privacy and crammed spaces made it difficult to achieve the kind of attention and focused interactions that school work demands (Barrère, 2003), and made palpable the extent to which what can be "locally" achieved in classrooms depends on "humble mediators" that are 'brought silently to the scene" (Latour, 2005, p. 195), such as walls, windows, doors, blackboards, desks, school janitors and prefects, among many others (Dussel, 2018).

This was particularly visible in rural schools, with little or no connection, e.g. in a secondary school in the state of Guerrero (southern Mexico), the principal described their technological infrastructure in dire terms :

> TV signal is practically absent, as it can only be accessed through satellite and only four or five households have it. Internet access is only possible through tokens that are sold by a neighbor. […] Each token costs 20 pesos [one dollar] per hour, when the average family income is around 150 dollars a month. I would have liked that they had brought internet to the village and invested in more antennas. Those who have satellite dishes could have made them free for students, at least for two hours [a day], but this did not happen. (Interview with school principal, Guerrero, March 22, 2021).

In this school, teachers scheduled WhatsApp calls with their students twice a week, paid by the students' families. In the calls, they talked about the content of the curricula but mostly used the time to send and receive homework ("*tareas*"), a feature that will be analyzed in the following section. Some teachers went to the village every three weeks, taking printed materials with them. The cost of these materials was also an issue of debate and negotiation : several teachers reported frustration at the resistance of families to pay for the copies that teachers had prepaid and carried, and families complained that their economic difficulties were not considered. Even if solidarity abounded in

teachers' and communities' interactions, these arrangements are yet another evidence of a state where the costs of school continuity are transferred to local actors who are already on the brink of poverty, and to whom centralized strategies, even those that embrace multilingualism, remain inaccessible.

At urban schools, even if better connected, difficulties were reported. Students had to share digital devices with parents or siblings ; even when they had one, the cost of connection constrained the possibility of synchronous meetings. Because of limited data access, teachers said that they mostly used WhatsApp to get to their students, but also met them through Facebook, Google Meet, Google Classroom, Zoom in its free version, Padlet, Edmodo and Kahoot.

This diversity increased the workload of teachers, who became the human agents of interoperability between platforms (Perrotta et al, 2021). One teacher at a rural school in Guerrero told us how he would get 50-80 pictures of school tasks from his 15 students each week, which he downloaded in his personal computer, organized, evaluated, and returned the following week, while sending them to his school principal as evidence of his work and his students'. Other teachers had to navigate five or six platforms to meet their students and adapt their teaching to what students' devices and data allowed. More broadly, teachers had to take on the job of gathering and organizing the scarce records of school work scattered through different platforms in order to monitor progress and to be held accountable to the authorities. A preschool principal in the State of Mexico said that teachers spent a good amount of time working individually with parents on strategies to help children ; the pandemic made it more evident that teachers perform a great amount of invisible work that in the new conditions expanded (Chauvel, Delès and Pirone, issue 26-2). Teachers reported doing these tasks late at night, in a 24/7 time of almost continuous operation with little or no pause or boundaries (Crary, 2013), and shared feelings of acute stress, fatigue, and depression.

In these uneven and pedagogically challenging infrastructural conditions, it is no surprise that the program *Aprende en Casa* had

weaker results than expected. However, difficulties were not always recognized by the authorities ; in February 2021, the Secretary of Education reported that 80% of the students were reached by *Aprende en Casa*, and families were amply satisfied with the strategy, giving it a score of 8 to 10 points in a scale of 10 (Secretaría de Educación Pública, Boletín 40, 2021). Yet another survey done in April and May 2021 by an NGO critical of the government stated that only 6% of students followed the TV programs -a figure consistent with what the National Institute of Statistics (INEGI) had found in November-December 2020- and that most of them reported using internet and social media to stay connected with teachers (Mexicanos Primero, 2021).

In our own research, teachers, students, and families said that they mostly used social media to connect (as one teacher from Mexico City said, "I was 100% WhatsApp"). Most of them reported that they did not follow the TV programs because of their pedagogical shortcomings, i.e., their length and complex language, and their attempt to cover too many contents. The lack of centralized coordination led to diverse negotiations and arrangements between local authorities and families both in terms of resources and support, and of pedagogical configurations, as will be analyzed in the next section.

School work in the pandemic : the taskification of education

The limitations of policy strategies for remote education and the heterogeneous and unequal infrastructure led to local arrangements that could have paved the way for a more participatory configuration. Yet what emerges in our research is that these local arrangements produced greater fragmentation and dispersion, and furthered the transfer of costs of material and symbolic connection to local actors, thus deepening previous inequalities.

We follow Anne Barrère's approach to school work as an activity that has a strong cognitive component and that is aimed primarily at manipulating signs and eliciting interpretations (Barrère, 2003, p. 28). According to Barrère, school work can be considered as a palimpsest that combines organizational, intellectual, and affective dimensions that relate to communication, content and activity, time management, group coordination, routines but also creation and personal

involvement (pp. 31-2). Of particular importance in the classroom is the coordination of individual work time with that of collective work : for example, dictation involves a particular choreography of gazes and hands that moves from hearing to writing to confronting one's individual production with what is written on the blackboard or on a peer's notebook, or what is said by the teacher. All in all, the classroom is the space-time where a specific type of work with knowledge is promoted, one that is simultaneously individual and collective or public. This public validation of knowledge is what turns schools into particular learning sites (Tyler, 2010) and into relevant places for intergenerational encounters around a common culture (Arendt, 1961)[3].

The public dimension of the work in classrooms was particularly affected in the pandemic. Given the infrastructural limitations, the class was broken into several individual threads that took place in different platforms or supports and did not come together, except as discrete records that were 'conjoined' by the interoperability between platforms performed by teachers, and the scattered circumstances in which class groups could get together. But even in synchronic group meetings, teachers found it very hard to ignite conversations or debates within their groups. One primary school teacher from the State of Mexico expressed her frustration :

> It is very difficult that students talk to each other. What I see is that they just talk to me, and I would like them to converse [among themselves], but I wasn't successful […] Everything they tell just to me. We have a good rapport, they tell me many things, but they don't talk to each other, they have hardly met, they barely recognize their face in Zoom, they just recognize their voices -if they do. So it has been really complicated. (1st grade teacher, State of Mexico, March 15, 2021)

The individualization of school work and feelings of isolation were visible in the writings and drawings made by students for our research, in which they depicted themselves alone, equipped with devices with

3 This is what the notion of 'ubiquitous learning' seems to miss : the specificity of the work with knowledge that is (should be) promoted by schools, which requires a public validation or confrontation of what is learned with what others (peers, teachers, curriculum regulations) learn or prescribe as valuable knowledge. At its best, this validation takes the shape of a conversation around common knowledge and makes room for each generation to turn this common knowledge into their own (Arendt, 1961).

screens, or with notebooks and pencils, and spoke of loneliness, sadness, stress, and frustration. One primary school student from Sinaloa said that he learned how to do his homework alone, as he was ashamed to ask for help because he is in 6th grade and "already a grown-up," and added : "if I don't understand something, I search it on the Internet" (Boy, 12 years old, 6th grade primary school, Sinaloa). In line with what Pelhate, Ponté and Rayou (2022) found in French schools, autonomy is understood as completing school tasks on their own and not as an expansion of one's own intellectual or affective possibilities for self-affirmation (see also Durler, 2015).

What was most remarkable in our fieldwork was the overarching presence of school assignments or tasks ("la tarea") as the centerpiece of what constituted school work in the pandemic. Teachers were clear about this equivalence :

> The assignment is the class. I say it because parents say: "teacher, tomorrow there is no class", and that is because I will not send them any tasks for whatever reason. This is how it is now. (Primary School Teacher, Sinaloa, May 25, 2021)

> The assignment is super relevant, because without assignments we cannot see the progress of the little ones. That is, if they don't send their assignments, we cannot see their learning processes, their areas of opportunity, what they lack, and detect language problems. (Preschool Teacher, Mexico City, April 14, 2021)

The pandemic seems to have reinforced some trends already present towards the "taskification" of schooling, that is, a reduction of teaching and learning to managing a discrete amount of assignments or exercises that are to be performed individually (Alirezabeigi, 2021). Taskification appears as the right word to describe the simplification of educational processes to sending and receiving assignments, although we would like to nuance part of Alirezabeigi's argument, who considers taskification as a recent development related to the digitalization of schooling. We stress instead that taskification was present before, in the deeply engrained assumption that a good teacher is the one who gives out several assignments (Rayou, 2010) and in conjunction with the spread of so-called child-centered or progressive pedagogies that put activity to the fore. In that respect, it can be said that classroom activity

was already organized through tasks or activities that were to promote students' learning (Trujillo Reyes, 2019).

During the pandemic, this trend became ever more dominant in pedagogical strategies. Assignments had the goal to keep students busy and to verify students' learning, even if teaching had not taken place, or was severely constrained by the technological infrastructure. Some school principals reported that they reached an agreement with families to send assignments only once or twice a week, and give one week for their completion. In several secondary schools, parents asked teachers from different subjects to send their tasks on a particular weekday to avoid overwhelming the students. In both cases, families seem to have acted as speakers for children's wellbeing, but mostly bargained the workload considering their own possibilities to help their children with school homework.

When possible, whole-group lessons took the form of pre-recorded videos or short synchronic meetings in which there was no time to discuss how the assignments were resolved ; one secondary school teacher from Baja California said she almost felt like a *youtuber*, recording three classes on a row. The time boundaries of the class changed from the preestablished temporal sequence with beginning, development, and closure of physical classrooms to a continuous loop of tasks to be completed, which could be done at different rhythms. In the interviews, it was not easy to get teachers to discuss the content of the tasks ; what mattered most to them was that tasks were sent and returned, properly stored and forwarded to school principals as evidence of their own work. Feedback to the students frequently took the shape of motivational stickers in WhatsApp conversations, but some teachers also reported sending voice messages to their students, which they thought was a good way to give a more personalized assessment and had some similarity to the physical encounters in classrooms.

In the end, what mattered most was that assignments were handed in by students or parents to the teachers so that they could fulfill the bureaucratic demand to gather records ("*evidencias*") of students' learning. The term "*evidencias*" was popularized by the previous administration, which established new forms of teacher evaluation as a norm for permanence and promotion and in which "*evidencias*" were

part of teachers' portfolios (Antonio Pérez, 2021). These "*evidencias*" are usually pictures of school assignments that, multiplied by the huge numbers of tasks and students, give shape to a hypertrophied archive with no other addressee than an anonymous bureaucracy. At the same time, in our conversations with school actors we found little or no questioning about the links between the "*evidencias*" and students' learning processes, which have several invisible or un-showable dimensions ; these records were detached from working processes that could be nurtured by feedback on what was achieved or what could be done differently. The records appear as discrete units, cut off from longer flows of work that include revisions and reflection.

Moreover, the "*evidencias*" became a token in the relationships between teachers and families, and it was common to hear teachers complaining about parents' not sending "*evidencias*" as well as parents accusing teachers of being lazy and only caring about legitimating their work without helping their children. One primary school teacher in Tabasco said she had suspended grading her students because she knew homework was done by parents ; a secondary school teacher from Baja California Sur said that she tried to trust her students even if she knew they were cheating on her. A school principal from Mexico City acknowledged he had conflicts with the teachers because they were too demanding and were not sensitive to exceptional conditions. The "*evidencias*" condensed several of these conflicts and mistrusts, and worked as a minimum on which to account for school work. In this precarious and unstable equilibrium, discussing what these "*evidencias*" stood for, what were they evidencing, was out of the question.

The kind of knowledge that this combination of pedagogies and sociotechnical conditions privileged was one conceived as "finished" and "correct" (Hébrard, 1995), which students have to find for themselves and with the means they have at hand ("search on the Internet," as the student from Sinaloa said), with the predictable consequence of worsening inequalities, as children and families were left to their own resources. In some communities, families tried to negotiate a smaller workload and contain school demands, but unfortunately this left children more isolated and helpless in terms of their relationship to school knowledge.

Another consequence of the taskification of school work is that the conceptualization of knowledge as complete and univocal marginalizes the relevance of learning processes and the multiple forms of producing knowledge. While there is no doubt that this conceptualization was already present in pre-pandemic classrooms, decades of democratic pedagogies had been challenging it. Whatever gains were made in those struggles became threatened in conditions where teachers had a high pressure to show results that reduced teaching and learning to what could be recorded and shared. Solidarity was understood as not grading or not making more demands on teachers, students, and families, but the need to develop new pedagogies to work through complex and difficult knowledge in new sociotechnical contexts was not part of the public agenda.

Concluding remarks

Similarly to what historians have found for the first tumultuous decades after the 1910 revolution, much of the success of schooling during pandemic conditions in the poorest parts of Mexico today seems to be dependent on teachers' knowledge, abilities, creativity, resourcefulness and good will, including their readiness to pay for photocopies of textbooks and activities, or provide credit for students' internet connections, in a context of low teacher salaries and teacher training of uneven quality.

Also, as much research has shown, local communities are resourceful, and the pandemic context confirms this (Cohen and Mata-Sánchez, 2021). Historically, the contributions of communities have given them various degrees of bargaining power (Rockwell, 1994). Today parents retain their right to veto certain pedagogical or administrative plans as when, for instance, they inform a teacher that TV programs are not suitable in their village as they do not get a free TV signal, or that schools should send less assignments so that their children are not overwhelmed or have time to help with domestic work. The problem here, as in the past, is that social participation is regressive : it tends to be more of a burden, and less effective, the poorer one is.

Perhaps one of the most striking arguments that emerges out of these narratives about school experience during the pandemic, and that requires further research, is the weak legitimacy of schooling as a relevant public institution, differently from what was seen in other Latin American countries where schools emerged as relevant public agents (see Birgin and Ferrante, in this issue). In Mexico, school actors speak mostly about the reduction of learning to bureaucratic validation, and the reduction of teaching to gathering and storing records, shifting away from the preoccupation with the variety, significance or density of learnings that took place in the pandemic. Even if gestures of solidarity abounded, they seemed to run in the margins of the institution of schooling and failed to connect to the work that schools should do in relation to knowledge and culture and to intergenerational encounters.

It is no surprise that drop-out rates are soaring. By the end of 2021 many schools had not fully recovered their pre-pandemic levels of student attendance, with a persistent absenteeism that, according to unofficial statements, goes from 5% to 50% of the students. Absenteeism is less significant in rural areas than in urban ones, and while it is primarily related to fear of contagion, it also expresses low confidence in schooling as a significant experience for children, and a withdrawal of the social into the small circle of the family, especially where local community life is not strong. The trends in school enrolment are also worrying. According to different sources, 2021-2022 has seen an interannual decline in student enrolment of around 10% in rural schools, while in urban schools this decline is almost unnoticeable.

Thus some of the trends that seem to be emerging in 2021-2022 are a contraction of enrolment in rural schools and an intermittent or discontinuous school trajectory in urban settings[4]. The contraction seems to be more noticeable in preschools and upper-secondary schools, which is undoing the progress made in the last decades, and in private schools (Comisión Nacional para la Mejora Continua de la Educación, 2021).

4 For a general overview, see "Deserción escolar podría convertirse en una crisis educativa, advierten en la Permanente", *Boletín del Senado de la República*, No. 115, 15 June 2021. The situation resembles that at some school districts in the United States (see Goldberg, Dec 17, 2021).

It remains to be seen whether these movements will stay on the same course or change direction, but the renewal of public policies and pedagogies in order to challenge the current configurations and make schooling a valuable experience in itself is urgently needed. This renewal should not perpetuate policies' underlying tones of suspicion and mistrust directed at teachers and communities, but instead promote a more complex understanding of how these entanglements are produced, and which meanings are attached to particular practices. Instead of the incessant recording, surveilling, accusing, and controlling, school actors could stress reflection, acknowledgment, and gratitude, thereby strengthening longstanding traditions of solidarity in, and with, Mexican schools, which have shown their resourcefulness but which still need to be more effectively mobilized towards a greater sense of social justice and ethical responsibility in the education of the younger generations.

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