Changes in conditions, practices, and relationships between teachers and students in rural Mexican high schools during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract. This article analyzes some of the changes that occurred in the Mexican community tele-baccalaureate (CTB) during the COVID-19 pandemic, with emphasis on the conditions experienced by actors within school systems, new activities associated with distance-learning, and teacher–student relationships. By employing the approach of interpretive sociology and through semi-structured interviews, the perspectives of head teachers and other teachers were analyzed in order to get an understanding of their role in the transformation of schools. It was found that although the pre-existing problems of head and other teachers were exacerbated during the pandemic, these actors played a leading role and approached their work as teachers with creativity and commitment.

Keywords: rural education, community education, COVID-19, teachers, head teachers.

1. Introduction

The closure of schools as a public health measure intended to avoid contagion during the COVID-19 pandemic was a hard blow to educational systems in general and to schools, teachers, and students in particular.[1] The effects differed according to the economic and technological resources each country had available to confront the crisis. Therefore, it has been noted that the pandemic not only visibilized inequalities between and within countries but also exacerbated them (CEPAL-UNESCO, 2020; UN, 2020). The populations that became the most vulnerable after distance education was implemented were inhabitants of poor or rural areas, girls, refugees, the handicapped, and the forcefully displaced (UN, 2020). Mexico, like most countries, opted for distance education starting in March 2020 and had to face the pandemic emergency even though part of the population had limited access to information and communication technologies (ICT).[2]

Emergency distance education in Mexico was put into practice through the *Aprende en Casa* ("Learn at Home") program. It made provisions for teaching the curriculum contained in free textbooks through television and radio, with the support of the internet, for all students from preschool to baccalaureate.[3] The plan to use television was based on the fact that 94% of all students had access to this medium (Senado de la República, 2020). However, it soon became evident that remote areas had poor television reception, there were deficiencies in the telephone network, access to internet connections was scarce, and poor areas lacked the necessary equipment to take advantage of this plan. Each school and their teachers had to use their own resources and strategies to continue distance education and complete the 2019–2020 school year. Faced with the prolongation of the pandemic and despite the existing problems, the following school year started with the *Aprende en Casa II* program, which was once again based on the use of television, only with better coverage.[4] This strategy did not allow for

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1   According to CEPAL-UNESCO (2020) data, by May 2020 more than 1.2 billion students at all levels around the world had stopped attending in-person classes. Of these, more than 160 million lived in Latin American and the Caribbean.

2   In Mexico, only 44.3% of homes have a computer and 56.4% are connected to the internet (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía [Inegi], 2019).

3   Translator's note: the Mexican school system is organized as follows: preschool (educación preescolar): ages 3 to 5-6; primary school (educación primaria): ages 5-6 to 11-12; secondary (secundaria): ages 11-12 to 14-15; and baccalaureate (educación media superior or bachillerato): ages 15-18.

4   An agreement was signed with private television networks, including 40 national and local channels, in addition to public, federal, and state stations and university channels (Senado de la República, 2020).

the expansion of internet and telephone networks, or provide support for purchases of the equipment needed by rural populations, thus leaving the digital breach between different social groups intact (Fernández & De la Rosa, 2020; Oliver, 2020). The problems with capturing television signals and access to the internet persisted and, once again, the whole responsibility fell to the head and other teachers.

During this stage the transformations of schools was evident, and so too was the capacity of the head and other teachers to rapidly adapt to unprecedented circumstances for which they were not prepared. The spatial-temporal attribute that supported teaching had to be left behind— including calendars, hourly timetables, and the materiality of the building or facilities, its furniture, and its teaching materials. Education had to be reinvented and today, more than ever, the category of the school as a social construction—proposed by Elsie Rockwell and Justa Ezpeleta since the 1980s—resonates. Of particular relevance today is their proposal about the transformation of the school, its historical character, and the need to look at it from below, from the point of view of the actors that construct it on a daily basis.

In this context of social and educational inequality, the objective of this study is to analyze some of the changes to rural baccalaureates (*bachilleratos rurales*) that took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, using a qualitative approach. To this end, the focus is on three dimensions: the conditions experienced by the actors (head teachers, other teachers, and students); the new tasks and responsibilities of the head and other teachers; and, finally, the relationships between teachers and/or students.[5] Faced with the gap in educational policy, this study seeks to visibilize the role of school actors in the transformation of education.

The focus is centered on schools in rural areas since they have been affected the most by distance education. Teaching and learning processes are more difficult in these places because of problems related to connectivity, internet access, and telephone reception, and the lack of devices such as cell phones and computers. The precarious economic and housing conditions of students' families are also a factor. The study deals with the high school level of the community tele-baccalaureate (TBC in Spanish) modality, which serves the most vulnerable young people at this educational level.

This study is part of an emerging line of research about the effects of the pandemic on the Mexican educational system as well as the difficulties faced

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5   The term "head teacher" is used for those teachers who also have administrative tasks (community tele-baccalaureate studies).

by teachers, students, and families. This study falls between the sub-lines of research on the social and educational consequences of the pandemic and the research on the experiences of students and teachers with distance learning.[6]

At the same time, this study continues a line of research centered on the links between the school and its subjects, exploring the subjective dimensions of the students; that is, their values, identities, experiences, and social representations (Guzmán, 2013; Guzmán & Saucedo, 2007). The study contributes by taking into account the relationship between students and teachers, thus converging with studies that deal with these relationships (Albornoz & Cornejo, 2017; Covarrubias & Piña, 2004)—particularly those studies that explore how teachers view this interaction (Albornoz & Cornejo, 2017). This paper also aspires to provide new contributions to recent and ongoing research on the TBC in Mexico (Guzmán, 2018, 2021a, 2021b; Alanís, 2020a, 2020b; Estrada & Alejo, 2019; Weiss, 2017).

2. The social construction of the school and teacher-student relations

For our analysis of the specific changes that took place during lockdown, we start by acknowledging the basic premise that the pandemic precipitated a public health crisis that had political, economic, social, and emotional effects. Education was affected by the pandemic to the extent that it disrupted daily life, including the spatial-temporal coordinates where the processes of teaching and learning took place. In this sense, these were not changes that were sought, far less planned, as would be the case of reforms or changes to improve education, but rather a response to a critical situation. Therefore, this study takes up Pedró's (2020) definition of "emergency distance education" as a strategy to provide pedagogical continuity, but which lacks the capacities and resources available for optimal distance education.

As noted, this study employs the notion of the school as a social construction; that is, that the school is constructed day by day and is therefore transformed and modified over time (Ezpeleta & Rockwell, 1983). From this perspective, the school has a situated character and responds to processes of historical construction.

Starting with the view of the school as a social construction, Rockwell and Ezpeleta (1983) ask: What happens at the school? How does it live? How is it constantly being constituted? How does teaching change and

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6   After an initial survey, 30 studies undertaken in Mexico were found. Their main themes were: 1) the social and educational consequences of the pandemic; 2) the experiences of students and teachers during distance learning; and the use and operation of new technologies (Guzmán, 2021a).

how does it happen there? These questions lead the authors to look at the school from below, from the point of view of the subjects who construct it daily. In this sense, the everyday dimension takes on a particular meaning as an effort to understand singular moments of the social movement. For these authors, it is only in the sphere of daily life that people appropriate uses, practices, and conceptions.

We are living at a time when schools must respond to both unprecedented circumstances and the demands of emergency distance education. To understand this situation, the notion of the school proposed by Rockwell (2005) allows us to think about it from a broader concept and as part of the social and historical process that we are currently living through:

> I start from the conception of the school as a place of intersection of networks and processes that go beyond the physical and institutional limits of the school space. I conceive of the school as a place that is "permeable" to the cultural and social processes of its environment. Viewed in this way, the school stops being a "relatively autonomous" institution that reproduces itself in an almost immutable manner. It is rather a sphere where various social and cultural processes can occur.[7] (p. 28)

In the context of the transformations that are taking place in the school, student–teacher relations have changed and are constructed based on new referents. This study focuses on how teachers view the way in which they now interact with students and the new tasks this entails. The study does not analyze the impact of this relationship on learning, on retention, or on educational achievement as it is conceived in a particular line of research (Albornoz & Cornejo, 2017; Covarrubias & Piña, 2004). Rather, the analysis concentrates on the emotional aspects that are at play in each one of the parties, and, particularly, on the emotional support that teachers provide to students. However, these teacher–student links are not analyzed based on the psychoanalytic tradition, which uses concepts such the unconscious, the desire to learn, transference, and others (Cuello & Labella, 2017; Mejía, Toro, Flórez, Fernández, & Cortés, 2017). Over and above particular analytical perspectives, the centrality and importance of teacher–student relations in teaching and learning processes are acknowledged. The premise that accepts the bidirectionality of these relations is recognized here, but also its asymmetry (Cuello & Labella, 2017; Albornoz & Cornejo, 2017; Bertoglia, 2005; Covarrubias & Piña, 2004).

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7   All translations from Spanish are by *Apuntes*.

As to the analytic approach to educational actors, this study is positioned within comprehensive sociology, since it endeavors to understand the subjective signification of social action (Weber, 1964). Actions are framed in a social context and, following Giddens (1995), in a structure that constrains the actor while also making action possible. The capacity of actors to reflect on the course of their actions is recognized, again following Giddens.

3. Methodological perspective

As discussed above, this study analyzes some of the changes to baccalaureates that took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on three dimensions: (1) changes in the conditions of head teachers, other teachers, and students; (2) the new tasks that the head and other teachers had to carry out; and (3) the new relationships between teachers and students. This is intended to visibilize the role of school actors in the transformation of education. The analysis centers on the points of view of head teachers and other teachers, who explain their own perspectives and their views regarding students.

As to the timeframe, the pandemic is viewed not as an event that occurred at a particular time but as processes that took place over an indeterminate period. During this time there were changes to the ways that distance education was carried out and in the manner in which both teachers and students experienced it and confronted it. In analytical terms, we can discern three periods: (1) the pre-pandemic period, which provides a baseline and antecedents; (2) the early period, when the first responses to the emergency were deployed and the 2019-2020 school year concluded; and (3) the application, when the 2020-2021 school year started and distance learning was implemented virtually. At this writing, it has been announced that the country will return to in-person classes gradually, step by step, as federal entities decide that the public health conditions exist to make the resumption of classes advisable; nevertheless, TBC facilities, like many others, have postponed this return because they do not think that the wellbeing of students and teachers can yet be guaranteed.

The approach taken by this study belongs to the category known as interpretative currents, since it shares an interest in the knowledge of subjectivity linked to specific cultural contexts and the everyday dimension (Erickson, 1989). This tradition stems from qualitative methodology, which allows us to delve into the perspectives of the actors as well as their positionings and postures (Flick, 2004). This approach was adjusted to fit the particularities of the object of study and the difficulties presented by the pandemic and the mandatory confinement measures. To obtain

the necessary information, detailed interviews were carried out based on a thematic guide.

The interviews were done using the Zoom videoconferencing platform, lasting approximately two hours each. With the consent of the interviewees, the conversations were recorded within the platform. Both head teachers and other teachers were eager to talk and share their experiences. Despite their workload and responsibilities, they were grateful to be heard. However, it was not possible to interview students and gain direct access to their viewpoints due to internet connectivity problems and a lack of adequate equipment.

Given its scope, this is an instrumental multiple-case study that does not claim to generalize but rather to inform about significant cases within a general problematic (Stake, 2010). The study was carried out in six TBCs, three in the state of Mexico and the rest in Morelos. Both federal jurisdictions are located in central Mexico and reflect the general characteristics of schools around the country (Guzmán, 2018). The TBC, because of the characteristics of this type of education, are located in rural areas, and in different regions of each federal jurisdiction.[8]

In order to capture the changes in each school, it was necessary to do fieldwork in two stages. The first was carried out in Abril and May 2020. Of the three teachers who make up each TBC, the head teacher and one other teacher were interviewed. The total universe was made up of eight women and four men. An effort was made to strike a balance in each federal jurisdiction between the different areas that the teachers taught.[9] The second stage was carried out in November and December 2020; during this stage only the head teachers at the six TBCs were interviewed (five women and one man) since in the first stage no significant differences were found between the head teachers and other teachers.

The interviews were partially transcribed using analytical records with pre-established categories that were systematized according to thematic matrices (Huberman & Milles, 2000). The analysis was carried out through a search for the main themes by subject and school, as narrated by head and other teachers. The focus was on changes that occurred both in the conditions experienced by teachers and students and in the

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8   It is worth mentioning that the various federal jurisdictions that make up Mexico are subject to the general guidelines set out in national educational policy. However, each jurisdiction has leeway to establish specific policies as necessitated by their particular conditions. In this article, the results are presented for the two jurisdictions together, except when there is a significant difference between the two.

9   To make it easier for readers, the generic term "administrators" is used to refer to those teachers who also have administrative functions.

tasks they carried out, in teachers' views of students, and in the types of relationships between the two. The analytical perspective was oriented by a search for the significations of actions and the reflectivity of the head and other teachers.

4. Before the pandemic: characteristics and conditions of the community tele-baccalaureate (TBC)

Mexican upper-level high school education, known as the baccalaureate, has two basic functions: preparatory and terminal. The first prepares students for higher education and the second, for entry into the labor market.[10] This stage of education lasts three years and is compulsory; students typically range from 15 to 17 years of age. There are currently 5.2 million baccalaureate students, 299,000 teachers, and 18,000 schools (Instituto Nacional para la Evaluación de la Educación [INEE], 2019). Despite being compulsory, the rate of school enrollment is just 75.2% for this age group, which is considered low in comparison to other Latin American countries (INEE, 2019).[11] It should be noted that enrollment is even lower in rural areas.[12]

The TBCs are part of the baccalaureate system and were created in 2013 in order to increase student attendance, a year after baccalaureate education was made compulsory. This mode of education is intended to promote inclusion and equity; consequently, it is focused on localities of fewer than 2,500 inhabitants, which, in addition to having lower school attendance, also face higher levels of marginalization (Secretaría de Educación Pública. Subsecretaría de Educación Media Superior. Dirección General de Bachilleratos, 2020). Over time, the TBCs have succeeded in educating young people who were not able to leave their localities in order to continue their studies. During the 2019–2020 school year, there were 144,399 TBC students at 3,306 schools (SEP-SEMS-DGB, 2020).

In accordance with principles of inclusion, the TBCs do not charge tuition fees; this is the only mode of education that provides textbooks to students and in which all students receive scholarships.[13] But while the

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10 Organization at this level is very complex because it exists in diverse modalities in the public and private; federal and state; centralized, decentralized and autonomous; and in-person and distance sectors.

11 The rate of school enrollment is lower than countries such as Chile (95.5%), Bolivia (86.8%), Brazil (95.2%), and Uruguay (82.1%) (INEE, 2019).

12 This low enrollment is evident in the fact that only 60.9% of 15–17 year-olds who live in localities with fewer than 2,500 inhabitants participate in the baccalaureate program, while 79.1% of this same age group who live in localities of more than 2,500 inhabitants attend baccalaureate studies.

13 This scholarship is provided through the Benito Juárez federal program, serving all baccalaureate

goals of expansion and inclusion were clear from the beginning, the budget allotted was small and no school facilities were constructed. Instead, existing tele-high school infrastructure were used for afternoon classes or else public spaces were fitted out.

The TBC is a school modality that is in-person and propaedeutic, operating with three teachers and a minimum of 12 students. Over time, with increasing demand, the average number of students grew to 30. The curricular model is organized into three areas.[14] Each teacher teaches one of these subjects, while one also serves as the school administrator (the head teacher).

Because of the small budget that the TBCs receive, the conditions under which they operate are precarious. In those cases where the TBCs use public spaces or have been able to construct their own buildings, the infrastructural conditions also have their limitations. In general, the buildings lack basic facilities and services such as drinking water, electricity, and access to the internet. They also lack sufficient furniture and computers that are in good working condition. Their small budgets preclude school maintenance as well as the purchase of cleaning supplies, stationary, and teaching materials. As a result, it has been necessary to turn to families and local authorities for support (Guzmán, 2018; Estrada & Alejo, 2019; Weiss, 2017).

Teachers have very precarious labor conditions. This is evident in the annual requirement that they renew their contracts for 20 hours a week. In addition, in several federal jurisdictions, they do not have social security or benefits such as bonuses or personal days.[15] The head and other teachers complain that they are overworked, that they work more hours than they are paid for, and that they have to carry out many tasks for which they were not hired (Guzmán, 2018).

The students come from very poor families who cannot contribute to their school expenses. The majority depend on their scholarships to support themselves and many of the male students also work on farms or in other jobs. There are also girls who work, while all of them help out with house-hold chores and caring for family members. The students' parents have little education and thus cannot help their children with their homework or with academic decisions. TBC students score lower on academic evaluations than

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students, disbursing 800 pesos a month (the equivalent of $40) to each participant (Gobierno de México, 2021). https://www.gob.mx/becasbenitojuarez

14 These areas are: (1) Mathematics and Experimental Sciences; (2) Social Sciences and Humanities; and (3) Communication. Training for work falls under the Community Development area of study. Unlike other types of baccalaureates, there are no artistic- or sports-related subjects.

15 Those responsible for the school are paid for an extra 10 hours for these administrative tasks.

do students studying in other educational modalities.[16] Students start out in the TBCs with academic deficiencies, which makes it more difficult for teachers to bring them up to the level of their course material. Despite the physical infrastructure conditions and the obstacles the students face in their education, they value the opportunity to study and expect the baccalaureate program will lead to a better life (Guzmán, 2018, 2021b).

5. The pandemic and new conditions faced by the actors

The effects of the pandemic are multiple and have affected people's living conditions as well as their activities, routines, and forms of coexistence during the different stages of confinement. These changes in conditions permeate the ways that head and other teachers as well as students deal with distance education. For this reason, in this study, the family, labor, and emotional changes experienced by head and other teachers are analyzed, while in the case of students, educational changes are also taken into consideration.

Teachers

For teachers, the arrival of the pandemic and subsequent lockdown measures brought a variety of changes to their personal, familial, and labor situations. In most cases, problems that existed before the pandemic were exacerbated. The transfer of school activities to the home required a reorganization of tasks and responsibilities. Women referred to the need to alternate their teaching activities with caring for their children and supervising their schoolwork, and the resulting increase in pressure and fatigue. Faced with the daily demands of teaching, one teacher noted that "In my case, I have a son to take care of, I have my house, I have to cook, wash clothes." Several teachers mentioned that they also had to do the shopping and other activities outside the home, which meant that they were at a greater risk of contagion and of "taking the virus home." There were also cases of teachers who had to take care of elderly and sick relatives.

The new dynamic of distance education necessitated the rearrangement of teachers' homes. Some had to create a workspace in their patio areas or share a common space, such as the dining or living room, with other family members. The same was also the case of the use of the computer, which often had to be shared. One teacher narrated this new dynamic:

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16 According to the results of the National Plan for the Evaluation of Learning (Plan Nacional para la Evaluación de los Aprendizajes, Planea) in 2017, 75% of TBC students scored on the lowest level in Mathematics (the national average was 66%). In the case of Language and Communication, 61% of TBC students scored on the lowest level (the national average was 34%) (INEE, 2018).

> We have to organize and schedule ourselves. Perhaps I use it [the computer] in the morning, someone else in the afternoon, another at noon, or if today I don't have work to send in but my brother does, he uses it, or my mother.

The majority of teachers have access to the internet; however, they referred to frequent problems with internet connectivity, with power cuts, or with their computers lacking the power to run the virtual platforms. The labor conditions of most of the head and other teachers were also affected. Perhaps the most serious issues occurred in Morelos, where teachers were not paid during the first four months of the confinement, prompting anxiety and concern. At the same time, the teachers worried about not having social security or, especially, medical services at a time when they felt most vulnerable. This is how one teacher said she felt: "I felt up in the air because we didn't receive benefits. We were dependent on our jobs, were up in the air and at any moment, we could fall." Most teachers thought that their workload had increased. If before the pandemic they felt that they worked more hours than they were paid for, now they worked even more. Their activities also increased and they referred to needing to work all day, as well as receiving messages and even telephone calls at the crack of dawn. The head teachers said that their administrative workload increased since they had to do all their paperwork on platforms that they were not familiar with. The increase in the length of the workday was put succinctly by one teacher: "We start earlier and we go to sleep later."

These conditions, coupled with those caused directly by the pandemic, created difficult emotional conditions for teachers. The majority felt "stressed" and "tired" by their professional and household work as well as by communication problems with students. Almost all referred to the "uncertainty" caused by the pandemic, as one of the teachers said: "Uncertainty is the worst thing in this situation, because it is the fear of not knowing what will happen next." They also felt unsure about the course of school activities, the school calendar, and the types of evaluations. They were worried about their own health, that of their families, and that of the students. The teachers' emotional states sometimes led to depression, insomnia, and anxiety attacks, which they had to overcome to continue discharging their responsibilities.

During the first stage of the pandemic the head and other teachers thought that this was something that would go away quickly and expected to be able to go back to in-person classes during the 2020-2021 school year. As time went by, they accepted that the process was going to be longer than they had thought, and that they would just have to deal with it. Thus, many bought their own computers and other devices, upgraded their cell phones,

and better organized their family and school responsibilities. Despite this, some negative aspects of their work conditions did not change: the work-days continued to be too long, and they became convinced that "you work much more at home." While the teachers started to be paid regularly, the uncertainty continued because their contracts came up for renewal at the end of the year. The concern about access to social security and medical services increased along with the risk of contagion. In the case of some teachers, anger and displeasure also increased—as these comments illustrate:

> If it was already difficult without the pandemic, now, with the pandemic, it's an extremely difficult situation that we face in the trenches, without anything, without support from any-one. They only pay us our teachers' income and we are like robots; meaning we don't feel, don't think, nothing happens to us […]. And I think the authorities should pay more attention to us teachers because we take care of 90 distance students and sometimes, they forget about us, about the problems we have, I mean, that we are alone. If I get sick, I have to pay from my teaching income; if I call my students, I have to pay from my income, because there is no additional support. That is, they leave us alone, all alone […] and we feel alone because we have no certainty. (A teacher from Morelos)

In emotional terms, during the second stage of the pandemic and the provision of distance education, the teachers' feeling of uncertainty remained central, and the resignation that ensued manifested itself in expressions such as "Well, there's nothing to be done," "We have to adapt," and "Little by little, we are getting used to this new form of work."

The students

According to the teachers' statements, the precarious conditions in which the TBC students lived were worsened by the pandemic. Some of the heads of household lost their jobs, which meant that many young people had to work while those who already did so increased their hours. As noted earlier, some male students worked on farms and as bricklayers; the female students took on office jobs or sold products. At the same time, the girls' domestic responsibilities increased, in terms of both housework and care of family members. One teacher stated: "Their life is work, work, work." A head teacher agreed: "I think that this time [away from the classroom] has been used to work nonstop, without doubt; some on farms, others in construction, others as musicians." When it comes to schooling, the students lacked the material conditions for distance study. First of all, they did not

have access to the internet or a computer; at most there was one computer per household, which was shared among all members of the family. Some had their own cell phones but they did not have the capacity to run the distance education platforms. In other cases, there was only one cell phone in the family, which also had to be shared. Another problem were the cell phone bills, which the families could not afford to pay. Given their economic situation, students' housing conditions are precarious, with intermittent access to electricity, and, in many cases, no cell phone reception. Students used a variety of strategies to deal with these limitations: they might ask to borrow someone's cell phone to send photos of their schoolwork by WhatsApp, look for spaces that offered free Wi-Fi, or access their phones at times and in places with better reception, whether the roof a house, a hill, or a public park.

As has been documented in various sources, during the pandemic children and young people were the most adversely affected by the lack of interaction and time spent with their peers (Mejoredu, 2021). In the case of the TBCs, the school was the only place where students could get away from household chores and family problems, or where they had more freedom and autonomy. One teacher described this:

> They miss this dynamic of arriving at school and doing what they wanted to or seeing their friends or their [boy or] girl-friends. Also, because some [parents] don't let them have a boy-friend or girlfriend, so the school lets them break loose. And though it is also not permitted at school, they have their ways and at least there they could make eyes at each other in person!

Not being able to go to school and staying at home made the young people feel "angry," "sad," "depressed," and "stressed." They told the teachers that they wanted to return to in-person classes. In their words, "I miss school, I miss by friends! We are very isolated! I can't stand my family!" They frequently asked their teachers "When are we going to return?" and "When is all this going to end?" The students asked these questions because, according to the teachers, they felt very "bored," "fed up," and "exasperated."

According to one teacher, not all students obeyed the lockdown; some because they had to work, others because they said that "they couldn't stand being couped up." There were also some cases of young people who had a skeptical attitude about the pandemic, thinking it "didn't exist" or that it "will not come here" and who therefore went out to play soccer, spend time with friends, or go to parties.

During the second stage of the pandemic, the students' financial conditions remained precarious. Some heads of household that were able to

return to work; however, most students who had been working continued doing so, whether to contribute to the family income or for other reasons. Now they were not working only out of financial need; rather, given there were still no in-person classes, work was an alternative space that allowed them to get out of the house and have their own income.

Given the excessive cost of cell phones for families, some decided to get internet. To this end, they used their savings or went into debt. Some students used their scholarships to change cell phones or buy a new one. They also resorted to strategies to avoid paying extra charges; for example, some studied in the homes of friends who had internet access while others, in groups of four or five, took turns to access the platform using a single cell phone data plan.

The desire to return to in-person classes not only continued but intensified over time. However, the students who had not dropped out were forced to adapt and accept that distance education was the only way to continue their studies. In the second stage of the pandemic, there were conspicuously fewer and fewer students who were interested in school activities, kept in touch with their teachers, and submitted their homework. For those who finished the TBC, not having a graduation ceremony was particularly depressing.

If in the first stage of the pandemic only a few students respected the lockdown measures, attitudes became still more relaxed later. In some localities, the transmission rate was high and there were cases of close family members getting sick or dying. However, many people refused to go into confinement and the "COVID doesn't exist" discourse gave way to "If you get it, you get it, whether you are careful or not."

6. New tasks and responsibilities for teachers

Emergency distance education meant that teachers had to completely change their way of working to respond to new needs. They not only had to move their work to their home, but also to change routines, adjust methods, and, above all, carry out new activities and take on responsibilities that they did not have before. Some of these new tasks are described below.[17]

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17 A study carried out by Mejoredu (2021), which describes the experiences and the level of learning among different actors in the field of high school education during the COVID-19 emergency in Mexico, found similar changes in different schools and buildings. Nevertheless, the problems of access to technologies and equipment were greater in localities with high or very high levels of marginalization. The problem of school dropouts also became more serious. These trends coincide with those reported by the TBC in similar localities.

Locating students

Before the pandemic, TBC teachers stayed in close touch with their students and their families. They had their phone numbers, and in some cases, knew where they lived. At the same time, they had access to Facebook and WhatsApp groups to communicate. Such pre-established organization helped teachers to use these media once the lockdown was declared. However, not everything was easy. They lost contact with some students who did not answer phone calls or others who changed addresses due to the pandemic. Teachers often tried to locate these students either through their classmates or by visiting them directly in their homes. Similarly, before the pandemic, each set of teachers kept in close contact with each other as well as working together to solve the problems they all faced. This level of organization was channeled and strengthened in order to face the crisis, maintain communication with the students and families, and to "make" a school even in adversity.

During the second stage of the pandemic, teachers were able to establish communication with students and already had a register of those who had dropped out of school; however, the task of seeking them out did not end because, as time when by, there were students who "disconnected" and neither answered nor sent in homework. In some cases, this was because of too much work, illness, or lack of interest. The teachers set out to find the errant students and convince them to return to their studies. This work also involved contacting their families to find out their reasons and, where the case warranted it, asking families to support the students in keeping up with their studies. A head teacher described one example:

> […] I told the mother or the father that the student was not handing in his homework, and they said: "Oh, teacher! I will talk to him because he is supposed to do his homework when he gets back from work, but once he gets home from work, I will tell him."

The teachers' teamwork and their commitment to finding students and following up is notable—as is the fact that they were motivated by the desire to make sure students did not miss a school term or even year.

Training, refreshing, and assistance on technologies

The new conditions of emergency distance education required digital skills that not all teachers possessed. This limitation worried and "stressed" them because they had to learn to work on the new platforms or programs, or to

deepen their knowledge of those they were already familiar with. To this end, most took online courses or certification, or sought help from friends who either shared tutorials or taught them directly.

Teachers took advantage of vacations to continue learning, this time not only about basic or general usage of programs and platforms but to fulfill more specific needs. For example, some wanted to learn how to edit videos while others were interested in math teaching programs—each according to their own needs and level of knowledge. By the beginning of the 2020–2021 school year, most teachers had overcome their resistance and felt they had improved their use of platforms and learned about more tools and programs. This gave them greater peace of mind and improved their ability to work, though they still preferred in-person classes.

Despite the teachers' own difficulties with the use of new technologies, they still had to advise students and help them to connect. They reported that students knew how to use social media but were less versed in the use of basic software such as Word, Excel, or Powerpoint. Thus, the students had to learn how to use their phones for something other than WhatsApp or Facebook. Faced with students' complaints about the lack of storage space on their cell phones, teachers encouraged them to "delete your games, delete your Facebook, delete Free Fire, delete your.…" The teachers also taught them to download apps that were more important for distance education, such as, for example, a PDF reader.

To use the platforms, several students had to be taught how to open an email account and how to use it—something they had never done before. The majority of the TBC students did not have access to computers in their homes or schools so they did not know how to use them.

In the second stage of the pandemic, the students learned the basics about accessing the platforms and using the applications, before going on to use them with more assurance and fluidity.

Reorganizing daily work

Emergency distance education resulted in drastic changes in the organization of daily work. Teachers had to respond immediately and adjust procedures as time went on. This new organization had to be based on the actual conditions in which the students were living; that is, their problems in connecting to the internet and accessing devices. In Morelos, there were no federal or state guidelines for virtual work so the most viable solution was to use WhatsApp as a way to send and receive photos of assignments or textbook exercises. The importance of the use of cell phones and the changes it led to is described by one head teacher:

> In the classrooms, we were always saying: "Put away your cell phone; mute it; turn it off: you are not allowed to use it; leave it in your backpack," and now it has become the main instrument, right now, precisely to keep doing the work, right now with the pandemic. So, it was like… "Ah, really, teacher? I thought we weren't supposed to take them out? And now the cell phone is what is saving us. Because of it I won't flunk out, I won't fail because I'm doing my homework, and this is the way I can send it, my evidence to prove that I am working." So, in this way, the change was dramatic.

In the state of Mexico, as part of state policy, schools primarily used the Google Meet platform and complementary videos. In both states, the *Aprende en Casa* television programs were not useful because of poor television signals and because their contents differed from the curriculum.[18]

Head teachers' workload increased during this stage in both federal entities because, in addition to their previous administrative and teaching responsibilities, they also had to gather information about students, evaluations, and registration using new platforms, as well as attending many virtual meetings with authorities.

During the second stage of the pandemic, teachers made various changes. They organized themselves to assign schedules for classes, advise students and ensure they handed in homework in addition to spreading out assignments to avoid overloading and pressuring students too much. They picked out a single platform to which the students could upload their work when they were able to connect. They also staggered the frequency and limited the duration of videoconferences in order to avoid excessive costs to families and used WhatsApp only for purposes of notification. They also set more precise evaluation criteria.

There were also changes made to the curriculum. At first, teachers tried to follow the regular program contents and the "expected learning goals" established for each assignment. They also tried to incorporate material related to the pandemic to promote awareness and awaken students' interest. During the second stage teachers were afforded more autonomy, which meant that each emphasized what she/he thought was most important, most appropriate to the level of the students, and what could be done online.

The textbooks that had been assigned to the students were only partially useful for emergency distance education, since they were not up-to-date and

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18 In the state of Mexico, from the beginning of the lockdown, general guidelines were established for high school distance education. However, this was not done in Morelos (Guzmán, 2021a).

their contents did not correspond to the program. The teachers therefore took some of the content, adapted its exercises, and prepared work guides, but, above all, they developed personalized strategies according to the level and difficulties of their students. These changes helped to improve the provision of emergency distance education; however, they were not able to overcome the difficulties in learning. The teachers were very concerned because they felt that students had many doubts and were not really learning. In their minds, the fact that students did the tasks and the homework assigned was not an indication that they were actually learning. Given the conditions, it was very difficult to motivate and stimulate students. Indeed, the teachers' impressions were correct. Students wanted in-person classes so that teachers could explain things to them directly. Given the adverse conditions, only a few students were able to learn on their own; nevertheless, some of them did develop certain skills related to searching for information and research.

7. Changes in teacher–student relations

Emergency distance education implied substantial changes in relationships between professors and students. These links had been constructed on the basis of in-person education and daily contact. Therefore, it was necessary to reconstruct them in a different context and considering new needs and space-time coordinates. The way that teachers perceived the students was also different, and so was the way they interacted with them. This section explores some of the most significant changes.

More empathy

Even before the pandemic, teachers had close relations with students, were sensitive to the problems which they faced, and were always ready to listen and help them. The fact that the groups were relatively small, helped teachers to notice when the young people had some kind of personal, family, or school issues, or if there was some kind of conflict between students.

When the pandemic and then the lockdown measures were imposed, the emotional state of the students worsened and thus their need for help increased. Many students were affected by family problems and by losing the space in which they interacted with their peers. In these cases, the teachers acted as mediators, reasoning that their mission was to "reassure them," to "calm them down," and to make them feel they were not alone when facing their problems. There were teachers who gave students advice on how to deal with and solve critical situations: "Think about something else," "Don't pay attention to them," "Who can help you?" They also had

to encourage students to deal with the confinement and not get depressed. One head teacher tried to convince the students about the importance of accepting and living through this moment:

> It's hit us, guys. This is going to be part of your history, and if you go on to have children, you are going to tell them about it, and if not, then all the girlfriends, all the boyfriends, they will share it. It is part of their history.

The most important change during the pandemic was that the teachers were now experiencing the same problems as their students: they were also affected by the confinement and the new family dynamics that came with it. This was the case of the head teacher who shared the following:

> If for us adults it was difficult, for them, as students, it was twice as complicated, because I think that for many the school is a place where they are free, to breathe fresh air, to spend time with their fellow students, and so, the mourning is tough. They become, have become, dispirited.

The fact that teachers and students were in the same situation also meant that the former approached the latter from a different angle; they had more empathy, and this closed the gap between them and the students all the more. The pandemic meant they became more sensitive to the problems, concerns, and demands of the students. One head teacher explained this as follows:

> I despaired about working this way., When I understood them a little more, and I think that it must be the same despair that they feel. I had to be less severe and put myself in their shoes.

The teachers made efforts to emotionally support their students. They generally had to do this on an individual level, since there were few opportunities to communicate with various students simultaneously. In the TBCs, where possible, the teachers opened up spaces to bring together the group, provide guidance, and let the students interact and keep their sense of belonging. The emotional support on the individual rather than the group level was not easy for the teachers since they had to deal with their own problems. On the other hand, they felt that they did not have the psychological tools to deal with the problems that the students were facing and they asked for advice, courses, or qualified personnel that could take on the most serious cases.

During the second stage of the pandemic, the same problems continued and some even worsened. Some teachers attended virtual conferences or courses to better equip themselves for their work while others requested the help of psychologists to treat some cases or to give talks to students.

More flexibility and tolerance

The empathy that developed between teachers and students amid the similar problems they faced was reflected in a change of attitude to certain school requirements. The teachers explained that they understood perfectly when a student said they did not feel like sending in some homework or when they said they did not have reception to send in homework, that there was no electricity, or that another family member was using the cell phone. So, teachers forgave absences, or homework that was sent in late or was incomplete. This was the case of a teacher, who said:

> Because of the economic issue, topping up the phone is a little bit difficult, so we were pushing them. They say to me: "Look, I don't have data [on my phone]." Later they are able to connect: "Profe,[19] I did the homework, can I still send it?" "Yup, send it to me [I would reply]."

The teachers, when they understood the emotional condition of their students, were also flexible in the organization of their activities, because they tried not to overburden themselves too much "in order not to get stressed out." This greater flexibility and tolerance were also evident in the evaluations: the parameters changed and the teachers could apply neither the same methods nor the same criteria they did before. One teacher explained:

> There are some that are experiencing more limitations, economic and also technological, and what we do is [ask] "Well, what do you have?"
> "Well, I have WhatsApp." "I will talk to you by videocall." Or also: "No, I don't have anything, but my neighbor has."
> "If you want, go to her house and I will evaluate you there." And like this we have had to adjust because the reality is that this community is very deprived.

The teachers recognize that they prioritize emotional issues, and for this reason issues related to learning and educational relationships take second place. The conditions related to communications are so adverse that teachers find it difficult to arouse interest and understanding in the material to be studied.

Another central concern for head and other teachers was the end-of-year evaluation, which brought up questions about unjustly applied criteria or

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19 Translator's note: currently, students in Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America often call their teachers "*profe*," an abbreviation of "*profesor*."

the lack of sufficient evidence to justify the awarding of a grade. In general, teachers took into account the conditions faced by the students and gave greater weight to effort than to results. They followed the federal guidelines of the Secretariat of Public Education (Secretaría de Educación Pública, SEP) not to fail any student, which allowed many students to stay in school. However, not all continued or enrolled for the next year, whether because they were discouraged, because of adverse economic conditions, or because work outside of school made it impossible.

As a product of their own experiences and the problems they had to face, during the second part of the pandemic the teachers felt that they were now more open to understanding students, and better able to face and solve problems.

8. Conclusions

This article discusses some of the most important educational changes that took place during the pandemic in three dimensions: the conditions faced by TBC actors; the new tasks and responsibilities of the head and other teachers; and finally, the relationship between teachers and students. It has been demonstrated that, during a public health crisis that had no immediate precedents and for which schools were not prepared, the head and other teachers responded quickly, with creativity, commitment, and empathy and, using their own resources, designed strategies to make distance education workable.

The responses of the head and other teachers took place in a context in which educational policy administered through the *Aprende en Casa* program did not match the curricular organization of the TBCs (Guzmán, 2021a). Emergency distance education operated in very deficient conditions due to the lack of suitable technological resources in rural areas, as well as the lack of support on the federal and state level to make up for these deficiencies.

The precarious conditions under which emergency distance education was provided were not new: even before the pandemic, the TBCs operated with resources that were very limited and inadequate for teaching and learning (Estrada & Alejo, 2019; Guzmán, 2018; Weiss, 2017). The lack of an educational policy was also not new: from the beginning the TBC was thought of as a low-cost model, receiving a small budget and offering teachers very precarious labor conditions. In any case, the teachers were accustomed to solving problems themselves with limited resources. This pandemic aggravated their conditions and, in macrostructural terms, worsened institutional segmentation in Mexico by widening the gaps between

the different educational modalities based on the conditions and possibilities of each. In this context, the TBCs were pushed to the limit and this led to processes of educational and social exclusion.

The TBC organizational model helped in facing the crisis. The close communications that the head and other teachers maintained with the students and their families before the pandemic helped with locating and monitoring them during the crisis. The same was true of the collaborative work between head and other teachers since it allowed them to organize themselves and face the distance education emergency together. The efforts of all the actors to organize each cadre and "continue being a school" was notable. Although the TBCs were able to survive the crisis; it was evident that it was not possible for them to achieve the learning goals proposed on the national level.

It was not easy for the head and other teachers to confront distance education given their own labor, family, and emotional problems, which were aggravated by the pandemic. These were the conditions under which they had to deal with the students, with all their personal conflicts, exacerbated learning deficiencies, and resistance to confinement and the distance modality. Faced with this crisis, teacher–student relationships were once again at the forefront, as has been the case in other situations (Albornoz & Cornejo, 2017).

Even before the beginning of the confinement measures, TBC teachers already suffered from work overload and carried out more activities than they were hired for; yet the new teaching modality led to new tasks and new responsibilities. In the first stage, the teachers' priority was to locate the students and set up means to communicate with them. Later came the reorganization of their work, with all the challenges this entailed; they tried out strategies and were able to adapt and change them according to students' needs and particularities. The teachers recognized their own weaknesses and took on the challenge to expand their knowledge and acquire new digital skills. In the second stage of the pandemic, they felt better prepared and with more peace of mind.

The biggest challenge faced by the teachers was to support the students and keep them emotionally even keeled. And although they felt that they did not have the psychological tools they needed to do so, it helped that they identified with the students' problems. The resultant empathy allowed the teachers to strengthen communications and relations at a distance. They had to design their own strategies and adapt them, since in the first stage the goal was to convince the students to stay in lockdown and participate in distance education. In the second stage of the pandemic, a major challenge

was to deal with students' mounting fatigue and disinterest in order to stop them from dropping out of school.

The teachers recognized that they have become more flexible and tolerant in order to change the requirements in terms of tasks, homework, and evaluations. They were sensitive enough to notice the conditions in which students were living as well as their limitations, and therefore valued what students did accomplish more highly. They reflected that they tried to fulfill their responsibilities as teachers to the maximum; however, the results in terms of learning were not what was desired. They recognized the utility of the new technology but they continued to think that in-person teaching and learning were better for teachers and students alike. For many teachers, these changes were not temporary but implied new ways of being teachers, of relating to the teaching and learning processes as well as to students.

The crisis caused by the pandemic made it possible to appreciate the transformations of the school and the manner that the actors constructed it day by day (Rockwell & Ezpeleta, 1983). The head and other teachers expressed a great capacity to understand the limits and possibilities of the conditions imposed by the emergency, beyond the spatial and temporal attributes that existed previously. They also demonstrated a reflexive capacity to channel their actions and to understand themselves and their students. For their part, the students made efforts, made changes, and sought out their own strategies.

It is essential for educational policy on both the federal and state levels to recognize the capacity for action of the actors that deal with the needs of the TBCs, of the head and other teachers, of the students and their families, but, above all, to recognize them as subjects of rights. Finally, responsibility must be assumed to create the ideal conditions for teaching and learning processes in any circumstances, to avoid the continual exacerbation of institutional segmentation and educational and social exclusion of those who study in the most vulnerable schools.

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