

COVID-19 and the Global Impact of School Closures

Education Response to COVID-19 in Colombia

Preliminary Findings, April 13-17 2020

Summary

As part of the Global Center for the Development of the Whole Child's investigation into the impact of COVID-19 on the educational system, a Notre Dame team conducted 12 virtual interviews between April 13 and 17 with the participation of school directors and coordinators in educational institutions (IEs) across seven Colombian departments (Meta, Antioquia, Tolima, Atlántico, Caquetá, Cesar and Arauca). In these departments, the interviewees work with vulnerable, rural, and indigenous communities and students. This report also includes interviews with teachers who work with students living in boarding schools and who are a part of pendular foreign populations. Many of the rural educational institutions are located far from urban centers and in areas that are difficult to access. In most cases, the IEs have several sites scattered in the geographical area of influence.

Although all of the interviewed IEs are part of the public-school system, two IEs are operated by private entities, and one IE is associated with an indigenous reserve located in the area of Sierra Nevada at the Caribbean Coast. Please see page ten of this brief for more details on each IE.

“ The Ministry really does not know the difficulties that these rural communities have in terms of technology and access. In urban areas there are many guarantees. For the rural areas, we are very limited. ”

German Castañeda

Impact on the Right to Education Indicators as a result of COVID-19

Using the information collected from interviews, the team examined the impact of school closures on students' rights to education through UNESCO's right to education categories: access to the regular education system; the possibility of having alternative educational modalities; the existence of infrastructure and basic services; and the provision of qualified teachers. These categories are included in the Tomaszewski 4A's framework, which led the team to group their findings based on Availability, Accessibility, Acceptability, and Adaptability in order to best capture and present what was expressed in the interviews.

Within the categories of Availability and Accessibility, the interviewers also include barriers such as administrative procedures, costs, and risks. Within Acceptability and Adaptability, interviewers group information that focuses on curricular frameworks, the teaching and learning processes, school financing, and coordination, as well as institutional capacity to guarantee that schools offer quality and relevant education for children and adolescents regardless of school closures.

The Right to Education: Accessibility and Availability

There is consensus among the different principals and coordinators interviewed that the elements of availability and accessibility of education are seriously affected by school closures. The main causes hindering the availability and accessibility of education include restricted access to technology, digital illiteracy, and increased food insecurity.

Restricted access to technology

One of the main limitations that children and adolescents face during the COVID-19 pandemic is the lack of connectivity and technology. Students often lack the possibility of using the Internet and consequently cannot download the guides offered by the central government or even those designed by their teachers.

Communication mechanisms between teachers and their students are generally limited to the WhatsApp messages to parents; direct communication between members of the community who may have contact with other students; community delegates; heads of community boards; and a parent who acts as a grade-level representative. In any case, these contacts are restricted by limited cellphone access. This difficulty is almost absolute in some regions. In other regions, it is subject to the availability of parent phones and/or bandwidth of data plans.

This situation is even more difficult in rural areas:

“*The problem I have is that their father takes the phone when he goes out to the fields. So, my children must wake up very early to study before he leaves, study a little more at lunch when he comes to eat and then do whatever they didn't do in the morning or at noon, when he comes back at 5 pm.*” —María del Pilar Blanco

“*Giving children materials they can work with is very difficult because we live in rural areas. Our children do not have computers, tablets, cell phones, or anything like that. Some of them do not even have electricity. Consequently they, of course, cannot connect to any virtual tool. We do what we can and send them materials to places [from where] they can pick them up and work.*” —Oscar Diaz

The impossibility of accessing technology is directly related to the vulnerable conditions experienced by these families. Most salient are the limited financial means that families have to acquire devices or data plans as well as the economic pressures to guarantee other household expenditures.

Some organizations prioritize the establishment of internet and technology access for rural children.

“*The solutions that I am going to propose are very concrete: One, you have to subsidize electronic equipment or donate tablets, computers, all at a low price so that children have these tools. Second, the government must make an agreement with multinational companies so that they install antennas throughout the rural areas. We need free or subsidized high-speed internet not only for schools, but for communities and parents.*” —Andrés Emilio Torres

Educational institutions in rural areas are often in places that are difficult to access and where budgetary conditions make the availability of technology limited.

“*Our school is in a place where access is difficult. Some children must walk up a mountain for an hour or an hour and a half to get there. They will see a house every half an hour or so. They are very far from each other. My cell phone has reception in some places on the mountain. I usually have it with me, so we can communicate with parents and send and receive messages as soon as I have signal. We have tried getting internet in the school, but it is very expensive.*” —Andrés Emilio Torres

“*There were a lot of people who were not considered “vulnerable” or “in need.” These are the ones who worked in hair salons. It is harder for those who have never had to ask for something. These people are suffering, often in silence.*”

María del Pilar Blanco

Digital Literacy

Digital illiteracy refers to the limited knowledge of how to use tools such as email, web portals, forums, and collaborative platforms on the Internet that can support virtual education.¹ Virtual education requires trained teachers who know how to integrate technology in the pedagogical process; parental knowledge and access to devices; child digital literacy skills; and finally, a curriculum that supports digital learning.

“*There is a big cultural issue even with parents. Teachers are being paid, and many parents say they don't understand why they are being sent homework and putting all the burden on them to help children when teachers are doing nothing [...] I have some teachers that are very good with technology, but we do not have the culture, and it is hard for people to adapt to this new reality*” —Andrés Emilio Torres

Food Insecurity

The suspension of face-to-face instruction increased the vulnerability of children and adolescents to food insecurity. One consequence of school closures is nutritional deficiency as many children received their daily nutrition from a school feeding program. Since schools closed, many children have not been provided with food support.

The closure of rural boarding schools significantly increases the risks of children having nutritional problems since these schools are often located in regions of great vulnerability.

The emergency further increased the number of families experiencing difficult economic circumstances. It is not uncommon for the principals and teachers to support some of the needs of students and vulnerable families.

“*While we were doing the WhatsApp group, parents, as soon as they joined, started saying ‘Teacher, please help us: we are hungry.’ We know these families and know that this is true, so we contacted them, and we are now collecting a small amount of money, among the community, so they can buy something.*” —German Castañeda

¹Farrell, G. M. (2005) The changing faces of virtual education, Canada: The Commonwealth of Learning, in: www.col.org/virtualled/virtual2pdfs/virtual2_complete.pdf

The Rights in Education: Acceptability and Adaptability

Rural and urban students living in vulnerable conditions are experiencing significant impacts to the quality of their education. There is limited opportunity to adapt content that was intended for face-to-face instruction to a virtual education model. Although digital content was made available at the national level, it does not have cultural relevance, and its utility is limited in remote communities. Evaluation and student assessments are also difficult to adapt. Finally, the change to a virtual model requires new capacities for which there was no previous preparation.

Quality of Education

The challenges that teachers, principals, and coordinators identify in the quality of education are related, among other things, to the limited support that children and adolescents may receive in their homes for the continuation of their learning.

“It is difficult because of the low level of education of parents. You send a guide, but they cannot help students or follow it: they do not understand it. Many of them didn’t even finish primary school.”
—Andrés Emilio Torres

“Another difficulty will be convincing parents to let children study at least until noon. Parents will probably see this time as “children being on vacation”. They are going to think children are at home doing nothing, and they will take them to the fields, to milk the cows, to help with the chickens, to help with chores around the house. They are not going to let them study.”
—Miguel Suarez

Most of the teachers expressed their concern about the impact that this crisis could have on students completing their last year of secondary school. These students were in the process of preparing for the state exams (Pruebas Saber 11°). And now, the future is not clear nor is it known when they will take the tests, which could limit access to higher education.

Student Evaluation

Overall, the principals, teachers, and coordination staff of the different IEs expressed the need to adjust the evaluation process for children and youth. They put particular emphasis on the inadequacies of the current evaluation models being implemented at the time of school closures.

Most interviewees agreed there needs to be a change in student evaluation in order to allow for “nontraditional” assessment methods.

“Our current grading and evaluation systems don’t work for this situation. The model needs to be adapted to the current situation so that we can continue to evaluate students.” —Henry Mora

However, doubts remain as to what would be an effective way to modify assessment to fit the realities faced by students.

“We have no idea how we are going to grade this. We are used to evaluating everything. But how can you evaluate what a child learns virtually? You cannot. We will continue to research and watch videos to see what we come up with.” —Mariluz Cáceres

Some creative modifications in assessment were mentioned:

“The academic calendar was suspended, and they only got 6 weeks of instruction. I think an opportunity would be to give children a diary and have them write about their day, their experiences. This will kickstart their imagination and will help them articulate in writing their needs and feelings.” —Ana María Rodríguez

Evaluation also presents some dilemmas in terms of equity and the quality of the home learning environment.

“And when we come back, are we going to grade equally the kid who always participated with the dad who helped him and then compare him to the child who disappeared and did nothing? Is that even something we should grade?” —María del Pilar Blanco

Cultural Adaptation: Indigenous Populations

A central element of the 'rights in education' is the adaptability of instructional practices and materials to the particularities of students. One of the interviews carried out was with the principal of Sierra Nevada de Santa Martha where the Arhuaca community lives. This community had a different approach to and management of the COVID-19 crisis.

In the case of these indigenous communities, after the national government's announcement regarding school closures, the ancestral authorities came together and made the decisions that the community would follow.

“*The elders got together, analyzed the situation, and decided what was going to happen with the entire community. In all the communities there is an elder, a council, a priest, and a commissar. They contact the elders of the tribe who follow their instructions and apply them in their communities.*” —Néstor López

In addition to actions aimed at preventing contagion, such as limiting entry into the Sierra Nevada and exercising this control through indigenous guards, the community has taken additional actions to protect itself. These are in addition to the self-care strategies required for members of the community who must leave the village to get food.

Protection rituals, which involve the entire indigenous community, are a part of the activities that children and adolescents are carrying out while schools are closed.

In relation to the continuity of the educational process through virtual means, it should be noted that these communities do not have access to electricity nor is there any technology that allows for virtual schooling. There are a few adults who have access to mobile phones, but the coverage is minimal, so access to WhatsApp or other applications is deeply limited.

The principal highlighted the following:

“*The impact is significant since many of these children will not be able to pass the year. They are only learning their internal cultural knowledge and won't be able to advance to the next year because they won't have the required knowledge according to the ministry standards.*” —Nestor Lopez

Pedagogical Adaptation: Children in Preschool

Without exception, teachers, principals, and educational staff highlighted the need for virtual support of young children:

“*With 5-year-olds and children in preschool, there is clearly the need for a responsible adult - in this case the parents. We are doing a pilot program during this forced vacation period with some students, and it has rendered good results. The teachers connect with 25 students per class, and parents help when they can.*”
—Ebert Pinzón

There are difficulties for teachers and parents who find it challenging to support children who require special attention.

“*For our teachers in preschool, it has been especially hard. They do not agree this is good for the kids but are, nonetheless, working to help parents and sending them special instructions, so they can help them. It's been especially difficult since these are the parents that fight teachers and often tell them that this [education] is their job.*” —Antonio Bernal

Although it is especially challenging, some teachers manage to work and connect with these boys and girls.

“*The teachers I have, they are fierce. They are the kind of people that get things done. They write parents every day and monitor their children. They have set times with the IT professor to see the kids. It is just to say hi. But for a kid to see his or her teacher and know he or she cares, it means the world.*”

Miguel Suarez

The Role of Schools and Teachers

Interviewees highlighted that the role of the school in rural contexts transcends the field of learning.

“The school is everything for the community [in remote, rural areas]. The teachers know the families, where they live, what they do: there are stronger ties than those built in the urban areas. When the school closed, those ties ended. There are students who go every day to school because this is the space for recreation, for social interaction... in the urban areas, there are online games, video game consoles. They have cable. But we don’t have those things over here.” —Andrés Emilio Torres

In general, it was observed that teachers’, principals’, and coordinators’ commitment to students goes beyond their commitment to fostering learning. Teachers have become, of their own initiative, sources of support for the most vulnerable families.

In regards to the social deprivation that students currently face, one coordinator notes that teacher support has always gone further than academics:

“One of the most problematic things that I am seeing here is that children are left without the presence of the state because they no longer have the teachers or a place for recreation or rest or interaction with peers. We assumed a role in these childrens’ lives that goes beyond their educations. We were aware of their health and would often call upon parents [...] Little by little we became everything for these children. We celebrated their birthdays, had special activities like racing kites and other organized sporting activities. In this confinement, they are alone, isolated, with zero social interaction.” —Andres Torres

This new situation raises questions for teachers about how their role must be transformed in order to face this new reality.

“Here are good questions that we need to reflect on and answer: What is the role of the school right now? What is the relevance of the content we are teaching? What is the teacher’s role in this? The parents’? Reflecting on these questions will help us all mature, become more human. It will especially help us get more in tune with our children’s contexts and realities.” —Mariluz Cáceres

Without exception, teachers mentioned the need to reinvent themselves to respond to the situation.

Teachers have had the additional challenge of having to learn to use new tools and to develop new learning and evaluation strategies in the midst of facing many of the same difficulties and vulnerabilities their students face.

“We do what we can, but it is very difficult. We are going to continue and try to help as much as we can.”

Heriberto Gualtero

“Students are not taught this type of [virtual] education; it requires more commitment and autonomy than they may have. Parents are not interested. They think that the responsibility of education is only for the teachers.”

German Castañeda

Psychosocial Needs

Both teachers and educational personnel expressed concern about the psychosocial and emotional impact that the current situation will have on children and their families. The impact is linked to many factors including the suspension of school activity, but also, the internal stress and pressure for families in mandatory lockdown.

“The impact on all of us is massive and significant [...] How to recover from this? This situation impacts children heavily. They are exposed to what scientists say... to what the government says... and they are exposed their parents’ stress. They are only children; this takes a toll on them.” -Heriberto Gualtero

Most teachers have taken some action, aimed at providing emotional support to students.

“ We have considered the importance of psychosocial support. With school psychology staff and support from the “Bienestar Familiar”, we have devised a system, so parents can have some support, and we are scheduling the meetings via WhatsApp.”
—Antonio Bernal

From the perspective of the principals in rural areas, there are different conditions that frame the emotional context of children and young people.

“ These children don’t feel locked up because they are going out to the fields to help their parents with the crops. I am sure they are missing school because they want to stop working for their parents and because they want to be with their friends.”
—German Castañeda

Teachers and principals have identified ways of expressing their emotional support.

“ We know there have been problems with isolation, depression, and other mental health problems. We are working with our psychologist to send parents support materials regarding best practices and advice on how to work from home. We know violence in the household has increased and that communication and interaction is difficult for many families.”
—Ana Maria Rodríguez

“ We figured out pretty early on that we could make videos to support the children. These are kids that are very lonely, exposed to all kinds of risks and problems. They might feel hopeless, but at least if they see the video, they know they are not alone, and we are here for them. They can say ‘hey, that is my teacher, that is my psychologist.’” —Miguel Suarez

“ There is an impact that goes beyond anything academic. Some children need to come to the institution to feel guided and seen. This is what we can offer. In their homes there is no one to guide them. Therefore, there is a full academic and psychological impact. I think we will see the consequences later. ”

German Castañeda

Additional Risks

“In conflict zones, the armed actors, and the guerrilla act as a stronghold. They say that outsiders should not enter, among them, the teachers, who went away for vacation. These armed groups have already told us that teachers will not be allowed in “La Macarena”. They cannot enter, and if they want to come to the schools, they will have to pay a fine. No teacher can pay a fine of 5 million pesos to enter [...] those armed groups put obstacles and create fines to control us.” —Maria del Pilar Blanco

Another risk cited was the risk of students dropping out to support their families and an inability to return to pre-crisis family organization once face-to-face instruction resumes.

Some teachers think that dropping out may be a parent’s decision for his or her children, motivated by a desire to protect them from the uncertainty of the pandemic. Other teachers mention that drop-out will be the result of too little support in the home learning environment.

Additional risks emerge for children and youth living in urban settings. One risk is that children are spending more time alone and are more vulnerable.

“ The school is an oasis. Outside they can easily get drugs. We fight every day to keep drugs out of the schools and keep vigilance in our community. They live in a very complex neighborhood. They can easily access narcotics, weapons, or become part of a gang. We are afraid that they might fall for this “easy money” and that all the work we have been doing might be for nothing.” —Miguel Suarez

Other risks stem from domestic violence.

“ One of the biggest challenges is abuse, in all its forms. We have had cases before. Another risk is that children might believe that they can “live without” schools, and get used to this new reality and lose their interest and love for education.” —Mariluz Cáceres

*“ We are going to try and develop skills. More than specific knowledge like trigonometry or arithmetic. We want children to develop skills that are useful for them like **critical thinking and communication skills.** ”*

Mariluz Cáceres

*“ When confinement is over, **we are not going to bury children in work.** We will have to make different activities, games, and other things to make sure that they get used to being in the school again and having a schedule. ”*

Heriberto Gualtero

Innovative Ideas

Amid the difficult circumstances, shortcomings, and challenges for the continuity of education during school closures, innovations continue to emerge. These innovations focus on improving the learning experiences of students as well as supporting their psychological and physical wellbeing. Ultimately, they are a result of the creativity and commitment of principals, teachers, and educational staff.

In order to guarantee the right to education, communities are organizing the delivery of physical teaching and learning materials in areas where virtual schools are not possible. These strategies often involve parents, members of the community, and community leaders.

“ People move from one community to the other on mules. The messengers will pick up the academic guides from the teachers and take them to the families.”
—Néstor López

“ Passing the frontier will be hard, but not impossible. We were thinking of making packages with the child’s name and placing them along the Venezuelan border where parents can pick them up and take them home.” —Mariluz Cáceres

“ In some places schools are going to organize meetings with parents. They will have to take precautions. These meetings are to explain to parents what the children need to do and how they should work on the guides.”
—Antonio Bernal

Other innovative solutions to promote the continuity of learning involve community radio or short videos shared by WhatsApp.

“ [A teacher] did something very interesting: every day she leads a story time for preschool and elementary school children, adapts the story, and sends it to all children who wait patiently on their cell phones for Johana’s story time.” —Ana María Rodríguez

“ We have tried asking students to send videos, but because of connectivity, this has been hard. We are going to set up a system soon where students can interact with their teachers and hopefully be more responsive.”
—Miguel Suarez

“ Some teachers, especially those teaching math, are establishing additional moments in the day when they are available to answer questions and help students with exercises they don’t understand.”
—Antonio Bernal

There are various initiatives aimed at ensuring the well-being of children and families during the emergency. In these initiatives, the coordinators, teachers, and principals play an active role.

“ Our main concern is to guarantee, when possible, that industrialized snacks and aid can reach those who need them most. All the time we are thinking about it, looking for ways, talking to everyone, as a link.”
—María Del Pilar Blanco

Other ideas relate to how to resume learning when schools reopen.

“ I really don’t see the sense in completing 40 weeks a year for school. I do not think it would be wise to extend the year just to fulfill several weeks. What can be done is to give autonomy to IEs and give guidelines to fundamentally develop these competencies. Some might not need these 40 weeks to teach all the content.” —German Castañeda

“ I think there is a benefit. The virus is a very difficult thing, but it leaves us with some **learning opportunities**. We have had to deviate from materialism and living in a rush, and we are now focusing on ourselves, on others, **reflecting on our mission in life.** ”

Ana María Rodríguez

Additional Educational Institute Details

The information in this table was collected during interviews with principals, directors, coordinators, and teachers and represents their best estimates or perceptions of the categories outlined. As a result, the units reflected for each response differ according to the interviewee's preferred means of responding.

Name of the Education Institution	Municipality/ Department	Number of Students	Characterization	School feeding program	Percentage of students with access to tablets/ computers/ internet
IE El Dorado	El Dorado, Meta	1050	Rural	870 students participate ¹	60%
CE José Joaquín Forero	Km 22, Tolima	280	Rural	Breakfast	10%
IE Santiago Villa Escobar	Ibagué, Tolima	1120	Urban Social stratum 1 & 2	50% of elementary and middle schools participate	40%
IE Técnico Industrial Blas Torres de la Torre	Soledad, Atlántico	3300	Urban Social stratum 1 & 2	186 receive lunch and snack	In evaluation
IE San Francisco	Ibagué, Tolima	640	Urban Social stratum 1 & 2 – 9 Rural areas with restricted access	100%	40% WhatsApp/ 10% Full connection
IE El Salitre	Florencia, Caquetá	155 ²	Rural and Urban Social stratum 1	100%	15% WhatsApp
IE Escuela Indígena de Donachui	Valledupar, Cesar	1400 ³	Indigenous	100%	There is no connection
IE Normal Superior Jorge Isaac de Roldanillo	Roldanillo, Valle del Cauca	1300	Unavailable	Majority participate	15- 20%
IE Baja Victoria	Florencia, Caquetá	200 ⁴	Rural	In evaluation	10%
IE Ricardo Gonzalez	Valledupar, Cesar	1440	Urban ⁵	Majority receive support of the Diocese	20%
IE Juan Jacobo Rouseeau	Araucita, Arauca	1129	Frontier ⁶	100%	<20% WhatsApp. No computer access
Núcleo Educativo 10 y 13	Granada, Meta	100	Rural	100%	20-30% cellphone ⁷

1 570 students in the main campus, and 300 students in rural areas with support from the local governments

2 IE El Salitre is a boarding school with 155 students, as well as 60 interns.

3 Indigenous students from the Arhuaco's tribe in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta across 17 campuses

4 Students across 16 campuses

5 In concession with a private entity

6 Venezuela is across the Arauca river with 114 rural and 200 Venezuelan students

7 These cell phones are of low-quality