



Experiences of primary education teachers on returning to school during the covid-19 pandemic

Experiencias de los docentes de educación primaria sobre el regreso a la escuela durante la pandemia por covid-19

Experiências de professores do ensino básico no regresso às aulas durante a pandemia de covid-19

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ABSTRACT. The purpose of this article was to describe the experiences of teachers in returning to classes during the covid-19 pandemic in a rural primary school in Yucatán, Mexico. The study was qualitative, based on an educational ethnographic study design. The information was obtained through semi-structured interviews addressed to six primary school teachers. The results were obtained by analyzing and categorizing the responses. Among the main results, the difficulties in adapting to hygiene standards and handling of children were observed, in the challenges and challenges the use of the face mask, the curricular modification, the lack of digital tools and the problems with connectivity, as well as the effects on health and experience on return. However, it is recognized that the adaptation of the curricular content contributes to continuing the teaching and learning process in person and at a distance. It concludes by attributing relevance in terms of the difficulties, challenges and challenges of returning to school, considering the influence of the conditions of the rural community where the primary school is located.

PALABRAS CLAVE

RESUMEN. El presente artículo tuvo como propósito describir las experiencias de los docentes en el regreso a clases durante la pandemia por covid-19 de una escuela primaria rural en Yucatán,

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experiencias docentes, escuela primaria rural, pandemia covid-19, regreso a clases.

México. El estudio fue de corte cualitativo, basado en un diseño de estudio etnográfico educativo. La información se obtuvo a través de entrevistas semiestructuradas dirigidas a seis docentes de educación primaria. Los resultados se obtuvieron mediante el análisis y categorización de las respuestas. Entre los principales resultados se observaron las dificultades en la adaptación sobre las normas de higiene y manejo de los niños, en los retos y desafíos se señala el uso del cubrebocas, la modificación curricular, la falta de herramientas digitales y los problemas con la conectividad, así como los efectos en la salud y la experiencia en el regreso. Sin embargo, se reconoce que la adaptación de los contenidos curriculares contribuyó a continuar con el proceso de enseñanza y aprendizaje de manera presencial y a distancia. Se concluye atribuyendo relevancia en cuanto las dificultades, retos y desafíos del regreso a la escuela, considerando la influencia de las condiciones de la comunidad rural donde se ubica la escuela primaria.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

experiências de ensino, escola primária rural, pandemia de covid-19, volta às aulas.

RESUMO. O objetivo deste artigo foi descrever as experiências de professores no retorno às aulas durante a pandemia de covid-19 em uma escola primária rural em Yucatán, México. O estudo foi qualitativo, baseado em um desenho de estudo etnográfico educacional. As informações foram obtidas por meio de entrevistas semiestructuradas dirigidas a seis professores do ensino fundamental. Os resultados foram obtidos por meio da análise e categorização das respostas. Entre os principais resultados, foram observadas as dificuldades de adaptação aos padrões de higiene e manejo das crianças, nos desafios e desafios são apontados o uso da máscara facial, a modificação curricular, a falta de ferramentas digitais e os problemas com conectividade. Bem como os efeitos sobre a saúde e a experiência no regresso. No entanto, reconhece-se que a adaptação do conteúdo curricular contribuiu para a continuidade do processo de ensino e aprendizagem presencial e a distância. Conclui atribuindo relevância às dificuldades, desafios e desafios do regresso à escola, tendo em conta a influência das condições da comunidade rural onde se situa a escola primária.

1. INTRODUCTION

During the pandemic, teachers in Latin America faced different challenges, such as: inequality in access to education, insufficient infrastructure in schools, access to technology, the digital divide due to conditions of students with less opportunities (Anaya et al, 2021; Cáceres et al, 2020; Gaudin & Pareyón, 2020), challenges due to poor internet connection and scarce economic resources for families living in disadvantaged communities (Gómez and Quijada, 2021).

Another challenge was the lack of face-to face interaction among students (Sepúlveda & Morrison, 2020) and difficulties in addressing curricular content (Bravo et al, 2020; García & García, 2021). Teachers had to redesign the teaching and learning process, they had to create multiple assignments and practices at a distance. They also had to be trained in the use of virtual platforms to meet the demands of teaching under the new context (Almazan et al, 2020; Annessi & Acosta, 2021; Gómez & Quijada, 2021; Morgan, 2020).

In the country of Indonesia, teachers point out that the excess of work and activities increased their stress level (Baptista et al, 2020), they were overwhelmed by designing curriculum materials, creating homework, saturation of many meetings together, change of teacher and students' schedules, the extended working days until early morning, personal wear and tear and the absence of spaces (Bravo et al, 2020). Consequently, the effects on health became evident with the increase in frustration, sadness and anxiety (Sánchez et al, 2020).

In the United States, female teachers reported that they spend little time with their families because they provided constant support outside of working hours (Baptista et al, 2020; Gicheva, 2022). In Argentina, teachers pointed out that 55% of the tasks were delivered through WhatsApp and the difficulty was that the families had a cell phone, but they ran out of balance. In addition, students did not have a space to study at home (Baptista et al, 2020). In Peru, teachers stated that they did not have the technological tools to perform their duties properly (Anaya et al, 2021).



In addition, in Colombia, Venezuela, and Nicaragua, teachers suffered virtual violence such as hacking, cyberbullying, phishing, sexting, and sextortion (Peña, 2021) due to the use of digital tools, unlike in Paraguay and Brazil. Teachers also pointed out that parents are unaware of virtual media (Baptista et al, 2020).

In Mexico, it has been pointed out that the challenges faced by schools were the lack of teacher training in the technological and digital field, the difficulties of migrating from face-to-face to virtual education and vice versa (Romero, 2021). In addition, to continue with education during the confinement, digital platforms, television, and radio were implemented to disseminate educational content. However, in a survey carried out by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) it was found that 39.4% of households did not have any internet connection (INEGI, 2020). The lack of infrastructure for distance education was also a problem faced in schools.

Other of the difficulties faced by schools is related to inclusive education, such as not having support tools, giving access to avoid educational segregation and mistakenly thinking that special education teachers are responsible for student learning instead of regular teachers (García et al, 2015). In addition, the most affected were children with disabilities or those who belong to ethnic groups or areas with vulnerability and marginalized rates because the school did not have the resources to meet their needs (Muñoz et al, 2022).

In August 2021, Mexican authorities announced a voluntary return to face-to-face instruction, and created the National Strategy for the Safe Return to Basic Education Schools, as a national strategy for the 2021-2022 educational cycle aimed at basic and higher education institutions that remained closed due to the covid-19 pandemic (SEP, 2021).

This national strategy was implemented by federal authorities such as the Ministry of Public Education and the Ministry of Health. The guidelines and recommendations implemented were inspired by international organizations such as the National System for the Comprehensive Protection of Children and Adolescents (SIPINNA), the World Health Organization (UN), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Education, Science and Culture (UNESCO), the Organization of Ibero-American States for Education, Science and Culture (OEI) and the World Bank (WB) (SEP, 2021).

Similarly, on August 28, 2021, the Ministry of Education of the Government of the State of Yucatan with the support of the State Government and the Ministry of Health of Yucatan implemented the Safe Return to Classes program, that established official strategies, guides and protocols to avoid contagion by covid-19 aimed at all public and private centers of basic and higher education in the State (SEGEY, 2021).

This paper focused on preliminary findings from the case study of school applying the policies established at the national and state level during the return to face-to-face education in 2022. It examines the difficulties of teachers who work in a primary school in a rural community during their return to face-to-face classes, considering the conditions of the school population and the context of their school. The study addresses the need for analyzing the implications of returning to school under the conditions of a rural multicultural community in a context of poverty, it allows for an understanding of the difficulties and challenges that other teachers have had to go through.

The results presented focus on teachers' experiences of returning to school during the covid-19 pandemic. The research questions were: What are the difficulties faced by teachers during the application of the program safe return to classes in primary school? And what are the challenges that arise because of going back to face-to-face instruction?

2. METHOD

This article presents partial results of the qualitative study, the design used was an educational ethnography. This type of study focuses on describing aspects of the school culture that take place in educational centers or classrooms (Álvarez, 2011). We first obtained authorization from school authorities and teachers to conduct the study. All of them participated in the study on a voluntary basis and signed an informed consent form. There was a total of seven teachers at the school, six of them were group leaders (three women and three men) and the director of the special education area. The teacher's ages range was from 25 to 40 years, with a teaching experience between 3 to 4 years at the school.

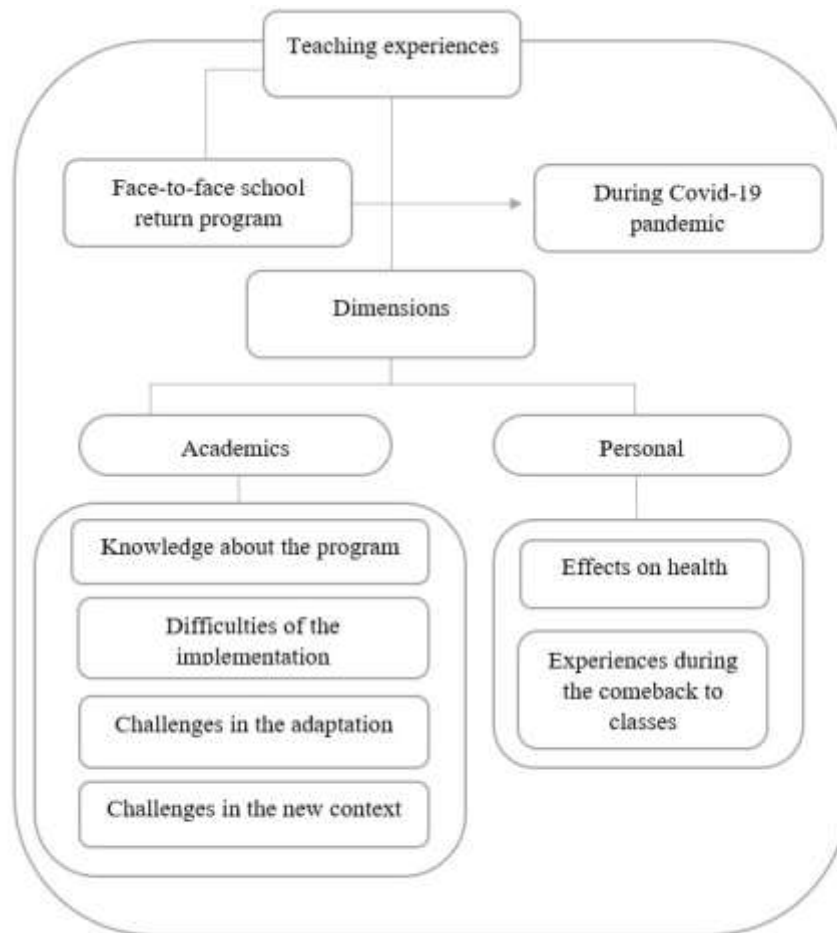
Next, we present the results from the semi-structured interviews. We used the Affinity Diagram as a technique to help with the data analysis, which is a method of examining the thoughts, opinions, judgments, and ideas of the participants (Trochim, 1989). We analyzed the answers to each question and identified patterns and categories of responses, that are illustrated in the diagrams to synthesize the information. We found two main dimensions: the academic and the personal challenges faced by the instructors.

3. RESULTS

This section presents the analysis of the results from the interviews. Findings indicate that there are five fundamental categories of difficulties faced by the teachers: not having enough knowledge of the program, difficulties in its implementation, challenges in adaptability, problems in the new school context, negative effects on health and lack of personal experience. Figure 1 shows the categories and subcategories found during the analysis of the information.

Figure 1

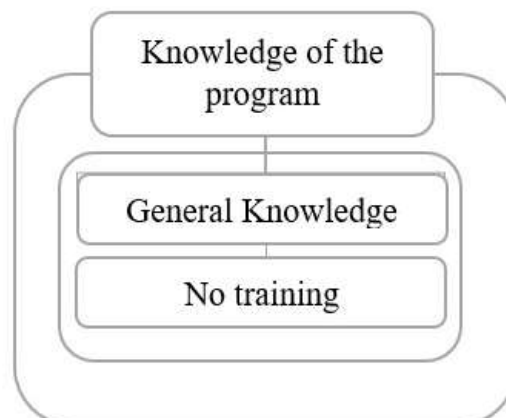
Categories and subcategories of information analysis



The results of the study indicated positive aspects in the implementation of the safe return to school program, even though the primary school is located in a rural community and considering the conditions of the population, this was not an impediment to observe the critical aspects of the implementation of the program in the school, as indicated in figure 2.

Figure 2

Knowledge of the safe return to school program



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Teachers confirmed to have a general knowledge about the Safe Return Program, since they did not participate in workshops or training courses to carry out its implementation. They had to find out on their own what the program itself consisted of. Officers from the Ministry of Education at the state level affirmed that they had provided teachers only with information on the process of implementing the program through courses, workshops, and newsletters. However, teachers did not receive this support. As they stated:

“Sí conozco el programa, pero no, nos dieron cursos como tal, solo nos mandaron la guía, el manual y los protocolos, nos dijeron léanlo y aplíquelo”.

Commissioned Principal (4th Grade Teacher).

“Si bueno no detalladamente pero sí, de hecho, ni material nos llegó, lo conozco porque averigüé, estuve buscando en Google y en Facebook sobre de que trata y con la ayuda de las guías y de los manuales que nos mandaron, pude entender de que trata”

6th grade Teacher.

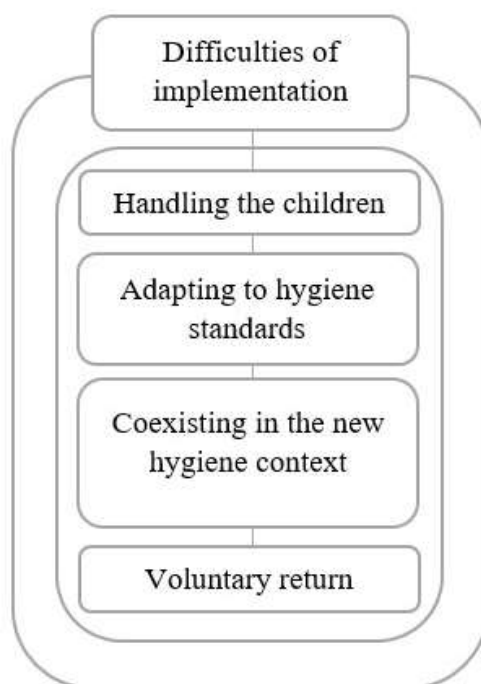
Only the Special education instructors received some training:

“Sí, si conozco el programa, bueno como yo soy la directora de aquí del área de USAER, pues a mi si me capacitaron, me hicieron tomar unos cursos, como el uso del cubrebocas, lavado de manos, la sana distancia, más que nada de los protocolos y se me pidió que yo capacite a mis compañeros que trabajan conmigo, que yo replique lo que he aprendido, por lo que se no todos los maestros tuvieron la oportunidad de tomar ese curso”

USAER Principal (Psychology).

Figure 3

Difficulties in implementation



Teachers pointed out that the main difficulties in the implementation were with the handling of the children, but this happened only at the beginning of the return to school, over time the children were able to adapt to the new context. This was achieved through vigilance and the insistence of following the hygiene measures, such as: the correct use of the face mask, hand washing, not hugging.

In addition, teachers are aware of the coexistence between them, because one of the strategies implemented was staggered schedules both in classes and at breakfast, at school entrances and exits.

“Yo creo que al principio fue difícil porque cuando hicimos la encuesta muchos papás y mamás no se habían vacunado y pues tampoco podrías dejar que los niños vinieran sus familias no tenía vacunas, sobre todo para cuidar a lo que venía, pero ya después cuando vieron que no les pasa nada empezaron a venir más niños a la escuela”

2nd grade Teacher.

“Con los niños, el que entiendan que no se puede abrazar, no, hacerlos entender que no todos sus compañeros vienen, que no se abracen, que usen bien el cubrebocas y la careta”.

USAER Principal (Psychology).

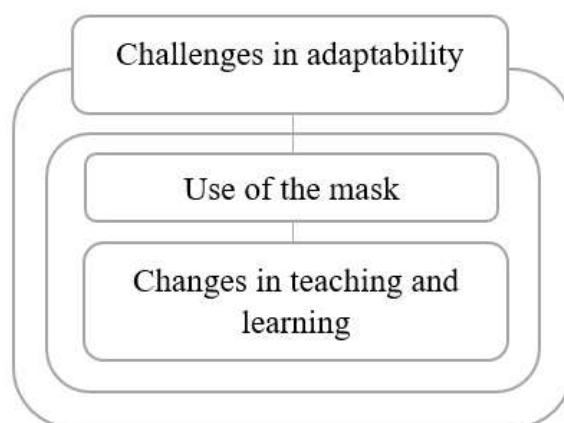
“También, algo que nos afecta es que no tenemos apoyo de recursos por parte de arriba, así que nosotros tenemos que ver cómo mantenernos y los padres de familia han respondido muy bien”

Commissioned Principal (4th Grade Teacher).

Another difficulty that teachers faced was that when they just returned, very few children attended school because it was voluntary, and most parents did not send their children to school for fear of catching covid-19.

Figure 4

Challenges in adaptability



One challenge in the implementation was teaching during the new context, since the mask prevented certain skills such as the expression of oral language. This made the teaching and learning process difficult, especially for students with some hearing disability, who are guided by the lip reading, so their teachers had to use other teaching methods.

“Chispas, sí fue todo un reto, porque yo trabajo con niños especiales y un reto que veo es que necesito hablarles y con algunos es nuestra forma de trabajar, me leen los labios y con la careta y el cubrebocas, fue muy, muy difícil pero bueno también busque otras alternativas para que ellos sigan aprendiendo”.

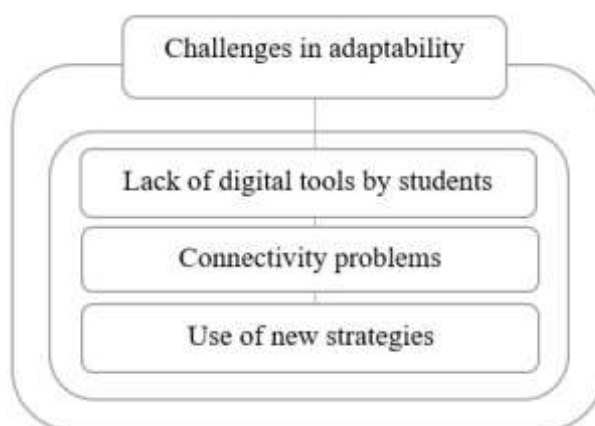
USAER Principal (Psychology).

“Fue complicado, porque trabajar desde casa estaba super bien, yo ya me había adaptado, pero regresar también fue un cambio drástico, tuvimos que adaptarnos de nuevo a lo que había, con mis niños por ejemplo ellos no tuvieron preescolar y vienen desde cero y pues los aprendizajes que debe de traer no lo traen, pero yo trato de adaptarme lo que ellos necesitaban”

1st Grade Teacher.

Figure 5

Challenges in the new context



The challenges perceived by teachers about the new context were (a) teachers had to learn how to use new work tools, (b) working remotely was very difficult because the students did not have the appropriate technological tools and (c) there were problems with internet connectivity in their community because the signal is very bad.

“Ahora sí que nadie se esperaba esto, pero hemos aprendido a trabajar con otras herramientas, implementar la educación a distancia, tener que adaptarse al contexto y a lo que hay”.

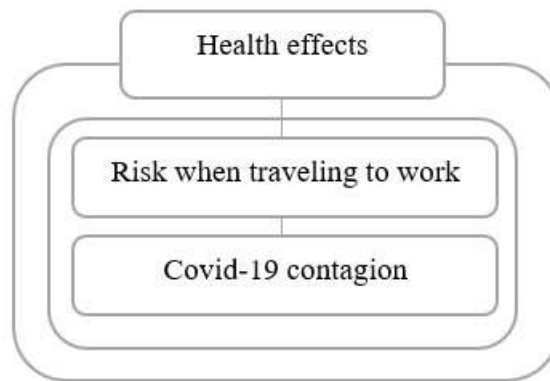
3rd Grade Teacher.

“pues un desafío es que, por ejemplo, algunas mamás son responsables y otras no, cuando hay que trabajar con los niños y se les pide algunas cosas, pues las mamás responsables son las que lo traen y las mamás que no, pues son las que ni siquiera mandan a veces a los niños y por ejemplo les mandas mensajes y no te contestan, unas porque no tienen dinero para el saldo y otras porque trabajan”

USAER Principal (Psychology).

Figure 6

Effects on health



The return to face-to-face instruction also had negative health effects on some teachers who got infected with Covid-19, even though they had already been vaccinated. Because teachers shared transportation from home to school, they believed that traveling together by car created the conditions for getting the disease:

“Pues el maestro Oscar y yo nos contagiamos del covid-19, pero no aquí si no en el camino porque venimos en el transporte público y fuimos dos los contagiados a pesar de que ya teníamos la vacuna”.

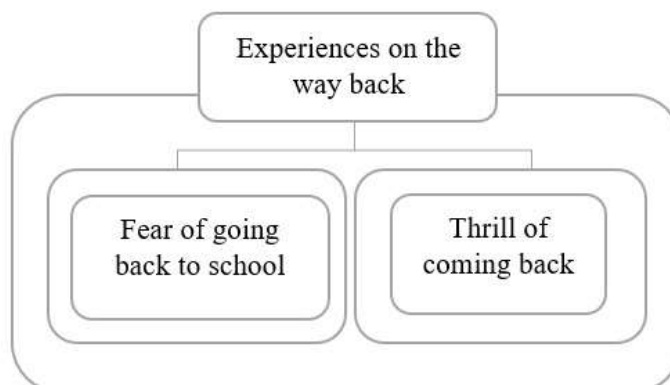
3rd Grade Teacher.

“De hecho los niños no contagiaron a los maestros, sino entre nosotros como maestros nos contagiamos, pero pues no fue aquí en la escuela fue por los viajes”

Commissioned Principal (4th Grade Teacher).

Figure 7

Experiences on the return to classes



Teachers had mixed feelings when they were informed that they needed to return to face-to-face instruction during Covid-19. Most of them stated that they felt fear about getting the disease despite the new school regulations about using hygiene protocols. They also were concerned about using new teaching methods and technology.

On the other hand, instructors felt excited about reuniting with their students. They were aware that it was necessary to return to face-to-face classes so that their schoolchildren did not fall further behind academically:

“Al inicio me dio miedo, pero también sentía emoción de regresar a la escuela y ver a mis niños porque se lo importante que es que ellos se adapten y no dejen la escuela, sobre todo la transición de preescolar a la primaria”.

1st Grade Teacher.

“pues yo la verdad sí sentí un poco de miedo, pero yo ya quería regresar, yo insistía en este cambio porque pues vamos a tratar de regresar con todos los protocolos de salud que nos están y pues también yo sentía que era un poco difícil trabajar a distancia, pero la verdad yo me sentí emocionada de regresar de estar con ellos porque pues mi grupo son pequeñitos ella quería trabajar con ellos”

1st Grade Teacher.

“los niños respondieron bien a pesar de que al principio de que los niños estaban raros emocionalmente porque no sabían cómo reaccionar, además hubo un desbalance en sus emociones pues consideró porque dejaron de socializar y para algunos todo es nuevo, pero ahora ya están más adaptados”

Commissioned Principal (4th Grade Teacher).

4. DISCUSSIONS

Teachers faced difficulties in returning to school was the adaptation to face-to-face and distance education, challenges included adapting to new conditions and context. The school and the students did not have the necessary technological tools to support an online education, as Ahumada and Gil point out., (2021) due to the contingency, teachers had to make changes in their educational practice such as migrating from face-to-face education to distance education (Ahumada and Gil, 2021).

Among other difficulties, they faced a lack of access to technological resources and educational materials. This is consistent with the work of Molina (2020), who found that three out of ten teachers in rural communities did not have a computer because having a computer is not common in poor community homes, likewise there is a lack of study spaces, as well as no internet connection (Guerrero and Guerrero, 2020; (Molina, 2020).

Teachers who had to learn to use non-conventional technological platforms. As Beltrán et al, (2020) state, they faced a pandemic with inadequate preparation and training and faced challenges such as the inequalities of their students, since not everyone has the same opportunities. They faced low participation from their students due to feeling unmotivated (Ílter & Izgar, 2022).

In addition, teachers and students faced the lack of infrastructure at both home and school, the socioeconomic level and living conditions (Eroğlu & Şenol 2021), the challenges of connectivity generally caused by the location of the community and according to (Prado, 2020) one of the problems in rural schools is due to the inadequate connectivity that exists in those regions.

Therefore, it is pointed out that in rural areas, teleworking activities are not allowed due to low speed and lack of internet connection (ECLAC, 2020a). All these conditions created a digital divide between those who have access and those who don't to resources and technology due to inequality in digital skills among students (Beltrán et al, 2020; Navarrete et al, 2020; Cotino, 2020).

These difficulties above all affect people with the greatest needs who are at a disadvantage (Kuzu et al, 2022) and children with higher rates of marginalization, poverty and inequality (UNESCO, 2020) so it is necessary to propose new teaching practices, create new educational models capable of understanding and facing a crisis such as a covid-19 pandemic (Navarrete et al, 2020) that involve the right to receive quality education, that addresses inequalities in learning and generates inclusion and social participation (UNESCO, 2020).

Similarly, a risk was perceived in the health of the teachers since they experienced fear of catching covid-19 and, as has been pointed out by different authors, stress, anxiety and depression bring consequences and effects on the health of the teachers. teachers as well as in the immune system, due to the increase in working hours both at work and at home (Ahumada and Gil, 2021; Beltrán et al, 2020; Robinet and Pérez, 2020).

The uncertainty and anguish of returning to school, the use of digital tools, and the extended use of platforms in which they were not familiar, the excess of tasks imposed by the school and psychosocial factors such as confinement and social isolation (Ahumada and Gil, 2021; Robinet and Pérez, 2020) have caused an increase in anxiety in teachers. The change of academic activities, increased stress due to psychological pressure, considering that covid-19 has brought risk of death (Cao et al, 2020).

It also brought an impact on the economy due to the magnitude of costs and investments in health and education systems (McKibbin & Fernando, 2020), so the pandemic has forced health measures to be taken and its effects have been observed more impact on women due to the increase in mental health problems (Matiz et al, 2020). As stated in the results, teachers feel fearful, anguished and hopeless, but with a human predisposition to overcome collective fear, adapt to the new context, be flexible, use planning to be able to move forward, oriented towards empathy and transmission of calm in order to continue educating students (Villafuerte et al, 2020).

The responses provided by the teachers are valid and reliable because the interviews were personalized and each one voluntarily agreed to participate and express their experiences around this new context, so they were also presented with the results of the analysis and they had the opportunity to verify the accuracy of their responses.

Finally, it is necessary to carry out other studies that involve the rest of the school community to observe the effects of the reopening (UNESCO, 2020) since receiving education is a human right and therefore it is necessary to redistribute educational resources to the sectors with the greatest needs. and with high rates of poverty and marginalization, to achieve social justice in education (Ruiz, 2020).

5. CONCLUSIONES

The purpose of this article was to describe the experiences of teachers who work in a rural primary school about returning to face-to-face classes even with the covid-19 pandemic. Among the main findings obtained through this study are the difficulties in adapting to hygiene standards, the handling of children, the difficulty of coexistence in the new context and the lack of economic resources.

Likewise, critical aspects arose about the challenges in adaptability and challenges in the new school context that teachers faced, such as the use of face masks, the curriculum modification in the teaching and learning

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process. The use of new teaching tools and lack of connectivity at the school, since both they and the students in the community do not have access to digital media.

Instructors pointed out that these difficulties arise through the conditions of the community, because students were not able to access online education, since they and their families did not have digital resources and tools, so teachers had to adapt the curricular contents to the needs of their students. Students, so they could continue with their education.

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Judith Ek: conceptualización, revisión y análisis de información, investigación, metodología, administración del proyecto, recursos, software, supervisión, validación, visualización, escritura y edición.

Edith Cisneros: conceptualización, revisión y análisis de información, investigación, metodología, administración del proyecto, recursos, software, supervisión, validación, visualización, escritura y edición.

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