

# Pandemic and learning experiences in secondary schools from Río Cuarto (Argentina)

*Pandemia y experiencias de aprendizaje en escuelas secundarias de Río Cuarto (Argentina)*

*Pandemia e experiências de aprendizagem em escolas secundárias de Río Cuarto (Argentina)*

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## Abstract

The objective of this qualitative and exploratory study is to analyze meanings constructed by high school students regarding educational experiences in times of pandemic. The objective is to study real life experiences in 2020, recovering from the own words of the participants, emotions, bonds and processes of learning and agency. 518 students from secondary schools in Río Cuarto (Argentina) participated in the study and responded to an open questionnaire on virtual learning experiences. Students from 1st to 6th grade from public and private institutions were enrolled, ranging in age from 12 to 20 years old. The data was analyzed qualitatively through constant coding, categorization, and comparisons. The results indicate the predominance of the following emotions: feeling overwhelmed, stressed, frustrated, anxious, anguished, helpless, confused, demotivated, and isolated. Digital gaps and inequalities were identified in terms of institutional proposals and family support. There is a notable concern among the students about relationships and unachieved learning. However, there were also expressions that account for agency processes, the construction of new actions and projects to face adverse educational situations. Students generated alternatives to solve problems during remote learning, among which the search for pedagogical aids in peer groups, teachers, and relatives, and the organization of time and learning activities stand out. The results are interpreted in light of current studies on educational processes in the context of COVID-19. Based on the analyses and interpretations, guidelines and suggestions are proposed to think about the "new educational normal".

**Keywords:** COVID-19, high school, experiences, emotions, learning, remote education, inequality, agency.

## Resumen

El objetivo del presente estudio cualitativo y exploratorio es analizar significados construidos por estudiantes de nivel secundario respecto de experiencias educativas en tiempos de pandemia. El interés es estudiar experiencias vividas en el año 2020 recuperando, desde las voces de los participantes, emociones, vínculos y procesos de aprendizajes y de agencia. Participaron 518 estudiantes de instituciones de nivel secundario de Río Cuarto (Argentina), quienes respondieron a un cuestionario abierto sobre experiencias educativas en la virtualidad. Se incluyeron estudiantes de 1.º a 6.º año de instituciones de gestión pública y privada; las edades de los participantes oscilan entre los 12 y los 20 años. Los datos se analizaron de manera cualitativa mediante codificaciones, categorizaciones y comparaciones constantes. Los resultados indican el predominio de las siguientes emociones: agobio, estrés, frustración, ansiedad, angustia, impotencia, confusión, desmotivación y aislamiento. Se identificaron brechas digitales y desigualdades en cuanto a las propuestas institucionales y los apoyos familiares. Se observa una marcada preocupación del estudiantado por los vínculos y los aprendizajes no logrados. No obstante, también se hallaron expresiones que dan cuenta de procesos de agencia, de construcción de acciones y proyectos nuevos para afrontar situaciones educativas adversas. Los estudiantes han generado alternativas para resolver problemas durante la enseñanza remota, entre las que se destacan la búsqueda de ayudas pedagógicas en grupos de pares, en profesores y en familiares, así como la organización del tiempo y las actividades de aprendizaje. Los resultados se interpretan a la luz de estudios actuales sobre procesos educativos en contexto de COVID-19. A partir de los análisis y las interpretaciones, se proponen orientaciones y sugerencias para pensar *nuevas normalidades educativas*.

**Palabras clave:** COVID-19, escuela secundaria, experiencias, emociones, aprendizaje, educación remota, desigualdad, agencia.

## Resumo

O objetivo deste estudo qualitativo e exploratório é analisar os significados construídos por estudantes do ensino médio sobre as experiências educacionais em tempos de pandemia. O interesse é estudar experiências vividas no ano de 2020, resgatando, a partir das vozes dos participantes, emoções, vínculos e processos de aprendizagem e agência. Participaram 518 alunos de instituições de nível médio de Río Cuarto (Argentina), que responderam a um questionário aberto sobre experiências educacionais em virtualidade. Foram incluídos alunos do 1º ao 6º ano de instituições gestoras públicas e privadas, as idades dos participantes variaram entre 12 e 20 anos. Os dados foram analisados qualitativamente por meio de codificação, categorização e comparação constantes. Os resultados indicam o predominio das seguintes emoções: opressão, estresse, frustração, ansiedade, angústia, desamparo, confusão, desmotivação e isolamento. Foram identificadas lacunas e desigualdades digitais em termos de propostas institucionais e apoios familiares. Há uma preocupação marcante do corpo discente com as ligações e o aprendizado malsucedido. Porém, também foram encontradas expressões que dão conta dos processos de agenciamento, construção de ações e novos projetos para o enfrentamento de situações educacionais adversas. Os alunos

têm gerado alternativas para a resolução de problemas durante o ensino a distância, entre as quais se destacam a busca de ajudas pedagógicas em grupos de pares, professores e familiares e a organização do tempo e das atividades de aprendizagem. Os resultados são interpretados à luz dos estudos atuais sobre processos educativos no contexto do COVID-19. A partir das análises e interpretações, propõem-se diretrizes e sugestões para pensar novas normalidades educacionais.

**Palavras-chave:** COVID-19, escola Secundária, experiências, emoções, aprendizagem, educação à distância, desigualdade, agencia.

## Introduction

Among the multiple and difficult social changes caused by the pandemic, the suspension of on-site educational activities was one of the most impacting consequences. Worldwide, UNESCO (2020a) reports that this situation has affected more than 1.5 billion people. In Argentina, most educational activities were conducted remotely during 2020.

According to the 2019 Secondary Education Evaluation report in Argentina (Ministry of Education, 2020a), at this educational level, significant inequalities were observed in terms of students' income, technological resources available in homes and schools, as well as connectivity, academic performance and educational pathways (grade repetition, dropout, graduation rate, etc.).

Data collected in the second half of 2019 indicates that 53% of the population under 18 years of age lives in households where income does not cover the basic food basket. 14% of children under 18 years of age are in a poverty situation, while their households do not manage to cover the basic food basket.

Tiramonti (2019) considers that the secondary education system in Argentina is defined as inclusive in terms of access, but with a low graduation rate. The author defines the system as heterogeneous, fragmented, and differentiating by social class. Regarding the academic proposal, she argues that it is encyclopedic, of low quality, and obsolete; she also points out a prevalence of socio-educational functions over educational ones.

According to Nobile (2016), the main challenge of the intermediate level of education is to reverse the negative indicators of grade repetition, dropout, and over-age, notoriously high among the most disadvantaged sectors of society. The author points out the need for profound changes that "make the transit through secondary school a meaningful school experience, providing adequate socio-cultural tools to participate fully and equally in the contemporary world" (p. 127).

Research in times of COVID-19 indicates that many of these inequalities have been exacerbated, with widening gaps and educational difficulties at various levels of the system (Álvarez *et al.*, 2020; Bocchio, 2020; Ruiz, 2020). The Rapid Assessment Survey conducted by UNICEF (2021) points out that the lack of connectivity, availability of technological resources and informational skills limit the teaching and learning opportunities of broad sectors of Argentinian society.

In this complex and unequal context, we are interested in the exploratory and preliminary analysis of high school students' constructs regarding educational experiences in times of pandemic. In particular, we intend to study these constructs by considering emotions and emerging bonds, as well as learning construction and agency processes.

It is also relevant to consider the family and social conditions in which these experiences are constructed. We understand educational experiences as constructions, articulations of meanings, and action logics emerging from the interactions between the subjects and educational contexts (Dubet & Martuccelli, 1998).

These experiences are not constructed in a vacuum, but in broader social, cultural, and economic contexts. Likewise, emotions, bonds, and educational approaches play a prominent role in the shaping of school experiences (Nobile, 2014). We agree with Martinenco *et al.* (2020) on the importance of studying and educating emotions at the secondary level.

We understand emotions from an integral perspective articulating psychophysiological, behavioral, and cognitive issues, which are reconfigured according to the environment and individual peculiarities. Like Martin *et al.* (2015), we stress the need to adopt an integral and situational perspective of emotions; Kaplan (2019) states that they undoubtedly carry a biological component, but cannot be separated from the symbolic.

Both components are mobile and dynamic. Insofar as emotions are conditioned by social contexts, it is not possible to address them if we do not attend to human beings' relational perspectives. Emotions are cultural practices that are socially organized through affective networks; they reside neither in individuals nor in objects but are produced by interactions between bodies, by relationships between people.

Agency also plays a predominant role in the complex process of constructing educational experiences: "Understanding agency not only as the practice of resistance (...) but those practices that collaborate in the processes of subjectivation, allowing these young people to project into the future within a framework of asymmetries and social inequalities" (Nobile, 2014, p. 69).

In this sense, the issue of educational experiences and emotions in high school students acquires a special significance considering problems, inequalities, social, economic, and family complexities caused by the pandemic. The challenges of adolescence (subjectivity construction, search for their place in the world, abandonment of childhood parents) seem to become more difficult in an isolation context (Frison & Longas, 2020).

Data from the UNICEF (2021) Rapid Assessment Survey indicate feelings of anguish, fear, depression, and uncertainty among Argentinian teenagers during the pandemic. Ardini *et al.* (2020) also report feelings of confusion, frustration, boredom, anxiety, misunderstanding, insecurity, discouragement, tension, and anger in students.

Likewise, emotions linked to feelings of loneliness, isolation, and loss of bonds with friends and classmates also appear.

From the present study, we hope to contribute relevant knowledge, both for conventional and extended educational planning in the classroom and for the design of projects and programs at the institutional and regional levels. In order to collaboratively build the "new normal", it is essential to analyze experiences, emotions and lessons emerging from the pandemic, from the perspective of the educational community.

## Methodology

### Participants

518 students from the city of Río Cuarto, Argentina, participated in the sample, responding to an open-ended questionnaire on emotions in the virtual world. This sample was formed intentionally, not by probability or convenience, and it was intended to include students from different years and types of secondary schools. 64% of the participants defined their gender as female, 35% as male, and 1% as fluid or non-binary.

Ages ranged from 12 to 20 years old ( $M=15.13$   $s=1.84$ ). 22% of the participants are in the first year, 10% in the second year, 14% in the third year, 21% in the fourth year, 16% in the fifth year, and 17% in the sixth year. 51% of the survey participants attend a privately managed high school, while the remaining 49% go to a public institution. All the students indicated that this was the first time they had experienced a remote education initiative.

### Instrument

Participants answered an open-ended online questionnaire that included items referring to socio-educational data and perceptions of online educational experiences. Students were invited to express themselves freely regarding their emotions, bonds, learning, and social condition. The questions were asked within the framework of a broader study on academic emotions in times of COVID-19. The instrument is an adaptation of the questionnaire used by Suárez Lantarón, García-Perales, and Elisondo (2021) for the investigation of feelings in college students during the pandemic. The questionnaire was managed online through Google Forms.

### Procedures

In mid-December 2020, when the school year was ending, the link was sent for anonymous completion by high school students from Río Cuarto, with the consent of the school principals. The responses were analyzed qualitatively: we constructed five categories based on coding, categorization, and comparisons.

Although the categories are presented in isolation for analytical purposes, it should be clarified that they are permanently connected in the construction of a variety of educational experiences. That is, they are configured on the basis of

emotions, bonds, learning, social conditions, and agency processes. The analyses are exploratory and preliminary; they intend to demonstrate, in a general manner, some of the experiences reported by the students.

## Summary of results

### Between anger, sadness and shame: a mix of emotions

The conducted analyses indicate that students have experienced a mixture of emotions during the year 2020. These diverse emotions arise in the context of an uncertain social setting, which significantly conditions the lives of teenagers and their chances of building and rebuilding bonds.

In the responses, we observed a prevalence of emotions linked to stress, frustration, exhaustion, anguish, loneliness, and isolation. From the participants' own words, stress, frustration, and exhaustion appear to be linked to an excessive amount of compulsory educational activities.

According to the participants, distress, loneliness, and isolation are associated with communication problems with teachers and classmates. They perceive difficulties in the construction of fluid communication processes, difficulties that mainly refer to a lack of answers, feedback, and explanations from teachers, and the lack of genuine exchanges with their peers.

Some students have reported physical and mental problems that significantly affected their quality of life and required individual attention from health professionals. These participants in particular have referred to migraines, gastritis, insomnia, anxiety disorders and depression.

*The excessive amount of work to be done and the fact that the application had a date and time stressed me out (more so because we were given five or more assignments to submit in a week). Having to turn on a camera where everyone could see me didn't make me feel comfortable. When I wanted to give an answer or an opinion, I felt insecure or another classmate would always get ahead of me. I felt little interest on the part of some professors in explaining the study material, which made it difficult for us to do our work. Also, having to answer my questions online, the answer would arrive hours or days later (sometimes I didn't even get an answer), when in the classroom it was obtained instantly and you can ask them as many times as you want. (María, 18 years old, personal communication, December 2020)*

In the statements analyzed in the present study, emotions such as embarrassment and shyness also emerge significantly. "I don't want to turn on the camera", this datum appears significantly among the participants: turning on the camera generates embarrassment and shyness for them, considering it an obligation that infringes on privacy. Many claim they do not want to show their image or their personal space.

*In online classes I am very shy and I was very nervous to turn on the camera or speak for fear of looking bad or being embarrassed, many times I only used the chat application. We had a few presentations, and although during and after I felt much calmer, the weeks, days, and hours before I was terrified of making a*

mistake and being shamed in front of my teachers and classmates. I think those two were some of the worst experiences of the year. (Clara, 15 years old, personal communication, December 2020)

The findings are consistent with data from the UNICEF Rapid Assessment Survey (2021) and the study by Ardini *et al.* (2020). These studies indicate that in 2020, teenagers experienced negative emotions related to remote educational activities. Predominant among these emotions were exhaustion, distress, tension, frustration, fear, depression, anxiety, and uncertainty.

According to Núñez (2020), preliminary results from studies with teens indicate that sharing experiences with friends and peers is the most missed activity by high school students. Similar results were observed in the UNICEF survey conducted in Argentina (2021):

Adolescents have been strongly affected by difficulties in sustaining face-to-face bonds: 2 out of 3 emphasized that the hardest part of the quarantine was not seeing their friends, and 24% also mentioned as a problem being unable to meet other family members beyond their living group. (p. 18)

Bazán *et al.* (2020) note that the students surveyed reported having different feelings during the course of the quarantine, the most frequently mentioned being: anguish and/or sadness, tiredness and/or weariness, anger and/or irritability, anxiety, loneliness, and despair. The authors also observed feelings of anguish and loss of a long-awaited moment among high school seniors.

Murat *et al.* (2020) argue that graduating during a pandemic causes uncertainty, discomfort, and sadness in students, due to the loss of bonds and rituals proper to the completion of each school stage.

Similarly, in studies by Alegría Gutiérrez *et al.* (2020) and Alfonzo (2020), it has been observed that turning on the camera in virtual classes generates discomfort, stress, and embarrassment in some adolescent groups. Many consider this action to be very invasive and infringes on their privacy. In this regard, we consider it relevant to ask ourselves about the role of image and peer valuations in adolescence, especially in the current climate of isolation and "compulsory" technological mediation.

According to Kaplan (2016), shame is perceived as a frequent emotion in educational contexts and in teen groups. This emotion is linked to the fear of losing love, prestige, recognition, and group affiliation. Shame arises when the subject feels that he/she does not meet the expectations of others, so it has a strong social component.

While going to the blackboard was an action that frequently caused embarrassment in classroom contexts, in times of pandemic, turning on the camera seems to be an embarrassing event for many young people. Turning on the camera, in addition to showing one's own body, implies rendering visible one's personal space, the home, and its particularities.

In short, the analysis of students' emotions in times of pandemic is crossed by the specific contextual conditions and by the specificities of the evolutionary stage they are undergoing. According to Tustanoski *et al.* (2020), the inability to leave home and to meet peers and friends hinders the forms of being and doing

typical of adolescence: leaving childhood parents behind and gaining a place in the outside world.

## **The value of bonds: “we need to be heard”**

In this category, we obtained responses from participants who point out the need for spaces for sound off and interaction with teachers and peers. The analyses conducted show the importance assigned to communication processes by the students. The expressions highlight the need for constant communication, both on issues related to curricular topics, as well as on emotional, bonding, and social issues.

The students consider that in remote learning, communication is not fluid, a situation that hinders learning and bonds in general. Communication problems are linked to feelings of loneliness and isolation. As we can see, this category is linked to the analyses made in the section “Between anger, sadness, and shame: a mix of emotions”. Poor communication and limited synchronous encounters seem to generate sadness, loneliness, and isolation in the students.

Bonds build and rebuild educational experiences (Nobile, 2014). In times of pandemic and compulsory isolation, bonds and communication processes acquire new formats, sometimes configuring experiences that are perceived as adverse by students.

*As a student I felt on my own when I had doubts, you didn't have the teachers, and when you asked them or insisted because they took several days to answer you, they asked you to wait because they were busy with work and, in the end, you turned to your classmates because you didn't want to continue burdening them. (María, 13 years old, personal communication, December 2020)*

The analyses carried out show two types of communicative processes with teachers during 2020. The former refers to experiences where communication has been null or scarce. Several students have indicated they have never interacted with professors. They have only sent in assignments and, in many cases, they have not received any feedback.

A group of students indicates that they have never had virtual synchronous sessions with teachers. In such cases, students demand more teacher presence, frequent exchanges, adequate organization, and clear criteria. In this context, it is significant that several students expressed gratitude for being listened to in the questionnaire conducted for this research, and for finding a platform to express their emotions and desires.

They also valued the questionnaire as an opportunity to express their points of view, and make criticisms and suggestions. The latter typology groups experience where students have felt they have been supported, listened to, and helped. Those who felt this way are grateful to their teachers. Students emphasize the importance of empathy in understanding complex personal and family situations.

*But what really makes me angry is that teachers, in general, are more concerned about deadlines and the delivery of things than about the mental health of their students, and I've been wanting to say that for a long time (...) No one was capable of asking me, at least not me, and I am talking about my own point of view, how I*



felt, OK, because maybe they were not interested, just don't make any demands of me because you have no idea how I feel inside. I believe that what I think and say, many people think the same way and maybe they don't dare to tell you, because we are not machines, not all the information they give us is kept in a little folder (...) Many young students commented thru the networks a few months ago how bad and stressed they felt at school, that they didn't want to be forced to turn on the camera in virtual classes because their self-esteem was at rock bottom and there was nothing that could raise it. (Zoe, 14 years old, personal communication, December 2020)

The demand for greater communication made by the participants is consistent with data provided by UNICEF (2021): 23% of adolescents in households without internet had no contact with their teachers during the quarantine period. In addition, it is significant that a large number of those who do communicate with their teachers only do so once a week or even less frequently (43%).

The organization concludes that progress in communication between teachers and students was seen during the school year; however, a significant percentage of teens maintain low levels of contact with their teachers. The research by Ardini *et al.* The research by Ardini *et al.* (2020) also points out that students perceive difficulties in communication with teachers, poor returns and feedback.

In short, participants demand more communication with teachers regarding curricular topics as well as family and emotional situations. Virtuality seems to hinder educational communication in a broad sense, both in terms of learning queries and feedback, as well as in issues related to the emotional development of adolescents.

## **Metacognitive reflections: “I didn't learn anything”, “I have trouble staying interested”**

The analyses performed indicate that many of the participants consider that they have not acquired any learning during remote education. Several of the recovered responses clearly reveal: “I didn't learn anything”. In general, they perceive that they have not learned and that it has been a “year wasted”. Students' statements also indicate difficulties in maintaining interest, motivation, and attention during remote education. Several comment that, at times, they have dropped out of activities and then resumed them.

However, the analyses also show some cases in which adolescents recognize that some learning has been achieved, especially in reference to procedural content associated with the use of technologies, and reflections on their own emotional and cognitive processes. In short, this category reflects diverse perceptions of the learning acquired, while a greater group perceives little learning, another group recognizes some achievements during remote education during pandemics.

School is about memorizing and passing, not learning, and this is a big mistake. With the preventive and compulsory isolation, these defects stood out in a big way generating impotence and discomfort in their students, taking away their desire to learn and progress. I hope this will serve as an experience for teachers and educators. Personally, it has been a year without any real learning, what I have learned I have done on my own. I have felt abandoned and alone in this process. (María, 17 years old, personal communication, December 2020)

The participants' statements are consistent with the data collected by UNICEF (2021): 31% of students consider that they learned "very little" and 49% that they have only achieved "some learning" in 2020. Among teenagers without internet access, 46% perceive that they learned "very little" or "nothing". Data from the Pedagogical Continuity Report are also oriented in this direction: 45% of teens agree with the following statement: "I feel that if we do not return to in-person classes as soon as possible, I will not learn anything" (Ministry of Education, 2020b).

Autonomy and self-regulation of learning processes are essential in virtual learning. Similarly, motivation is a key factor in the building of knowledge through remote environments. Several of the participating teens have pointed out problems in giving continuity to educational processes and sustaining them throughout the year. UNESCO (2020b) has stressed the importance of paying attention to the self-regulation processes of learning in adolescents and youngsters during remote learning, as difficulties are observed in time management and in carrying out diachronic activities.

Most of them consider that they have learned very little or nothing during 2020, however, in a more detailed reading of the students' comments, we observe a variety of meaningful learning, not only in relation to the curriculum but also to emotions and bonds. Some acknowledge having learned new ways of building knowledge and using technologies, while others emphasize the importance of this learning for their academic and professional future.

*I think that in this particular year, we learned more about our feelings, it is a year in which nobody knew what was going to happen, we learned things we didn't know about ourselves, we learned how to use the virtual method, and above all, we learned to value ourselves. A year full of sadness and a year full of learning (Iara, 14 years old, personal communication, December 2020)*

Regarding the learning achieved, some students recognize processes of knowledge acquisition that transcend the contents defined in the syllabus of each course and cover a wide range of reflections on technologies, emotions, bonds, challenges, and projections. This data is linked to findings made by Giardino (2020) and those collected by the Pedagogical Continuity Survey of the Ministry of Education (2020b): in these studies, adolescents recognize learning processes linked to the use of technologies and self-regulation of educational processes.

In short, we value the metacognitive reflections made by students regarding both "non-learning" and the learning achieved. The views of the participants show inequalities regarding the chances of self-regulation and learning management in remote contexts.

Not everyone has had the same educational experiences, nor the same support; the pandemic exacerbates multiple and diverse inequalities that condition learning. "Precisely those students who have fewer objective conditions conducive to self-regulation are those who need them most because the spatiotemporal order of the school (...) is now disrupted" (di Napoli, 2020, pp. 53-54).

## Miscellaneous inequalities: “I don’t have internet”, “I must care for my siblings”

Since educational experiences are always constructed in the framework of broader contexts, it is essential to analyze the social, economic, and family conditions in which individuals learn in times of pandemic. Just as we observed a mix of emotions in the first category, we also found a mix of inequalities in the teenagers' opinions that condition the possibilities of learning in times of pandemic.

Specifically, the students' opinions indicate unequal conditions related to the availability of resources, technological knowledge, and educational support from family members and teachers. Furthermore, some participants argue that they lack the necessary time and space for the development of remote learning activities. The students' views also reveal family problems that condition learning and the possibility of completing assignments.

Regarding the availability of digital resources and skills, the data emerging from this research match the results found in other studies that have also referred to digital gaps during the pandemic (Álvarez *et al.*, 2020; Bocchio, 2020; Ruiz, 2020; UNICEF, 2021). These studies show that the lack of material resources and connectivity has limited the educational opportunities for students. Similarly, the lack of knowledge about technological uses seems to have negatively conditioned learning for some students.

*It is very difficult for me to enter virtual classrooms sometimes... My computer broke down and I had to do it from my cell phone. Also, some platforms were very complicated to manage. I don't feel motivated at all, my work submission is by inertia and obligation (Agustina, 16 years old, personal communication, December 2020)*

Other students reported very few synchronous encounters with teachers, declaring disorientation, little understanding of contents, lack of feedback and exchange opportunities with teachers. In the analyzed group there are notable differences between those who have had opportunities for virtual meetings with teachers and those who have not: the latter expressed greater feelings of isolation, loneliness, and confusion regarding learning activities.

Students perceive differences between educational programs offered by different institutions. This data is consistent with the findings of the Pedagogical Continuity Survey of the Ministry of Education, where it was observed that 71% of students in privately managed high schools had regular synchronous meetings with teachers; on the other hand, the percentage in public schools is around 30% (Ministry of Education, 2020b).

According to Preti & Fernandez (2020) the gap between public and private schools is notorious, while in private schools they participate more with videoconferencing and other platforms, in public schools, usage of WhatsApp is predominant.

*I would have liked to have weekly video calls as normal class time, I saw many who do it that way and my school didn't do it, there were very few. Teachers who didn't provide corrections and said "if there is no corrections, it's because it's fine", which from my point of view discourages many students, it wouldn't be a bad thing to put a congratulations message or at least a simple correction because I doubt*

that all the work I handed in during the year is 100% fine and that's how I got it. To tell you the truth, I found this year very stressful and I felt very lonely in many of the subjects. Maybe... this didn't happen in every school, but I felt this way in mine. (Andrés, 16 years old, personal communication, December 2020)

The analyses also show differences among students regarding family circumstances. While some students emphasize the support received from some family members, others describe complex situations that have demanded time and effort (taking care of siblings, performing domestic chores, etc.), hindering learning activities in some cases. 20% of those chaperoning high school students indicated: "I cannot properly assist the children with their schoolwork due to my job's demands" (Ministry of Education, 2020b). In the research by Ardini *et al.* (2020), students also reported learning difficulties due to a lack of family support.

The educational institution I attend never cared about their students' situation. Many kids don't go to report their situation for different reasons, out of embarrassment, fear, etc. My situation was one of those. Some kids had the opportunity for their parents not to have to be at work in person, unfortunately for me and my siblings, my parents had to go to work, as they are essential personnel. I had to take care of my brothers when they were at work, leaving me with no time to do/submit some assignments and log on to some classes. My routine was disrupted and so was my mental health. The institution was VERY absent in this regard, leaving kids on the sidelines and burdening them more and more. It is stressful for a 15-year-old boy/girl to see how his/her classmates finish everything, but not him/her because he/she had to take care of his/her siblings and time was not enough. (Lourdes, 15 years old, personal communication, December 2020)

In summary, multiple and complex social, material, and symbolic inequalities configure complex environments for virtual learning. It is not only a matter of having connectivity and technological resources; it also depends on the institutional educational approaches and the educational support available at home. The work situation of families, care practices, and economic difficulties make up a complex framework where learning opportunities are often limited.

## **The role of the agency: "I prefer on-site education, but I was able to get ahead"**

The analyses indicate that the vast majority of students positively value and prefer face-to-face education over virtual. Although some said to have enjoyed the experience as a challenge, most of them disliked the virtual method. They emphasize communication, social interactions with teachers and classmates, the mere presence of the teacher, explanations, the chance for fluid communication, the opportunity to share different points of view, etc., as positive factors in the face-to-face mode.

The convenience of remote learning and the possibility to manage time autonomously were mentioned as favorable for learning through virtual means. Some participants expressed that there was no other alternative and that, in this way, it was possible to give continuity to educational processes.

The present research findings are in line with data from other studies, where preferences for in-person education and adaptive experiences to virtuality are

also observed (Ministry of Education, 2020b; Suárez *et al.*, 2021). In the research by Ardini *et al.* (2020) the following advantages of online education were observed: 34.8% consider that the digital format is in line with the current technological development and 12.8% point out that this form of learning prepares them better for their professional future.

Students also point out advantages linked to the shorter time spent (22.7%), the convenience of not having to travel (8.6%), the versatility of course times (7.3%), and the flexibility provided by certain tools (2.8%). Among the main difficulties, students point out the lack of teacher support (24.9%), lack of information (15.5%), inadequate spaces (13.5%), and poor equipment (13.3%). The lack of knowledge in the use of the tool reaches 8.8% and the impossibility of group work (13%) also appears as difficulties.

I feel that the virtual classroom is more comfortable since I don't have to leave my house, I turn on the computer and that's it. At the same time, nothing compares to the classroom, with the thousands of moments and experiences that can be lived in that way, I think that is what made me feel worse. Virtuality replaces face-to-face, but only academically, because nothing replaces what you experience in person at school and nothing is going to give us back all that we lost, and that is the biggest sorrow. (Agustina, 17 years old, personal communication, December 2020)

Some students have reported adapting to remote education: they perceive learning and potentialities from the experiences they have had. Perhaps it depends on learning styles or personality: those who work individually and more autonomously seem to adapt easily to remote learning.

At the beginning of the year, I felt very insecure about everything, I didn't like this online modality and many times I despaired because I didn't know if I was going to be able to submit anything, nor did I know I was going to be able to cope well with this mode. So then I sat down, got settled, and started to organize myself and write in a notebook the class schedules and write down the assignment due dates. That helped me to be able to turn in my assignments on time and not stress as much as before. And thanks to this I was able to complete and finish very well this year. I don't mind studying this way (although I still prefer in-person classes), but this way helps me to experiment in other areas and in different ways, but I like to accept and experience new challenges, and I am willing to enjoy and face them. (Celeste, 18, personal communication, December 2020)

From the analysis of some students' comments, it is possible to recognize processes of agency, i.e., the construction of new actions and projects to face adverse or complex educational situations. Students have generated alternatives to solve problems during remote learning, among which the search for educational support from peer groups, teachers, and family members, as well as the organization of time and learning activities, stand out.

The construction of networks among students, the guidance of adults, and the strategies for self-regulation of their learning seem to have contributed to their adaptation to virtuality. In some cases, these actions generate enthusiasm and motivation to continue facing challenges, as they enhance the feeling of agency and control over one's own learning and projects.

## Conclusions

Learning in times of pandemic is not an easy task for adolescents. There is a strong concern for bonds and emotions in the face of an adverse and uncertain context that has been prolonged over time. Analyses have indicated that teenagers experienced a mix of emotions during remote learning, with a high degree of stress, frustration, exhaustion, anguish, loneliness, and isolation.

From the eyes of adults, turning on the camera and enabling microphones seems like a simple action, but for many teens, it is a big challenge. It is not only a question of having technological devices, it is a much more complex game of images, social emotions, and processes of construction of their own subjectivity.

In this sense, emotions related to shame and shyness appear through the words of the participants. Regarding bonds and communication processes, the participants point out problems in the building of genuine interactions with teachers and peers, a situation that generates certain feelings and hinders learning. In contrast, or in opposition to stereotypes indicating that teenagers are not committed to school, we found a constant concern for unachieved learning.

However, the analyses not only show us diverse emotions, inequalities, and problems, but we also found processes of agency and some experiences valued by students as conducive to conceptual, procedural, and behavioral learning.

We observed processes of self-regulation of learning, search for time management alternatives, and requests for educational support from teachers, classmates, and family members who, in the face of adversity, seem to have been able to promote significant learning. Relevant learning linked to the appropriation of technologies, the development of autonomy, and care practices also appear within the results of the analyses.

## Final reflections and future lines of research

We know that the present study has the limitation of being an initial exploratory analysis, but it also has the advantage of retrieving feedback from key participants, such as students, in a remote emergency educational space.

In the future, we are committed to focusing on certain variables that may contribute to understanding certain differences, i.e.: to delve deeper into gender issues, the management modality of the institutions, the age and academic level of the students, among others.

It remains to gather opinions from teachers about the experienced situation and the approaches that are surely being developed in this new way of teaching. It is essential to work on the emotional aspects of the educational process, beyond the synchronous meeting in the virtual world or the scarce face-to-face time in "bubbles".

Reviewing the causes of this situation, framing it in a global context but also in a particular context, favoring the opportunity to express our feelings, what triggers them, and sharing these states, can be a healthy way to deal collectively with these difficult times. The joint construction of genuine dialogue spaces is along the lines proposed by Martín *et al.* (2015) and Kaplan (2019) about thinking of situated emotions, conditioned by social contexts, and interactively built in this particular way in which students, teachers, and the whole community are required to relate to each other.

The generation of peer and teacher tutorials is imperative, aiming at the building of solid bonds that perhaps go beyond the academic, rescuing relationships, that which happens and provokes each educational encounter, with the peculiarities that it entails. It is crucial to guarantee the presence of other means, permanent scaffolding, to support and listen.

To build agreements regarding forms of communication and exposure that do not jeopardize the student's or teacher's privacy, making room for discussion concerning public and private space. It is necessary to redeem what has been gained: to make visible the metacognitive processes regarding the learning achieved, to highlight what has been accomplished in spite of adversity, to value the knowledge acquired and to reflect on the learning of processes and the learning in progress.

Once again, students make essential aspects evident: it is always possible to continue trying different ways of teaching and learning, despite differences and rifts; it will be the building of a framework, that supporting network that will determine the great discrepancies in the value of a situation, no matter how extreme and adverse it may be.

#### **Notes:**

##### **Final approval of the article:**

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##### **Authorship contribution:**

The authors have collaborated equally, in all stages of the article.

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