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Voices and images of hope: the rebirth of educational television in Ecuador in times of COVID-19

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We must stay at home! That was the slogan on March 11, the day the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic. Needless to say, no country was prepared for this crisis; some were better prepared than others, though, and some adapted quicker than others. Our home country, Ecuador, was not among those countries, due to a myriad of variables that are at play at any given moment in our national reality: even if we had had a “manual” to respond to COVID-19, the subjacent chaos, incompetence, lack of education and mere common sense, indifference, individualism, and idiosyncrasy, as well as, and especially, the blatant, and increasing, social inequality, made worst yet by recent budget cuts to the educational and health sectors, created the conditions for a perfect storm that made Ecuador one of the worst-hit countries worldwide.

It is in this context that the Ministry of Education had to suspend all classes, at all levels and in every district of the country, on March 13. In need of financial resources to massively implement distance learning to guarantee the right to education during a pandemic, the Ministry of Education worked within an emergency group activated by UNICEF that established mechanisms of urgent cooperation between Ecuadorian institutions, national organizations, and private companies like Diners Club.

One of the premises upon which this “cluster of education” worked was that virtual education, while important, was not enough, since only 45.5% of Ecuadorian households have access to the internet (INEC, 2019, p. 10). Moreover, a study found out that 38% of those children and youth were “distressed,” and indeed that 24% of them declared to be “depressed” (UNICEF, 2020a, p. 8). Of course, teachers were “distressed” and “depressed,” too, and, at least in some cases, they did not have access to the internet at home, either . . . much less the abilities required to teach virtual classes effectively or to deal with the social-emotional questions that the sanitary emergency brought up in almost every Ecuadorian family. Improvisation was at the order of the day, sometimes heroically so (teachers who sent audio files to their students via WhatsApp, or who printed out materials and brought them personally to each student’s home), but an institutional response was needed.

According to studies, 9 out of 10 households of the country have a television set (UNICEF, 2020b, para. 2), which makes television the most popular and perhaps the most effective medium. Hence, it was determined that television formats had to be created in order to “introduce” filmed classes with relevant information for children, youth, and their families.

On March 16, UNICEF and the Iberoamerican Institute of Natural and Cultural Heritage (IPANC), an intergovernmental public organ with a focus on promoting education, culture, science, and technology, signed an agreement to start the project “A-prender la tele,” which was broadcasted daily, and for free, on every single local, regional, or national television channel, due to legal preconditions in Ecuador. Since there was no budget for educational television, however, nor for public media (which was, in fact, being closed by the government, as a measure of austerity), the financing had to come from international organizations, without which the continuity of education could simply not have been obtained. One of the authors of this article, Mónica Maruri Castillo, is the Director of IPANC, which was in charge of the actual development of the project, whose challenge was to generate educational resources for television (mostly “teleclases” or filmed lectures aided by some degree of animation) quickly, but without sacrificing quality. Besides, emphasis was put on covering the topics of the curriculum, but also on stressing the importance of emotional regulation and acknowledgment, of learning in informal and daily-life contexts, of personal care and hygiene, of peaceful coexistence, of physical activity and prevention, etc.

In total, 394 programs have been produced and aired from May 4 until the date of this writing (the final days of November), at which formal education in Ecuador is still almost universally being performed online (96 more programs are being finished to be aired in December). Each one of the four seasons of “A-prender la tele” that have been made until now has included an increasing number of episodes designed for different ages and, accordingly, for different levels of education. The Ministry of Education provided essential content, and UNICEF and Diners Club contributed with funding and assistance, with which IPANC and the team of experts in educational television put learning situations in television formats, aided by actors/presenters. All in all, up to 20 episodes have been produced weekly, which is something that had never been seen in this country, much less on public television and with budgets so low that make this a virtually no-budget initiative, with an average of just 800 USD for the pre-production, production, and post-production of each finished episode.

This is exhausting work, but it is of utmost importance. In our country, right now, education cannot continue without educational television. In order to guarantee that education – which in Ecuador we consider to be a right and not a commodity, and it is constitutionally protected in that way – is available, accessible, and inclusive, we have to accept that not every aspect of the curriculum will be covered, but also that not every standard of television production quality will be met. We also have to accept that there will be households that we, sadly, do not reach. Further, we have to admit the fundamental truth that distance learning does not replace face-to-face, classroom education, as well as that the social-emotional support that we can provide through television, the internet, radio, and other media, will never quite amount to a hug. And we are all eager to hug each other again, albeit we want, after this experience, to remember how important

educational television is and can be, in the future, to support, reinforce, and universalize education on a truly national level.

But this is a constant struggle with structures, both mental and legal. It is also a constant fight for economic resources, funding, and acknowledgment. Many countries of our region, including Ecuador, had its own platforms with digital educational resources; all those countries had to, abruptly, deal with the fact that a good portion of its population did not have internet access at home. That is why educational television started to trend again, which is a positive outcome of a terrible situation, we maintain. In Ecuador, educational television was already on intensive care *before* the advent of COVID-19, with meager financing or even with zero budget, permanently reprising programs that were produced several years ago. Yet, even under these adverse circumstances, and thanks to international cooperation and private funding, we have been able to reach almost every family in our country with content from the curriculum, but also with social-emotional support and with programs about daily learning at home. We have been able to strengthen international alliances and to work together for a better tomorrow. From now on, our focus will be on how to make this an experience for the future, not just for COVID-19, and to promote the institutionalization and revalorization of educational television in Ecuador, in order for it to be perceived as a right by the citizens of our country.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Marcela Samudio Granados (PhD [c] in Education and Social Communication at the University of Malaga, Spain) is an independent researcher. She participated in the creation of the Tele-Education project (Educa) in Ecuador, where she worked for five years. Also, she has taught at different Ecuadorian universities, and has done research on rural development, educational television, identity, and gender.

Mónica Maruri Castillo (MA in New Technologies for Education from the Autonomous University of Barcelona, Spain) is the Executive Director of IPANC, which produces educational television. She created the Tele-Education project (Educa) in Ecuador and was its Manager. She has been a member of the Board of Directors of CIESPAL and of the Association of Educational Televisions of Iberoamerica.

Roberto Ponce-Cordero holds a PhD in Latin American Literature and Cultural Studies from the University of Pittsburgh, USA. After having worked at the Ministry of Education of Ecuador, where he was the National Director of Pedagogical Improvement, he is currently a professor at Universidad Nacional de Educación, Ecuador.

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