Educating through instant messaging: breaking down barriers to study together

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Since the covid-19 pandemic that devastated the world, many social dynamics had to change, including formal education, where schools were no longer the places where children had to be in order to acquire knowledge. Virtual classes came to replace face-to-face classes, and teachers and students had to adapt to new learning methodologies and technologies.

To learn more about this issue, we spoke with Carmen Barrantes, advocacy and communications coordinator for Latin America at Terre des Hommes Suisse (TdHS), who quickly formed a team in March 2020 to respond to the new challenges that confinement brought to education, and was one of the first to develop pedagogical sessions through WhatsApp, which not only served to transmit knowledge and information, but above all, to create containment and support for students, and capacities for teachers, who learned to teach with new resources and also with humor, in high Andean and Amazonian areas.

How was the process of designing the pedagogical proposal of learning experiences in the context of distance education developed through instant messaging?

The process of designing the pedagogical proposal of learning experiences in the middle of the pandemic was really challenging, it was developed with a lot of uncertainty in relation to the acceptance it could have, because we developed it at a time when people were still hoping to return to face-to-face school.

The design of the pedagogical proposal started in March 2020 when the pandemic had just confined us, locked us in and isolated us. One issue that was clear to us was the importance of getting the children to work together again and that physical isolation did not mean social isolation, so we started working on this proposal even before it was officially announced that there would be no face-to-face classes.

We hired the team and began to experiment methodologically, to develop contents and strategies of the classes and their phases, at the beginning of the pandemic and we adapted it.

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Who participated in its design?

The way we reacted to the emergency was quickly put together. A team of six people, a sociologist, two teachers, one of whom spoke Quechua, a psychologist and myself, a journalist and lawyer with experience in popular education with the Paulo Freire approach.

This initiative received the backing of the TdHS National Coordinating Committee to take a gamble at a time when it was still being debated how long the pandemic would last and whether it would be wise to wait to see if we would return to classroom-based schooling, which was very important for us. The response from TdHS was immediate, so that in the second semester of 2020 we already had a methodological proposal that we began to validate and our beneficiary students began to receive WhatsApp classes, which allowed teachers to meet with students, and even parents who participated, because the classes were heard through their phones.

What makes this proposal different from others and how did you adapt it to the communities you work with?

The main thing, and it is noticeable when we interview the children and ask them what impacted them, is that we achieved school continuity. In 2021 that has passed, our school continuity in rural, high Andean and Amazonian areas is 100%. The students who participate in this proposal point out that one of the things that attracted them was that they could learn while having fun, talking with the teachers and feeling welcomed.

This proposal, in addition to taking technology into account, is intentionally designed with the objective of being a welcoming educational space that provides containment at the same time, because let's remember that it was the time of the first wave, there was this whole situation of collapse of the health system, the thousands of losses of life began there, it was a country in mourning, with students in mourning, parents in mourning, teachers in mourning. At that time we bet on that welcoming, fun, but also critical thinking space.

The topics we dealt with were all related to the situation, from aspects on how to accommodate to study at home, where there is only one cell phone or one room. That session was very successful, the parents thanked us because they felt more relieved with the tips we gave them, how to arrange the spaces, how to put the desk near the light, organize the use of the radio so that they can study in a quiet way.

The topics were well grounded in reality, in the distribution of household chores. The learning took place in the area of the social person, but we were no strangers to other issues that could arise, how to organize your home, the schedule, how many people are there, it was applied in that context.

The population was not alien to us, we have four years of working with them, that accumulated experience definitely helped us, the classes were not as long as the official time, we have to have shorter periods, flexibility, the context for us was important, it was not about complying with the rules, we had to respond to reality, to the presence or absence of connectivity and equipment, to the concentration time of the children, we gave ourselves certain licenses. We did it based on experience and on conversations with the children themselves.
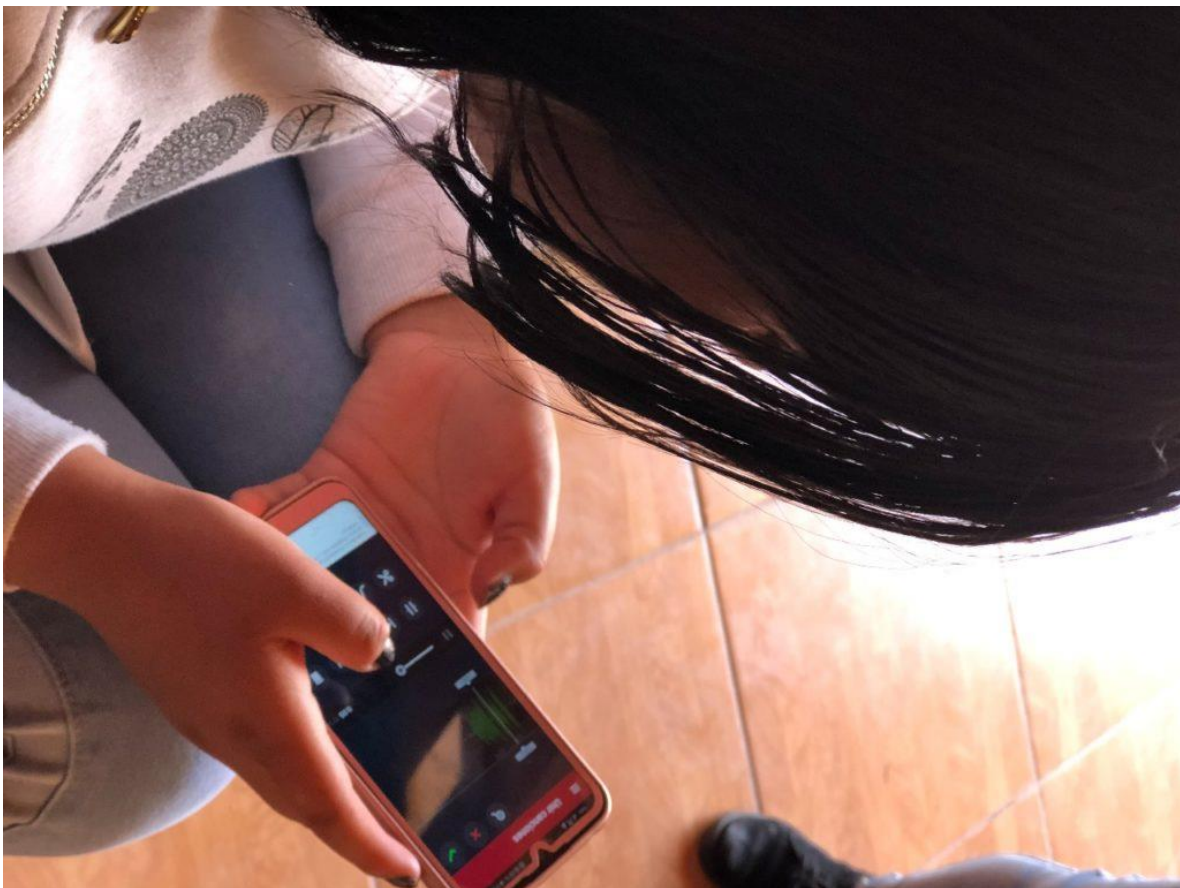
How did the teachers receive it? How did the students receive it?

The teachers received it with skepticism, they had no idea how to make a synchronous class. The students had a better idea, they were more receptive, the first sticker that the teacher sent them had already won them over, they knew the figure and the characters that they liked, all this work was done with the teachers, making them aware of the resources, the characters and mechanisms that the children used to communicate with WhatsApp. They knew that these resources were not only to call their attention, they could use them when they were distracted, others

to make them stop, to make them smile, they were taught the use that the resources could have.

How did this proposal help teachers and students achieve their educational goals? What kind of solutions did it provide them with?

The teachers learned in the trainings how to use the youth language, to use WhatsApp for synchronous communication, on the subject of the danger of school dropout. There was not yet all the evidence of dropout, it could be that there is absenteeism but not the dropout that was felt later.

We talked about strategies, methodology and what should be found in the classroom, also how to work the topics, the cognitive and formative aspects, it was important not to neglect them, but a dosage was necessary that would allow,

precisely, to manage in a context of crisis, we could not be oblivious to that context. They also had training in how to handle technology, some learned to make TikTok, to make their own stickers, to know that they had to have a package of audiovisual resources that would be their best allies for communication via WhatsApp. These were the solutions provided to them.

What were the main difficulties encountered along the way and how did you resolve them?

The proposal started, because there was skepticism, to try and show them a class in which they felt confident, after a while depending on the school, the facilities provided by the institution, the infrastructure, the number of students. So the process could last three months, six months, there are schools with which we work on a stable basis that are allies and we were already periodically monitoring the work they were doing.

We did not start from zero, because we already knew the population and there was a subsequent accompaniment, not only monitoring, but in classes, the basic difficulties are always connectivity, because it affects you when in areas where connectivity is lower and resources cannot be downloaded, even if they weigh little, the existence of little equipment in a house, usually a telephone, a father or mother who uses it to work, the children who use it to study. We solved it in part with organizations, some cases if they had a telephone that did not have a line, we have supported the direct beneficiaries of our projects to have a telephone line so that they can do the classes.

As a final evaluation, did they meet the objectives they had set?

We largely achieved the objectives set, there was educational continuity, teachers today know more than before about creating welcoming spaces of solidarity with their students that they will be able to apply in the on-site school, strategies that are not only typical of the WhatsApp.

Machismo has advanced, teachers have validated that the student does not lose respect because they apply humor in class, that there does not necessarily have to be a distant and formal relationship to have authority, for example. I think there have been surprises regarding the maturity of the children, at the beginning we had a class about the safe exit, about taking biosecurity measures, and they talked about their anguish, their regrets for not going out, their frustrations regarding what the pandemic was doing to their lives. The teachers were very surprised by the candid ways in which they exchanged, to such an extent that it could already be worrisome in the sense that they could be children vulnerable to leaving school to go to work and not leave their parents alone, those who had families in which the parents had lost their jobs. Beyond the lessons that WhatsApp classes work and that all the resources are available for learning to take place, in terms of pedagogical strategies there is also an innovation.