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New Rurality and Traditional Families. Multigrade Schools in Colombia and Mexico during Pandemics

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present an exploration on the response of parents of two rural multigrade schools facing the homeschooling activities in the context of pandemics. To frame a comparative perspective some conceptual work was done about new rurality and family structure before interviewing parents of both schools about distribution of tasks among family members, distribution of time and technological support. The study concluded that the traditional structure of rural families made easy to carry on with the tasks of home, labor and education.

Keywords: new rurality, traditional families, multigrade schools

Introduction

It is assumed that schools play a significant role in the development of rural communities. Nevertheless, during the pandemic schools were closed but not the education activities. These were migrated home, where parents took a mayor role to play. What was the role they had undertaken? An exploration was carried out in the communities of the unitary schools in Colombia and Mexico. The paper starts with an overview of development theories to focus what is known as new rurality and then explores the family structure in these settings to frame the response of families to homeschooling activities during the pandemics, especially on the topics of distribution of activities among family members, time distribution and technological support.

New rurality

In all narratives of development theories, rurality is seen as a prelude to urbanity. From the different theories rurality represents the delay, the ballast that must be towed towards modernity. In linear theories, rurality represents the poor areas that must be brought up for economic takeoff; for prismatic theories, rural areas must be integrated into industrialization, be it in its agro-industrial aspect or in export manufacturing; in dualist theories the task for rural development is to bring the benefits of urban life to their communities. Paradoxically, the advancement of the rural areas consists of its de-ruralization, in other words, its urbanization (Mendoza, 2004).

Regional disparities, as well as unsustainable social inequities, have produced a mass and growing migration to national and international urban centers, depopulating rural communities, and therefore generating shortages in food production. Rurality has undergone important transformations; the sale and rental of land, farming by contract,

the introduction of agro-industries, as well as a greater diversification of economic activities related to rural tourism, commercial and food services, maquiladora companies, as well as greater development of communications and transport, environmental impacts, hydrocarbon spills, insecurity, many rural communities had begun a change towards occupations different to agriculture and cattle raising. In some territories, rural life with its traditions and cultural expressions tends to become part of the world of nostalgia. Given the anachronism of the rural-urban theoretical dichotomy, rural sociology has been introducing more appropriate concepts such as rurbanization, agro-cities, peri-urban agriculture, among others, which try to account for the current new rurality.

Traditional family

The changes in the family structure that have occurred in industrialized societies in recent decades are notorious. Martin Carnoy (2006) has observed the behavior of highly industrialized societies such as those of European countries and the United States, where a growth in single people is notorious, so is the incremental number of couples without children and single-parent families. For this author, changes in the structure of families are part of the changes in the structure of work and the labor market.

Although in some aspects there could be some similarities with those urban areas of Latin America where there are signs of flexibility in the labor markets (Lladó Lárraga, Sánchez Rodríguez & Navarro-Leal, 2013) the truth is that little research has been done on the rural family in Latin America. According to Vargas Calle (2022), more than talking about family, one should talk about families (in the plural), due to the uniqueness, variety, and complexity that each one presents.

Regarding the analyzed research, this author comments on three types of activities that make up the daily life of the rural family: non-agricultural work that allows some extra income; agricultural work that generates crops both for sale and for self-consumption; and the activities of the house that fall on the mother, daughters-in-law, sons and daughters, tasks that are distributed according to age: “the little ones fed the animals, the middle ones helped in the kitchen and the older ones went to work with the father” (Vargas Calle, 2022, p. 6). In summary, through the reviewed investigations it can be observed that still there is a traditional pattern of the extended family with a traditional distribution of activities.

Rural education

Just as rurality is perceived from development perspectives as a delay in the arrival of modernity, education is seen as a channel for modernization and social mobility. In this the family places great expectations, although the schools are generally perceived as “unfinished” or “incomplete”. Due to the sparse and dispersed population, these are often rural concentration schools and multigrade schools, which are generally considered by their teachers as “transit” schools, for whom programs have been implemented in various countries to promote their permanence.

Various studies show the benefits of the rapprochement between school and community. Ortega Arias and Cárcamo Vásquez (2018) reviewed research aimed at analyzing the relationships between families and schools and found strong conclusions: “a good organizational climate, good personal relationships, collaborative work

between families and schools favors good learning” (p. 115). A necessary reciprocity of relationships is recognized, while families recognize in school “the possibility that their children acquire educational credentials that facilitate their insertion into the future labor market and upward social mobility” (p. 116), aspirations that in the rural environment (old or new) do not differ from family aspirations in the urban environment.

However, despite these common aspirations, families do not share the same type of schools, unlike graduate schools with homogeneous grades and curricula in urban areas, in rural areas it is common to find multigrade schools, which, from the urban perspective, they are considered as “incomplete” schools, “in transition” in correspondence with development theories that consider rurality as a prelude to the urban, in a temporary situation, in a transition stage towards modernity. They are generally located in the smallest and most dispersed rural localities and consist of small schools in which a teacher attends students of different grades, ages and levels in the same classroom. In the case of Mexico, a 2019 report indicated that 78.3% of these schools were located in areas with a high and very high level of marginalization and 84.9% in the highest levels of isolation and that “one in three basic public education schools (36.7%) are multigrade” (Castro, Perales & Priego, 2019).

As for Colombia, the first Unitary School was in Pamplona, department of Santander, in charge of the teacher Oscar Mogollón in the 1960s. Later the school multiplied into 150 pilot schools. This is how in 1967 the Colombian government extended the methodology of the Unitary School to all multigrade schools in the country. Program that in 1985 managed to reach 8000 schools and that is how the Colombian government adopts the program as a strategy to universalize rural primary education. Later in July 1990 through decree number 1490 the national government says that the Escuela Nueva Methodology will be applied as a priority in basic education in all rural areas of the country, in order to improve it qualitatively and quantitatively (MINE, 1990).

Two unitary schools

Our interest in studying these schools resides in the fact that they represent the depth of rural schools and the relationships between them and the community. The context of the Covid 19 pandemic allowed us to analyze the response that rural families had to the transfer of education to their homes. Specifically, the study categories were the parental role, time, technology support and the management of school and domestic chores, but this contribution is focused on the importance of the extended family to face this transition. The resistance of rural families to transform their structure, as urban families have done, allows them to face and survive both confinement and the advancement of the “new rurality”.

The study of two multigrade schools in rural communities in Mexico and Colombia shows how, thanks to their extended structure, families transitioned through the pandemic period. The Praxedis Balboa school is a multigrade school, in which a teacher attends to 10 children and is located in a small community with the same name, in the Municipality of Villa de Casas, in the State of Tamaulipas, which according to the 2020 Census of Population held 113 inhabitants (52 women and 61 men) grouped in 26 houses equipped with electricity and piped water, all have a television, but none with a computer or tablet, although 80% have at least one cell phone. The level of schooling for adults is around the sixth grade. The agricultural town is located

approximately 25 km from the municipal seat and about 20 km east of Ciudad Victoria, Capital of the State of Tamaulipas.

Regarding the Misael Pastrana Borrero school, located in the village of La Linda in the municipality of Pensilvania, department of Caldas, belonging to the Santa Rita Educational Institution, this is a single-teacher school, a teacher attends to 15 students from preschool to fifth grade, guides all subjects, ensuring 5 effective hours of class per day, to each of its students. The school also includes 13 families with school-age children from the 28 families that make up the community.

This is a coffee growing community, therefore, the parents of the family are dedicated to the cultivation of coffee for the most part, accompanied by bananas, cassava and different fruit trees. The mothers of families are most of the time at home, taking care of the housework. Both fathers and mothers have primary education, some have incomplete high school and few have finished high school. It is located 15 kilometers from the municipal seat, by tertiary road without asphalt paving, dirt or uncovered type. Located 155 kilometers from Manizales, capital city of the department of Caldas.

An interview was designed with five open questions, which are applied to parents or guardians in the form of a recorded conversation and later transcribed. The interview was applied with previous validation in Colombian families in direct conversation with them, complying with biosafety protocols and in the same way it was done in Mexico. In this country the participants were 8 mothers, whilst in the former were 13 mothers of families.

Findings

The information collected was relevant since it allowed recording the organizational dynamics of families during the pandemic: the conformation of families, the distribution of activities, the attention to school tasks. A first record of observation is that in both communities the families are of the extended type, in which the grandparents, in addition to the central couple and the children, share the same roof, in addition to the fact that between the different families there are also interfamily relationships, although their homes are sometimes not contiguous. The treatment between the different members of the families is one of closeness and collaboration, despite the natural conflicts that arise from daily interaction in small communities like the ones explored here.

By taking care of the children's education at the same time as carrying out the jobs that allow subsistence without neglecting the traditional household chores. Different interviewees stated that once the confinement began, all routines were disrupted, except the work done by adult men in the fields. "Sometimes there was not enough time to do housework and also help the children with their homework." However, it did not take long to get organized. Most of them said that they did not have a fixed time to study, they were scheduled so that together they could do housework and later on the school tasks. Teachers were available all the time to clarify doubts, by calls or messages.

The pandemic made family members living in the cities to return home to live with their relatives in the same place, parents, cousins, uncles, grandparents and other relatives. All linking to the teaching-learning process of the students. In many cases in both countries, the grandmothers state that they stay at home with their grandchildren so that the children can go out to meet their work obligations and bring home economic support.

Conclusions

During the pandemics, in both countries was found that the mothers and in some cases the grandmothers, were always willing to support the children in their home education. The men, as a general rule, were the ones who got out to the fields in search of economic resources to support home. The technological tools for a virtual or distance education were always very limited in both countries, so an emergence education was offered, mediated by available resources such as, printed guides, cell phones that were present in most families, phone calls, videos, audios, video calls.

In both countries, many mothers and grandmothers commented that they had not finished their primary school studies and did not know how to help children, they did not understand the assignments, and it was necessary to request help from other people, including the teacher who were always available through calls and messages.

Finally, in relation to the purposes of this study, the analysis shows that from the perspective of development theories, this paradoxically consists in its de-ruralization and that the policies supported by these have promoted a certain impact on what has been called new rurality. However, although in the economic sphere of the rural communities studied there are signs of this new rurality (as shown by the creation of social organizations for production and the new occupations in the service sector, created from the growth of communications and transport), in the sociocultural sphere, traditional formations such as extended families and their distribution of roles still persist (still very distant from the changes that these have undergone in industrialized countries), which during the pandemic allowed attention and continuity not only to the tasks associated with the procuring of livelihood, but also the tasks of the home and the education of children.

Even in the context of new rurality, families retain the traditional structure of the extended family, and this allowed them to respond to educational processes of children, which was more difficult for nuclear urban families with greater technological support. So, the idea should prevail that any attempt to evaluate or transform the rural school should not be done from the perspective of urbanity, but rather consider the articulation of the culture of these schools with the culture of rural communities and their families.

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