Las honduras de este Déficit Escolar
The Pandemic and its Impact on the Educational and Schooling Experiences of Front-Line Responders Working at a Private High School in Honduras

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Centered on the testimonios, "a narration marked by the urgency to make public a situation of oppression or injustice and of resistance against that same condition" (Forcinito, 2016, p. 239) of four female frontline workers employed at a private bilingual high school in a city in Honduras, this ethnographic study provides details and themes about how these essential workers grappled with the shutdown and lengthy interruption of their children's face-to-face schooling. Offering insight into the contextual realities of Honduras and the differences and commonalities between private bilingual and private and public schooling institutions, this study relies on testimonio as a critical methodology to address the impact of the pandemic on front-line workers' life experiences. The goal is to ensure that the audience understands the realities of some families in Honduras pre-, during, and after the COVID-19 crisis, resulting in conditions that threaten the welfare of generations of children from a nation in the heart of Central America.

Ms. Sandra gently leaned into the glass door with a firm nudge of her right shoulder. "Ya puedo pasar, Ms.?" [*Can I come through, Ms.*?]. Behind her, the cacophony of the middle school hallway was blaring, but she needed to keep to a tight schedule if she was to get to every room in the hallway and give the bathrooms one last once over.

The moniker "Ms." is the catchall for all female colleagues who work at the school, just like "mister" is the umbrella term used for any male colleague who works there. Given my recent arrival at the school, to many of my colleagues, I was the "Ms." in the corner room, the one with the short hair who laughs loudly, with tattoos and piercings, affectionately chides her scholars and spoils them every chance she gets. Sandra, or Ms. Sandra, my partner in trying to uphold all biosecurity measures and keep our students and their families safe, became not just my colleague but my friend when distance was the norm and uncertainty the name of the game.

Los Chambres Al Final Del Día: The Stories Told at the End of the Day

As part of my daily end-of-day ritual, I picked up the relics of snacks and school supplies left behind by the shifting crowds of freshmen and juniors littering my classroom. Late in the afternoon, that corner classroom offered respite from the hustle and bustle of the day, where Ms. Sandra and I shared in laughter and banter. When she asked if she could come in, I ran to the cafeteria to get a snack or drink to catch up with the day's events. Our conversation is more than platitudes; we talk about the news, how her kids and my students were doing, and other things. During these waning hours of our workday, we also pulled back the layers of our lives to reveal the nuances of this remarkable woman's story. As a mother who struggled to keep her family together during the global Covid 19 pandemic, Sandra was forced to decide when and how to send her four children to school. Moreover, the nearly impossible decision that ultimately led to her eldest daughter, Ms. Nina, joining her at our school while she placed her dreams on hold, maybe permanently.

Through our daily engagements, I discovered that theirs was a family affair. With a shared commute, a stable job, and solidarity in times of hardship, these women supported one another against all odds. Sandra, my oldest acquaintance, has a laugh that vibrates through the diaphragm and rattles gently whenever I tell her about the shenanigans the students are up to. She knows more about them than they will ever know. Sadly, however, when I asked the students if they knew the name of my colleague who helped keep them safe and the room readily cleaned, only a few raised their hands. Even fewer than that bothered to ask about her or even needed to find an answer to my question.

Little did these students know that we would not have survived the last two years without Sandra and her colleagues' care and service across every corner of our campus. They are, and

remain, the unsung heroes of the pandemic. They placed themselves and their families at risk to ensure that the children of others could return to face-to-face instruction. They worked against the mounting obstacles of a nearly depleted public healthcare system in Honduras, one of the most impoverished nations in the Western Hemisphere, and helped our institution return to "normalcy" as soon as authorities allowed for the school to transition back to asynchronous and eventually, full face to face instruction.

Obstacles to Learning

Pre-Pandemic (Before March 2020)

Articles 151, 152, and 178 of the Honduran Constitution of the Republic established the responsibility of the State to guarantee access to quality education for the population because, historically, the right to education is not guaranteed in Honduras. However, despite this legislation, the situation worsened before the COVID-19 pandemic (Estado de Pais: Honduras 2022 Educación, 2023, p. 3).

The *Association for a Fairer Society*, a Christian organization focused on the fight against corruption and violence in Honduras, reported that many Honduran students do not have access to education, do not know how to read, and depend on schools for some of their meals of the day. Information provided to the organization by the Honduran Ministry of Education states:

1. En 2022, más de 1 millón de niños, niñas y adolescentes continúan sin acceso a la educación [*In 2022, more than 1 million children and adolescents continue without access to education*].
2. Más de 750 mil personas mayores de 15 años siguen sin saber leer ni escribir [Over 750 thousand people over 15 years old continue without knowing how to read or write].

3. Gasto en merienda escolar se quintuplicó en 2022 comparado a 2021 [*Spending on school meals increased fivefold in 2022 compared to 2021*] (The Association for a More Just Society (ASJ) Honduras, 2023).

Nevertheless, while the Honduran Constitution proclaims that schooling is an inalienable right for all Honduran youth, this remains a promise that lies in print alone as efforts to ensure equity and access to all Honduran youth, residents, and citizens alike falls primarily to institutions and community members as the needs and requirements that public and private schooling institutions need to meet ranged widely across the entirety of the country.

Tragically, the insidious nature of corruption makes its far-reaching impact not exclusive to one sector of the Honduran economy. Ricardo Matamoros, the Honduran director of Economic and Social Research on the news website *Tiempo,* contends that due to a lack of accountability and transparency, corruption affects the development of four critical areas of social and economic growth: health, education, infrastructure, and subsidies (Amador, 2023).

Brigida (2020) claims that Honduras has "one of the weakest healthcare systems in the world and is ill-prepared to confront an epidemic. Corruption in the healthcare system, including embezzlement of public funds and schemes to buy overpriced medicine and equipment, only worsens the problem." (p. 1, para. 3). Corruption in the Honduran education and government sectors is also prevalent and has led to substandard educational outcomes. Porter et al. (2019) would agree with Brigida and Matamoros when they wrote,

> Honduras spends more money on education (as a percent of GDP and per pupil as a percent of GDP) than nearly all other Central American countries. Still, corruption and poor government capacity lead to substandard education quality outcomes at both the primary and secondary levels. (p. 1)

Before interviewing my colleagues, I would have never imagined that the engagements I considered sacred, such as transparency and cooperation between scholars and teachers, would also be touched by the tentacles of corruption.

During and Post-Pandemic (Post March 2020)

After March 2020, the Honduran government closed schools nationwide, but students, teachers, and the communication infrastructure that connected them were unprepared for this action. "Como resultado de la pandemia de COVID-19 y el distanciamiento social, el gobierno decretó el cierre de las escuelas" [*Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing, the government decreed the closure of schools*] (*Estado de Pais: Honduras 2022 Educación*, 2022, p. 4).

While extraordinary efforts were made on behalf of school personnel across Honduras, there was undoubtedly only so much they could do if the resources and access to their students were limited. As argued by Solís et al. (2020):

> Es evidente que los docentes han realizado significativos esfuerzos para desarrollar comunicación con fines educativos con sus estudiantes, pero los mismos se encuentran seriamente condicionados por las limitaciones del hardware al que tienen acceso (en muchos casos, teléfono móvil en lugar de una computadora), y la calidad del servicio de internet al que acceden. A ello hay que agregar la necesidad de recibir capacitación en el manejo de herramientas virtuales, expresadas por una gran mayoría de los informantes, casi el 75% de los docentes indicaron que requieren capacitación para el manejo de plataformas educativas como Google Classroom, Moodle, Blackboard, etc., el 67% respecto al desarrollo de videos educativos, y un poco menos para el manejo de APPs para reuniones virtuales. [*It is evident that teachers have made significant efforts to*

> *develop communication for educational purposes with their students, but they are seriously conditioned by the limitations of the hardware to which they have access (in many cases, a mobile phone instead of a computer), and the quality of the internet service they access. To this we must add the need to receive training in the use of virtual tools, expressed by a large majority of the informants. Almost 75% of teachers indicated that they require training in the use of educational platforms such as Google Classroom, Moodle, Blackboard, etc., 67% regarding the development of educational videos, and less for the management of APPs for virtual meetings*] (p. 6).

Eventually, in 2022, The National Risk Management System (SINAGER) began authorizing full-time face-to-face instruction for some students, including those who attended several bilingual educational centers and private schools. However, students enrolled in Honduran public schools were still limited in their part-time face-to-face instruction. Approval depended on several factors, as explained by Burgos (2022) on the news website *Tiempo*; she wrote:

> No obstante, la aprobación depende de otros factores, ya sea por el incremento de casos por las variantes de COVID-19, los requisitos que deben de cumplir y las medidas de bioseguridad así como los espacios en las aulas de la clases [*However, approval depends on other factors, whether due to the increase in cases due to COVID-19 variants, the requirements that must be met and biosafety measures as well as the spaces in the classrooms*]. (https://tiempo.hn/escuelas-retoman-clases-sps/)

While some institutions may have slowly resumed face-to-face instruction, we must recognize the widening learning gaps between entire cohorts of children and scholars attending Honduran private bilingual schools and private and public schools nationwide. In the case of my school, the United District School UDS (a pseudonym), students, staff, and administrators were among

the first to engage in asynchronous and, consequently, face-to-face instruction in the metropolitan area. This reality juxtaposed starkly with the total, and sometimes partial, interruption of face-to-face teaching in Honduran public schooling institutions until October 2022.

Education Debt and the Living Curriculum

UDS, one of the premier bilingual private institutions in Honduras and where this study took place, was kept from the realities of interrupted education. Most public schools in this country pale compared to the resources, professional development for teachers, and financial support garnered at private bilingual institutions like UDS. This stark contrast only contributes to what Ladson-Billings (2006) referred to as *education debt,* described as the opportunities and resources held back from students of color over the decades. As such, the devastating blow that the Honduran public school system suffered and the students' own "*lived curriculum*" will probably leave Honduran youth with a considerable education debt for generations to come. Maxwell and Roofe (2020) describe the *lived curriculum* as "the lived experience of students and teachers in the classroom as they live out their lives individually and in the relationship to one another" (p. 28).

The reality of schooling in Honduras was that spaces like UDS had the staff-acquired knowledge, technology, education, and communication resources to weather the storm known as the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the children of the front-line workers, like Ms. Sandra, attended public schools, spaces where these resources were not readily available to them. Families associated with public schools did not have access to reliable internet connections, internet-capable devices, online communication and learning platforms, and other resources deemed necessary for learning. The trickle-down impact of interrupted schooling had a

cumulative effect on the well-being of everyone in the communities where the students, teachers, and colleagues like Ms. Sandra and Ms. Nina lived.

These women saw their own children struggle not just with their coursework but also when their older children tried to help their younger siblings with theirs. Again, many parents, like Ms. Sandra, felt frustrated at the lack of institutional support and transparency regarding how to help their children; some were exposed to dubious practices around grading their children's work. These incidents would ultimately color the lens through which the parents and their children saw schooling and the possibilities ahead of them.

This study, focused solely on the experiences of the front-line workers at UDS, was conducted to raise awareness of the plight of parents who were front-line workers, like Ms. Sandra (and others I will introduce you to later in this paper), to whom we owe so much. This study Four questions that guided the study were:

1. How did the front-line responders (cleaning and maintenance support staff) navigate the interruption of their children's educational journey during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How did their "lived curriculum" (Aoki,1993) as front-line workers at UDS influence their response to the shutdown of their children's schools?
3. What areas of their children's educational journey were most affected upon their return to face-to-face instruction?

Methodology

In this section, I defined my research role, described my research approach and design, explained how I sampled the participants, collected data, and analyzed their problem-solving abilities and words from interviews.

My Role as the Researcher

While many of my fellow teachers have collegial relationships with the front-line workers at UDS, I am closer to some than others because I hang around a bit after school. I started working at the school during the COVID-19 pandemic, so my relationship with them spans less than two academic years. I had daily interactions and conversations with them about school-related topics and some personal matters. Being privy to the reality of front-line workers during the pandemic has always interested me because of my experiences working on cleaning crews and food service as a college student. My appreciation for that time and the lessons gleaned from this "*lived curriculum"* served me professionally.

When the pandemic first hit, I was in the United States, and I worked with Central American women and men who were front-line workers at grocery stores, large corporations, offices, and other spaces. I saw firsthand the impact and anxiety that overtook many of them; a few even fell ill with Covid-19. Some could not afford to not take on these dangerous jobs at a time when we knew so little about the virus. It did not matter if they were pregnant, had preexisting conditions, or had no insurance. Regardless of their vulnerability, their determination, faith, and urgency to provide for their families always won. I also saw these behaviors as a Native Language Support Specialist; many of my clients had to grapple with child care and the continued schooling of their children.

Three years shy of being back in Honduras, I wish I had done this research earlier to address some of my front-line colleagues' and their families' immediate needs. These colleagues were and are integral to the UDS and Honduran community. When I connected with them and explained the general idea behind my research, they were intrigued and touched by my desire to inquire about how they supported their children's educational journeys during the pandemic. Of

course, I honored their desire for confidentiality and was humbled by their support and interest in this work.

Research Approach and Design

A qualitative, narrative research approach was chosen because I wanted to “describe the lives of individuals, collect and tell stories about people's lives, and write narratives of individual experiences” (Creswell, 2015, p. 504). This is a relational approach whereby this study relies on the storied experiences of the participants because I valued their experiential knowledge. Bell (2002) explains that "the shape of our stories, the range of roles available, the chain of causation, and the sense of what constitutes a climax, or an ending are all shaped by the stories in which we were raised" (p. 207). This research highlighted humans as "storytelling organisms, who, individually and socially, lead storied lives" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2).

Influenced by Magolda and Delman's (2016) ethnographic research on the lived experiences of first responders on school campuses and Adarkwah and Agyemang's (2022) research about stakeholders in higher education (parents, students, teachers, and administrators), this research centered on the experience of front line workers employed in private bilingual institutions of secondary schooling in large Honduran cities.

This qualitative study relied on *testimonio*, a research methodology whose origins are rooted in Latin America. Reyes and Rodríguez (2012) describe it as one that “entails a first-person oral and written account, drawing on experiential, self-conscious, narrative practice to articulate an urgent voicing of something to which one bears witness” (p. 525). I used it to understand the impact of the forced shutdown of public schools attended by the children of front-line workers at a bilingual private school in the Honduran capital. As the unsung heroes of

the pandemic, education practitioners and researchers must witness and honor our front-line workers' lives and stories to address the inequities that impact their children.

Even though this study was written and presented in English, my colleague's testimonios and the probing questions that informed them were all in Spanish. While the conversations were prompted by questions about interrupted schooling in Honduras due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I was curious to see if and how the front-line workers referenced the educational experiences of their children and grandchildren as they shared their stories.

While the stories of front-line responders informed this study, I contributed artifacts such as news articles and photographs that chronicled the disruption to the Honduran educational system during the COVID-19 pandemic. The truth is, the only way we, teachers and the children we serve, could have returned to our classrooms and our institutions was because colleagues like Sandra, Esperanza, Ms. J, and Karlita placed themselves in harm's way to ensure it was safe for other people's children and those who taught them.

Participants & Research Site

Participants. According to Hoy and Adams (2015), before a researcher conducts a study, they must decide upon a unit of analysis. A unit of analysis can be (a.) persons (e.g., students, parents, teachers, administrators, school board members, other staff, etc.) or (b.) places (e.g., classrooms, schools, districts, daycare centers, etc.) or (c.) things (e.g., curricula, test scores, student work, lesson plans, etc.). The unit of analysis a researcher chooses to study is based on the research questions. Once a unit of analysis has been selected, a researcher identifies a sample.

A sample is a representative subgroup of a population under study, and a population is a collection of persons, things, or objects. "Unless data are collected from every single member of

a population, a sample must be used" (Hott et al. 2021, p. 206). Once a sample has been identified, a sampling strategy must be used.

According to Creswell (2015), "Researchers decide which type of sampling strategy to use in their study based on such factors as the: (1.) amount of rigor they seek for their studies, (2.) characteristics of the target population and (3.) availability of participants." (p. 141). Two purposeful sampling strategies were chosen.

Convenience Sampling was selected because the participants were willing and available to be studied." (Creswell, 2014, p. 144). Homogenous Sampling was used because they belonged to a subgroup of adults working at UDS. From a population of approximately 45 front-line workers at UDS, four Honduran women who worked at a private bilingual school in Honduras from the spring of 2020 until the school reopened entirely to face-to-face instruction in the Fall of 2022 agreed to be interviewed. They're all mothers and caretakers of at least one child under 19.

Site. The United District of Schools (UDS) is a private bilingual school with ties to the local community that spans almost eight decades. It offers nursery, elementary, middle, and high school grades. Nestled on a hill surrounded by residential and commercial areas, UDS serves approximately 1,200 students.

Except for a two-week hiatus at the pandemic's beginning, the students, faculty, and staff completed the required curriculum and contact hours via online platforms such as Zoom and Google Classroom. The people who learned, worked, and taught at UDS had experiences that starkly contrasted with those who attended public institutions of schooling and even other private bilingual schools in the area and across the country. UDS has ties with various local,

international, state, and government entities that invest in community development on Honduran soil.

An integral reason that UDS was able to be among the first private bilingual institutions given the "go-ahead" to return to face-to-face instruction was that UDS met all the requirements outlined by SINAGER and COPECO (Coordination Center for the Prevention of Natural Disasters). This is due to the planning and organization of our institutional administrators and community members, the training and access to wi-fi and educational technology, and indisputably and most importantly, the efforts of our front-line workers.

Data Collection Instrument & Procedure

Qualitative researchers use open-ended data collection instruments (e.g., interviews, observations, and participant artifacts) to learn from their participants (Creswell, 2015) because they "enable the researcher to build upon and explore their participants' responses" (Seidman, 2013, p. 14). As such, an interview protocol (see Appendix A) was developed to examine the experiences of Honduran front-line workers employed in a school during the COVID-19 pandemic and how the health crisis impacted their children's education and schooling experiences.

Interview Testimonios. Given the front-line workers' work schedule, the conversations that gave rise to their *testimonios* occurred at a time and space convenient for them. All *testimonios* were audio recorded and transcribed using an online app called Rev. Using the Rev application on my electronic device allowed me to focus on my colleagues, their *testimonios*, and the personal insight they shared about their and their family lives. I removed all recordings and transcriptions from my electronic device and saved them to a password-protected external

hard drive in a locked cabinet inside my UDS classroom. Special attention was paid to assuring my colleagues that their names and *testimonios* were protected with pseudonyms.

Testimonios were collected during interviews which are organized around the following eight topics: 1.) demographic information about the interviewee, including but not limited to the demographic information about the school-age youth in their life; 2.) recollections about the pandemic as a Honduran citizen and resident; 3) what were (are) some of the concerns they had as front-line workers working during the pandemic, 4.) how did the pandemic impact the schooling and educational experience of youth in their lives, 5.) with the reopening of schools in Honduras, how did face-to-face instruction impact their child's reintegration into the classroom, 6.) what practical approaches did teachers, administrators, and support staff offer at their children's schools, 7.) the support and resources their youth need now in regards to their schooling and educational journey and lastly, 8.) their concerns about the impact the pandemic had on academic and schooling experiences of Honduran youth.

Data Analysis Plan

Upon securing the *testimonios*, I transcribed the details shared by these four colleagues and translated them into English. Data Analysis was completed to answer the following research questions:

1. How did the cleaning and maintenance support staff navigate the interruption of their children's educational journey during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How did the "lived curriculum" (Aoki,1993) of front-line workers at UDS influence their response to the shutdown of their children's schools?
3. What areas of their children's educational journey were most affected upon their return to face-to-face instruction?

After transcribing, I listened to the audio once more as I reread the transcriptions to ensure that I had been able to capture their words as transparently and authentically as possible. While very few idioms were used in the conversations, I focused solely on their *testimonios*, not my questions or comments. The qualitative data were analyzed using open coding procedures so that the phenomena in the *testimonios* could be broken down and conceptualized (Corbin et al., 2008). Initially, participant responses were read without performing any analysis. Then, they were re-read using Corbin and Strauss' (2015) questioning strategy to help me view the participants' responses from their perspective. Questioning their responses enabled me to compare, identify relationships, see patterns, and categorize the data with similar properties.

The analysis' main findings revealed: (1.) the *testimoniantes'* own schooling and education experiences, (2.) their current lived realities, (3.) the difficulties they face given their role and their schedule as front-line workers, and lastly, (4.) what came to mind when it came to their children "s future.

Findings

Overview

This research was informed by Ladson-Billings's (2006) concept of education debt as told by the *testimonios* of the four Honduran women. They shared their experiences, challenges, and the aftermath of their children's interrupted schooling during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Two distinct threads emerged from my analysis of our conversations: (1.) their faith in God and (2.) their willingness to sacrifice their well-being to secure their children's future. These four women were aware of how the relics of the pandemic and their response to it continue to impact them, their children, and Honduras at large.

My compañeras [*companions*] agreed that no one ever asked them about their commitment to the arduous labor of supporting UDS with the sweat of "el pecho, pulmon y palmas" [*chest, lung, and palms*] during the pandemic. Nevertheless, they did so with faith in their hearts, gratitude in their voices, and their eyes set on improving their children and their families' lot. When the pandemic happened, their hopes for their young ones and the safety of their kin remained in jeopardy. For many Hondurans and countless others worldwide, the impact of inflation, unemployment, interrupted schooling, and the rumblings of political instability makes it essential to identify the lessons gleaned from their life-changing experiences. Even when the face masks came off, the distance between us surpassed six feet in more ways than we could have imagined. Deep down inside, we all hoped that returning to "normal" would bring waves of newness and relief.

Little could we have imagined how much things would change, how much would stay the same, and how the echoes of both would reverberate for generations.

Ms. J., Karlita, Sandra and Esperanza

La Mamá de los Pollitos: Ms. J.

Hers was a 5 a.m. start time. Before the sun rose over the expanse of the school against the cooing of the mourning doves, Ms. J. worked through the different hallways and buildings, ensuring that all things were aligned and ready for the hustle and bustle of the day. More than simply checking for those things that had run out, such as toilet paper, paper towels, or even the need for additional garbage bags, she became the surveyor of what was left behind by the community members who visited the school.

An infinite source of institutional knowledge and a quiet leader amongst the front-line workers, the entire school staff, and administration, Ms. J. was nearing her second decade of

being an integral part of UDS. More than just the demands of housekeeping and maintenance, she traveled on the school bus to ensure the scholars had an additional caretaker to see them safely on and off the bus. As we sat down to converse, we shared the delicacies my scholars put on scenes from Homer's *The Iliad,* trying to make the most of our short time together.

She was filling in for colleagues who fell ill during the week. Her phone lit up and beckoned for her attention. As she kept apologizing, I urged her to be at ease. We had been continually interrupted by messages on my device from our division's WhatsApp group and the continued entry of scholars seeking answers to their queries. As she patiently answered with voice notes instructing the colleagues who took on roles while she was on her lunch break, I smiled and remarked how we would be lost without her. The weariness of her eyes juxtaposed with the gratitude in her smile as she credited God for the opportunity to work, provide for her family, and the endurance to bear what came with it all.

In our short period together, against the mounting demands and uncertainties of when and if we could continue our conversation without further interruption, I was reminded of the previous week's discussions with my colleagues, Sandra and Esperanza (described later in this paper). The opportunity to have time to sit and meditate on such subjects was a luxury. No one had asked them what the experience of the pandemic had been like for them, and most of the people who would listen and commiserate were often in the same boat. My positionality afforded me the outlier's perspective, a single, hyper-documented, multilingual, multiliterate full-time employee of a private bilingual institution of schooling whose position (and income) remained steadfast. However, the truth is that the only reason the scholars, fellow teachers, administrators, and colleagues could return to the classrooms and face-to-face instruction before

the large majority of the country was because of the lengthy hours, tireless efforts, and continued exposure of our compañeros/as that were the first line of defense against the virus.

Nevertheless, her work was never done. We reminisced on how far we had come since the pandemic, yet not far enough. In her case, Ms. J.'s "sun" rose on her grandbaby's smile. Her little one was only four years old when the pandemic first hit. Residing with her sons, her husband remained confined to their home just like the rest of the Honduran population. These extreme measures were taken to help alleviate the already taxed public healthcare system that was unprepared to handle the rise of COVID-19 cases. At the time, a COVID-19 vaccine was only a glimmer of promise. Hondurans across the country sought refuge in their homes, knowing that while they were safe, their well-being and loved ones were threatened due to an income interruption and possible employment interruption.

As a cab driver, her spouse recognized the dangers that lay outside of their home, not just when it came to exposure to the virus but with the mounting pressures of impuesto de guerra or war taxes that local gangs sought to extort from the community as a means of their survival. Her sons, both in their early twenties, helped support the household in all the ways they could. She had intermittent travels onto campus to sustain her employment at UDS and worked with her grandbaby as she started preparatoria [*kindergarten*]. Her baby's first experience with schooling would be through a small screen as she connected with her teacher and whichever classmates could log on that day.

With the last stop in her educational pipeline a distant memory she can no longer recall, Ms. J knows that the only thing she could do for this little girl was keep working to ensure she and the rest of her family were cared for by the grace of God. Faith is the one thing she has never lacked. All my colleagues spoke of their faith and hinted at how deeply it ran through

them. Nevertheless, the constant threat of the illness every time she sojourned outside of their house, every time she came on campus, and every time she rode back on public transportation nagged at the corners of her mind. Her family depended on her and trusted that, God willing, the virus would not follow her home. Thankfully, my friend is healthy and continues to thank her Lord dutifully in service of him and what she believes is her purpose as the matriarch of her family.

Chatting in Room 56 with Karlita

"¿Ms, lista para que le encienda la luz?" [*Ms., ready for me to turn on the light?*]

A sweet voice called from the northeast corner of my room. As Karlita peeked at the threshold of my classroom, a warm smile spread across her lovely face. We usually catch up at the end of the day, as it feels nearly impossible to catch our breath while school is in session. I only get brief glimpses of her during the day. As she is more petite than most of my scholars, her pink smock and the dark curls of her long tresses often slip down from her bun as she moves to and from the entire hallway. She never sits still and rarely ever gets a moment to herself.

Nevertheless, it is unusual for any of the kids to stop to ask her about her day; many might not even know her name, but I do. I am embarrassed to admit that before I met her face-to-face, I knew her name only from the sheet in the teacher's bathroom that meticulously outlined the number of times she visited the bathroom to inspect and clean it. She ensured it remained pristine and stocked with toilet paper, soap, and disposable hand towels. Hers was an effort to ensure that the entire hallway and the ten classrooms packed with students were left as if no one had taken up space. She did so diligently, quietly, trying to weave between the moving bodies occupying all these spaces.

She was eager to support my efforts when I asked for an interview for this study. Even though her story started at UDS as the pandemic came to a close, she knew firsthand what it was like to try and support her two boys with their schoolwork, advocate for their learning, and deal with the aftermath of their interruption of face-to-face instruction. Just like our other compañeras, she went through great pains to be able to carve out time for me. On this particular Friday, she took a shorter lunch break to sit with me at the end of the day and did so only after completing all her work in the other classrooms.

As a mother of a teenager and a now seven-year-old, her boys were swept up in the flurry of the pandemic as countless other children were. From one day to the next, a sign in the school explained that classes were canceled until further notice. While her youngest had an easier transition, her eldest encountered challenges; much like Ms. J., her youngest's first experience with schooling happened on a small handheld screen, an unforeseen purchase that racked up additional bills. Honduras did not offer connectivity programs and incentives free of charge or at a discounted price like other countries. Hence, all further data plans were at the expense of every family.

However, these tangible resources had a minor cost compared to intangible resources such as time. How did Karlita put in all those work hours and still make it home to try and help her children make heads or tails of their homework? With the little one, it was much more accessible. However, with her eldest, now fourteen, her educational attainment felt insufficient to support him, and the subject that gave him the most trouble was mathematics.

A recent exposé by *La Prensa* newspaper on November 22, 2023, outlined the dire impact that closing Honduran schools had on certain subjects, particularly mathematics. Informed by a study conducted by the Observatorio de la Educación de la Pedagogíca

(Observatory for Pedagogical Education) at the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional Francisco. The authors recognize that:

> Hemos retrocedido cerca de 10 años en los niveles de aprendizaje en matemáticas; en cambio, en los niveles de español se bajó, per fue tan importante. [*We have been delayed nearly ten years regarding mathematics learning objectives; the Spanish levels went down, but it was not as significant*]. (Redacción, 2023, para. 3)

Magolda & Delman (2016) explain that in recognizing that "knowledge is partial, positioned, socially constructed, and incomplete" (p .248), many parents and guardians who were trying to see their children through virtual or asynchronous schooling were reminded of their educational journey and at the bumps, detours or even interruptions along the way.

My compañeras' educational attainment made them uneasy about what they could contribute and how they could help their children succeed. The pandemic revealed the dangers of what could unfold if we did not attend to our children's broken and interrupted educational pipeline and how these children's current parents and guardians had lived this phenomenon in the flesh.

Thirty-seven, Thirty-eight, and Thirty-nine … (Doña Sandra and Doña Esperanza)

The hustle and bustle from the school festival filled our ears as we settled in the last classroom left to clean in a long hallway. Not only were they doing me a tremendous favor and kindness, but they did so without sacrificing the integrity of their work and the meticulous nature of their labor; they gave up their lunchtime to ensure that everything was spotless so that they could sit down and break bread with me.

Sandra and I went way back to when I was first on campus. She and I knew each other and communicated daily, and before we knew the entirety of each other's facial expressions, we

knew the tenor of each other's laugh. We're both no taller than 162 cm (~5 ft 4 inches). I had a short, cropped pixie cut, and Sandra wore her dark tresses in a loose bun. One would think we were having a hoot as we threw our heads back in laughter and disbelief at the hustle and bustle of energy that left scattered evidence across all corners of my classroom. With her systematic care, the little tornadoes that rolled through my classroom were doubly assured of a continually clean, well-ventilated classroom where we could resume our face-to-face instruction.

It was two doors down from my first classroom, and almost two years later, we got to sit down and rehash the lessons from the past and the concerns about the future of both the kids in private bilingual schools like UDS and other private and public schools in Honduras. With a school festival in the background and the waning sunlight of the day, I knew that individual *testimonios* were a luxury given the demand of their time and their desire to make it out of work in time to catch the bus or series of buses that will get them closer to home before it gets too dark.

Esperanza**,** a colleague with a raven black, neatly pulled bun, stood at least three inches taller than us. I had rarely heard her voice during our brief encounters over the last semester. She was kind, measured, and thoughtful in the details she shared about her experience as a mom of two growing teenage girls and how her experiences were similar to those of Sandra, who had four children of her own and a bonus son from her husband's prior relationship.

As they read through the consent form, I fiddled with the plastic dinnerware and the individual plates of pupusas mixtas [*lightly fried stuffed tortillas with cheese and pork topped with pickled onions and a light cabbage slaw, coupled with a bottle of fresh limeade*]. I waited to see if they had any questions, and when they signed their names to the form, I smiled as they discussed the word date in the line alongside their name. They did not include that day's date but

rather their age. I smiled because while they wrote the date in another space, I was the eldest of the three, or at least I would be a few weeks from that uncommonly warm day in November. Tres reinas terminando sus treintas [*Three queens towards the end of their thirties*].

"*Weren't you just thirty-seven?*" Esperanza asked Sandra.

"*I was*," Sandra replied with her unmistakable laugh.

"*Uy, you are as sprightly as I am,"* I chortled back. "*When did you turn 38?*"

"*In March, Ms.*" Even in this lovely exchange, they still will not call me by my first name, just like I will not call them solely by theirs. I call them Doña Sandra and Doña Esperanza, a mark of respect in front of the students as they are the heads of households and mothers, something I am not. Moreover, when it is just us, I call them by their first name in diminutive form to express affection.

"*Even though,*" Sandra explained with a mischievous grin spreading through her face, "*I am always saying I am 37.*"

The three of us burst out laughing heartily, understanding why one of us might choose to fudge our birth numbers just a little bit. It felt so good to laugh before we started our conversation. It broke whatever veil of discomfort I felt in asking questions in Spanish because I am far more comfortable conducting interviews in English.

"*Can you believe her, Ms.?*" Esperanza remarked, gently teasing our compañera.

"*No problem here at all*." I giggled.

"*Uy, Esperanza, do not be mean… only you would…*" Sandra retorts, sending the three of us into another fit of giggles. As our laughter subsided, we began to dig in before our meal got cold and our limeade got warm. Time was not a luxury they could afford me a great deal of, so we ate and chatted. Looking back and wishing our lives away was a luxury none of us could

seriously ask for anymore. At least, that is what it felt like after the pandemic. The truth was, I was not even in the country when the pandemic hit. So, the reality of Honduras at that time was second- and even third-hand knowledge. There was so much I did not yet know. So, when I asked las chavas [*the girls*], as I affectionately entitled the audio file of our conversation, they thought about it for a second and wove their individual stories into a shared *testimonio.*

As we continued our conversation, our ages would not dissipate from my mind. Those numbers reverberated in my ear—three children of the eighties whose scholastic journey shaped their epistemic knowledge in myriad ways. Kerr (2016) explains that "to live curriculum in the key of Ted Aoki means to be present to liminal moments of pedagogy in places where people can dwell authentically and in "their longing to be together, belong together" (p. 70). The truth remains that I occupied a physical space as an educator because of different push and pull factors that forced these colleagues and many others into roles as front-line workers.

When asked if they remembered where they were when the pandemic started, "*Well*," Esperanza started tentatively, "*I was working during the pandemic, I was not working here but on another project with the same company (a cleaning company). We never stopped working there."*

"*Never*?" I asked.

"*No, never,*" she explained. "*We worked; we worked in another space."*

She explained that they were provided masks and gel when the pandemic started. Nevertheless, it was still a risk. Esperanza is a single parent of three children, while Sandra has four children and a bonus son. Both women spoke of their gratitude for having employment even with the high risk of contagion. The news and even the schools had prepared them for the

eventual interruption of face-to-face instruction due to Covid-19, but just like many of us, they could have never expected what would come next. Esperanza shared:

> *What we did not expect was when they told us that everything (regarding the children's schooling) would now be through Zoom. Things were complicated because we had no understanding or experience managing the internet, for example. It made things difficult. We have to carry a mobile device for work. More for emergencies because our jobs require it of us. In my case, I had no choice but to purchase a simple device to leave with my girls.*

A tall, regal woman with dark hair pulled back in a neat bun, Esperanza's earnestness in her account of how the pandemic affected her family was palpable. Of her three children, the two eldest were girls, and her youngest was a young boy who she believes suffered the most from the closing down of schools.

With one turning 16 in less than a month, a thirteen-year-old, and the little boy at only eight years old, the grade levels and the requirements for each of her children were different. She went on to explain:

> *It was challenging because, if one needed it, as you know, the Colegio (high school) had a heavier course load, and it gave the other little chance to work and catch up. Moreover, in the case of El niño, it was even more difficult because he was in preparatoria (kindergarten), I still remember. And then he was in first grade, and still, they remained on that Zoom. Even now, I tell Sandra he has many problems with learning, reading, and writing in Spanish. In truth, it was really hard.*

This comment reminded me of my experience navigating virtual schooling with my first group of first-year scholars at UDS. I recounted how they survived virtual schooling by relying on one

another and the internet to help with the assignments. As the days passed and there was no end to virtual education, the scholars admitted to becoming less engaged in the material and more focused on "going through the motions" of schooling. While their grades may have reflected high marks, their engagement in their learning was not transparent. It was much more challenging to tell if they were struggling with the material, given their reliance on one another to submit assignments.

To better understand these behaviors amongst youth, Sage & Mahlum (2021) explained that "as the pandemic swelled and students' motivation dipped, cheating became an increasingly popular trend with students finding new creative methods by the day" (para.7). Not only did the pandemic impact global youth during those tumultuous times but it consequently altered how they went about their learning, their relationship to schooling, and its impact on their knowledge and cognitive development. Even now, my scholars share how they struggle to manage their time and tasks and fret about heavier workloads than they remember during the pandemic.

Esperanza's account of how it affected her children also rang true with the tenets of Sandra's *testimonio* about how the pandemic affected them. Nothing was the same for either the children or the teachers. One was in high school, while the other was in fifth grade. As Sandra explained:

> *It was difficult because I had a situation in my own house. When the professor (teacher) taught my son, she would assign work in their workbook. She would let us know if she would check said work the following Thursday. We would bring her the workbook, which she would check at the school.*

Finding time to mobilize themselves and their school assignments required complex juggling, as it exposed them to the contagion via public transportation, and the additional costs of taking

time off from work put extra stress on the family. But at least a fellow teacher provided Sandra's child with feedback.

Esperanza's story was different. The teacher never met with the students or the family. In her case, the teacher would share the material via *WhatsApp.*

> *The niño would send a screenshot of the work. But because he (the child) didn't like that, we had big problems. Because I was not at home, and you know, the girls didn't have the patience to deal with him. But you know, I do thank God because it didn't affect them; I had that advantage in their case; they are aplicadas* [*disciplined*]. *But with him, it's been difficult. Thankfully, this last quarter, he did make headway. Thank God.*

She laughed as she recounted how she warned him that he would not pass the grade. We commiserate that we had to urge the children to see that they are the only ones who can do this work and that we are here to support them.

Sandra explained that two of her kids, now ages 16 and 12, saw the impact of those crucial years on their academic performance:

> *At first, it (the pandemic) started as a game, right? It was a joy because they said we weren't going to school. And those that can, you know, as they say, salir adelante (push forward) can have a way of connecting with the teacher, they will reach out to them if they have their numbers, ask them questions, and seek guidance … but in my case, because I only had a cell phone for my the calls I got from my boss… So for him [her son], it became hard because of where he was in primer curso because the teacher told him to focus on a topic or write a story. He came home and said the teacher told him that if he did not know how to write a novel in his notebook, he did not know how he made it that far.*

Sandra's account shook me on many levels. What could be gained from saying that to a child? How could anyone do that to a little one? How was it their fault? Sandra went on to say:

> *She [the teacher] said that he was only there to "calentar la silla" (the equivalent of a bench warmer). So then I told him to keep going. Because of the reality of things, they say that time will tell. I told him, "I know you understand math and other things. I know that you understand it." I know he doesn't need that much to catch up, but when the teacher said that to him, he did not want to return to school this year. But I told him, "You should go, one way or another; we will figure this out. And no matter what, there is always next year. By then, you will at least know." I told him, "how to write a story, what a narrative is… and all that." The reality is that is what there is right now.*

While we laughed uncomfortably at how preposterous this notion was, it was aligned with the mindset that *it is what it is*.

Sandra explained "*that some teachers still do not understand what happened to them (the kids)."* At that moment, Esperanza circled back to our earlier conversation:

> *It is like we talked about before. You mentioned that some Ms. pursued that field (education) without a calling or vocation. Those are not words you say to a child, especially in the places where we live, where we do not have access to many things.*

Sandra went on to explain that in her situation:

> *It was around the time I had just started my job here that I could not just leave. So I told him, "I cannot just go over it." Moreover, when I am free, this thing happens, or that thing happens. The truth is they (the teachers) need to sit right next to you and say, "Now listen, this is what we are going to do. So, if I ask you something, you can answer me. And if there is something you do not know, then I am here to support you." Whenever*

> *they get a chance, what would it look like for her (teacher) to give each student 15 minutes… It's like I tell my daughter, at the school, she is at now, "One needs to raise their hand, with respect, and you ask the teacher, Profe, I didn't understand this." Sometimes, my daughter explains, "the kids will laugh though."*
>
> *"It doesn't matter," I say, "learning happens from the questions you ask your teacher. If you do not ask, you will not know anything. For example, I don't know math, explain it to me again, will you, profe? Maybe I am messing up on one number." So that is what I tell her. Nevertheless, she hems and haws that her classmates will laugh. It does not matter, I explain. Maybe you are doing what none of them dare to do: asking a teacher how to do the assigned work. I talked to a teacher once and told them this, and they said they never asked questions. "They must all know what I am talking about," she recounted; the teacher said, "because they never ask questions."*

As teachers, we are familiar with what it is like to hear “crickets” after asking the students if they have any questions. However, we also know that schools are complex ecosystems with many moving parts. It wasn't just children and parents affected by the pandemic. Instead, teachers were also profoundly impacted and needed support and grace. I then asked my compañeras if the school administrators ever communicated with them as members of the school community. “*No*,” Sandra and Esperanza both said emphatically.

However, not every experience with their children's teachers was negative. Instead, some teachers created WhatsApp groups to communicate with parents. While Sandra's children visited the school once every two weeks, because of Esperanza's home location, her school did not offer to support her children similarly. This was partly due to the area of remote places like

Esperanza's house. She told us that "*even to get there, the teachers had to walk from the bus terminal the same distance I do, which is about 15 to 20 mins to get there (the school).*"

While both my colleagues felt supported by the cleaning and maintenance company that UDS outsourced, they did not receive any additional support to cover the cost of their children's schooling. That response was the approach all around the country. No local, departmental, or even national support exists for school-age children and their families. By this, I am referring to no free or reduced rate internet access or tarjetas de recarga [*prepaid data cards*] they could use to secure their children's internet connection so they could complete their homework or access their school work.

When I was employed working with a large public school district in Ohio, one of my main tasks was to call a local telephone and internet provider and secure free wifi or mobile hotspots for multilingual learners from Latin America. It made a great deal of difference for so many families. Sadly, this was not the reality in Honduras, as Esperanza explained:

> *It was like this. Imagine that they would send homework or messages almost every seven days of the week. Because of this, the prepaid cards hardly lasted. Each card, each gigabyte, well, it didn't amount to much.*

So, if the teachers or even the schools were not set up to allow face-to-face interaction with the students (a great deal relates to the health crisis and the physical restrictions imposed on Honduran residents), these prepaid cards were an out-of-pocket expense that befell the student's families. At the same time, this extra expense was one more stressor added to the already full plates of heads of families, as was the case with Sandra and Esperanza.

Even when resources are slim, it takes a creative mind and determination to find ways to connect with our scholars. Around the world, and in Honduras, I had heard about the

extraordinary lengths some teachers had gone to support the students and their families. Whether dressing up as Spiderman to send updates or making a concerted effort to make themselves physically or virtually available to their scholars, colleagues were trying to make the connections. Thus, I posed the following question: When it came to teacher engagement with their children, what memorable efforts did they recall being made during the pandemic? "*Well, that I can recall, Ms., ninguno (None),"* said Esperanza. Echoing this, Sandra simply said, *ninguno."* After hearing Sandra's response, Esperanza did go on to say:

> *This is something we need help with. In our case, Sandra, for example, had the support of her husband. But at this time, I was on my own. Sometimes, we needed help to meet this need. It was tough in our case. You know, I have raised my children to be very independent. I tell them that their responsibility is to study. And if you need anything, please let me know. That created a problem for my son. He was so used to me being there, and it became difficult for me when the pandemic started, and I had to be away for work. He was in kindergarten and then moved on to first grade, but he walked in knowing nothing. As I shared before, even at their age, the girls did not have the patience to work with him, and I am not justifying this. This last quarter was challenging because you get home tired and weary from work. Just to come home to have to argue with him about his assignments. But thank God, he is making his way.*

When I asked about Sandra's experience, she sighed and collected her thoughts*:*

> *Because I can't take time off work to go to their school, my one daughter se quedó (failed) in two or three classes, and she told me that her art teacher was charging her 30 pesos (the idiom for lempiras, our national currency) to pass her.*

Esperanza and Sandra laughed at the absurdity of it all, and I sat there dumbfounded. Shaking my head, I asked for clarification from Sandra, who said:

> *When she told me that the teacher got 30 pesos, I told her I should have this teacher reported via the local news channel. Thirty pesos were needed to pass the subject, and she (her daughter) took it. So that way, she only failed two, math, and I need help remembering the other one. Then, my little boy, Arturo, I still do not know if he passed or not because I have not been able to make it over because I lost hours when I was sick with a terrible cough. I couldn't risk trudging up in the hot sun and getting sicker. I still have to ask for that time off to get over there. But because he is in kindergarten, I am praying he will do well. Some teachers are good at explaining things, but others will write something on the board and expect the children to follow along. But if the child is just starting, how will they be able to do it? With my 9 to 6 pm schedule, I am not getting home till almost 7:30 pm, so I get home tired. How am I supposed to give him the attention? Sometimes, I will ask my daughters for help, but if and when they don't get mad, they do it incorrectly. As a mother, one takes the time and gently says, "Come here and let me explain this to you." I can only help him in the first classes because I have only ever made it to fifth grade myself. There are some things I understand and then some things I do not. So I can only help in so far that I know how. After that, don't even ask me because I will not know anything.*

Their grace and honesty brought me a chaotic wave of emotions.

Conclusions

All my colleagues spoke to the realities of the Honduran education system. Kerr (2016) cites Aoki, who writes that “to truly understand educational ideas, our formalized inquiries

should consider the ways these ideas become artfully lived by people with unique histories, motives, intentions, and orientations" (p. 12). This statement speaks to the urgency of chronicling the stories of vested parties in Honduras' educational and schooling system, where we pay no heed to the epistemic contributions of these *testimonios.* We would ignore warning signs that will, and can, further the chasm of educational attainment between children of Honduras, Central America, and other nations in the Western Hemisphere.

Before returning to Honduras, my work centered on the educational, schooling, and lived experiences of children who emigrated from the isthmus toward nontraditional sites in the Rust Belt States of the United States. As I worked on fine-tuning the details of this publication, a beloved sister-friend called and shared the story of the over thirty Central American youth, among them several Hondurans, who flourished against the most unlikely circumstances and conditions and secured their goal of obtaining a high school education.

As happy as it made me for them, I could not help but think about a recent article by *El Heraldo*, a local national newspaper, that offered a grim view of the educational pipeline in Honduras. Based on figures provided on April 27th, 2024, "400,000 children between the ages of 15 and 17 are outside the Honduran educational system. The urgency of this piece written by the Redaccion of *El Heraldo* is that this, "los vuelve presas del trabajo infantil, la migración y del crimen organizado" [*makes them prey to child labor, migration, and organized crime.*]. (2024, para. 2). I would argue this and so much more.

My thoughts and love go out to all children who face these and other atrocities of the times. For no matter where these children are, wherever they choose to lay their heads and call home, whether they are from the isthmus or in lands far, far away, the truth lies in the proverbial words of James Baldwin (1980), who claims:

> The children are always ours, every single one of them, all over the globe. I am beginning to suspect that whoever can recognize this may be incapable of morality. Or, in other words, that we, the elders, are the only models children have. What we see in the children is what they have seen in us–or, more accurately perhaps, what they *see* in us. (para. 2)

That premise is precisely why many of us do what we do and will continue to do so for as long as we are able.

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APPENDIX A

1. ¿Cuál es su nombre completo?
2. ¿Tiene preferencia de un pseudónimo que podamos usar?
3. ¿Cuál es su fecha de nacimiento?
4. ¿Cuál fue el último grado que cursó en la escuela?
5. ¿Cuánto tiempo lleva trabajando en la UDF?

6. ¿Qué recuerda de marzo del 2020?
7. ¿Cómo fue impactada personalmente?
8. ¿Cómo fue impactada su familia?
9. ¿Cómo fue impactada la experiencia escolar de los jóvenes/sus hijos?
10. Que tipo de respuesta recibió del colegio de sus hijos en cuanto a cambio de formato presencial a formato en línea?
11. En su experiencia, como fue impactada la política educativa (a nivel institucional y nacional), por la pandemia del COVID-19?
12. En cuanto brindarle apoyo académico a sus hijos, cómo describiría su experiencia?
13. ¿Qué observó sobre las experiencias de otros niños/as hondureñas durante este tiempo?
14. ¿Qué apoyo recibe de parte de UDF en cuanto al apoyo al navegar la incertidumbre de la pandemia?
15. ¿Hay algo que le gustaría compartir con una audiencia más amplia sobre las realidades del sistema educativo hondureño durante y después de la pandemia de COVID-19?

APPENDIX A (English)

1. What is your full name?
2. Do you have a preference for a pseudonym we can use?
3. What is your birth date?
4. What was the last grade you attended in school?
5. How long have you been working at the UDF?
6. What do you remember from March 2020?
7. How were you personally impacted?
8. How was your family impacted?
9. How was the school experience of the youth/their children impacted?
10. What kind of response did you receive from your children's school regarding the change from in-person to online format?
11. In your experience, how did the COVID-19 pandemic impact educational policy (at the institutional and national level)?
12. When it comes to providing academic support to your children, how would you describe your experience?
13. What did you observe about the experiences of other Honduran children during this time?
14. What support are you receiving from UDF in navigating the uncertainty of the pandemic?
15. Would you like to share anything about the realities of the Honduran educational system during and after the COVID-19 pandemic with a broader audience?