

Violence, insecurity, and the pandemic: notes on the possibilities of "virtual education" for early childhood in Tierra Caliente (Warm Land), Michoacán, Mexico

Marco Calderón Mólgora¹

Abstract: Tierra Caliente, in Michoacán, Mexico, is a region with serious problems of insecurity and violence. This is an area where agricultural production is very significant, particularly lemon cultivation, but where several organised crime groups operate. The illegal collection of quotas from agricultural producers is common. Physical aggression is also common among the various groups fighting for the collection of quotas, in addition to controlling the transfer of illegal substances. This situation has had multiple consequences, some of which are linked to the formal and informal education of girls and boys of different ages. For example, this school year, which began in September 2023, several schools were unable to start classes. On the other hand, in 2020, because of the Covid-19 pandemic, a long period of closure began, which implied the search for alternative ways of teaching classes in very complex conditions. Taking into account the problem of public insecurity as well as the situation of confinement resulting from the pandemic, the purpose of this presentation is to give an overview of the educational needs of young children and the possibilities of using virtual media for teaching. On the basis of a questionnaire applied to teachers of early childhood education, the focus is on some localities and schools in Tierra Caliente, Michoacán.

Keywords: preschool education, violence, pandemic, remote virtual education, rural areas

1 Introduction

Although I have been studying the history of rural education in Mexico for 20 years, the opportunity to participate in the conference on *Challenges and Opportunities in the Digital World* made me look for new information. I took a break to think about how I could contribute to the overall theme of this international conference. The answer was to write something about the use of digital media in early education in a very conflictive rural region where insecurity and violence are daily problems. In addition, for more than two years, schools throughout the area were closed due to the confinement resulting from Covid-19. During this time, teachers had to use their imagination and some electronic resources to continue teaching. After the pandemic, remote virtual classes prevailed, partly because of the growing problem of violence.

2 Methods and theory

To write this text, I prepared a questionnaire of eight simple questions, which was distributed through WhatsApp to preschool teachers in Tierra Caliente, Michoacán. The person in charge of this area approved the questionnaire and sent it to the teachers using WhatsApp. Within three days, I received 90 completed questionnaires. Some teachers answered directly on WhatsApp; some used a word processor or PDF format; a few wrote their answers by hand and then took pictures. I also used information from previous research and articles from local and national newspapers. I consulted conferences on the subject that appear on YouTube, as well as a bibliography on the subject cited in the final references.

There is a vast literature on the phenomenon of violence, perhaps since it is a problem that crosses the history of humanity. For this research, one basic aspect concerns the state, a subject that is a fundamental part of the history of political theory, at least from Aristotle to the present day. In relation to the state and violence, there are two classic authors who are indispensable. Thomas Hobbes argued that, in the "State of Nature", war was a daily occurrence and that the State can be conceived as the result of a "social pact" that seeks to control the exercise of daily violence among men

¹ El Colegio de Michoacán, Centro de Estudios Antropológicos, México, calderon@colmich.edu.mx

(among human beings, we would now say). Men, in renouncing their "natural right" to exercise violence, did so to protect themselves from the aggressions of others and thus achieve survival. Three centuries later, Max Weber defined the state as the "monopoly of legitimate violence". Without referring directly to Hobbes, Weber redefines a philosophical concept by a sociological concept.

With these general ideas in mind, it is possible to affirm that in the case of Mexico and other countries, despite the existence of a certain type of State, the exercise of violence between private individuals continues to take place. Different authors have reflected on the "limits" or "margins" of the State in contemporary societies, such as the remarkable collective book edited by Veena Das and Deborah Pool published in 2004. On the one hand, despite the existence of nation states, war continues; on the other hand, within nations, the use of violence is a daily occurrence even though it is illegitimate from a legal point of view. In the case of Mexico, it is notable that in the last twenty years the violence exercised by organized crime groups has generated multiple consequences in political, social, economic, and cultural terms in very diverse regions, as noted in these pages. Here, social inequality and corruption play a significant role. In this context, digitalization acquires both positive and negative characteristics.

3 Research results

I would now like to present several aspects of the research that are fundamental to contributing to the central theme of this international conference about challenges and opportunities of the digital world. As I said before, in this text I put emphasis on rural areas.

3.1 Tierra Caliente, Michoacán

Tierra Caliente is characterised by extremely high temperatures. At times, the heat reaches 50 Celsius degrees. It is a region that covers a large part of the state of Michoacán, starting in Jalisco and extending towards Guerrero. It is a strip located between the mountains that border the Pacific coast (the Southern Sierra Madre or Sierra Madre del Sur) and another mountain range, the Neovolcanic Axis (Eje Neovolcánico), which runs through much of western Mexico. There are 18 municipalities (Apatzingán, Nueva Italia, Buenavista, Parácuaro, La Huacana, Tepalcatepec, Aguililla, Coalcomán, Gabriel Zamora, Nuevo Urecho, Huetamo, Turicato, Tiquicheo, Tuzantla, Nocupétaro, Carácuaro, Churumuco, and San Lucas) in Tierra Caliente, with half a million inhabitants, in an area of 7 000 square kilometres.

The main legal cash crop is lemon. About 700 000 tonnes are produced every year on an area of 40 000 hectares.² It is the region with the highest lemon production in the country and perhaps in the world. Other agricultural products include melon, watermelon, papaya, sesame, pumpkin, tomato, and mango. Some crops are irrigated and others are rainfed. However, due to its geographical location and geological conditions, Tierra Caliente is also an area with a long tradition of producing illicit crops, such as marijuana and poppy. In addition, at some point in the late 20th century, laboratories were set up to produce synthetic drugs. To get their lemon harvest to market, growers have to pay organised crime a fee of one peso per kilo. This amounts to 700 million pesos a year. The scale of the business is enormous, not to mention other sources of income that different organised crime groups compete for.

For all these reasons, several areas of Tierra Caliente have been controlled by organised crime groups for several years. Perhaps, the first group was the Knights Templar, which at some point reorganised and gave way to the Familia Michoacana, which later gave way to the formation of Los Viagras. However, in recent years, another criminal group, the Jalisco Cartel - New Generation, has entered the fray. The process is very complex, and I do not have the conditions to give more information now. The main problem is that under these conditions, violence has increased significantly in recent years, including during the years of the pandemic.³

² <https://www.tridge.com/es/news/michoacan-is-the-first-place-in-lemon-production-a>

³ Data published in local and national newspapers.

3.2 The school sector and early childhood education

I will now give some basic information about the school zone I wish to highlight. According to the administrative criteria of the Secretary of Education of Michoacán, part of Tierra Caliente belongs to Section 10, including the municipalities of Coalcomán, Aguililla, Tepalcatepec, and Apatzingán. In total, there are 3297 students in early childhood education for the year 2023. The largest number is concentrated in the municipality of Apatzingán, with a total of 1248 children. In Tepalcatepec there are 950 children in early childhood education, while in Coalcomán and Aguililla there are 635 and 464 children, respectively.⁴ The following table shows these figures.

Municipality	Schools	Total population	Preschool students
Coalcomán	12	19633	635
Tepalcatepec	19	24074	950
Apatzingán	87	126191	1248
Aguililla	14	14754	464
Total	132	184652	3297

It is important to note that each municipality has different characteristics in terms of urban settlements and in relation to rural localities. In the municipal capitals, there are better infrastructure conditions for the provision of Internet services, while in the small rural villages, the existing service is inefficient or it is non-existent. That is why most of the questionnaires I managed to collect came from urban or semi-urban areas, while in the more remote areas there is sometimes no possibility of using WhatsApp.

During the pandemic, a number of strategies were used to continue teaching and to move forward with educational programs. In areas with better Internet service, some teachers were able to provide online lessons, but in a very irregular way. However, not all families have the necessary infrastructure or sufficient resources for children to take lessons and develop online activities. Under these circumstances, there were teachers who prepared videos or some materials so that the children could continue to work at home with the help of their parents, especially their mothers. Several teachers went to the children's homes once a week or every two weeks to distribute materials and assign homework, and to collect the materials that had already been worked on.⁵

So, teachers used WhatsApp as the most effective resource for sending videos, educational materials, homework, and exercises to do at home. Unlike the Internet, which is more readily available in small towns or semi-urban areas, information sent via WhatsApp can reach rural areas that are very isolated or poorly communicated. Still, mobile phones cannot be used in all rural areas, partly because of problems with Internet connectivity or lack of resources to make data available. Another big problem is the lack of basic infrastructure, such as computers or tablets, in the domestic space. However, for at least a year, before the vaccination campaigns began, the only alternative for most of the preschool population was to use WhatsApp to do their schoolwork.⁶

Another major problem was the fact that parents were not prepared to adequately take on the role of tutors or substitute teachers. While this was very evident in the urban areas of many cities in Michoacán and in Mexico in general, the problem was more pronounced in rural areas, where mothers and fathers have a very low level of schooling. Still, despite the confinement, infants in rural areas were able to socialise with other infants outside their homes.

3.3 After the pandemic

After the pandemic "ended", the problems continued. Returning to school was very complex. Many parents feared getting infected. On the other hand, before the pandemic, many schools were in very poor condition in terms of infrastructure. During the two years of lockdown, the schools deteriorated. It is still necessary to take stock of this problem.⁷

Another major problem was the increase in public insecurity and violence resulting from disputes between organised crime groups, as I mentioned earlier. Here are some facts. It is estimated that in 2022, the homicide rate in Tierra Caliente was 51 per 100 000 inhabitants, one of the highest rates in Mexico and in the world. There is also a significant number of

⁴ Official data from the Ministry of Public Education on the State of Michoacán.

⁵ Data collected through the questionnaire applied to prepare this text.

⁶ Data collected through the questionnaire applied to prepare this text.

⁷ Data collected through the questionnaire applied to prepare this text.

forced displacements: 13,151 people were displaced from their homes, in 2021. Only in June 2023, at least 800 people from Apatzingán were displaced in less than a week.⁸ One-third of the displaced are children and adolescents. According to a non-governmental organisation, there are about 2648 displaced families in Michoacán, a quarter of them from Tierra Caliente and the coast of Michoacán.⁹

3.4 Education in violent times

In some schools in Tierra Caliente, it was not possible to start school in September 2023. It is no longer a question of the pandemic, but of public insecurity and the increase in violence resulting from the fight between organised crime groups for the collection of quotas for the transport of lemons to the market. According to the teachers who responded to the questionnaire, parents' main fear is the increase in violent conflicts. The irruption of different groups is a daily occurrence. Many teachers are afraid, too, not only because they have to go to work, but also because children may be in danger, as several schools are located in conflict areas.¹⁰ It is important to note that in recent months the conflict has involved the use of drones with homemade bombs to attack the enemy. It seems that sometimes these bombs do not reach their original target, but hit people or property belonging to people who are not part of the criminal groups.

3.5 Economic problems

During and after the pandemic, the family economy was negatively affected. First, displaced families had to find new places to live in, as well as new activities that would allow them to earn income and function as a household unit. Many of them are still in transit and their fate is uncertain. Apparently, many of these families are at the US border hoping to obtain legal permission to establish there. Secondly, the prices of basic survival products in Tierra Caliente have risen at a very high rate, much higher than the national average inflation rate. Armed conflicts between organised crime groups in the region prevent the arrival of several products in the daily diet. Even the price of petrol has increased much more than the national average. As a result, the household economy has been severely disrupted. It is at this level, the family household, that the social, cultural, and political impact needs to be assessed. Both the pandemic and the violence continue. Most important, school attendance is declining, especially in areas where violence tends to increase.

3.6 Impact on Civic Education

More information is needed to understand the long-term social and political impact of both the lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and violence on the lives of the children I have referred to. The children now face multiple learning difficulties. Several teachers have reported cognitive problems. Many children are shy and anxious; others, on the contrary, are aggressive and unwilling to follow the guidelines set by the teachers. Lack of attention appears to be a common trait, and fear would be at the root of the difficulties children show when they try to engage with schoolwork. In several schools, teachers have established some protocols so that children know how to act in case of a violent assault. It is important to emphasise that school attendance both of teachers and students has decreased due to insecurity and forced displacements. Parents are afraid to send their children to school.¹¹

⁸ <https://www.infobae.com/mexico/2023/07/01/michoacan-bajo-el-control-del-narco-estas-son-las-organizaciones-criminales-que-se-disputan-el-estado/>

⁹ Acompañamiento a Desplazados de Michoacán (Tierra Caliente), Julio Franco
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OnJEuMwoMg4&t=2870s>

¹⁰ Data collected through the questionnaire applied to prepare this text.

¹¹ Data collected through the questionnaire applied to prepare this text.

4 Conclusions

As I have pointed out, the problem is very complex and the whole process deserves further investigation. Given the general theme of this congress, it is important to conclude with some thoughts on the opportunities and difficulties of remote education via the Internet for young children in rural areas, a modality that overcomes the limitations of connectivity and infrastructure that prevent participation in virtual classes.

Despite all the problems, WhatsApp has been a very important resource in trying to mitigate the negative effects of the pandemic in terms of formal education. However, the difficulties are enormous, mainly due to violence, insecurity, social inequality, and economic problems. Another major problem stems from the forms of socialisation fostered by these conditions, which have been exacerbated by, among other factors, the absence of an effective state.

I am looking forward to the opportunity to get feedback on this work from the teachers who responded to the questionnaire, and thus be able to formulate some changes and specify other elements.

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