

Teachers' Views on the Implementation of Blended Education during the Pandemic in Costa Rica

Opiniones de los profesores sobre la aplicación de la educación combinada durante la pandemia en Costa Rica

Opiniões dos Professores sobre a Implementação da Educação Mista durante a pandemia na Costa Rica

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic reshaped every educational system worldwide. Almost a year after the pandemic hit Costa Rica obliging classes at public schools to be substituted by a distance education model, the Ministry of Public Education decided to implement a blended-learning model in 2021 which involved both face-to-face and remote teaching, with students alternating school attendance. This study, carried out in the Norte-Norte Educational Directorate in Costa Rica; specifically, the counties of Upala and Guatuso, had the main purpose of describing the perceptions of six primary English teachers regarding the blended model to arrive at a better understanding of the pedagogical methods these employed and the professional context they experienced during the COVID-19 public health crisis. This study used an inductive qualitative approach and implemented a descriptive case-study design in which data were obtained and triangulated via interviews, document gathering, and photo elicitation. Analysis of the data was then carried out using ATLAS.ti software. Despite the supposed implementation of two combined modalities, teachers experienced multiple modalities due to students' irregular attendance of both face-to-face and online classes, lack of internet connectivity, and parents' fears impacting their decisions regarding sending their children to school. Additionally, education authorities and school management played key roles with regard to the pedagogical methods employed and the perception of decontextualization and work overload.

Keywords: blended learning, distance education, foreign language teaching, pandemics, teacher's perspectives.

Resumen: La pandemia del COVID-19 transformó cada sistema educativo alrededor del mundo. Casi un año después de que la pandemia golpeará Costa Rica y la educación pública presencial fuera sustituida por un modelo de educación a distancia, el Ministerio de Educación Pública decidió implementar un modelo de educación combinada para el 2021, usando clases remotas y presenciales en el que el estudiantado alternara la asistencia a la escuela. El estudio, llevado a cabo en la Dirección Regional de Educación Norte-Norte de Costa Rica; específicamente los cantones de Upala y Guatuso, tuvo como propósito describir las opiniones de seis docentes de inglés de primaria sobre la educación combinada profundizar en la comprensión de la mediación pedagógica y el entorno laboral durante la crisis sanitaria. Este estudio utilizó un enfoque de investigación cualitativa inductiva con un diseño de estudio de caso con datos obtenidos y triangulados mediante entrevistas, recolección de documentos y foto elicitación; el análisis de los datos se llevó a cabo mediante el software ATLAS.ti. A pesar de una implementación teórica de dos modalidades combinadas, los docentes experimentaron múltiples modalidades debido a la asistencia irregular a las clases presenciales y virtuales, la poca conectividad a internet y la decisión de las familias a no enviar a sus hijos a la escuela. También, la gestión educativa y escolar jugaron un rol fundamental en la mediación pedagógica y en la percepción de descontextualización y sobrecarga laboral.

Palabras claves: aprendizaje semipresencial, educación a distancia, enseñanza de lengua extranjera, pandemia, perspectiva docente.

Resumo: A pandemia da COVID-19 transformou todos os sistemas educativos em todo o mundo. Quase um ano depois que a pandemia atingiu a Costa Rica e a educação pública presencial foi substituída por um modelo de educação a distância, o Ministério da Educação Pública decidiu implementar um modelo de educação combinada para 2021, utilizando aulas remotas e presenciais em que o estudiantado alternasse a frequência na escola. O estudo, realizado na Direção Regional de Educação Norte-Norte da Costa Rica; especificamente os cantões de Upala e Guatuso, teve o objetivo de descrever as opiniões de seis professores de inglês de primária sobre a educação combinada para aprofundar a compreensão da mediação pedagógica e do ambiente de trabalho durante a crise sanitária. Este estudo utilizou uma abordagem de pesquisa qualitativa indutiva com design de estudo de caso com dados obtidos e triangulados por meio de entrevistas, coleta de documentos e foto-elicitação; a análise dos dados foi realizada no software ATLAS.ti. Apesar da implementação teórica de duas modalidades combinadas, os professores experimentaram múltiplas modalidades devido à frequência irregular às aulas presenciais e virtuais, à má conectividade à Internet e à decisão das famílias de não enviarem os seus filhos à escola. Além disso, a gestão educativa e escolar teve papel fundamental na mediação pedagógica e na percepção da descontextualização e da sobrecarga de trabalho.

Palavras-chave: aprendizagem híbrida, educação a distância, ensino de línguas estrangeiras, pandemia, perspectiva docente.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic hit Central America at the beginning of 2020, provoking the sudden closure of schools in Latin America and the Caribbean, and thus preventing approximately 166 million students from attending face-to-face classes (Elacqua et al., 2021). In this context, the Costa Rican Ministry of Public Education (MEP) decided to pause the school year preventively and to implement a model based on distance education (MEP, 2020) which posed multiple challenges due to inequalities between urban and rural areas as well as the work overload it posed on teachers (López-Estrada, Elizondo-Mejías, & Pérez Hidalgo, 2024). These challenges were also perceived in other educational systems worldwide (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). After constant analysis of the situation, by the end of 2020, the MEP decided to progressively bring students back to the classroom, declaring the implementation of a combined education modality for 2021. This new modality had the main purpose of providing students with more comprehensive support from teachers while working both in face-to-face on-site classes and in distance education classes (MEP, 2021a).

As part of this new modality, the MEP provided teachers with specific guidelines regarding the implementation of combined education in different schools; some of these included the adjustments required to divide groups such that students could attend classes on certain weekdays while studying remotely

on others. This strategy was employed in response to public health protocols regarding social distancing in classrooms and the need to combine face-to-face, distance, collaborative and, autonomous work (MEP, 2021a). Another fundamental aspect of this new modality was the ongoing use of the self-study guides (Guías de Trabajo Autónomo) implemented in 2020 as a pedagogical tool for use when studying at home. These guides required review and expansion for face-to-face classes (MEP, 2021b).

In addition to the aforementioned aspects, distance education required the implementation of both synchronous and asynchronous sessions, taking into account the resources available to students, who were classified into the following four scenarios with respect to their access to technological devices and online connectivity: (1) students with access to electronic devices and internet connectivity; (2) students with access to devices and limited connectivity; (3) students with access to devices but no connectivity; and (4) students lacking both devices and internet connectivity (MEP, 2021a).

The pedagogical methodology employed was mostly based on the use of the self-study guides that had been implemented in 2020. However, for 2021, it was necessary to employ four key stages in their implementation, these being connection, clarification, collaboration, and application. Thus, teachers had to: supply activities to make connections with students' prior knowledge of specific topics; provide opportunities to clarify any questions on the target contents; create activities promoting teacher-student, student-student, and family-student collaboration; and create tasks in which students could apply the knowledge constructed in their classes (MEP, 2021a). This structure sought to facilitate students' autonomous work at home while leaving room for teachers and students to interact in synchronous encounters, both virtually and at school.

It is worth taking some time to examine the notion of distance education implemented in the context of the COVID-19 public health emergency. As pointed out by Chaves Torres (2017), even at the best of times this term has become somewhat problematic given the multiple changes that society has undergone, with the concept further muddled by the boom currently underway in online learning, virtual teaching, and the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in social and educational contexts. Along the same lines of thought, Garrison (2000) (as cited in García-Aretio, 2011), and García-Aretio, (2021) point out that there is conceptual confusion around distance education in terms of which new technologies, tools and programs should most appropriately be used for this, along with fundamental changes in both the audience and providers of distance education, and that all these factors pose major challenges to the implementation of this modality. In view of the limitations of the model of distance education adopted by the MEP both in 2020 and 2021, this model could in fact be seen to be better described by the concept of emergency remote teaching, which is defined as an unplanned modality that includes abrupt changes improvised in response to an unexpected situation or event (Elizondo-Mejías et al., 2021). This term was thus coined as a way of separating distance education from a model implemented in times of emergency in which teaching and learning processes are not suspended but continue happening outside the regular classroom, mostly aided by technological tools or any other teaching instrument that enables autonomous work to continue outside the classroom (Hodges, et al., 2020).

In Costa Rica, the decision to implement a model in which students could attend classes at least some days a week was made based on statistics that showed that 87% of classes were taught remotely in 2020. This represented the longest on-site class suspension in the country's history (Programa Estado de La Nación, 2021). Furthermore, it was clear that many students, particularly those living in rural areas, did not have internet connectivity nor access to the digital tools required to successfully learn under a distance education model (Arias-Ortiz et al., 2020; Programa Estado de la Nación, 2021). Nonetheless, it was clear that the public health crisis made full on-site classes impossible due to the public health protocols required, in particular social distancing. This made it necessary for teachers to use whatever means they could to try to teach students in far-from-ideal remote education conditions. The model implemented in Costa Rica could be compared to blended learning, a relatively new term in the educational literature (Hrastinski, 2019) which combines face-to-face instruction with didactic strategies and

activities carried out online (Cobo-Rendón, et al., 2022). However, in Costa Rica, the latter was substituted with distance instruction supported mostly by self-study guides.

An effectively designed blended-learning program (also known as bimodal teaching) should incorporate face-to-face classes as a key element to complement students' individual and autonomous learning processes carried out outside of the classroom (Allan, et al., 2019; Cobo-Rendón, et al., 2022); nevertheless, in Costa Rica attendance to school during 2021 was not mandatory but became a parent decision (Castro, 2021).

Parallel to the guidelines issued on the pedagogical methodology to be used during combined education, the MEP created and disseminated a document with specific guidelines for preschools, single-teacher schools, special education, indigenous education, and foreign languages. This document stated that for English instruction, teachers were required to use the 2017 study programs except in sixth grade, for which the 2005 program was still being implemented (MEP, 2021b). This document also emphasized the need for teachers to determine class contents based on what had been missed in the previous grade due to the pandemic, to pick up, prioritize, and include these contents with those of the following grade in 2021. Finally, it was expected that students would be in face-to-face English classes for at least 80 minutes a week (MEP, 2021b).

Another key consideration for the English subject in terms of the self-study guides was that teachers needed to provide students with two guides a month that included the four-target language linguistic macro skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing). These needed to include evaluation rubrics and expected learning outcomes to promote self-regulated learning and autonomy. Furthermore, it was highly recommended that teachers use authentic language in the guide, taken from poetry, short stories, songs, movies, online videos, etc. (MEP, 2021b).

All these new requirements led to a challenging situation for teachers to attempt to impart classes successfully and correctly in 2021. Given this context, this study aims to describe the perceptions of six primary English teachers from the Norte-Norte Educational Directorate regarding combined education, to promote a better understanding of the pedagogical methodology these employed and the professional context they underwent during the COVID-19 public health crisis. The two research questions intended to be answered were: What opinions do English teachers express regarding the implementation of combined education? And what were the teachers' experiences during the implementation of combined education because of the public health crisis provoked by COVID-19?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This investigation sought to examine the social complexities arising from the implementation of a combined education model in times of pandemic, providing some lessons learned with regard to decision-making processes for primary education in Costa Rican rural areas. The study took up an inductive qualitative approach and a case-study design. The specific data elements were converted into semantic constructs according to their content and the categories they fit into (Hatch, 2002).

The case-study design was descriptive in nature (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Flyvbjerg, 2011; Lichtman, 2013), with combined education as the unit of analysis. It focused on the perceptions of six English teachers working for the MEP, seeking to have these teachers share their individual experiences and opinions on the combined education process implemented in 2021. This was to better understand the reality experienced in rural areas from the teachers' perspectives. The study was conducted in the Norte-Norte Educational Directorate, specifically in the counties of Upala and Guatuso.

The data were collected and triangulated using three different techniques. First, semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out via Zoom; these interviews included open-ended thought-provoking questions previously validated by two experts in education in addition to the three researchers.

The interview recordings were transcribed verbatim for later analysis. It should be noted that all interviews and related concept categorization were carried out in the original Spanish, with quotes translated into English by the writers for easier comprehension in this paper. The second technique was document gathering, in which didactic lesson plans were collected and analyzed as evidence of the specific pedagogical practices employed. Finally, photo elicitation adapted from Harper (2002) was employed with the intention that teachers reflect on the implementation of combined education in a way that gave them the opportunity to conceptualize their own realities and professional perspectives, through the use of two illustrative photographs taken and provided by the teachers, one portraying a positive and the other a negative aspect of the model used; both pictures were accompanied by a written reflection piece (Bautista-García, et al., 2018; Harper, 2002; Lauck et al., 2021).

The target population was six English teachers selected through a single round of purposeful sampling. All teachers taught English as a Foreign Language to grades one to six, working in schools with significant representation of students allocated to scenarios three and four (with access to devices but no internet connectivity, or access to neither devices nor connectivity). All participants had tenured positions and held a minimum of a professional licentiate degree, with no experience in combined education. Furthermore, all teachers were working at rural schools in the counties of Upala or Guatuso; understanding those schools as the ones located in rural areas as defined by the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos (2018).

The content analysis of the data gathered involved the researchers in intense processes of identification, synthesis, and review of the information. Six major recursive steps were followed for the related analysis (Hatch, 2002):

- Data familiarization including the researchers' critical reading and systematization of the information.
- Coding the data into meaningful units using the ATLAS.ti software.
- Category creation by implementing Spradley's (1979) semantic relationships, obtaining only the relationships of strict inclusion and attribution.
- Checking categories by reviewing the code book and making any adjustments required to consolidate the semantic relationships.
- Identification of the most prominent categories to ensure being able to answer the study's research questions.
- Presentation of the contents, including description of the categories and their contents in all their narrative complexity.

Even though the pictures are not reflected in this article, they were examined by the researchers, and the teachers' reflections on the pictures were analyzed to contrast the results against those obtained during the interviewing process. Hence, some of the quotes portrayed in the results section correspond not only to the interviewing process but also to the written reflections either from the didactic planning or the photo-elicitation process.

Ethics in the research process were ensured by obtaining the participants' informed consent, both to participate in the study and for the recording of the interviews; codes were assigned to each person to maintain confidentiality, and the entire data collection process was carried out using virtual tools to avoid physical contact or exposing the participants to health risks during the pandemic. Finally, internal validity was obtained by cross-checking the transcriptions and applying intercoder reliability during the coding process.

RESULTS

Analysis of the data shed light on multiple results based on a set of categories and subcategories derived from the inductive coding process, which are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Themes and categories

Themes	Categories
Pedagogical aspects	Prioritized contents
	Evaluation
	Pedagogical mediation
	Didactic planning
	Learning processes
Self-efficacy	Communication processes
	Personal abilities
	Reflexive abilities
	Definition
	Benefits
Characterization of the modality	Limitations
	Aspects to improve
	Sanitary protocols
	Work routine
Professional context	Work overload
	Professional relationships
	Pedagogical advice
MEP-based management	Educational support
	Communication processes
	Decision-making processes
	Schedule flexibilization
School-based management	School support
	Communication processes
	Decision-making processes
	Tiredness
Teacher's feelings	Confusion
	Inequality
	Difficulty
	Empathy
	Frustration
	Gratitude
	Uncertainty
	Work overload

Source: Researchers' own design.

For this article, two main results are emphasized: teachers' perceptions and experiences with regard to the type of classes implemented during the combined education modality, and to the educational management during this modality, at both the MEP and the individual school level. Other relevant results were the feelings experienced by teachers, self-efficacy skills, and management of pedagogical aspects presented in detail by López-Estrada, Pérez-Hidalgo, and Elizondo-Mejías (2024).

Result 1. Classes: The first result of note is that teachers had to deal with multiple expectations regarding the sessions to be taught under the combined education model; a variety of session types or sub-modalities were created due to the teaching context, including synchronous and asynchronous distance sessions, and regular and irregular face-to-face classes. Furthermore, teachers had to deal with school logistics regarding the equitable distribution of English lessons, and work overload resulting from the need to attend to all students while accommodating to differing levels of face-to-face classes and remote sessions catering to differing levels of communication difficulties.

Teachers started the school year with multiple expectations with respect to the combined modality and the logistics this implied. When consulted on these during the interviews, it was found that expectations were mostly positive regarding the possibility of having students back in the classroom. Some expectations were personal in nature and focused on the fact that teachers would be able to teach students in a face-to-face environment once more; however, there was some nervousness due to uncertainty. For instance, DI-2 expressed, "I felt happy because I was coming back to school, and also, quite scared stiff." Along similar lines, DI-5 saw the modality as positive since students were going to spend more time in the classroom, stating, "I saw some light at the end of the tunnel in the sense of being able to come back to school and having children at least for a certain amount of time in the classroom." Likewise, DI-3 indicated that "maybe something positive [...] was the fact that we were going to have the opportunity to go back, that students were going back to class, and we were going to be able to share with them and teach them directly; a little similar to the reality of years prior to the pandemic." This shows that teachers were pleased to have students back in school and supported the return to face-to-face classes.

Other expectations had to do with the logistics involved in the combined modality. These expectations were created after reading the guidelines or talking to school principals and certain MEP authorities. DI-1 manifested, "They [advisors and school principals] explained that we were supposed to work with a certain number of students; that the schedule was not going to be a complete one, that we needed to have spaces for students to work at home and also at school." Similarly, DI-2 anticipated teaching smaller groups, stating, "Of the total number of lessons, some were going to be distance classes and some face-to-face ones; therefore, not all the groups were coming to school. They were to be divided in groups A and B." Furthermore, DI-5 mentioned, "I knew the distance part was going to be difficult because we didn't have the conditions regarding access to technology. They were the same as those we had in 2020, but I felt happy about the fact that students were coming back." These ideas portray the expectation of having subgroups and the requirement to create materials to work with students at school and self-study guides for students to work on at home.

Combined education was expected to be made up of two types of sessions: distance and regular face-to-face classes combined. Nevertheless, the former was characterized as being made up of "students who stayed fully in distance education [...] due to the option given parents and because going to school was not mandatory" (DI-1). This choice given to parents was related to "any pre-existing diseases such as asthma; so, parents were afraid of their children being exposed to COVID-19 and decided that their kids should stay fully in distance education" (DI-2). Nonetheless, some participants considered that such decisions were unrelated to health issues; participant DI-4 stated, "They [the parents] decided to keep children in distance education because the mothers did not want to commit to dropping off or picking up their children and getting up early."

For some teachers, distance education sessions were subdivided into synchronous and asynchronous work. Synchronous sessions were offered to those students who had some internet connectivity. Participant DI-1 said, "After 2020, parents became aware of the need [for connectivity]. It might sound bad, but those who are more responsible acquired some type of internet plan." This led to synchronous classes; however, this modality did not work with every grade: "Actually, first grade was the level in which more students used to connect. Sometimes five did; there were 13 students and only five used to connect [. . .] In second grade only one did, in third grade sometimes there were two or three, and in fifth grade there were also two" (DI-1). Most remote work was done asynchronously. Teachers used WhatsApp as their main pedagogical and communication tool: "I took the guide and recorded short videos explaining what [the students] had to do; I also sent some audios." (DI-1). For participant DI-5 however, this modality was somewhat challenging because "when children went home, they had to do work at a distance and could ask their teachers questions. This dynamic rarely worked because children did not have the conditions to connect, and they could not take advantage of the time I had scheduled to work with them; most of the work was done asynchronously."

Combined education implied a gradual return to face-to-face classes in schools. Nonetheless, face-to-face classes continued to be divided into regular and irregular sessions. Regular sessions were characterized by a settled schedule of school attendance. DI-1 stated, "I worked with the groups where the principal was the homeroom teacher, so she brought in a group in the morning and another group in the afternoon; I taught four lessons a week." Similarly, DI-2 emphasized the group division: "They [students] got used to having their own group, so three days was Group A's time and the other two days was the chance for Group B; the following week, the schedule switched." This sub-division of groups was a strategy to "provide children with equal opportunities to receive face-to-face lessons" (DI-2). In bigger schools, groups were divided into more sub-groups; such was the case for participant DI-3, for whom "one group had four subgroups: A, B, C, and D, to make sure their schedules did not clash; sometimes one group left at 8:10 a.m. and another group started class at 8:20 a.m. to guarantee social distancing at the main gate."

The face-to-face scenario was also affected by certain irregularities due to differing contexts in schools: "I was teaching combined education and I only taught three lessons a week, sometimes only two lessons... I had to rotate with the Religion teacher so some weeks I taught less lessons per group" (DI-1). Similarly, participant DI-3 stated, "I sometimes saw them [the students] twice a week because the schedule was constantly changing; even in October or at the beginning of November we had to adjust things again due to the changes in social distancing."

Although schools worked on logistics to ensure every group received English classes, the number of lessons each had was reduced. Participant DI-4 explained, "We came back with less lessons, but I always saw the groups on Mondays and Thursdays." This phenomenon occurred at different institutions; in fact, DI-5 indicated, "We managed a 4:1 dynamic; four days face-to-face and one day at a distance. However, this schedule did not allow English lessons on the four days, only two lessons a week were taught."

Finally, this modality created some work overload, since teachers needed to plan for those students who were regularly attending school, those who were able to connect to virtual classes, students who lacked connectivity, and students whose parents decided not to send them to school. As expressed by DI-2 when reflecting on the self-study guides, "This work of planning, creating, checking, sending, returning feedback and the like was a tiring process because it required more time than it used to take in the past." Nevertheless, the same participant perceived this process as necessary and important because "it gave some extra help to those children whose parents decided to continue with distance education for health safety reasons."

Result 2. Management: Results related to management were analyzed both with regard to MEP authorities at a macro level and the management made directly within schools by school principals. Generally, teachers felt more supported at the school level than by the MEP. MEP management was described by teachers in terms of decision-making and communication. School management was characterized as involving decision-making processes, flexibility, support, and communication.

The teachers noted that the MEP decided to continue using the self-study guides for students, both for face-to-face and distance modalities: "Planning was the same for both stages; students used self-study guides at home, and we used the same guides for those times when students were at school" (DI-1). Nonetheless, teachers experienced some difficulties such as constant changes in the decisions made; participant DI-6 stated, "Things changed abruptly halfway through, and I did not know whether MEP had sent private guidelines to principals and supervisors, and we were not informed." These decisions were perceived as decontextualized; participant DI-2 stated, "The results that were expected by the MEP were difficult to achieve because we didn't have the same resources; we needed to take the individual conditions for each student into consideration." In this regard, participant DI-3 thought that decisions only took into account conditions in urban areas and felt that schools in their directorate "lacked those conditions. I told my superior that they asked us to do things that seemed to have been decided on in an office without any classroom experience."

Additionally, the subdivisions in modalities posed another challenge that teachers perceived not to have been considered by MEP authorities. Participant DI-5 stated, "There was a guideline that we needed to plan only for a bimodal setting; it could not be 100% face-to-face, nor 100% distance; authorities made recommendations without thinking about the scenarios where there was no internet connectivity and most of the time, we needed to teach face-to-face."

The other aspect of MEP management that was reflected upon was communication; teachers expressed that there were multiple guidelines established regarding planning, teaching methods, and schedules. DI-3 commented, "They sent a schedule or a model for working in the face-to-face modality [. . .] but we needed to figure out how to implement this here and find solutions." Even though some teachers felt communication was timely, others considered this process as ambiguous and left open to interpretation. Participant DI-5 stated, "Communication was correct, we got the information on time", yet participant DI-6 claimed, "MEP's guidelines are often ambiguous and left to each principal's interpretation."

When analyzing management at a micro level, school communication was perceived as being open and bidirectional. Participant DI-2 said, "With my school principal, I consider that communication is good. We both tried to interpret the MEP's guidelines, but in the end, we were unsure if that was what the authorities expected." DI-1 experienced a similar case in which communication was open and decisions were made jointly between school authorities and teachers: "They [the school authorities] explained what we had to do and the number of days we needed to work with students, we made the schedule together" (DI-1).

Another aspect perceived as positive was decision-making at schools. This was related both to logistics and flexibility in schedules. Participant DI-2 commented that the school principal met with each teacher to discuss the guidelines and to ask for their opinions on their interpretation. For DI-3, the principal's decision was to "accommodate the schedule so that I could attend both schools where I teach with no problems and with enough time to commute between them" (DI-3). DI-1 also stated that schedules were created together with the school administrator to be able to attend both schools worked at without any inconveniences. In summary, most principals seemed to "make decisions together with their teachers, taking into account the infrastructure, the number of teachers, and the number of classrooms available; but this seems to be the case in this area because in other directorates, school principals made the decisions themselves" (DI-6).

School support was mostly perceived in relation to printing out materials. Five teachers reported that their corresponding schools provided the conditions for printing these: "My school gave me the material" (DI-2); "Yes, I printed everything out at school" (DI-4); "My school took charge of all the paperwork" (DI-6); and "I printed everything at school, every resource and material was taken care of; in that sense, I had no problems at all" (DI-5). Finally, teacher DI-3 indicated that the administration supplied teachers with the copies, paper, and ink for the self-study guides they needed to print out: "I was just in charge of giving them out to my students" (DI-3). Another element of support noted by participant DI-4 was related to communicating changes and guidelines in a timely fashion. DI-4 stated, "The information was always sent by WhatsApp or e-mail. My principal was always careful to provide us with all the guidelines and timely information."

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The public health crisis provoked by the outbreak of COVID-19 at the end of 2019 impacted almost every educational system worldwide, affecting a vast number of students who experienced a momentary suspension of their formal learning processes. Despite the efforts made by the Costa Rican government, face-to-face classes were only gradually restored in 2021, a year after the pandemic hit, under the modality of combined education. Even though this modality was supposed to have been made up of two main components, regular face-to-face classes, and distance education (MEP, 2021a), teachers in the rural areas of the Norte-Norte Educational Directorate experienced multiple modalities due to the context, which included a lack of internet connectivity and electronic devices. The sub-modalities employed included both regular and irregular attendance of face-to-face classes, synchronous remote sessions for the few students who were able to connect virtually, and asynchronous remote sessions carried out mostly via WhatsApp videos for those with limited connectivity, for those lacking all connectivity. This multiplicity of modalities not only created work overload for teachers who were required to juggle multiple scenarios but also shed light on the inequitable access to connectivity, technological tools and educational resources that are present in the rural areas of Costa Rica when compared to urban areas (Garnier, 2022).

The Ministry of Public Education issued guidelines for every sub-modality implemented during the pandemic (MEP, 2021a); however, communication was perceived as untimely and ambiguous by teachers. Furthermore, there were constant changes and clarifications made to the guidelines to provide further details regarding specific subjects (MEP, 2021b). These constant changes impacted teachers and made it difficult for them to cope with the modalities required. This difficulty noted by teachers was the result of the country being unprepared for the crisis and, as occurred in many Latin American countries, was exacerbated by "not having a clear national digital education strategy to cope with a distance learning model that can capitalize on new Information Technologies (IT)" (Arias-Ortiz, et al., 2020, p. 11).

Decision-making in times of crisis is key to successfully dealing with situations like this and guaranteeing the continuation of the formal education process. During the implementation of combined education, MEP authorities decided to maintain the four scenarios regarding student connectivity and access to technological devices established in 2020 (MEP, 2021a); furthermore, English as a Foreign Language teachers were expected to emphasize the skills of listening and speaking, which had been left aside the previous year (MEP, 2021b). Nevertheless, teachers felt that these scenarios were insufficient and failed to address the context of rural areas, where teaching was complicated by the lack of viable means of remote communication with students and by parents' decisions to have their children remain under a distance model. In addition, the terminology adopted by the MEP might lead to misunderstandings since, as indicated by García-Aretio (2021), the modality employed could be more accurately described as emergency remote teaching, given that conditions were far from those required to ensure a properly designed quality distance education model.

Despite feelings of decontextualization due to the decisions made by the MEP and constant changes in guidelines that were perceived as ambiguous and communicated in an untimely fashion, the support provided at the school level was evaluated positively by teachers. As in 2020, during the combined education modality school principals played a key role in supporting and enabling assertive communication with their teachers (López-Estrada, Elizondo-Mejías, & Pérez-Hidalgo, 2022). This support included some flexibilization of schedules for those teachers who worked in multiple institutions for them to be able to commute between schools and the provision of all the materials for the printing of the self-study guides that had to be delivered to students.

In conclusion, teachers' perceptions, and experiences during the implementation of combined education suffered from a sense of decontextualization with regard to the guidelines provided to rural areas, leaving teachers feeling overworked due to the multiple session types they needed to plan to meet their students' differing contexts. Furthermore, management was characterized by constant sudden changes by MEP authorities, but supportive and assertive communication with teachers' immediate superiors at schools. The COVID-19 crisis posed opportunities to accelerate certain changes that were necessary and that had not taken place prior the pandemic (Garnier, 2021). Nonetheless, in the future, it will be necessary for the MEP to recognize the multiple contexts that are present in most rural areas of the country, where teachers encounter difficulties with students whose socioeconomic status interferes with their obtaining adequate access to connectivity and electronic devices, two resources that are fundamental to successfully carrying out a modality like that implemented in 2021.

This research is derived from a previous one carried out in the Educational Directorate of San Carlos during the modality of distance education in 2020 (Elizondo-Mejías et al., 2021; López-Estrada et al., 2022; López-Estrada, et al., 2024). Furthermore, the researchers are currently conducting another study in the Educational Directorate of Sarapiquí on the return to in-person education to consolidate a multiple case study from the Huetar-Northern region of the country during the pandemic (López-Estrada & Elizondo-Mejías, 2024). However, further studies can be conducted on students' perspectives and parents' opinions regarding the process of blended learning during the pandemic. Also, the study could be implemented in different areas of the country to better understand the similarities and differences between rural and urban areas.

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