

## **GEOGRAPHY TEACHING IN TIME OF CORONAVIRUS: PERCEPTION OF THE EDUCATIONAL COMMUNITY**

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The ability of the most lethal virus to spread in the 21st century has brought life to an uncertain halt by confining most of the planet in the first half of 2020. The streets of the world emptied as the outbreak claimed victims. 4.5 billion people in more than 180 countries were trapped in their homes. Much economic activity was suspended. Isolation from society became the only possible antidote against the enemy. And all this had a direct consequence on the teaching-learning system, which had to be drastically changed from face-to-face to distance learning, for at least 67% of the students enrolled worldwide. The permanence of COVID-19 until the scientific community manages to stop it raises many questions and challenges in any area of our lives, including the education system itself. The question will be whether this will have a return or not. Let us hope that normality will gradually be established and that there will be a return to face-to-face contact, but what is clear is that the use of telecommunications in the teaching-learning system will be more intense and continuous.

On the other hand, throughout the last decades, the school has been assuming the role that, in the past, was more typical of homes or families, on the responsibility of turning students into respectful and civic people. It is clear that, although parents have a great responsibility in the education of their children in terms of socialization, so does the education system itself. In other words, the school system is the main actor in teaching and transmitting models of coexistence or ethical and moral values at the level of society. The educational centers, at least in the stages prior to the University, postulate themselves as authentic responsible and representative of citizen training. A fact that is

also increasingly appreciated in the university environment. All this has become even more evident when the students, like the rest of society, have been confined to their homes for weeks and therefore obliged to live with their families.

Subjects such as geography, as the social science that it is, can and does have a lot to contribute to this whole situation. Perhaps even the current crisis over COVID-19 is a good opportunity to make oneself known and prove one's worth, given its involvement in understanding many of today's phenomena and events in any part of the planet. In order to achieve this objective, we can start with an understanding of the current situation that the Spanish educational community is going through in general and in terms of geography. In this way, it is possible to understand its strengths and weaknesses, as well as the demands of the different groups, as set out in this work.

Beyond the difficulties encountered, the stress and the situations of tension or distress generated at first, the results presented serve to help rethink certain background questions, such as the strategies for imparting the theoretical content, the set of computer tools best suited to each level and to each specific situation. In a situation such as the present one, where the practical nature of Geography is slowed down, it is necessary to reach students and awaken their interest in geographical knowledge by means of other procedures. The development of meaningful and constructive learning contributes to this. Thus, learning by discovery helps students to play an active role and feel that they are a fundamental part of their learning, which awakens their motivation. If all of this is achieved through geographical knowledge, as a means and end to better understand the reality in which they live, to create social and environmental awareness, it will be contributing in this way to the adequate formation of civic people.

The passage of time will confirm whether or not the current health crisis generated by the coronavirus is an exceptional situation, since ignorance of the virus generates uncertainty regarding the nearest future in any area being analyzed. The education system, as we have seen, is not unaware of this and has been greatly affected. The measures and strategies to be developed in the face of the so-called 'new normality' are currently being debated. The way in which the classrooms have been returned has been, in the majority of cases, hasty and without much consensus as the summer months have been wasted. For the primary levels, we have opted for attendance, even for secondary, although in those cases where the distance of one and a half metres between students was not guaranteed, we have opted for splitting groups, for combined attendance on alternate days, etc. And in the case of the University it has been even more varied, ranging from a commitment to maximum attendance, provided that health measures allow it, to teaching entirely at a distance. The lack of common criteria will further accentuate the differences in preparation between students with similar levels from one region or university campus to another. All of this means that we are at a key moment in

which all members of the education system must state their positions in order to reach the best possible understanding.

For all these reasons, the educational community must prepare itself for the challenge of how to adapt to a possible semipresential or digital education in the medium or long term. Its greater or lesser degree of adaptation to such a situation will mark the final successful or unsuccessful outcome of the teaching-learning system. This does not justify that decision making has to start from the opportunism that is often resorted to from disconcerting situations such as the current one to change issues drastically and without sufficient debate or common agreement. The presentation of the results of this work aims to raise awareness of the concerns and consequences that may have been generated among the main members of the educational community, to discover their perspective with regard to the teaching-learning of geographical knowledge and to discover possible needs or limitations in order to try to make progress in the transmission and learning of geographical knowledge, its adaptation to social transformations, the current technologies available, teacher training, etc. beyond the current crisis.

For this reason, during the weeks of May 2019, coinciding with the de-escalation phases after more than two months of confinement throughout the country, a questionnaire was distributed to the educational community (teachers, students and parents). The forms were created with the Microsoft Office 365 application, Forms, which made it possible to provide, in a simple way, the link that gave access to secondary and higher education centres in most of the country. In the case of the institutes, it was sent to public, subsidised or private centres. And in the case of the University, it was sent to all Spanish campuses that offer geography in any of its variants. In addition, it was sent to associations of parents of students in different regions of Spain. Thus, after an enormous effort of dissemination in which the Spanish Association of Geographers (AGE) and its Working Group on Didactics of Geography were involved, the number of completed forms reached 547, after about 40 were discarded as unreliable or fraudulent. From all of them, 260 were completed by students, 247 by teachers and 40 by parents.

As already mentioned, one of the main objectives of this work is to understand the perception of the educational community on the basis of the consequences generated by the coronavirus crisis, as it moved from a predominantly face to face teaching and learning system to online, so the results obtained show some of the main concerns and changes of the members of this community. The following are some of the most outstanding results:

-As is to be expected, most members of the educational community felt anguish at the beginning of the crisis, as they moved from a predominantly face-to-face system to an online one. All the members of the community agree that it meant the generation of extra work, so they had to redouble their efforts. Parents feel that the change was difficult

for their children and, despite the support of teachers, there has been no improvement in school performance.

-There is a general dissatisfaction with the management of political leaders with positions in education. However, concrete measures have been taken in some cases, such as the distribution of electronic devices to facilitate the monitoring of teaching at a distance and to reduce the digital breach. 85% of teachers believe that politicians should be more involved in education.

-Both teachers and students agree that what changed was the transmission of knowledge, but not its final content. Most of them accept that there are sufficient digital resources to teach/learn geography at a distance. In some cases, it is difficult for teachers to choose the most appropriate digital resource for each moment.

-More than 80% of the teachers consider that the current digital tools do not replace the traditional face-to-face activities (educational itineraries, laboratory practices, excursions...). Furthermore, this vast majority believe that distance learning does not favour the teaching and understanding of the landscape close to the students, as they believe that the best way to do this is to get to know it in situ.

-Students and teachers once again agree that geography as a subject will not be strengthened by distance learning. Among other reasons, this is because during the months of confinement it was not possible to carry out dynamics or activities that were organised but which implied presence for their development. And, on the other hand, these activities were not replaced by similar initiatives from a distance, as they could not be replaced by digital means, as they involved experiential and socialization experiences that are not achieved from a distance. Therefore, whenever health conditions allow it, they will try to carry out this type of face-to-face practice given their fundamental consideration in the training of students.

-Almost half of teachers believe that Geographic Information Systems (GIS) have been strengthened by distance teaching, although GIS practices have been changed by non-presence. Among other reasons, because even the tasks with GIS required prior preparation that could not be carried out.

These are some of the key conclusions drawn from the survey of members of the educational community at the end of last year, 2019-2020, after months of confinement. The aim is to gain a close understanding of the real situations experienced when moving from distance teaching to face-to-face teaching, in order to assess them and propose measures or strategies for action to improve the teaching-learning system in general and the teaching of geography in particular.