A Guatemalan School Community Response to COVID-19: Case Study of Growth Through Adversity

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Abstract

School communities around the world have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. School leaders, teachers, and students have experienced sudden and unprecedented ruptures to their personal and professional or academic lives. The purpose of the present case study was to investigate the response of a school community in Guatemala to the changes imposed by the pandemic. Essays written by 197 members of the bilingual school community (administrators, teachers, and students in Grades 4–12) about their pandemic experiences were anonymized and coded according to thematic analysis. The first reactions to the lockdown and health threats were negative emotions including fear and anxiety. However, students and faculty marshaled personal strengths, cultural values, and community and family support to explore new opportunities and gain new insights. For teachers, teamwork was key. Elementary and middle school students relied on parents to introduce new activities. High school students used the pandemic for self-reflection and growth. Potential approaches for addressing future crises in a way that promotes growth through adversity are outlined. Those include a focus on the social–emotional well-being of all community members, the engagement of parents in their children's education, and the utilization of cultural strengths to enhance community efforts.

Key Words: school community, Guatemala, COVID-19 pandemic, growth during adversity, students, teachers, elementary, middle, high schoolers

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to unprecedented challenges for school administrators, teachers, students, and parents around the world. The purpose of the present study was to investigate the response of one school community in Guatemala through essays written by teachers, administrators, and students. Essays were systematically reviewed and analyzed to provide a comprehensive view of the pandemic experience, including both community members' challenges and their ways of confronting the crisis.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, children and adolescents around the world have faced physical and psychological threats to their well-being and to their social, cognitive, and emotional development (Iqbal & Tayyab, 2020). They have encountered disruptions to their daily lives including lack of schooling, transition to distance schooling, lockdown, social distancing, and family stressors. "Schools for more than 168 million children globally [were] completely closed for almost an entire year due to COVID-19 lockdowns" (UNICEF, 2021). Of the world regions, Latin America had the highest percentage of closed schools (UNICEF, 2021).

The mental health of children and adolescents has consequently suffered. Internationally, high rates of anxiety and depression, as well as lower life satisfaction, are evident among youth (Cantiani et al., 2021; Cost et al., 2021; Forte et al., 2021; Ghanamah & Eghbaria-Ghanamah, 2021; Hussong et al., 2021; Kuhlman et al., 2021; Larsen et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021; Meherali et al., 2021; Pisano et al., 2021; Racine et al., 2021: Thorisdottir et al., 2021; van der Laan et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021). Some studies have also reported increased aggression, sleep disturbances, obsession/compulsion, and hyperactivity (Cost et al., 2021; Kuhlman et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021; Luijten et al., 2021). Older children and adolescents show more severe symptoms than do younger children (Ma et al., 2021; Samji et al., 2021). Children and adolescents report that they fear for the health of close relatives and worry about their academic tasks, as well as expressing existential concerns about the future (Sarkadi et al., 2021; Shukla et al., 2021)

Teachers have also endured anxiety and stress and faced new challenges (Anderson, 2021; Chan et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2021; Klapproth et al., 2020; Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2021; Pressley, 2021; Santamaría et al., 2021). Beyond the stressors of uncertainty, health maintenance, and multiple roles common to adults during the pandemic, many teachers have had to adapt their teaching strategies to incorporate distance learning (Giovannella et al., 2020; Habibi et al., 2021; Hascher et al., 2021; Kraft & Simon, 2020; Lestiyanawati, 2020; Răducu & Stănculescu, 2021), as well as attend to the psychological and

emotional needs of their students (Kim & Asbury, 2020). A teacher reported, "I started to have a panic attack" (Gewertz, 2020); another described the experience as, "like a rug had been pulled out from under you" (Kim & Asbury, 2020, p. 1070).

School leaders are at the center of academic challenges engendered by the pandemic. Administrators have had to completely reshape their academic programs and methods of delivery; provide encouragement, technical support, and training to teachers; as well as implement measures to attend to the physical and emotional health of teachers and students (Bagwell, 2020; Chang & Yano, 2020). Moreover, they faced the personal stressors of sharing equipment with other family members, dealing with other family problems such as their own children's online schooling, and working increasingly long hours (Argyropoulou et al., 2021). The educational leaders' dilemma was clearly expressed by the principal of a Greek school who said, "I wonder how I am to secure safety and psychological support to everybody, if lockdown will continue.…I am stressed myself" (Argyropoulou et al., 2021, p. 25).

Families are the core support of students and schools. Families around the world have suffered economically from the loss of jobs, loneliness due to lockdowns, and stress and uncertainty about the health of family members (Renjan & Fung, 2020). A survey of parents in the United States early in the pandemic revealed worsening mental health among over one-fourth of parents and 14% of their children (Patrick et al., 2020). Among the stressors were food insecurity and loss of regular childcare. Not surprisingly, children's emotional and mental health closely reflected their parents' stressors and emotional health (Bate et al., 2021; Romero et al., 2020).

Some studies investigated the COVID experiences of multiple stakeholders in schools, for example, teachers, parents, and adolescents in Greece (Hatzichristou et al., 2021) and teachers, school leaders, and special educational needs coordinators in Ireland (O'Toole & Simovska, 2021). In the Greek study, all groups reported high levels of anxiety, as well as coping primarily through engaging social support. School professionals in Ireland expressed their stress, but also both admiration and worry for their students. They reported that many young people had taken on new responsibilities in their families, including caring for siblings, but that some were suffering psychologically from loneliness or depression. Despite collecting perspectives from multiple sources, neither of those studies addressed the response of the school community as a whole.

Guatemala and the Pandemic

The response of the Guatemalan government to the pandemic was swift and restrictive. On March 13, 2020, all public and private schools in Guatemala

were closed to contain the COVID-19 virus. Other measures were implemented, including curfews, mask mandates, prohibition of public gatherings including religious services, the halting of public transportation, as well as bans on interdepartmental and international travel. Only in 2021 were some schools permitted to offer in-person classes according to a stop-light system, based on infection rates. In "red" departments (analogous to a state in the U.S.), no in-person classes were allowed in schools. Departments designated as orange or yellow could open in a hybrid model if their health measures were approved by the Ministry of Education. Until the present time (March 2022), most of Guatemala has been in the red condition, precluding in-person schooling except by special permission from the Ministry of Education.

Like others around the world, families and children in Guatemala suffered from the stress and anxiety imposed by pandemic challenges. A study early in the lockdown revealed that about one-quarter of adults surveyed experienced low levels of well-being (Fernández-Morales et al., 2020). Similarly, a study of 330 Guatemalan individuals revealed high levels of anxiety (46%) and stress (36%). Depression, burnout, and exacerbation of prior mental health issues were also reported (Alonzo et al., 2021; Alonzo & Popescu, 2021). Mothers of young children reported feeling stressed, fearful, and sad, but also found hidden benefits such as additional time with their children (Gibbons et al., 2021).

Compared to other age groups, Montenegro (2021) has argued that the pandemic has disproportionately affected Guatemalan youth, who have been impacted in the domains of education, job loss, violence, and physical and mental health. In the first half of 2020, in almost one-third of reported incidents of family violence, the victims were young women ages 15 to 29 (Montenegro, 2021; Nuñez, 2020). Very early in the pandemic (in April, one month after lockdown), 34% of a non-representative group of almost 2,000 young people in Guatemala were optimistic, whereas fewer (26%) were worried (U-Report). Those numbers would likely have changed as the pandemic continued. Although only one in 10 youth reported increased arguments at home, 40% said that children and adolescents were those most affected by tensions in the home, and 2% acknowledged that those tensions had led to physical violence (U-Report, 2020).

Indigenous communities were more vulnerable than other sectors to the impact of the pandemic (del Valle et al., 2020; Meneses-Navarro et al., 2020). Economic hardship and food scarcity ravaged many indigenous communities where much income stemmed from the informal economy that was completely shut down at various times (Arriaza Castañeda, 2020). A 41-year-old woman from the lakeside town of Santiago Atitlán said, "I was worried about the food for my daughters, and I thought that it would kill us" (Arriaza Castañesa,

2020, p. 22). Fishermen were unable to fish in the early morning hours because of the curfew, textile weavers had no buyers for their products, and farmers could not sell their vegetables in the closed markets. The emotional toll was extreme; some women attributed deaths not to the virus, but "susto" or extreme fear. In contrast, indigenous families sometimes reported increased closeness and unity because of additional time spent together (Arriaza Castañeda, 2020).

Education in Guatemala

Prepandemic, the Guatemalan educational system already suffered from scarce resources, inequality, and low achievement (Batz & Caballeros, 2019; Programme for International Student Assessment [PISA], 2018). Other challenges included poor teacher preparation, lack of access to technology, children whose first language was different from the language of instruction, and working children (Batz & Caballeros, 2019; García Córdova, 2020). The digital divide was particularly wide: according to Ola (2021), only 21% of Guatemalan homes had computers, and fewer had internet access.

The profound inequalities were exaggerated during the pandemic (Santiso Rodríguez, 2021). In a survey of teachers and school directors during the pandemic, private school teachers complained of keeping children's attention during online classes and of interruptions by parents. On the other hand, public school teachers had less access to technology; instead, they prepared study guides for distribution and used social media such as WhatsApp for communication. Teachers agreed that very few students would be academically prepared to enter the next grade level the following year. The directors said that parents were essential to the educational process, but families often did not understand the methods used by the teachers. In the public schools, directors worried that no matter how well-intentioned the parents, they were unable to help their children with schoolwork. Moreover, many parents were without work, so the food bags distributed to families were an incentive for keeping their children in school. The major worry of school directors was that there were few materials developed for distance learning. Overall, teachers and directors agreed that it was much easier to keep students' attention and to give personalized feedback when classes were in person than when they were at a distance.

A case study described the efforts taken by a need-based private school in Guatemala to promote education during the pandemic (Miller & Ashdown, 2020). In response to the crisis, the school provided food and hygiene supplies to students' families, many of whom already lived in precarious economic circumstances. Teachers used a variety of methods to continue instruction, including worksheets, as well as teaching and motivational videos posted on Facebook. For some families, worksheets were delivered to the homes and, for

others, posted on the door of the school for students to photograph or copy. Social support was provided by telephone, including a hotline to report violence. The authors argue that there are three essential aspects to a COVID response: (1) it should be local, addressing the needs of the local school community; (2) cultural values and economic and political constraints should be taken into account; and (3) responses must be flexible, adapted to changing conditions.

Rationale for Present Study

Despite numerous international studies that document the psychology of the pandemic response among children, adolescents, teachers, and school leaders, low-and-middle-income countries (LMICs) are underrepresented in those studies (El Omrani et al., 2021). Few investigations have addressed schools as communities or specifically attended to the local context and culture-based strategies for resilience (Miller & Ashdown, 2020). Therefore, this study addresses a gap in knowledge. We examined the COVID-19 pandemic response of a school community in Guatemala, an LMIC, as a case study to increase understanding of how a school community—teachers, administrators, and students—coped with the stressors of the pandemic (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Method

Participants

The participants included 38 faculty and administrators, 19 elementary students (Grades 4–5), 64 middle school students, and 76 high school students from a bilingual school in Guatemala. To maintain anonymity, no information was collected about the gender, age, or specific role of participants. Students were identified only by grade level and teachers by the level (early childhood, primary school, middle school, high school) in which they taught.

The school is a private laboratory school with an enrollment of 268 students, located on the southern Pacific slope of Guatemala. Although some scholarships are offered, all families pay at least partial tuition, and thus they are relatively wealthy in the Guatemalan context. In other studies conducted at the school, about one-third of parents had college degrees, and most were employed as professionals or were stay-at-home mothers; 98% of homes had computers connected to the internet (e.g., Poelker & Gibbons, 2018).

School Response to COVID-19

On March 13, 2020, when the Guatemalan Ministry of Education ordered school closures, the school quickly made arrangements for online classes—providing training, software, and hardware to teachers and communicating with

families about how to set up virtual classes. Online workshops and twice-weekly wellness sessions were offered to teachers. The school acquired new platforms for delivering classes and loaned equipment to teachers until they were able to purchase it. Students engaged in daily online nonacademic activities: life skills, advising, and motivational sessions. Parents were surveyed repeatedly about their experiences and needs. Response to suggestions was swift and included additional workshops and one-on-one consultations with teachers or counselors. When teachers, students, or their family members were sick, the school followed up with phone calls. As of October 2021, the school was only open for hybrid education for two days (in April 2021). Thus, classes have been almost exclusively virtual, with hybrid classes initiated in March 2022.

Procedure

In October 2020, approximately seven months after the initiation of COVID-19 restrictions in Guatemala, a schoolwide activity was implemented in order to address the central questions: How did students, staff, and faculty experience the pandemic? What were their challenges and strategies for dealing with the lockdown, online schooling, and other changes dealt by the pandemic? The staff, faculty, and students wrote short reflections on their pandemic experience. This activity was chosen, in part, because of research showing that writing about difficult experiences can reduce distress and improve well-being (Pennebaker, 1997). Potential identifying information was removed by a staff member at the school, and the essays were loaded onto Google drive. The IRB at Saint Louis University ruled that the analysis of archival blinded essays did not require full IRB review. The essays ranged from 2 to 1,742 words in length (= 492 ± 297). High school students wrote significantly longer essays (= 667 ± 241 words) than did teachers and administrators (=389 ± 374) and elementary and middle school students (=379 ± 219), $F(2, 194) = 27.11$, $p < .001$.

Coding and Analysis

Because of distinct roles and developmental stages among the school community members, the essays were divided into three separate groups for analysis: (1) teachers and staff, (2) Grades 4–5 and middle school students, and (3) high school students. The two authors analyzed the essays collaboratively according to the six-step process of Braun and Clarke (2006). Although the Braun and Clarke procedure can be carried out by a single coder, we adopted the suggestion of Hill (2012) to incorporate multiple coders as in consensual qualitative coding. In the first step of the Braun and Clarke process, the researchers/coders familiarize themselves with the data. In the second step they generate initial codes from significant statements. In the third step they collapse codes into

potential themes. In the fourth step they review the themes. In the fifth step they define and name the themes, and in the six step they produce the report. Having read the essays many times, the two researchers sat side-by-side, separately extracting significant statements and writing them on slips of paper with the participant number. An example of a significant statement was, "COVID has made me stronger." A statement that was not considered significant to the experience of the pandemic was, "When I arrived [at school] some of my friends were talking about the COVID-19." If one coder was uncertain, he/she consulted the other. The piles of paper slips with significant statements were sorted jointly by the researchers into potential codes. Then those codes were reviewed, re-sorted when necessary, and further combined into themes or higher categories. For example, 138 significant statements were extracted from the essays of the teachers and staff. One prevalent comment concerned teamwork, represented in 19 significant statements. Some explicitly mentioned the word, "teamwork" or "team." Others expressed the idea differently, such as "grateful to [school] leaders," "sharing ideas and resources with [other] teachers," or "learned to ask for help and depend on others." Similarly, other codes were extracted that related to a larger category of professional development. Those included new teaching methods (26 statements), technology (14 statements), and learning from students (5 statements). Although the four codes concerned professional development, in a review of the codes and themes, three fell together under specific new skills, whereas teamwork was an overall strategy.

Ensuring Trustworthiness

Reflexivity

The researchers, although originally from the United States, have lived in Guatemala for a combined total of over 50 years, are native English speakers, fluent in Spanish, and have both served on the board of directors of the school. They have deep knowledge of the culture of the school and Guatemala. Because of their investment in and commitment to education in Guatemala, the authors may have been better prepared to recognize strengths of the school community than to see weaknesses. In addition, the international media had emphasized challenges to schools and deficits in educational progress during the pandemic, and the authors were propelled to investigate ways that school communities coped and prospered.

Peer Debriefing

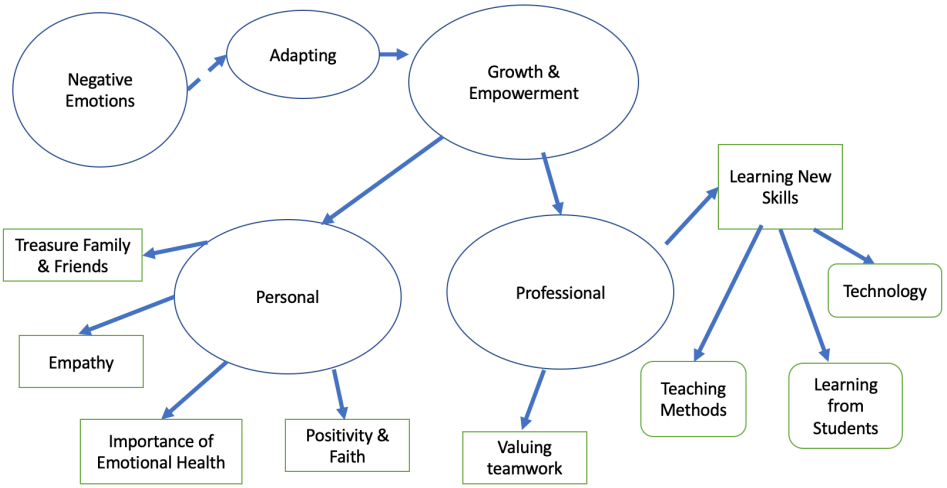
Two individuals involved in leadership in the school, the school director and the chair of the board of directors, read this report. They each concurred that it accurately reflects the school community experience during the pandemic.

Results

Administrators and Teachers

Figure 1 graphically depicts the responses of the administrators and teachers. Initial negative emotions gave way to adapting. Teachers' and administrators' adaptation to the crisis led to growth and empowerment, both personal and professional. Personal growth resulted in a renewed appreciation for family and friends, increased empathy for students and others, recognition of the importance of emotional well-being, and reliance on faith and positivity. In the professional domain, working as a team with colleagues was key. Teachers and staff also reported acquiring new skills as a consequence of the pandemic: increased technological competencies, new teaching strategies, and the ability to learn from students. Each of these areas will be examined below.

Figure 1. COVID-19 Pandemic Experiences of Administrators and Teachers



Negative emotions, especially fear, anxiety, and worry, were expressed by many staff and teachers in response to the sudden and unexpected changes. Anguish, discomfort, and feeling overwhelmed and exhausted were common experiences. Administrators and teachers noted that they were required to quickly adapt to the change: "We need to adapt" and "we have the capacity" to do so. It was mentioned that children adapt more quickly than do adults, but that, despite difficulties, everyone needed to be flexible to adapt to the new normal.

Teachers and staff reported that the adversity had led to growth and empowerment, both personal and professional. Empowerment was expressed in many different ways. A teacher wrote, "education has no limits; we can meet our goals." Others commented: "Life has gone on in spite of the pandemic."

"We can impact our communities and the world." "We are capable of assuming many different roles at the same time." And they wrote, "we must be forces of change, even if it's not our job."

Professional empowerment was revealed in learning new teaching strategies, valuing teamwork, learning from students, and improving technology skills. Teachers reported increased resourcefulness, better time management, taking advantage of professional development opportunities, and various strategies for teaching online through screens. Some specific actions included recognizing the importance of details (so that parents, as well as the children, understood), giving students five minutes to joke around, making classes fun, putting the material in the context of students' daily lives, being open to students' wishes, and keeping a positive outlook. Challenges arose when students were learning at different paces, when teachers' own children needed attention, or when the home environment did not lend itself to conducting online classes.

Although online teaching presented technological challenges and frustrations, many reported increased technological skills during the pandemic. Teachers adapted course content for teaching via Zoom and reported that Zoom was an improvement over videos. Teachers wrote, "I learned a lot about new technology," and despite internet and computer problems, "I was able to solve them." Some teachers reported learning from their students—that their students were creative and communicative and had worthwhile values.

Teamwork was highlighted as a coping strategy within the educational environment. Teachers communicated with each other, sharing ideas and resources. Families and parents were seen as essential parts of the team, and students were able to help each other. "It showed how brave we are and that we can overcome anything together." Several referred to the school as a family or a second home.

Personal empowerment was a prominent emergent theme. Teachers and staff reported personal changes such as "COVID has made me stronger" or increases in the personal qualities of persistence, patience, tolerance, trust in others, dedication, responsibility, resilience, and humility. Personal growth was impelled by adversity and resulted in recognition of the importance of staying positive and maintaining hope. Sometimes hope was based in religious beliefs, such as depending on God or being grateful to God. It was clear that the pandemic "took [educators] out of their comfort zone," that it was a growth opportunity, and helped individuals learn new things.

Prominent among the personal changes was the growth of empathy: "We learned empathy and solidarity." "We became better people, better listeners, more tolerant, patient, and empathetic." Empathy extended into the virtual classroom: "adults should try to understand things from [children's] point of view." A salient theme was the importance of emotional health for everyone—

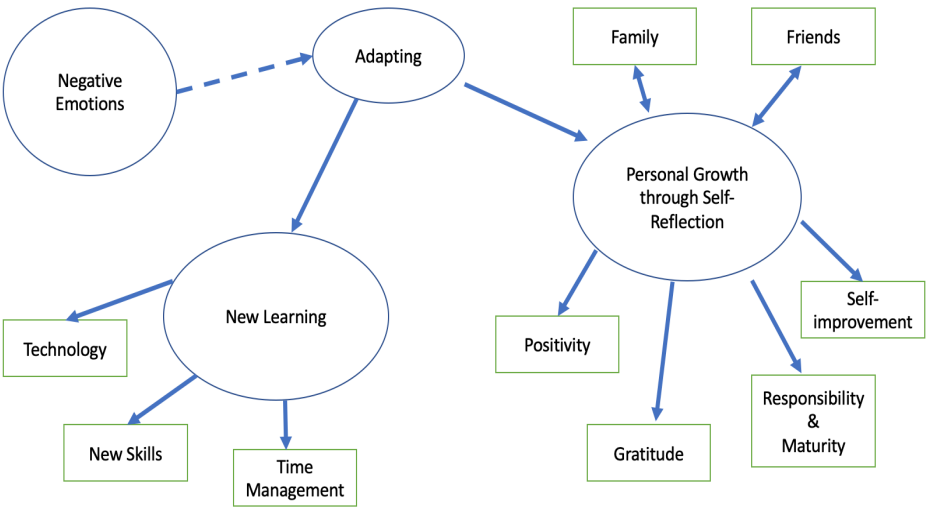
parents, teachers, and students—and that "we should teach about emotional health."

The importance of others in one's life was highlighted and assumed even greater salience during the pandemic. "We need socialization [socializing]." "I miss seeing co-workers." "I missed being with my students, and they missed [being at school]." "I learned to value time with family, friends, work companions, and students." Priorities focused on others, especially family. "Money isn't worth anything without health and loved ones." "Most important is a united family."

High School Students

Figure 2 illustrates graphically the response of high school students. High school students reacted initially with negative emotions such as fear and stress. For them, the process of adapting to the pandemic resulted in new learning and personal growth. New learning occurred in the domains of technology, practical living skills, and time management. High school students also reported engaging in deep self-reflection during the pandemic. That process resulted in personal growth through renegotiating relationships with family and friends, increasing gratitude and positivity, adopting strategies for self-improvement, and becoming more responsible and mature.

Figure 2. COVID Pandemic Experiences of High School Students



Like the faculty and staff and younger students, high school students responded first with negative emotions. They expressed not only fear, anger, anxiety, sadness, frustration, loneliness, and stress, but stronger and more

complex emotions, described as panic, disappointment, paranoia, inertia, depression, despair, desperation, anguish. Several reported crying and showing signs of clinical depression (not wanting to do anything, rumination). Students reported worrying about the future and experiencing an existential crisis.

However, even more than the other groups, high school students reported adapting, experiencing new learning and personal growth. Although it was "difficult to adapt," they found that "life can have paths different from what was expected" and the pandemic provided "proof that we can adapt." "Unexpected crises come, but we can overcome."

Adaptation occurred in two domains—personal growth and new learning. Personal growth involved deepening relationships with family and friends, as well as engaging in self-reflection, positivity, gratitude, and attention to others and global concerns.

Many students viewed the pandemic as an opportunity for self-reflection. In some of their own words: It was a "time to reconnect with myself," and "helped me learn about myself." "[During the pandemic] I got to know myself better," and I discovered "who I want to be." I was able to "explore myself as a person" and "appreciate myself, inside and outside." After reflection, I "had a new perspective on life." The pandemic "made me think about my future." "I re-examined my life and learned to value different things."

Family relationships were strengthened and deepened. "My bond with my family grew." Students valued and appreciated their families more. "Our family was there for each other." "I rely on my family." "I became closer to my parents." "[I recognized] the importance of family." Some mentioned specific family members. "I had more time with my brother (who was home from university)." "I have a better relationship with my dad." "I tried to improve my relationship with my sisters." There were a few hints of problems within families, as well. "My parents don't appreciate me." "I am losing patience with my stressed parents." "My older sister is stressed and treats me badly." "My younger sister is moody." But overall, the picture was of greater closeness and appreciation for family.

Friendships were renegotiated and differentiated during the pandemic. The pandemic made me "realize which circle of friends I want." During the pandemic, "true friends stayed close." "True friends stick with you." A few reported new friendships: "I advanced in social interaction and became closer to some new people." "I met cool people online." Many were sad not to be able to see or hug friends.

Gratitude and maintaining positivity were part of the process of change. "I learned to be grateful and enjoy things." "I am grateful for living during this time." "I learned the value of life—always be grateful." "We learned to be

more appreciative of things we had taken for granted." "We should value things more—everything bad also brings something good." Closely related to gratitude were finding joy and the positive during the pandemic. "There is always a positive side, and it's important to find it." "It's not OK to live with no joy." "Think positive and don't surrender."

The second salient domain was learning new things during the pandemic. Among those were new activities, hobbies, and skills. Although some activities were canceled (e.g., robotics, marimba classes, athletic competitions), many students used the time to develop new skills, such as learning a new language, coding, or how to make disinfectants, playing chess, starting a new collection, preparing sushi, or composing electronic music.

Technology was a specific area for learning. Both the challenges and rewards of increased use of technology and online classes were noted. At first online classes were seen as stressful, difficult, and often boring. Cell phones were distractions and sometimes addictive. However, advantages were later recognized: "online classes allow more autonomy." "There is more flexibility in online classes." "Technology has opened many opportunities."

Self-improvement was closely related to personal growth. "I think I am a better version of me after this time." "I worked on changing my appearance and personality." "I healed my mental health." "I started self-love." "I improved my attitude." "I became more calm and mature." "I became more empathetic." "I learned not to be ashamed of my psychological problems." "I learned I'm easily distracted, but have learned new strategies to deal with it." "I learned discipline and to live life." Other students reported being stronger, calmer, more patient, and more productive.

An explicit area for growth was increased maturity, independence, and taking responsibility. "I am more responsible for my education." The pandemic "helped me mature emotionally." 'I am taking responsibility for learning."

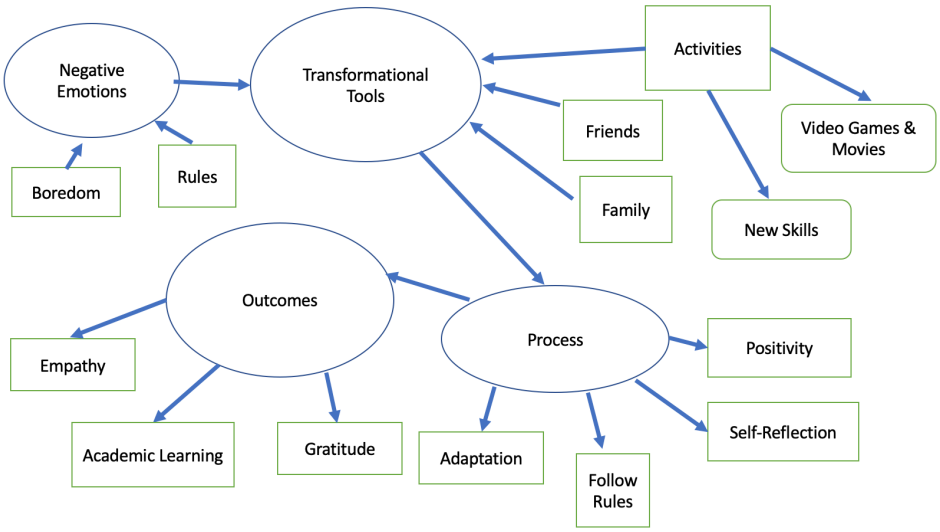
Another specific area of improvement was that students reported learning better time management. "I learned the value of time and self-control." "I learned to better organize my time." "I am better at managing my time." A few students wrote about achieving dreams outside of themselves. "I want to make a change in the world." "Collective action is important; there is no room for selfishness."

Elementary and Middle School Students

Figure 3 depicts the responses of elementary and middle school students. Younger students, those in elementary and middle school, also experienced stress, but additionally reported annoyance at the pandemic-imposed rules and boredom. Family, friends, and activities such as video games and learning new

skills supported their transformation. For them the process involved self-reflection, increased positivity, and learning to follow the rules and adapt to the new normal. The outcomes of this transformational process were increased empathy, academic progress, and heightened gratitude.

Figure 3. COVID Pandemic Experiences of Elementary and Middle School Students



Like the first responses of faculty, staff, and high school students, the elementary (Grades 4–5 only) and middle school students responded first with shock and (mostly) negative emotions. Although a few students said that they were happy at first to be able to stay at home, they quickly became stressed, sad, angry, scared, nervous, and worried. Some seemed to have even stronger responses, such as feeling terrified, anxious, depressed, and tearful. Feelings of boredom were prevalent. "I felt bored because I could not spend time with my friends." "Bored with my classes because it is harder to pay attention." "Life is so repetitive," "like being in prison." Some reported that the emotional stress kept them from doing their schoolwork.

The unexpected suddenness of the pandemic onset left students feeling unprepared. In this "craziest year ever," I learned that "anything can happen suddenly." Therefore, we need to "adapt to the new reality." "We were forced to adapt." For many students, especially the younger ones, a core domain for adapting was complying with the rules of mask-wearing, social distancing, and increased hygienic measures. "Mom is creating intense rules because she loves us." They noticed when others failed to comply. "The basic problem is caused

by people not following the rules." But respecting the restrictions was difficult. "I feel like a prisoner without being able to leave."

Attending classes online was also difficult. Many had problems with connectivity or slow internet. But other problems arose as well. "I have trouble concentrating in school." "It is hard to zoom without a break." "There is no place to do homework." "I'm academically stuck and disappointed in myself." "I was not used to the responsibility of learning independently."

For these students, transformational tools included engaging in pleasurable activities and relying on the support of family and friends. Playing more video games or watching Netflix movies were popular activities. Many students engaged in more productive activities—exercising, biking, or helping with household chores. Some reported learning new skills such as cooking, painting, and even tractor repair.

Family was central in students' lives. For most students, spending more time with family was seen as a huge benefit of the lockdown, and families became closer and more united as a consequence. The pandemic allowed me to "talk and share with family" and "[experience] increased family support;" "family is the most important thing." Companionship among family members was highlighted; families played games, watched movies, and "had fun together." Students reported missing family members they could not see. "Social distancing is difficult because I cannot see my cousins and grandparents." A small number reported increased tension among family members because of the lockdown and stress of the pandemic. "I fight with my siblings, and my father scolds me." "My family grew apart because of the increased time on the computer." "I miss school because it was an escape from my family."

Relations with friends were difficult. Many reported that they missed their friends, which left them sad or frustrated, or that it was difficult to communicate with friends during the pandemic. "I feel bad because I cannot see my classmates." However, a few made new friends. "I met my new best friend through virtual school." A few other tools or sources of support were the technology itself and the support of teachers. "Teachers are trying to teach us."

Growth and adaptation were impelled by processes such as self-reflection, gratitude, and maintaining a positive outlook. Self-reflection was revealed in such comments as "[the pandemic] made me reflect on many things like family and friends." "I started a video diary to reflect on each day." Reflection led to greater self-knowledge, such as "quarantine helped me to see many things differently," and "quarantine helped me to see what I don't do well," and to new learning, "I am learning how to care for myself," and "learned many things, like to value friends." "I am now more analytical and positive." Deeper thoughts also emerged: "We need to be more together," and "We need to live what life

gives us." A positive attitude was expressed in phrases like "We have to face these conditions with a positive mind" and "When something looks bad, you can always find something good." Gratitude for health, family, basic necessities, and nature were conveyed in statements like "I learned to give thanks and be tolerant" and "I am grateful for love and support."

Outcomes of these processes included a greater commitment to schoolwork and attention to others' needs and global issues. With respect to academics, students reported becoming more responsible in their schoolwork and more dedicated to their studies. Students recognized the difficult economic and health situations of others, as well as global problems such as pollution, violence, and the need for more research centers. "[During the pandemic] I cut my hair and donated it to children with cancer." "We can help the people around us." "[We need to address] global issues such as climate and police brutality." In line with these mixed positive and negative consequences of the pandemic, students reported that the pandemic brought mixed emotions: "both happy and sad moments," "positive and negative changes to daily life."

Discussion

The pandemic brought practical and emotional hardship to members of the school community. The first reaction to the pandemic was shock, fear, and anxiety. Yet each group also found silver linings and new opportunities within the stressful and difficult conditions. These findings align with the emerging literature that, with sufficient tools and support, people and communities can grow and even thrive through adversity (Murray & Zautra, 2012; Tedeschi et al., 2018). People in different roles at this school used their personal strengths along with community and family support to develop further in addressing the many challenges of dramatic life changes.

For the administrators, teachers, and staff, teamwork was key. They saw the parents, teachers, and students as part of a team—or even a family—that could accomplish a great deal and thrive together. Teachers relied not only on each other, but also on technical support to be able to carry out their responsibilities and adapt to the new teaching environment.

High school students focused on the pandemic restrictions as a time for self-reflection. They learned new things about themselves, found increased closeness with families, and renegotiated their relationships with friends. They grew in maturity and responsibility. They were more likely than other groups to report learning new skills during the pandemic. However, they were also more likely than others to report serious psychological distress.

Elementary and middle school students were more likely to feel bored and frustrated by the new rules. They relied on their family for support and to provide activities such as games. They needed a great deal of help with dealing with online learning. Some looked outward to help others during the difficult times.

The focus and growth of students reflected their developmental stages. High school students were self-focused, concerned with their own identities, and showed complexity and nuance in their thinking. Their growth was reflected in both increased maturity and independence, characteristic of the developmental tasks of adolescence (Erikson, 1968). The younger students focused more on the concrete aspects of their lives, especially adjusting to the rules and regulations stemming from the pandemic. They needed their parents to suggest activities or to participate with them. Interest in and mastery of new tasks is a typical focus of younger school-age children (Erikson, 1950).

Consistent with the changes impelled by post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi et al., 2018), many members of the studied school community changed their life priorities, especially abandoning materialistic pursuits for interpersonal closeness. A teacher reflected that, "Money isn't worth anything without health and loved ones." A second prevalent growth area was increased personal strength and self-confidence (Tedeschi et al., 2018). Participants from all three groups mentioned their capability to effect change, from coping with their personal challenges to making changes in the world. A third domain of growth after adversity is improved personal relationships (Tedeschi et al., 2018). With a few exceptions, members of the school community noted the increased closeness of families and colleagues. This is in contrast to some international studies of pandemic responses in which the confinement of family members was described as a pressure cooker, with the increased pressure likely to lead to tension and even violence (O'Toole, & Simovska, 2021; Save the Children, 2020). The cultural value of familism may come into play here, in that the centrality of family in Guatemalan culture drove families closer rather than into conflict (Gibbons et al., 2021). Another area of growth according to post-traumatic growth theory is often the spiritual domain (Tedeschi et al., 2018). Although increased spirituality was not a prominent theme here, some teachers and staff took refuge in their faith, consistent with a recent study of Guatemalan mothers' responses to the pandemic (Gibbons et al., 2021). In addition, the school community marshaled multiple resources derived from their cultural strengths, including a commitment to family, valuing respect for others, expressing gratitude, and faith (Dries-Daffner et al., 2007; Pebley et al., 1996; Poelker et al., 2017). These findings extend the post-traumatic growth paradigm to reveal that growth stems from building on core cultural values, principles, and practices.

Like the current findings, some international studies have documented psychological and cognitive growth as a result of pandemic-induced adversity. Reimers (2022) summarized the international findings of students' responses to the pandemic:

> for some students, the experience of learning in different ways during the pandemic provided the opportunity to gain new knowledge and develop new skills. It provided an opportunity to gain more autonomy in learning, to spend more time with their families, and to learn together with their families. (p. 462)

In a study of teachers in Scotland, the urgency of adapting to the new requirements helped teachers, especially new teachers, to overcome their resistance to pedagogical change (Carver & Shanks, 2021). Waters et al. (2021) documented stress-related growth during COVID among adolescents in Australia, related to their emotional regulation strategies of positive reappraisal and recognition of their strengths. Guatemalan commentators have speculated as well on the possible advances in education spurred by the pandemic. Among those are increased use of technology and greater collaboration between parents and educators (Spross de Rivera, 2021). Among the lessons learned from the pandemic may be that the Guatemalan educational system can grow through a focus on analysis, thought, collaboration, solidarity, and teamwork (Paredes, 2021).

Implications

These findings could inform any distance learning program for children: the importance of including parents (especially for younger children), fostering alternative social relationships, and cultivating hobbies and extracurricular interests to augment curricular online learning. These outside interests took on outsized importance during this time. A nexus with the curriculum could not only encourage their development but provide curricular support. For example, the increased attention to rules by the younger children could be exploited by teachers to discuss the reasons for rules and regulations and for older children to introduce the notion of the social contract.

Social–emotional health was recognized by teachers, administrators, and parents as key to coping with the pandemic. Social–emotional learning and psychological health were essential for thriving during adverse conditions. Exercises to enhance psychological well-being were implemented during life skills programming. Teachers also appreciated the value of empathy; social–emotional learning programming for empathetic perspective-taking should be included. Consistent with the recommendations of other authors (e.g., Maxwell, 2020), social–emotional learning should be prioritized during any form

of crisis (Lunn et al., 2021). As part of the response, teachers, staff, and parents could be offered workshops on recognizing emotional problems among their students/children, along with ways to support their students'/children's emotional well-being.

Instructors could also address the loneliness of students by assigning group projects. A seventh-grade student wrote,

> It started with a group project….We all [started] to create meetings to coordinate what we are going to present, so my friend and me, start[ed] having more communication, more meetings, more talking, to the point of having incredible connection, until now, we know everything about each other, our favorite food, color, who we like, EVERYTHING.

Friendships between students can be fostered through encouraging communication via assignments and discussions within the virtual classes.

We recommend using the lessons learned to develop a handbook or information sheet for parents to better guide their children during any crisis or disaster. This would include the importance of maintaining social relationships despite restrictions and limitations, encouraging the cultivation of new hobbies and interests, and including parents in schoolwork (especially for children younger than high school). An informed, well-prepared parent will improve the online learning experience. A second handbook might be developed for distribution to other schools as "lessons learned" during the pandemic or hints for school thriving during adversity.

Limitations

This report shows that one school community in Guatemala was able to draw on existing material and psychological resources, including cultural traditions and values, to foster psychological growth in the adverse conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the lessons learned, many schools in Guatemala lack the resources to take those actions (Miller & Ashdown, 2020). Inequality in Guatemala is profound, and the technological support and personnel needed to muster such a response are absent in many schools in Guatemala (Ola, 2021). The pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated existing digital and economic divides (Ola, 2021). A long-term solution to the multiple problems facing Guatemalan schools is sorely needed (García Códova, 2020).

Another limitation is that essays were written at a single point in time, approximately seven months after the beginning of the pandemic. It would be useful to trace the course of the school community's response and document changes over time.

Conclusions

This case study of a private bilingual school in Guatemala manifests psychological growth among the school community during the COVID-19 pandemic. The lessons learned include the importance of teamwork; reflection; social–emotional support; committed faculty and staff; adequate resources; communication among parents, teachers, students, and school leaders; and reliance on cultural values to allow increased self-awareness and sense of agency during stressful and uncertain times. These lessons are applicable not only to the COVID-19 pandemic, but also to other crises. Moreover, proactive planning for the next (inevitable) crisis will prepare the school community to grow and thrive.

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