

# Perceptions of the return to face-to-face education and reconfiguration of the domestic burden of university teachers during Covid-19 post-pandemic times

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** After a year and a half of contingency measures due to the Covid-19 virus in Colombia, by 2022 there was a return to face-to-face sessions in the educational field. This return to work implied a process of psychological adaptation to social distancing measures and to face-to-face work routines, and changes in domestic dynamics that were set during teachers' teleworking.

**Objective:** To describe the perception of the return to face-to-face work and reconfiguration of the domestic burden of university teachers.

**Materials and Methods:** The study approach was qualitative with a phenomenological design. The participating population were teachers in the higher education field in the city of Popayán (Colombia).

**Results and Conclusions:** We found a favorable perception of teachers regarding the return to face-to-face work, as well as expectations about the reduction of the workload that allows quality time with their families; however, there was no evidence of an attempt to distribute these tasks evenly amongst the household members, despite the shared family experience during the preventive isolation.

**Keywords:** higher education; teaching; gender stereotype; occupational health.

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## Percepciones sobre el retorno a la educación presencial y la reconfiguración de la carga doméstica de docentes universitarias en tiempos de pospandemia por covid-19

### Resumen

**Introducción:** En Colombia, para el 2022 se estableció el retorno a la presencialidad en el sector educativo luego de la contingencia por el virus por covid-19. Este retorno implica un proceso de adaptación psicológica a las medidas de distanciamiento social y a las rutinas de trabajo presencial y cambios en las dinámicas domésticas que se establecieron durante el teletrabajo de docentes.

**Objetivo:** Describir la percepción sobre el retorno a la labor presencial y la reconfiguración de la carga doméstica de docentes universitarias.

**Materiales y métodos:** El enfoque del estudio fue cualitativo de diseño fenomenológico. La población participante fueron docentes de educación superior de la ciudad de Popayán (Colombia).

**Resultados y conclusiones:** Se encontró una percepción favorable de las docentes frente al retorno de la presencialidad, así como expectativas sobre la disminución de la carga laboral que permita el tiempo de calidad en familia; sin embargo, no se evidenció una intención de distribución equitativa de las labores domésticas del hogar, a pesar de la experiencia compartida en familia durante el aislamiento preventivo.

**Palabras clave:** educación superior; docencia; estereotipo de género; salud laboral.

## Percepções sobre o regresso ao ensino presencial e a reconfiguração da carga doméstica dos docentes universitários em tempos de pós-pandemia por covid-19

### Resumo

**Introdução:** Na Colômbia, o regresso ao trabalho presencial no sector da educação foi estabelecido para 2022 após a contingência do vírus COVID-19. Este regresso implica um processo de adaptação psicológica às medidas de distanciamento social e rotinas de trabalho presencial e mudanças nas dinâmicas domésticas que foram estabelecidas durante o teletrabalho dos professores.

**Objetivo:** Descrever a percepção do regresso ao trabalho presencial e a reconfiguração da carga de trabalho doméstico das professoras universitárias.

**Materiais e métodos:** A abordagem do estudo foi qualitativa com um modelo fenomenológico. A população participante era de professores do ensino superior na cidade de Popayán (Colômbia).

**Resultados e conclusões:** Encontrámos uma percepção favorável das professoras quanto ao regresso do ensino presencial, bem como expectativas quanto à diminuição da carga de trabalho que permitiria um tempo de qualidade para a família; contudo, não havia evidência de uma intenção de distribuição equitativa das tarefas domésticas em casa, apesar da experiência partilhada na família durante o isolamento preventivo.

**Palavras-chave:** ensino superior; ensino; estereotipagem de género; saúde ocupacional.

## Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic took sectors by surprise globally, such as the economic, social, political and educational sectors. Therefore, strategies had to be implemented to mitigate contagion amongst the population (1). Specifically, in the educational work sector, this led to the closing of educational institutions and, consequently, there was an increase in the number of teaching hours due to the adaptation of teaching strategies through the use of information and communications technologies. (ICT) (2), in addition to latent inequalities of socio-educational factors in the Latin American context (3).

Moreover, teachers were very uncertain regarding the duration of the contingency measures, the institutions' organizational mechanisms, and doubtful about the appropriate way to interact with students through the use of ICT (4); this, in addition to work overload, which was associated with psychophysical symptoms of work stress (5). In particular, teleworking during the pandemic increased the paid and unpaid workload of women (6), who, compared to men, have performed three times as many hours of unpaid care work (7), which means that since before the arrival of the covid-19 virus, they were already experiencing an overload due to domestic burden. These gender inequalities in the educational work environment have highlighted greater negative physical and

emotional effects on female teachers (8) since the high domestic burden implied a greater effort to comply with teleworking activities (9,10).

After a year and a half of contingency measures due to the covid-19 virus, by 2022 there was a return to face-to-face activities in the education sector (10); and this implied a process of psychological adaptation to the social distancing measures and the face-to-face work routines and domestic dynamics of teachers in the workplace.

Conceptually, adaptation is understood as a process of coping and adjusting to the demands of the surroundings (11). Thus, human beings seek different solutions in advance through the tools they have available to face stressful circumstances. This is based on an attitudinal change whose purpose is to achieve an adequate adaptation (12). From a systemic approach, the family is an active system, where roles, interests and in-house rules meet in synergy; however, social changes also transform families(13). The interaction between the members allows a bidirectional influence, and in that sense, they have the ability to adjust to the demands of individual development and the environment, which in turn allows family members to grow psychologically and socially (13).

Therefore, the objective established was to describe the perception of the return to face-to-face work and the reconfiguration of the domestic

burden of university teachers, because when one microsystem changes, it affects the other bidirectionally.

## METHODOLOGY

The study approach was qualitative with a descriptive scope, with a phenomenological design.

It is understood as a set of theoretical models that interpret reality; and they not only explain it, but are built based on the knowledge, feelings and experiences of the research participant (14). In that same sense, the phenomenological design “allows exploring the person’s consciousness, that is, understanding the true essence, the way of perceiving life through experiences, the meanings around them and that are defined in the psychic life of the individual” (15).

Moreover, the sample is based on transferability, which is based on the description of each phenomenon in its context, which means it is not based on a number of research participants (16). Thus, the sample is subject to a screening of participants who represent the characteristics of the study phenomenon (17); in this case, a voluntary non-probabilistic sampling in which there was no refusal to participate, although there were difficulties to agree on the visits.

Based on the above, the population was composed of eight higher education teachers from a private institution in the department of Cauca (Colombia). The following inclusion criteria of the participants were taken into account: their marital status, years of experience at the institution, academic job functions and age.

It should be noted that this study was financed and endorsed by a university in Bogota. Also, teachers had to previously sign an informed consent in order to participate in the process, in which the parameters of the trial and their rights as subjects during the process were explained, including the protection of their identity—for which pseudonyms were used to identify each participant (18)—, in accordance with Article 11, Letter A, of Resolution 8430 of 1993. The research was classified as “no risk” because no intervention or intentional modification of the variables of the participants was made (19). According to the phenomenological design, the stages that make up the development of the phenomenological design are described (20).

### Previous stage

In the previous stage, two assumptions were made: a) the return to face-to-face classes creates positive expectations in teachers regarding the distribution of their workload; and b) teachers have a favorable perception of face-to-face work

due to the fact that it allows creating limits between work and non-work activities.

### **Descriptive stage**

Then, in the descriptive stage, the semi-structured interview technique was established as a first step, which addressed two topics: a) limits between work and non-work duties and b) return to face-to-face work with less workload. In this interview, the logbook was used to transcribe the participants' narratives. There, they expressed their experiences, emotions, thoughts and perceptions of the future regarding the return to face-to-face activities. The foregoing allowed extracting the angles of the narrated experiences.

It should be noted that the interview is an oral technique, based on questions and answers between the researcher and the subjects. This allows collecting information on perceptions, experiences and even exchanging knowledge or know-how (14,21).

### **Structural stage**

Lastly, in the structural stage, a general reading of the interviews was carried out to obtain an overview of each teacher's perspectives. Thus, a) the natural thematic units were determined in order to extract the expressions that are linked to the situations facing the return to the class-

rooms; b) the core theme that dominated each thematic unit was determined; c) the logic of the meaning of the core theme of the narrations was extracted, and d) the meanings shown by the teachers were selected and grouped, which allowed determining the core theme.

## **RESULTS**

**Table 1** shows some representative characteristics of the study participants.

Some of the most representative fragments in the research process are listed below.

### **Work burnout due to increased workload during the pandemic**

According to the narratives of the participants, they manifested an increase in the workload during the mandatory confinement. Below is a fragment from a participant: "I perceived the workload to be quite strong... It was exhausting both physically and mentally because the hours were extended. The workload had no limit and many times it transcended to family, conjugal or personal schedules" (woman 4).

**Table 1.** Characteristics of the participants

Name	Woman 1	Woman 2	Woman 3	Woman 4	Woman 5	Woman 6	Woman 7	Woman 8
Age (years)	34	33	34	30	29	32	35	38
Children	2	1	1	1	0	0	1	2
Marital Status	Married	Civil union	Married	Civil union	Civil union	Civil union	Married	Married
Position	Administrative/teacher	Teacher	Administrative/teacher	Administrative/teacher	Administrative/teacher	Teacher	Administrative/teacher	Administrative/teacher
Experience (years)	6	4	7	4	5	4	7	12

For its part, based on the process of phenomenological reduction, Table 2 summarizes the categories found as part of the results analysis process.

**Table 2.** Phenomenological Categories

Fundamental Topics	Individual Phenomenological Categories	Fundamental Phenomenological Categories
1. Increased workload due to the pandemic	Work burnout due to increased workload during the pandemic	Perception of work and non-work activities in the return to face-to-face times
2. Physical and mental wearing due to workload		
3. Difficulties in controlling working and non-working hours	Reduction of personal spaces due to the remote modality	
4. Reduced family spaces due to the incorporation of the remote modality		
5. Difficulty in migrating the classes with students to the virtual setting	Learning strategies mediated by ICT that are replicable during face-to-face times	
6. Difficulties to support students		
7. Change of educational strategies mediated by ICT		
8. Greater control of the teaching-learning process in the classroom	Greater monitoring of teaching and learning processes	
9. Learning how to use ICT that can be used in face-to-face times		
10. Perception of a decrease in the domestic burden when returning to the classroom	Domestic burden redistribution	
11. Reassigning chores around the house		
12. Fear of contagion of covid-19 due to crowds in the classroom	Biosafety conditions in face-to-face sessions	
13. Perception of difficulties in classroom interaction due to social distancing measures		

### **Reduction of personal spaces due to the remote modality**

It was found that during the remote modality, there were no limits between work and personal activities: "The most difficult thing was not being able to differentiate family spaces from workspaces. At first, I even had the computer in my room...and it was terrible because the bedroom became my place of rest, work and everything. So, it became exhausting. When I finished my working day, it was already night, and that became my routine" (woman 1).

### **Learning strategies mediated by ICT that are replicable during face-to-face times**

For its part, learning how to use ICTs during the pandemic involved teachers' effort and time. However, the participants see them as a strategy that can be continued the face-to-face times:

The implementation of new technologies caused the entire education system to change in terms of reporting and format (Woman 6).

The incorporation of technology, management of virtual platforms, comprehensive management of the virtual classroom were processes that demanded a lot of time, although now I plan to continue using them with my students (Woman 5).

In virtuality, new techniques were learned through the use of ICT, which can be continued in order to apply both models (Woman 2).

### **Greater monitoring of teaching and learning processes**

According to the findings, the remote modality revealed some socio-educational inequalities in the students. The participants revealed these perspectives in the following excerpts:

Classroom interaction is very important because remotely we could not know what was happening on the other side of the computer, cell phone or tablet. Sometimes I was told that the devices had to be shared among the household members (Woman 7).

I realized that while some went by boat, others were swimming. With attendance we create more equality for our students to learn (Woman 8).

### **Biosafety conditions in face-to-face sessions**

In contrast, two concerns of the teachers regarding the return to the classroom were the setbacks regarding the biosafety conditions and the possible disregard of the students of the guidelines for the prevention of contagion:

There is quite some fear because many of them do not take care of themselves and forget to follow

the biosafety protocols, exposing themselves and others (Woman 1).

Expectations of fear due to possible contagion, and difficulties when teaching a master class due to the use of the mask, but it is necessary to avoid contagion (Woman 2).

### **Redistribution of the domestic burden**

Finally, attempts of adequate housework planning, assignment of these tasks to third parties, and favorable perception of the division between the work and personal environments were seen:

Now, you must have comprehensive planning because you have to do many things at the same time: being a wife, being a mother. My husband goes to work very early... and getting my son ready for school, plus planning classes, workshops, evaluations and my home, are tasks that demand following a schedule (Woman 4).

The domestic burden is lower because when you have to leave your home, someone else, in this case a maid, has to do the housework. Whereas during the pandemic, by law it was not allowed to have anyone else at home, and we had to deal with all those duties (Woman 1).

The return to the university classrooms and offices means dividing the two scenarios again: home and

work, something that had been combined due to remote work, which made it impossible to respect the schedules allocated for each activity (Woman 5).

Since we will be able to dedicate more time to our family, to the housework, because before I definitely did not have enough time for everything... (woman 6).

### **DISCUSSION**

The implementation of ICTs was a great challenge that participants had to face during the pandemic. The transfer of the thematic contents to virtual settings, in addition to the adaptation of teaching-learning, demanded great efforts by the teachers; the lack of continuous training on the use of ICTs before the pandemic (22) and the absence of support in the transition process during the emergency were aggravating factors that brought with them psychological consequences such as symptoms of anxiety, depression and work stress (23).

In the same vein, socio-educational factors had to be faced in the teaching-learning process (24). The educational needs that the virtual setting brought during the pandemic also had consequences in the relation between educational actors and digital devices (25). Due to the aforementioned, it is important to highlight the expectations regarding the return to the class-

room: teachers perceive it positively because of the change in academic dynamics due to the teacher-student interaction; apart from the fact that a greater use of new technologies (26) is expected during said return. In this sense, some of the participants expressed they would continue using ICTs in face-to-face academic exercises. In contrast, fear was seen regarding the possibilities of contagion due to physical interactions in the classroom, given the agglomerations of groups of people could increase this risk. Furthermore, the continuous displacement of students and teachers can produce a lower perception of risk and, with it, actions that favor contagion (27).

On the other hand, remote work forced teachers to share their personal space with their workspace. The study participants hope that the return to face-to-face activities will reduce work overload and allow quality spaces to be shared with the family, because during the pandemic, although the members of the households were at home, work and domestic duties did not allow sharing quality time. (28-30)

Thus, teachers have good expectations about the return to the classroom, as for the redistribution of the domestic burden. The results allude to a greater structuring between paid and unpaid work, in addition to the allocation of some tasks to third parties (31-34). Nevertheless, the participants did not reflect a distribution of these tasks

among family members that would reduce the domestic burden on women, who have historically borne it.

## CONCLUSIONS

According to the study findings, an increase in the workload was perceived during the pandemic due to the transition of the teaching exercise to a virtual setting to comply with the mandatory confinement, which caused a reduction of personal spaces, even when people were in their own homes.

However, teachers consider that learning how to use virtual tools is a teaching strategy that can be replicated in face-to-face teaching. In addition, there is a favorable perception regarding the possibility of communicating and interacting with students in the classroom, which facilitates supporting students' academic processes. Furthermore, there is concern about biosafety protocols and the students' physical interactions in a closed environment.

So, according to the research process, one study limitation recognized is that the trial was conducted in a single institution. It would be important to carry out future research in different institutions and with a positivist paradigm in order to have a broader picture, as well as to consider organizational policies that benefit the teaching staff at the institutions.

Finally, regarding the redistribution of the domestic burden, organization strategies and assignment of these domestic tasks to third parties were mentioned. Nevertheless, there was no evidence of an attempt to distribute these tasks evenly amongst the household members, despite the shared family experience during the preventive isolation; this was possibly due to the cultural roots of gender stereotypes, which designate women as responsible for the housework and care for household members.

### CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

There are no conflicts of interests.

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