Chile: Fundación Súmate - Red de Escuelas de Segunda Oportunidad (Súmate Foundation - Second chance schools network)

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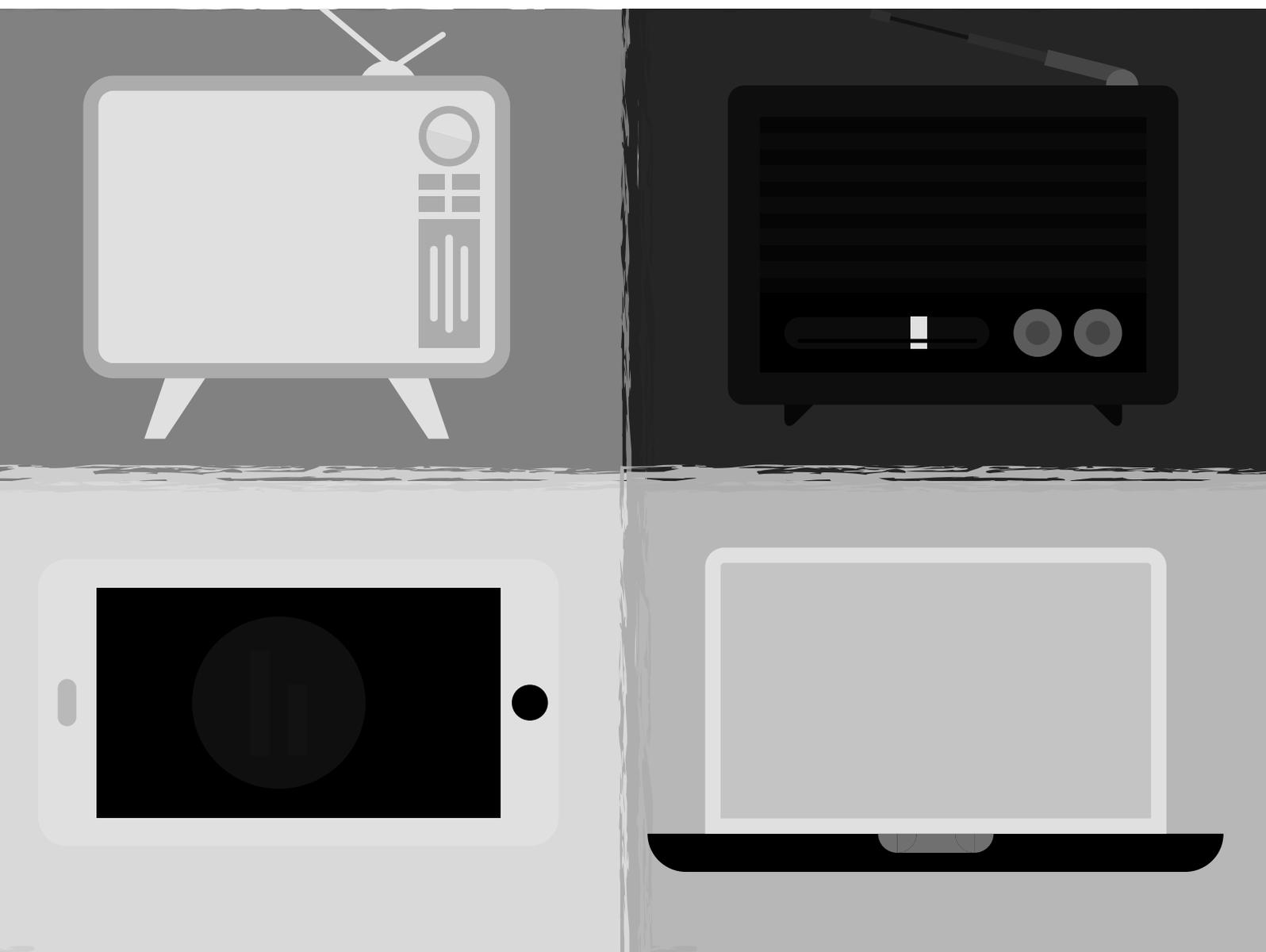
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The coronavirus crisis led schools and universities to rapidly transition to a distance-learning mode, via the Internet, television or radio. This series documents some country initiatives that ensured education continuity for all using technology and provided support to teachers, students, and their families.

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Type of intervention: non-governmental
Website: www.sumate.cl / www.fundacionsumate.cl

General description

Established in 1993, Sumate Foundation supports out of school children and youth between the ages of 12 and 21 in resuming their schooling. In 2019, the organisation served 1 882 students. An average student who participates in one of the five schools or six programmes sponsored by the foundation throughout Chile has a learning lag equivalent to more than two years below grade level and has been out of school for at least two years. Sumate sponsors students whose family members have also experienced interrupted schooling. A considerable number of students live in juvenile protection institutions, exposed to social risks such as drug abuse, early parenthood and run-ins with the law. In addition, they are more vulnerable to unemployment working in the informal sector, living in overcrowded homes, without adequate spaces to study and Internet connectivity.

By joining a second chance school, the students participate in an adaptation process designed to help them rebuild trust in adults. In the context of Chile – but also as documented internationally – children and youth attending such schools are generally considered dropouts rather than excluded from the school system.

The challenge of keeping these students in school is amplified because they are stigmatised for being outcasts from the system and blamed for their academic failure. Thus, renewing an emotional connection with this type of students is essential to support their academic achievement. Through the programme, teachers and tutors focus on establishing emotional bonds through intense and constant social and emotional support.

From March 16 onwards – just two weeks after the start of the school year in Chile – the Ministry of Education (MINEDUC) suspended school classes throughout the country. Initially, schools continued food service and delivering printed educational material. However, after a few days, those services were also suspended with the aim of protecting the health of both students and school staff. Then the winter break, initially scheduled for July, was moved up to the 13th until the 24th of April. In this context of multiple interruptions in schooling in less than two months, Sumate developed strategies to continue connecting with students and providing them with emotional support virtually, for the first time in its history.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Sumate relied on free social networks, such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook, and on students' smartphones as communication channels through which to continue providing emotional support to students and families, and educational continuity. The organisation's leadership has also provided continuous emotional support to teachers and support staff. In 2018, Sumate collaborated with UNESCO to receive technical assistance in order to build and implement curriculum adjustments with a focus on socio-emotional skills. UNESCO continues to support the work Sumate is doing today, and it has proved to be essential in the process of supporting the students.

Main problems addressed

In the context of the public health emergency caused by COVID-19 and all the adversities experienced by the students participating in Sumate's programmes, the organisation faced three challenges.

First, students had no access to computers and poor Internet connectivity at home. They could not take advantage of the wide range of online educational platforms offered by the Ministry of Education, which requires access to a computer and an Internet connection. In addition, most students in the programme have minimal digital literacy, as they were born and raised without a computer at home. Sumate responded to this situation by using free social media platforms and by connecting with students on their smartphones (more than 95% of students have a smartphone). Teams of teachers and other educators were mobilised to deliver support and content to students through suitable networks.

The second challenge was to provide social and emotional support to students remotely. Since bonding and emotional support are part of the Sumate strategies and have proved essential in keeping students on track, teams of teachers have had to imagine new ways to engage with students. An example of these strategies has been offering 24/7 contact with students through WhatsApp groups. Social workers monitor who responds to this group and follow up with those students who do not respond.

The third problem was reprioritising the curriculum and adjusting expectations to take into consideration how much academic instruction could be offered. Sumate prioritised social and emotional support over academic support. With few networks in place and little experience in providing emotional support virtually, Sumate has attempted to deliver academic content – a challenging task. Teachers specialised in different subjects worked together in order to switch from delivering subject-specific study workbooks to each student to interdisciplinary study workbooks that integrated different subjects.

Mobilising and developing resources

Sumate's leadership team has given schools enough autonomy to develop their own solutions to these three challenges. Below are the developed solutions that the staff thought worked best.

The foundation's operations division provided social and emotional support to school teams. These teams, in turn, have created a plan to support their students emotionally. The classroom teacher, a special education teacher, a psychologist or counselor, a social worker and the technical-pedagogical unit co-ordinator meet one week in advance to prepare for meetings with students through WhatsApp groups.

At the same time, educators worked together to create interdisciplinary academic work study guides because they realised that these were more engaging for students than creating separate subject study workbooks. Pictures of these guides were sent to students in the WhatsApp group, and posted on Facebook and Instagram. Students then submit, using the same social networks, their answers individually by taking a picture of the copybook where they solved the tasks given by the teachers. Students then submit their answers individually by taking a picture of the filled in study guide, using the same social networks.

The educational continuity strategy has focused on reading comprehension and skills, such as research and exploration. As students do not have computers or Internet access outside of social networks, they maintain ongoing communication with their teachers. Students ask their teachers to look up information on the Internet about the topics they are studying so they can complete the study guides. Similarly, teachers that have either the morning or afternoon shifts have video calls with eight students at a time on WhatsApp where students can report their progress.

During this process, teachers use an asset based approach to teach, identifying what skills students have and engaging them through those. For instance, if a student cannot complete a study guide, but is skilled in creating PowerPoint presentations, they are invited to present a PowerPoint to the entire class, demonstrating their understanding of the subject they have studied.

Fostering effective use and learning

Beyond the solution described above, the strategy put the effective learning of the students at its core through other things:

- Creating daily routines that include a morning greeting session with the entire student group. One of the educators initiates the day sending a message to greet the students first and each student must reply. A social worker verifies which students respond and which do not.
- Being available for students at different times during the day. For teachers, this is good practice, as they can have different shifts during the day and must balance the tasks within the group.
- Ensuring that students bond with a community and not with a particular adult. Such a strategy promotes autonomy rather than dependence.
- Valuing the different ways in which students can demonstrate understanding: videos and audio recordings, photographs.

Within two weeks of school closures and working remotely, the MINEDUC moved up the winter break. In spite of this, the teachers decided to continue working with students as a way to keep them engaged, initiating logic based challenges. As a result, students took the lead and sent challenges to their peers and teachers in their WhatsApp groups. This exercise, during winter break, allowed students to demonstrate skills their teachers had not previously seen, such as:

- Taking risks and demonstrating initiative in front of their peers.
- Being more available to provide feedback to their peers.
- Engaging with a learning community in an uninhibited and respectful way.
- Trusting their classmates.

As students took more responsibility for their learning, the teachers became guides and coaches, something which was new in the programme.

Box 1. Engagement rubric (supporting students in their learning engagement)

- Students learn in different ways, and teachers are learning to value those differences ("We see that each student advances at their own pace and that requires that we, the teachers, learn too" said the pedagogical co-ordinator at one of the schools).
- Bonding and social and emotional development are integral to students' development.
- Young people can lead and do so.
- Teachers are able to continue to support students in learning through remote models, something these teachers did not know.
- Teachers can collaborate virtually. (The school has experienced it.)
- Teachers have become more open to knowing more about other teachers in this virtual setting. There is a new sense of community among the adults in the school.

Implementation challenges

Implementation challenges involved the entire school community. For Sumate's leadership, the main challenge was to support educators virtually. A well-supported educator who can engage with their students is core to the Sumate educational approach, as teachers in these contexts feel powerless and distressed when confronted by their students' problems. In particular, during this time, there is concern for students who enrolled in Sumate this past March (more than 50% of the student body), as the first few weeks of face-to-face classes were insufficient to establish bonds of trust. Likewise, the economic situation of its students in the wake of the pandemic is distressing to teachers.

Teachers not only teach from their homes but they also take care of children, sick relatives and household chores. Also, they begin to get to know families personally who lost their jobs and fear for their job security. Teachers did not have the skills to provide lessons remotely and were suspicious of distance learning, although they were reassured about how much they could do remotely.

Students, on the other hand, are not receiving the protection generally given to them by the school. For these students, school is a safe space. They appreciate and value the physical space and the structure that the community provides them. Many of them miss school and have increasing economic needs. In addition, there is a lack of Internet connection, which for the time being, has been covered by free social networks provided by a public/private agreement.

Given Sumate's s hierarchy of values, balancing social and emotional bonding, and educational continuity has not been easy.

Monitoring success

Sumate's leadership team asked the teachers at the beginning of the process to answer a survey about communicating with students, (e.g. students' devices, data plans, the type of communication, and whether the students had received academic study guides/workbooks). With this information, both the leadership team and the school staff – understanding the main challenges – can focus on those students who require more attention.

The leadership team also surveyed the students asking about their satisfaction with the process. Most students responded that they value the process and the personalisation it allows. They feel that they continue their education and that their teachers are engaged and committed.

The most significant indicator of success will be that students return to school at the end of the pandemic – simply come back. So far, the educational continuity strategy has shown positive signs, as most students

remain connected to their WhatsApp groups, a minimum standard of success. The hope is that students can participate much more actively and systematically in distance learning activities.

Sumate has continued supporting teachers directly by providing through computers, Internet connection data plans, and the Microsoft Education platform.

Another indicator of success is that no teacher has refused to communicate with students during the mandatory winter break period. That is a reflection of the strong culture of teacher engagement in the school.

Adaptability to new contexts

Nationally, this strategy can be useful for second chance schools and also for schools working with highly vulnerable students. Countries that lack paid connectivity, online platforms and computers, and where the state does not have the resources or mandate to supply students with these kind of resources can also benefit from it.

While the social and emotional component of education is essential to any real academic process, it is even more important in the case of those who work with students who suffer from the stigma and frustration at the levels of those who are cared for by Sumate. This strategy can serve foundations, schools and teachers who need to redouble efforts on the social and emotional aspect while continuing to teach traditional academic subjects.

Key points to keep in mind for a successful adaptation

1. Involve everyone in the process according to their skill set by creating a sense of urgency, and explaining how these innovative actions allow us to deepen the foundation's mission, and therefore contribute to the lives of young people.
2. Provide emotional support to school staff in order to support them in continuing to engage with the students.
3. Encourage collaboration among professionals, timely planning, and peer support to balance the educators personal lives with the demands of the young people they serve.
4. Identify the options for communication available to the youth the program serves and support the adults in adjusting to those so that no student is left behind.
5. Encourage the team of educators to continue asking questions and showing interest on the details of this new way of educating, and encourage exchanges with other colleagues.
6. Evaluate the process with students in order to decide what to keep and what to change.