



Online Special Education in the United States and Peru: A Comparison of Responses to COVID-19

Maria Berrocal
Howard Community College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/bjur>

Recommended Citation

Berrocal, Maria () "Online Special Education in the United States and Peru: A Comparison of Responses to COVID-19," *Butler Journal of Undergraduate Research*: Vol. 8 , Article 6.
Retrieved from: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/bjur/vol8/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Scholarship at Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Butler Journal of Undergraduate Research by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact digitalscholarship@butler.edu.

ONLINE SPECIAL EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES AND PERU: A COMPARISON OF RESPONSES TO COVID-19

MARIA BERROCAL, HOWARD COMMUNITY COLLEGE
MENTOR: MATTHEW VAN HOOSE

Abstract

Public special education systems have distinct levels of economic resources at the international and local levels, as well as different social-cultural attitudes toward students with disabilities. This study is an in-depth exploration of those differences as they apply to the special education systems of Peru and the United States within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. I give particular focus to *Aprendo en casa*, a Peruvian multichannel distance education service for television, radio, and the Internet that was launched in April of 2020 because of the state emergency. I examine lessons from *Aprendo en casa* to identify the learning strategies they present for reaching students with diverse types of learning challenges, and compare those strategies with those identified in the broader scholarly literature as well as the pandemic experiences of public-school teachers in Howard County, Maryland. This comparative lens provides new perspectives on how teaching and learning within special education adapted to the COVID-19 pandemic. It also brings into clearer focus the broader social, economic, and political factors that shape special education in both countries.

Key words: special education, Peru, United States, online learning, inequalities, accessibility, COVID-19

Introduction

Special education is approached differently by different countries, like the United States and Peru. In this paper, I conduct a case study of a new Spanish-language online learning platform in Peru, called *Aprendo en casa*, and use it to compare and contrast approaches to special education in the United States and Peru during the COVID-19 pandemic. By situating this case study within relevant scholarly literature and consultation with experts in the field, I will add to the current literature base.

Aprendo en casa is a multichannel distance learning service for television, radio, and the web. The short-term goal for this service is to educate students of basic education (those in elementary, middle, high, and special education). The platform launched on April 6, 2020, when COVID-19 closed all the schools in Peru. When designing the remote learning plan for *Aprendo en casa*, public and private partners supported the goals for ensuring that learning sessions are delivered and are free of cost for all students. The medium- and long-term goals for this program are to instruct

students by stimulating discussion and reflection and to build knowledge in different subjects. Peru's education system currently relies heavily on *Aprendo en casa*, with teachers and students communicating through Zoom, WhatsApp, and e-mail where possible, but the teachers and students mostly rely on a television broadcast version of *Aprendo en casa* (Al Jazeera English, 2020). Content is also translated as needed into indigenous languages such as Quechua. In rural and indigenous areas of Peru, not everyone receives radio and television signals, so teachers also receive content through WhatsApp, which they then relay to students through phone calls, text messages, and WhatsApp, sometimes accompanied by videos that the teachers record themselves. The overall curriculum for *Aprendo en casa* consists of learning guides, audio recordings, videos, and workbooks that are available by level and by grade. Activities are scheduled for five days of the week, with different activities each day. Specifically for special education students, only one activity per week is scheduled.

Methods

This qualitative study was initially framed by a literature review on teaching and learning approaches for special education and on how they compare internationally. With this literature review as context, I closely analyzed materials and lessons available through the online *Aprendo en casa* platform. Specifically, I analyzed six separate online lessons for elementary-aged students covering both subject-area content and life skills. I viewed two versions of each lesson: the version directed toward students without learning differences, and the version created for special education students. My analysis extended to written materials provided on the *Aprendo en casa* website, which included worksheets for students as well as guidance for parents and caregivers. This analysis yielded insights about the approach to special education taken by *Aprendo en casa* in five main areas: social skills, accessibility, active learning, educational access, and inequality in Peru.

With these primary themes identified, I observed two teacher interviews that formed part of a separate student research project on approaches to special education in the public school system of Howard County, Maryland (Almony, 2021). I also consulted directly with that study's principal investigator and a special education specialist on the faculty of Howard Community College (E. O'Hanlon, personal communication, April 2021) to gain a sense of how her results compared and contrasted with my findings from *Aprendo en Casa*.

Results

As noted above, the methods employed for this project yielded insights into online special education approaches in Peru and Howard County in the following main areas: social skills, accessibility, active learning, educational access, and inequality in Peru.

Social Skills

When I spoke with Howard County public school special educators, we discussed the different learning needs of special education students. The first thing we discussed was the emphasis within special education on social skills that students can use daily to communicate and interact. I then reviewed and analyzed how *Aprendo en casa* teaches students this skill. *Aprendo en casa* is well structured to teach students social skills. Even though social skills cannot be practiced by the student via a video, *Aprendo en casa* implements some innovative solutions. During each video, instructors ask questions about social skills and give students some time to consider the answer. Afterward, the instructors reply with the answers in a highly conversational fashion. Another way *Aprendo en casa* interacts with students is by using books. *Aprendo en casa* reads a lot of picture books to the students; this is an effective way to introduce topics to them with concepts that are related to social skills and beginning conversations. Such techniques attempt to approximate a synchronous rather than asynchronous learning environment.

In an examination of the U.S. and Peruvian learning environments, the disparate levels of resources between the two countries are apparent. From observing an interview with a Howard County public school teacher, I learned that Howard County teachers incorporate many approaches to teaching social skills through Zoom and Google Classroom. This was challenging when quarantines due to COVID-19 began and students had to switch to online instead of in-person classes. This transition interrupted familiar routines and placed additional stress on both students and parents. Howard County public schools, however, possessed resources for navigating this transition. One example is a specific class for role-playing, in which students play a game through Zoom with other students. The teacher handles all the pieces and the game, and the students communicate by asking what attack they want to use or if they want to attack the monsters or not. The purpose of this game is to eliminate monsters, and each time a monster is eliminated, students level up as a team. As students progress through the game, they can obtain better armor and weapons to use. This role-playing class offers a way for students to interact with the teacher and have agreements or disagreements with classmates. These interactions with classmates can be an effective way to practice their social skills online because they cannot practice in person. Comparing this one class to *Aprendo en casa*, it is apparent that Howard County has more resources at its disposal to create a truly synchronous experience that benefits special education students. Peru is doing what it can with the resources and technology at its disposal, however.

Accessibility

Even though I could not meet teachers from Peru, *Aprendo en casa* provides ample documentation for approaches to engage students during the pandemic. The

platform's emphasis on accessibility is notable in the presence of a Spanish Sign Language interpreter in every video. This shows how inclusive this channel is while teaching others. Teachers in the Howard County public schools also noted significant attention paid to accessibility. One teacher remarked that Google Classroom is more inclusive and friendly than Zoom because it includes a screen reader that will read an article out loud to the student and teachers can write private messages to students who might need reminders for assignments. Google Classroom also offers a live captioning option for students with hearing difficulties or sensibility to sound, which Zoom has not offered until very recently. Here again, while *Aprendo en casa* faces more limitations in relation to available software, it is still setting a notable example through its efforts to address accessibility.

Active Learning

Branstetter (2020) notes, "Distance learning is challenging for many learners, but can be even more challenging for students with learning, attenuation, or social-emotional needs." To address this challenge, teachers can create learning environments that are more active, hands-on, and socially engaged. If students were in school, for example, teachers would greet them in person by saying, "I see you, I know you, I'm connecting with you, and you're important to me" (Edutopia, 2019). Tools such as Zoom and Google Classroom can facilitate these approaches in the virtual format. For instance, teachers can use the waiting room feature in Zoom to greet students through one by one. The same tools allow students to interact with each other or discuss a question of the day posed by the teacher. Requiring students to attend virtual office hours can allow teachers to connect with each student better one-on-one. Activating social connections in these ways through Zoom and Google Classroom can help to compensate for the absence of in-person instruction.

For its part, *Aprendo en casa* has only certain tools at its disposal for stimulating this kind of active learning approach, but the curriculum does make many efforts in this vein. As previously discussed, lessons usually teach students more life-skills techniques. For example, *Aprendo en casa* engages students in storytelling, which involves reading, and demonstrates how to make bubbles using water, soap, gel, a bowl, and a straw, which allows students to experience a science lesson in a highly hands-on fashion. When the teacher explains how to make bubbles, they also explain to the parents how to support completion of the lesson by students who have different learning styles. This is extremely helpful for the parents to understand better how to support their children's learning and success.

Educational Inequalities in the United States and Peru

Discrimination

Fellner (2015) discusses how some U.S. families of special education students are declined services because the testing and classification process is challenging to navigate for families with fewer resources. Moreover, most standardized tests in use do not provide insights into a student's emotional or behavioral characteristics, which makes these tests a flawed mechanism for tracking students for any purpose, including special education. As a result, many special education students are wrongly categorized and stigmatized as academically hopeless, similar to the pattern observed among students of color.

Even though Fellner's (2015) analysis touches more on race in the U.S. context, it provides insights that can be applied to the Peruvian case, especially in relation to poverty and classism. Currently, 22.3% of the Peruvian population lives on less than US\$5.50 per day (World Bank, 2021). This makes it difficult for parents who are trying to help their children with education. As noted throughout this paper, the sharp wealth disparity between the United States and Peru is apparent in the countries' approaches to special education but has not entirely prevented Peru from innovating within its available resources.

Technology

Within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, families may be struggling financially, causing their students to have less education. In the Peruvian case, *Aprendo en casa* is especially useful because the platform's use of multiple media channels could help parents and students who cannot afford the transition to online schooling. *Aprendo en casa* teaches social skills and academic contact in ways that engage both parents and students. This platform's process first shows a story/video of how to do the activity. Afterward, it teaches the parent how to do this general activity with the student and then offers specific directions on how to instruct each student if the student needs different accommodations. This approach helps students gain the knowledge they need and helps parents support their students' learning.

As mentioned, however, Peru is not a wealthy country, and some families do not have Internet access to engage with *Aprendo en casa* via the web. Mueller and Taj (2020) share the story of Delia, a 10-year-old who lives in a rural area of Peru and has been learning at home because of schools being closed indefinitely. She is getting her education through her family's television, not a computer or a phone. This is possible because *Aprendo en casa*, a "brand-new library of slickly made educational broadcasts" (Mueller & Taj, 2020), is available not only via the web but also via television. There are certain disadvantages to this approach. For example, Delia cannot ask the television presenters to slow down when she does not understand a

difficult lesson. A major advantage of the television learning that Peru has supplied, however, is that it has the power to reach more of the billion children worldwide who are shut out of schools by the pandemic (Mueller & Taj, 2020). While the United States does struggle with computer and Internet access and with making online learning more engaging, the challenges for Peru are of a different magnitude. As Peru does what it can to address these challenges, *Aprendo en casa* does seem to have adopted, across all its platforms, one of the “cardinal lessons of the YouTube era” that other countries have adopted as well: “the shorter and snazzier, the better” (Mueller & Taj, 2020).

Government Funding Sources

Another important difference between the United States and Peru relates to how their governments are structured. Peru’s national education ministry is currently trying to supply content to the whole country to sustain learning during the pandemic. In the United States, by contrast, public education is funded and administered largely at a very local level. School funding in the United States comes from “federal, state and local sources, but nearly half of those funds come from local property taxes, [so] the system generates large funding differences between wealthy and impoverished communities” (Biddle & Berliner, 2002). Peruvian schools, by contrast, are funded by school fees. In 2015, Peru invested about \$1,200 per student, with plans to increase that amount in subsequent years (*Peru Telegraph*, 2018). The average U.S. expenditure per student is \$12,612, which is more than triple that of Peru. The amount varies throughout each state in the United States, however. Maryland schools specifically spend \$14,762 per pupil, for a total of \$13.2 billion annually (Hanson, 2020). For special education funding specifically, the U.S. Department of Education covered 13% of total costs per student in 2020 (National Education Association, 2021). This is the lowest share since 2000. In the 2020–2021 academic year, the shortfall passed on to districts and states after federal assistance was \$23.6 billion (National Education Association, 2021). These shortfalls deny full educational opportunities to students with and without disabilities.

Discussion

It is clear from the observations above that Peru and the United States have both struggled to adapt to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic while seizing upon certain opportunities to innovate. Both countries are trying in their own ways to make special education as adaptable as possible. Although education in Peru receives far less funding than in the United States, Peru is doing what it can with its available resources, in one case innovating by reverting to an older technology (television), whereas the United States relied more on newer digital tools to create an interactive virtual learning experience.

While special education can look to the full range of emerging technologies to serve learners in post-pandemic digital learning environments, the Peruvian case demonstrates that educators should not overlook older, more analog, technologies for creating access to special education in underserved areas. For instance, Lai and Widmar (2021), among others, document how some rural areas of the United States are still affected by the digital divide, leading to a lack of educational opportunities for those who do not have access to the Internet. Roese (2021) estimates that as many as 30 million Americans in rural areas are currently affected. Fregni (2020) illustrates the ways in which these disparities affect teachers and students in their everyday lives, as well as the strategies the teachers and students develop to compensate, discussing the case of a student who must travel up into the mountains near her house to get clear cell service to do her homework. Other students in the same situation access Wi-Fi at the nearest Subway or visit friends who do have access to high-speed Internet (Fregni, 2020). During the pandemic, sufficient Internet became even more essential for work and school, but it remains till this day unattainable for many U.S. households. Accordingly, policy makers and educators in the United States may have more to learn that would seem immediately apparent from Peru's approach to meeting the challenges of the pandemic.

The insights derived from this study are still preliminary because of certain methodological limitations that must be acknowledged. *Aprendo en Casa* is just one dimension of the Peruvian approach to special education, albeit a particularly instructive one. A more comprehensive survey of the Peruvian system would yield additional insights. Likewise, Howard County, Maryland, is only one educational district in a diverse U.S. educational landscape. Comparisons to other parts of the country, as well as more extensive interviews with educators in different contexts, would continue to expand helpfully on the findings of this study. Case studies of other parts of the world, in addition to Peru, would also further understanding of how special education approaches vary from country to country.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the comparison of the United States and Peru reveals how resource and wealth differences have affected but not completely determined strategies for teaching special education students during the COVID-19 pandemic. While Peru's pandemic response was complicated by resource limitations, we can also see how vastly more resources have not translated to a perfect solution for the United States, either, and how resource shortages have pushed Peruvians to innovate. Future research should examine how instructional practices shift again when students return to face-to-face instruction from online learning. Will *Aprendo en casa* stop its program, or will it continue to give information to students and parents? Will *Aprendo en casa* be more economically beneficial to parents who do not have the financial support to send their children to school? Will schools in the United States continue

some part of the online format for some students who do better during online learning? These questions will merit continued examination by comparative scholars of education as the world emerges from the pandemic.

References

- Al Jazeera English. (2020, May 24). *Listen, watch, LEARN: Peru's school system takes to the AIRWAVES: The listening Post (feature)* [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/IRva3S1dSyM>
- Almony, J. (2021, April 21). *The transition to online learning in special education: Perspectives from Howard County Teachers*. Howard Community College Scholars Symposium.
- Biddle, B. J., & Berliner, D. C. (2002, May 1). *A research synthesis/Unequal school funding in the united states*. ASCD. <https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/unequal-school-funding-in-the-united-states>
- Branstetter, R. (2020). *How teachers can help students with special needs navigate distance learning*. Greater Good Magazine. https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_teachers_can_help_students_with_special_needs_navigate_distance_learning
- Edutopia. (2019, January 19). *Making connections with greetings at the door* [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/GVAKBnXIGxA>
- Fellner, G. (2015). The problem is education not “special education.” *Cultural Studies of Science Education*, 10(4), 1089–1101. <https://search-proquestcom.libproxy.howardcc.edu/docview/1749606928?pqorigsite=summon>
- Fregni, J. (2020, January 17). *How rural students are left behind in the digital age*. FPA. <https://www.teachforamerica.org/one-day/top-issues/how-rural-students-are-left-behind-in-the-digital-age>
- Hanson, M. (2020). *U.S. public education spending statistics*. EducationData. <https://educationdata.org/public-education-spending-statistics>
- Lai, J., & Widmar, N. O. (2021). Revisiting the digital divide in the COVID-19 era. *Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy*, 43(1), 458–464. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7675734/>
- Mueller B., & Taj, M. (2020). *In New Jersey, Tanzania, Peru, TV lessons replace online learning*. New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/17/world/coronavirus-television-schools.html?searchResultPosition=1>

National Education Association. (2021, December 2). *Special education*.
<https://www.nea.org/student-success/smart-just-policies/special-education>

Peru Telegraph. (2018). *Public schools in Peru in desolate condition*.
www.perutelegraph.com/news/peru-living-lifestyle/public-schools-in-peru-in-desolate-condition

Roese, J. (2021, January 27). *COVID-19 exposed the digital divide. Here's how we can close it*. World Economic Forum.
<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/01/covid-digital-divide-learningeducation/>

World Bank. (2021). *Peru poverty rate 1997–2021*. Macrotrends.
<https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/PER/peru/poverty-rate>