



Homeschooling during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Understanding the Challenges in France

التعليم المنزلي أثناء جائحة كوفيد-19: فهم التحديات في فرنسا

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Abstract:

There is no doubt that the whole world was going through an unusual condition, and that the time of the covid-19 pandemic was definitely a difficult time for everyone. Numerous countries decided to opt for a lockdown as a temporary solution for the number of cases which kept increasing day by day; in an attempt to save the people. France joined the race and called for an urgent closure of all the schools and the adoption of homeschooling. Though this concept has been introduced years ago in the field of education, it was still new to most of the teachers and learners. Accordingly, this article aims at discussing the basic changes witnessed in the whole world during the period of lockdown as well as the negative effects of the covid-19 pandemic on individuals. However, and more precisely, it sheds light on the most significant challenges that teachers, learners and parents in France have been going through during the lockdown. The experience might be challenging at first, but it certainly builds resilient communication skills, encourages adaptability, and teaches the value of perseverance. All in all, the insights gained are expected to strengthen partnerships between educators, families, and the rest of the community, which in turn would improve the educational system in France and countries all over the world for future challenges.

Key words: Challenges; Education; Homeschooling; The Covid-19 Pandemic.

ملخص المقال :

لا شك أن العالم أجمع كان يمر بحالة غير عادية، وأن زمن جائحة كوفيد-19 كان بالتأكيد وقتاً عصيباً على الجميع. قررت العديد من الدول اختيار الإغلاق كحل مؤقت لعدد الحالات التي ظلت تتزايد يوماً بعد يوم؛ في محاولة لإنقاذ الناس. انضمت فرنسا إلى السباق ودعت إلى إغلاق عاجل لجميع المدارس واعتماد التعليم المنزلي. على الرغم من أن هذا المفهوم قد تم تقديمه منذ سنوات في مجال التعليم، إلا أنه كان لا يزال جديداً لمعظم المعلمين والمتعلمين. وعليه، تهدف هذه المقالة إلى مناقشة التغييرات الأساسية التي شهدتها العالم أجمع خلال فترة الإغلاق وكذلك الآثار السلبية لجائحة كوفيد-19 على الأفراد. ومع ذلك، وبشكل أكثر دقة، فهي تسلط الضوء على أهم التحديات التي مر بها المعلمون والمتعلمون وأولياء الأمور في فرنسا أثناء الإغلاق. قد تبدو التجربة صعبة في البداية، لكنها بلا شك تُنمّي مهارات تواصل مرنة، وتشجع على التكيف، وتُعلم قيمة المثابرة. وإجمالاً، يُتوقع أن تُعزز الأفكار المكتسبة الشراكات بين المعلمين والأسر وسائر أفراد المجتمع، مما يُحسن بدوره النظام التعليمي في فرنسا ودول العالم لمواجهة تحديات المستقبل.

كلمات مفتاحية: التحديات؛ التعليم؛ التعليم المنزلي؛ جائحة كوفيد-19.

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Introduction

It is quite obvious that teaching nowadays is different from teaching in the past. What our generation has witnessed is never going to be the same for the coming generations. In fact, changes do not concern only the new advances in the educational context; but how people, including teachers, learners, and parents would react towards them. Besides teachers' training and multicultural classrooms, a very significant element keeps being introduced and welcomed in educational settings, which is the use of technology. "Classrooms, schools, and students use computers more often today than in the past for research, writing, communicating and keeping records. Technology...has also altered how teachers can teach most effectively, and even raised issues about what constitutes "true" teaching and learning" (Seifert and Sutton, 2009, p. 10). However, every success has a price. A considerable number of teachers find it difficult and even challenging to work in classrooms that are equipped with technological tools. The reason is basically that this world of technology is an ongoing and a continuously developing one. Teachers do not always have the possibility to get trained to use technology effectively, or to stay updated about all what is new in the field.

Besides all what is highlighted above, teachers found themselves engaged in a relatively new atmosphere; where they had to deliver lectures online during the pandemic. The true challenge was no more about using technology; however, about using only technology to teach the same content to the same learners, in a world that is going through a tough sanitary situation. Thus, this article is made in an attempt to answer the following questions:

- What are the effects of the covid-19 pandemic, especially in the field of education?
- What are the challenges that teachers, learners and parents have been going through when adopting this digital mode of teaching?

In an attempt to answer these questions, a whole section is dedicated to discuss the effects of the covid-19 pandemic from an economic, social, educational and psychological level. Then, the example of moving towards online teaching in France is thoroughly explained, as it is the core concern of this article. At a final stage, a summary of the main challenges that teachers, learners, and parents witnessed during that period is presented.

1. Literature Review

1.1 The Covid-19 Pandemic and its Effects:

The emergence of the covid-19 virus and the discovery of the truth about its very fast spread created frustration among individuals as well as governments. Since cases started to appear and increase in numerous countries around the world, governments relied on border closures and lockdowns, among other measures, as temporary solutions to prevent its spread and save lives. This was the beginning of other numerous and very serious problems that touched the economic, social, psychological, educational and other levels.

From an economic perspective, countries all over the world started to feel how bad the situation would be as most of their productive activities started to stop. Another factor which had the most effect on the collapse of the economic systems is the decrease in, not to say the inexistence of, import-export

operations because of border closures. Countries that were considered to be leading the universal economy were no more capable of selling goods overseas with the same rate before the pandemic. The following table summarizes facts about the decrease in imports and exports of some parts of the world.

Table 1. World and Selected Groups and Countries: Change in the Volume of Global Trade in Goods

	Exports	Imports
World	-18.3	-15.8
Advanced Economies	-22.7	-15.8
United States	-30.8	-15.8
Japan	-22.1	-4.4
Eurozone	-22.0	-16.6
Emerging Economies	-12.8	-15.8
China	-7.7	-13.8
Emerging Asian Countries (Excluding China)	-13.1	-17.2
Eastern Europe and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)	-4.4	-13.4
Latin America and the Caribbean	-26.1	-27.4
Africa and the Middle East	-13.9	-2.5

The Source: Special Report of the United Nations

The result of all what has been stated before is a drastic rise in unemployment; since a huge number of people have been dismissed or were obliged in a way or in other to quit their jobs. Indeed, this was the beginning of new emerging problems at the social level. Actually, when talking about social problems, two main phenomena always appear in the forefront: poverty and family conflicts. They are both interrelated with unemployment. The fact that people started losing their jobs made them at risk to be categorized as poor. The world health organization reported in October 2020 that the number of undernourished people was estimated to be almost 690 million and could continue to increase if the situation does not change fast.

Family scenarios changed drastically during the corona virus pandemic. The fact that a considerable number of self-employed, temporary workers, and skilled trade workers lost their jobs, and the fact that numerous companies and institutions raised the call for the workers to stay at home and deal with their duties online led to a forced proximity among family members; which created a collision for so many couples, as they had to discuss every single aspect of their daily lives and disagree on so many. The result of this was a mixture of feelings including fear, doubt, and uncertainty about the already existing family values, and relationship conflicts that started to appear within families around the globe. Carly Kinch, a partner at Stewarts Law-firm in the United Kingdom, described the pandemic, in an article published on the BBC website, as “the perfect storm for couples, with lockdowns and social distancing causing them to spend increased amounts of time together. This has, in many cases, acted as a catalyst for break-ups” (2020).

Now, when considering education around the world, we should highlight the fact that even before the pandemic, it was suffering from numerous problems; namely, the number of children out of school and which was believed to be around 250 million children in 2018 (The Institute of Statistics of UNESCO). However, the Covid-19 pandemic made it even worse with all its negative effects on individuals and nations. In fact, it resulted in a great shock in the educational system in almost all nations around the world. 1,6 billion learners in more than 190 countries had to accept unwanted changes in the way they used to live and study. They witnessed the shift from attending school to lectures delivered online, through the radio, television, or even through packages sent to their homes. Teachers, on the other hand, had to also accept the new situation and move towards a completely online mode of teaching. In fact, teachers, learners, and parents as well have been through a difficult time,



and faced a considerable number of challenges; which will be thoroughly explained further in this article.

As stated before, lockdowns have been so hard for almost every one, since almost every person experienced one or more of the following covid-19 effects:

- Social distancing
- Unemployment
- Financial problems including debts
- Family conflicts
- Divorce
- Caring for children
- Homeschooling
- Working online, and much more

Thus, speaking about the negative impact of the pandemic on the psychology of individuals cannot be summarized in few lines. People have been feeling that their mental state is not as solid and healthy as it was before the pandemic; as they were struggling with the sense of insecurity. The fear of death and the fear of losing the beloved ones made the nights sleepless for so many people. Their ambiguous careers and the unimaginable future of their kids were a source of chronic anxiety.

1.2. My Classroom at Home: The French Initiative

Before we deal with the French initiative ‘My classroom at home’, it seems compulsory to discuss first the notion of ‘homeschooling’. Indeed, this concept, known as ‘home education’ in the British English, “describes an education based in the home rather than in an institution and one that is facilitated by parents rather than teachers” (Salkind, 2008, p.477). A study conducted by the US department of education demonstrated that 1.1 million homeschooled learners existed in 2003, which represents 2.2% of the whole number of children at a school age. In fact, the reasons that may lead parents to choose home-schooling for their kids vary from one person to another. Some parents stated that homeschooling offers for them the opportunity to raise their children with a certain freedom when it comes to religion; which means that their choice is a religion-oriented one. For other parents, homeschooling is the perfect solution for children who suffer from bullying in school. Others mentioned that, with home education, their lives became more flexible and others see it as a lifestyle.

As stated above, though some parents have positive attitudes towards homeschooling, it still involves various problems and challenges. The most common ones were cited by parents as follows:

- The opinion of other members of the community who do not accept homeschooling.
- The sense of isolation; both for them and their kids.
- Parents feeling fully engaged in this process; which does not leave any free time for them.
- The lack of resources for some families.
- The exhausting and time-consuming nature of home education, and
- Feeling responsible for their kids’ success and failure (Salkind, 2008).

At a more professional level, specialists in the field also criticized home education for so many reasons. It is believed that this type of education causes so much harm to children for the fact that it is associated with:

- The lack of exposure to diversity
- Absence of socialization skills
- The potential difficulty entering mainstream life, and
- Feeling vulnerable to criticism by school-based educators (Salkind, 2008, p. 484)



After all that is discussed above about home education, one can deduce that it has been always available, in some countries, as an option to parents who really prefer to educate their kids at home rather than sending them to an educational institution. Salkind (2008, p. 477), in this sense, added that:

Though school is the most widely preferred form of education for the majority of families and governments, home education in the United Kingdom, the United States, and many other nations is a fundamental right that parents are at liberty to implement.

However, that was not the case after the corona virus came to existence. Some governments chose homeschooling as an alternative solution to attending school, and it became an obligation for parents to educate their kids at home, and not an option anymore. The following is an account of the French case.

At the beginning of spring 2020, more precisely, on the 16th of March, the French president Emmanuel Macron announced to the people that the country would witness a period of lockdown and which would be applicable on every citizen or resident of the country. This led to an urgent closure of all educational institutions, specifically primary schools, and an immediate call for parents to keep their children at home and wait for the instructions for homeschooling (Boudoukhane, Felio, Lheurux and Violaine, 2021). On the contrary, teachers received the call as well to prepare themselves for a new teaching mode and which would take place via screens. The reason behind this decision was that children had to maintain the already existing knowledge and acquire new skills; since that period was only the beginning of the pandemic and nobody was sure when that situation would come to an end.

Accordingly, 'my classroom at home' represented the French shift from studying at school to ensuring the continuity of education at home. In fact, though the general guidelines were applicable to everyone, teachers were given some freedom to deal with this mission in the way they see it appropriate for them and their learners. For primary school learners, the material needed, the educational content that needs to be conceived, the activities that need to be done and returned as well as the evaluation were all sent to parents via emails on Monday which is supposed to be the beginning of the week at schools before the pandemic. Parents download, print, and present the material to their kids at home, and ensure that the activities and the evaluations should be completed and resent again to the teacher before the end of the week. Parents, also, used to receive weekly calls, on Fridays; from the teacher during which they were supposed to answer questions about how good their kids were dealing with homeschooling and how far they could show acceptance to the idea of social distancing and lockdowns. Based on the information provided by parents, teachers would personalize, modify, add to or omit from the content to be sent the following Monday. Evaluations, however, were adapted to the online mode. Since learners were no more capable of sitting for tests and exams in the classroom, teachers used to innovate ways to evaluate how far children are learning from the content sent. For example, for history, parents were asked to record a video for their kids while they perform an oral presentation about a certain country of their choice, and send it back to the teacher for evaluation. Instructions were also continuously given to parents in order to practice sport with their kids at home.

On the other hand, other teachers preferred to use even more advanced tools to talk directly to the kids; as they consider eye contact, voice, and direct instructions very significant to the success of the educational mission. They used to rely on video calls from time to time, either with individuals or with the whole group. Again, this depends on how far the families are equipped with internet and technological tools as well as how ready learners and parents are in order to receive those calls. However, for middle school and high school learners, the case was different. Generally, teachers used to connect directly with learners via the educational platform specified by the educational institution since learners at this age are more capable of manipulating technological tools by themselves.



For the sake of helping the learners understand and benefit the most from the educational content sent via emails or educational platforms, the TV channel 'France 4' was transformed to a virtual classroom where several lectures were provided daily by teachers for all levels. The program was designed to include lectures for primary school learners broadcast between 9AM and midday, and others broadcast for middle school learners between 2PM and 4PM; where half an hour was specified for each level. These lectures were also uploaded and made available online so that learners can check them whenever needed, if they miss them on TV, or if they simply want to revise once again the content provided.

1.3. Challenges Faced by Learners

In a professional context, the way we prefer to receive information, sort them, and learn from them is referred to as 'Learning Styles'. Some learners prefer taking notes inside the classroom, others prefer to listen and do the recap later. Some are attracted by sound and image; others prefer dealing with printed documents or even learn through crafts. The result is that every learner has his or her own way of dealing with the new content, and only through that way he or she would benefit more. "This reality suggests that a balanced, middle-of-the-road approach may be a teacher's best response to students' learning styles" (Seifert & Sutton, 2009, p 67). This was unfortunately not possible anymore with the government imposing on everyone to sit next to a screen and learn. Learners who suffered the most are those who prefer person to person interaction rather than person to material interaction. Learners who used to get their daily extrinsic motivation dose from their classmates who show better engagement in the learning process were deprived from that; which led at the end to less motivated, less engaged, and more bored learners. In this context, Reid argued that "A car will not run without fuel, children will not learn without motivation- the 'fuel' of learning. At the same time, not all children are intuitively and intrinsically motivated to learn. Some children need to be motivated..." (2007, p. 14). This, with no doubt, influenced negatively their attitudes towards the whole process as well as their educational outcomes.

An important aspect to consider at this level is the ability to learn from others' knowledge and mistakes. Generally speaking, the classroom is the perfect place where learners pick up knowledge, whether consciously or unconsciously, thanks to their interaction with each other and the teacher. In normal days, children spend the whole day in class with one or more teachers. They all listen to the same content at the same time and they react differently; which allows them to have a rich atmosphere in which they can learn from each other's ideas. This is illustrated in Reid's words when he added that "social interaction can be beneficial as it can help develop important social skills, such as turn taking and sharing and listening to other people's opinions. The process of helping and working with others can in itself be motivating" (2007, P.15). Unfortunately, this was not always possible with online schooling since not all the content presented to the kids require this option.

Thus, the new style of life based on social distancing and online learning is not the right context for normal growth and development. It does not serve children to become future good citizens with strong standards and values, and with healthy minds and souls. In this respect, Eisenberg, Damon and Lerner (2006, p. 571) stated that:

Experiences with peers constitute an important developmental context for children. In these contexts, children acquire a wide range of behaviors, skills, attitudes and experiences that influence their adaptation during the life span. Experiences with peers affect social, emotional, and cognitive functioning beyond the influences of family, school, and neighborhood.

Another aspect that was severely hit by the stay-at-home order is 'sport sessions' for kids. The ability to attend sport classes with other classmates in the same place and at the same time was no more possible. Instead, learners were exposed, from time to time, to virtual gym classes in order to keep the



pace as they would do in normal circumstances. However, this would never be truly efficient in motivating children to be productive and exercise regularly. The combination of all the aspects discussed above made it impossible for learners to enjoy the learning atmosphere.

1.4. Challenges Faced by Teachers

After the challenges faced by learners, this section discusses the ones faced by teachers during the period of lockdown. Before the pandemic, teachers already had the habit of doing a part of their work at home. However, engaging in a one hundred percent online distance job was still a new concept for most of them. Accordingly, teachers had to move from a usual way of life where they used to:

- Have a normal family life
- Go out for grocery shopping, restaurants, malls, cinemas, gyms, etc.
- Develop lectures as well as prepare and correct evaluation papers.
- Work at school with assistants.
- Teach children in classes and interact with them without any barrier, and
- Keep parents updated about their children's evolution and problems

to a completely new and different mode of teaching where they faced numerous challenges. The following is a recap of the most important ones.

1.5. Challenges Related to Family Issues

The fact that teachers were also concerned with respecting the stay-at-home order led them to face some troubles related to family and daily life. Teachers had to:

- Ensure that all the needs of their families are being met including; but not limited to, housework, grocery shopping, and ready meals, and
- Deal with their kids who were also staying home and ensure that the ones concerned with home schooling are daily updated.

1.6. Challenges Related to the New Online Teaching Method

It seems indispensable at this stage to reiterate that teachers' capacities and skills are not equal in using information and communication technologies; since not all of them were trained to use them successfully. Terms like "Google classroom", "The Zoom Application", "teams" and "educational platforms" have never been introduced to a considerable number of teachers before the pandemic. However, in lockdown, these teachers found themselves under real pressure. Not only did they have to prepare lectures and adapt them to the online mode, but they also had to learn the basics of using these platforms; to be able to manage their learners and complete the mission successfully. Accordingly, this fully online method of teaching was being introduced for the first time to the majority of teachers; thus, they had to:

- Identify their weaknesses in terms of using information and communication technologies.
- Train themselves to better deal with those weaknesses.
- Deal with their daily stress and try not to make that obvious to the children they teach.
- Adapt the content of their usual lectures to the new mode of teaching where children had no opportunity to use the sense of touch. Subjects like physics and science needed a certain reflection and adjustment; so that students would be able to get the information in the most appropriate way, even through a screen, and
- Ensure that the children are still learning even though all the circumstances are different (Boudoukhane et al, 2021).

1.7. Challenges Related to Classroom Management

In the same context, it is important to note here that children at a young age show a lot of desire to explore the world around them. They often move, walk, jump, talk, ask, make noise, and shift from one activity to another and from one game to another. The classroom, then, is not a place where they



can do all of this without restrictions since they have to stay calm, listen to the teacher, and respect the order of activities and tasks. This can be challenging for children with high activity. However, some children are not only diagnosed with 'high activity'; instead, they show symptoms of another disorder inside the classroom and even at home. This is referred to as 'Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder'. Seifert and Sutton stated that:

In the classroom, the student with ADHD may fidget and squirm a lot, or have trouble remaining seated, or continually get distracted and off task, or have trouble waiting for a turn, or blurt out answers and comments. The student may shift continually from one activity to another, or have trouble playing quietly, or talk excessively without listening to others. Or, the student may misplace things and seem generally disorganized, or be inclined to try risky activities without enough thought to the consequences (2009, P. 94).

All that is said in this paragraph so far reflects how difficult it is for teachers to manage a classroom in which one or more learners with these symptoms exist. The situation is even harder with learners split in different houses around the town and only receiving content via a technological tool. Now, as far as the context discussed in this paper is concerned, and for some lectures which required direct instructions through video calls, it has been really a tough task for the teacher to supervise each and every person. The teacher sometimes loses sight of children who show high activity or even suffer from attention deficit hyperactivity disorder; as they may quit their desk chairs and move all around the room in spots that the camera cannot catch. Parents of such children were also involved in this hardship since they were only used to deal with their children's condition in normal days at home, but never with an educational task added on top.

1.8. Challenges Faced by Parents

To ensure the successfulness of home education to primary school learners, it was impossible to rely on children to do the task alone. Thus, parents have been involved more than never before in the learning process of their kids. Parents had to stay updated with teachers who used to send them the learning content as well as activities and evaluation, so that they can:

- Check their email inbox regularly, download the files and print them.
- Explain to their kids the content.
- Ensure that their children would do the practice related to the content.
- Supervise their kids in case they have any evaluation, and
- Make sure to send back everything to the teacher as well as any additional remarks.

In fact, their job did not end here. They used also to receive weekly calls from the teachers to discuss all the ups and downs of this process, and what their children are going through. This was definitely very challenging for parents as well since they had also to care about:

- Daily meals
- Housework
- Caring for babies
- Grocery shopping which required an authorization from local authorities in most cases, among others.

On the other hand, working parents suffered the most as it was really difficult to manage all the previously mentioned duties, in addition to their online jobs. Thus, at the end of this experience, a lot of parents, whose children had to deal with homeschooling, cited the following as their main challenges:

- Kids did not understand the notion of the lockdown at the beginning. Their engagement in the learning process was similar to the one before the pandemic. However, as the days passed, they started to feel very bored and they refused sometimes to listen to their parents



and finish their daily activities. This led at the end to having accumulated homework and bad grades for evaluation.

- Illiterate immigrants and refugees, though they do not constitute a huge community in France do exist. They were unfortunately incapable of helping their kids along the way. They experienced the same feeling of uselessness and desperation every single day during the whole period of lockdown. Unfortunately, these children could not benefit from the continuity of learning and had to stop. After the lockdown was over, children went back to school to find that they had to repeat the year and attend additional classes in order to remember the already forgotten background knowledge.
- Parents with limited incomes found themselves struggling financially to ensure that internet bills are paid on time and that all the needed equipments are available for their kids at home including computers and printers.

Conclusion:

For almost every teacher in the world, the Covid-19 pandemic posed unprecedented challenges, particularly in attempting to meet the goals of their teaching assignments. On one side, governments agreed that learners should keep receiving educational content through dealing intelligently with the sanitary conditions; since no one was capable of identifying how and when that situation would come to an end. On the other side, thousands of questions were risen up about how that would be done without doing harm more than good to all citizens including administrators, teachers, learners, and parents. Nevertheless, it was really inspiring to see teachers making extra efforts to make homeschooling work. This challenging period revealed once again that teaching is a worthwhile and a high-skills demanding profession. It also revealed to teachers themselves that willingness is the key behind overcoming difficulties and that continuous teacher training is the key behind successful education. Now that children are back to school, with respecting the sanitary measures, being mainly distancing and wearing the mask, teachers and children are experiencing another type of challenge. For example, children's reactions to wearing the mask were different and sometimes astonishing. Some of them are no more participating in the class, and some others even vomit when they wear it for a longer time than they can support.

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