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**DISTANT EDUCATION DURING COVID-19 LOCKDOWN:
A MOROCCAN OFFICIAL REPORT'S REVIEW**

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Abstract

Traditionally confined to physical classrooms, formal education underwent a rapid transformation as Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) became integral to teaching and learning processes worldwide. However, the extent of ICT integration varied widely across regions prior to the pandemic, with many areas experiencing limited technological adoption. The sudden closure of schools in March 2020 precipitated an urgent shift to online education, presenting unprecedented challenges for students, parents, and educators. Over the subsequent two academic years (2019-2020 and 2020-2021), Morocco grappled with fluctuating between online and face-to-face learning modalities, profoundly altering educational dynamics and impacting learning outcomes. The CSEFRS report critically assesses the success and challenges of this transition, employing a blend of statistical data and qualitative insights from questionnaires and interviews with teachers and students. This is a comprehensive analysis and review of the implementation and outcomes of distance education during the COVID-19 lockdown in Morocco, relying on the official report by the Higher Council of Education, Training, and Scientific Research (CSEFRS). This analysis not only evaluates the practicality and efficacy of distance education during crisis situation but also informs future educational policies and practices in Morocco and beyond, offering valuable insights for global educational resilience strategies.

Key words: Morocco, Distant education, ICT integration, E-learning effectiveness.

1. INTRODUCTION

Formal education has always been taking place in an enclosed space which involved a teacher and students. We-educators and laymen alike- always took this for granted until the technological boom took place and advanced education systems started integrating Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in the teaching and learning process. Nonetheless, this integration was limited and even absent in major part of the world. In March 2020, schools were forced to shut down and education has shifted online in a blink of an eye. This problem has caused tremendous

confusion amongst students, parents, and educators, and during two school years, education in Morocco has been oscillating between online and face to face. This has affected different aspects of learning and altered our relationships with the space of the classroom. After considerable debate and critique of the disposition and efficiency of E-learning deployed and the state's patent unreadiness for such contingency, the Higher Council of Education, Training, and Scientific Research (CSEFRS) in Morocco published a national report evaluating the progressions and the success of online education paradigm and tools adopted during the two of academic years 2019-2020 and 2020-2021. This official report has tapped on a number of points regarding this issue such as the impact of online education and school closure on students' knowledge and skills development, teachers' reactions, and the platforms and the tools deployed. This report has relied on both the statistical and qualitative data using questionnaires and interviews with first-hand stakeholders, i.e teachers and students. It came up with interesting results which do a great extent reveal the words practicality and usefulness distant educational in developing Morocco.

2. METHODOLOGY OF THE REPORT

The methodology respected the principle of triangulation. A document analysis whichby official documents such as circulars, reports, and guidelines regarding the situation in question both nationally and internationally were analysed. Several reports have been written to enrich the debate and the understanding of the phenomenon.

The report also relied on a quantitative study which included teachers of different backgrounds, levels, genders, etc. 386 school teachers answered questionnaires, giving their accounts on their experience with distant education during the period of the confinement, the process of distant education and the rate of students' learning, the teaching mode adopted in the 2020-2021 school year, their stance and aptitude towards new information and communication technologies, and the future of distance education in Morocco.

Table 1. Sample variation by milieu, cycle, and gender (%)

Gender	Male	57,5
	Female	42 ,5
Cycle	Primary	53 ,6
	Lower secondary	24,1
	Upper secondary	22,3
Milieu	Urban	57,3
	Rural	42,7

In order to be more inclusive and extensive, the data collection also adopted the qualitative survey to collect both teachers' and students' experiences and views. Hence, 14 focus groups were conducted in the three distant regions. Ten focus groups were conducted with teachers while four focus groups were carried out with students. 158 participant has taken part in focus groups including 108 teachers and 50 students. The study ensured utmost variation of focus group sample.

Table 2. Distribution of participants in focus-groups (%)

Teachers	Milieu	Urban	61
		Rural	39
	Cycle	Sec. qualifiant	33,3
		Sec. collégial	35,2
		Primary	31,5
	Gender	Male	47
Female		53	
Students	Milieu	Urban	52
		Rural	48
	Cycle	Sec. qualifiant	24
		Sec. collégial	22
		Primaire	54
	Gender	Male	48
		Female	52

3. EDUCATION RESOURCES DEPLOYED BY THE STATE

As schools were shut down subsequent measures and tools have been put in place to ensure educational continuity. In order to compensate for the absence of teachers in physical space, education authorities in Morocco resorted first to television. Regularly scheduled programmes including video lessons and activities for different school phases and study majors have been broadcast over different TV channels.

In addition, the ministry of education promoted and offered the national platform TelmidTice as a digital provider of educational content in video format for primary and secondary school students. This content was accessible and was free to download by all the website users. The state has also facilitated the use of virtual classes platforms including Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, Google Classroom, and Zoom to ensure synchronous teacher-students meetings and interactions.

The resort to the official platforms put forth by the government was very weak. One of ten, two of ten, and three of ten students in primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary school students respectively were reported to have used educational platforms. The results are starkly lower in rural areas, for a variety of reasons of which higher levels of parents illiteracy comes at the forefront. However, statistics make clear the dominance of social networks' use among students across the different levels.

4. ON THE 'GENIE' PROJECT

The resort to distant education and the eventual pitfall reported by official reports as well as public opinion have brought into question the notorious 'Genie' Programme the state has launched many years long before the pandemic. The digital project launched in 2006 was aimed to generalise the use of ICT in Moroccan public schools. This project, which comprised three components infrastructure, training, and digital content, was meant to gradually make ICT a real learning tool. However, weakness of educational digital content, limited use of ICT in class and poor endorsement by educational stakeholders emerged eventually.

Equipping schools with multimedia learning tools and teachers with adequate training was part of a state strategy for an information and digital society. This strategy also involved connecting public schools to the internet by 2013 and training of 200,000 teachers in information technology and content creation adapted to learning.

5. THE COMMON ISSUES FACED BY STUDENTS

Globally, Covid-19 pandemic has had serious repercussions on students and jeopardised their future. The report reports that this occurrence prevented 1.6 billion students worldwide from pursuing the normal course of their education. In Morocco, a High Commission for Planning (HCP) report assessed the impact of the pandemic on education revealed that half the number of households with children in primary school or secondary school had difficulties to follow courses remotely during confinement due to lack of educational means. In rural areas, however, the rate rose to around 55% of households who could not ensure distant education to their children in primary and lower secondary school.

The lack of educational tools is manifest in the massive use of social network as main resort to masses of students and households. 40% of households with children in primary school, 44% in middle school and 46% in secondary school relied exclusively on social networks to follow their lessons. On the contrary, the use of digital platforms put in place by the Ministry of Education palpably weak: 9% for primary, 20% for lower secondary and 30% for upper secondary education.

The national report in question, cites UNICEF's figures covering 127 countries. The UN's prominent organization revealed that nearly three quarters of these countries used digital platforms and television to ensure pedagogical continuity and, especially in Europe and Central and South Asia, while Sub-Saharan Africa records rates of highest vulnerability and inequality. To set an example, only one family in 100 has a television in Chad.

Access of schooled children to quality supervision is negatively impacted by parents' weak capacities and knowledge. The situation worsens for students in the area rural, the rates of illiteracy among parents are

reportedly higher. With the school closure, lack of facilities and means, students in rural areas experience further isolation from education due to their parents' inability to compensate for the roles of teachers.

The inventory of school facilities, especially in regards to ICT and internet access, reveals limited capacities which braked an adequate response to abrupt breakout of the pandemic. The establishment of accessible distance learning to all students was beyond reach despite immense efforts deployed by all stakeholders. The official report discloses that the PNEA 2019(4), revealed that three quarters of primary school students report not having a multimedia room and 65% indicate that their schools are not connected to the internet. These proportions go a bit lower (53% and 49% respectively) among secondary school students. Moreover, lots of schools are reported no to have a data show, which is considered an essential tool in average classrooms worldwide. Around one third of the students say their schools do not have Data Show.

Education in the digital age predisposes schools to update their relational and communicative paradigms. An updated accessible website which provides school 'clients' with necessary information such as schedules, events, amenities, registration, etc., is lacking in almost three quarters of Moroccan schools. The rates go higher as education phases go lower.

Under-equipped schools are obviously unable to effectively cater an adequate education offer to digitally immersed generations of students

6. THE EFFECT OF DISTANT EDUCATION

The shift to online or distant education did not ensure minimum educational standard according to the official report. The report does not only state that the learning outcome was mediocre; on the contrary, it reports that their learning has gone down. Various factors have come into play and led to significant loss in learning. One reason for this mediocrity is due to the inconvenience of current pedagogical contents to with the learning and teaching technologies and tools put in place, along with teachers' inability to exploit these tools efficiently, not to mention other reasons cited in this report. The results of the investigation shows that more than one third of the students were negatively affected by the lockdown compared to only

27,5% reporting positive impact on their learning, while 13,5% said it has no effect on their learnings.

7. STUDENTS' INVOLVEMENT IN DISTANT EDUCATION

Another major problem which faced teachers and certainly affected the students' learning is their low participation and involvement. More than half the number of surveyed teachers reported that their students' involvement was weak or very weak. This major issue, report interviewed teachers, is mainly due to the lack of communication tools, especially phones, for a number of students mainly in remote areas. And if ever, they happen to have phones or computers, they lack financial means to access to data and connect with their teachers.

The poor student involvement in the hybrid mode of education is manifested in their -or rather their parents'- choice of the face-to-face mode of education during the school year 2020-2021. Before the starting of studies, the Ministry of Education conducted a media campaign asking parents opt for one of the two modes: online or face-to-face. The results of the official report show that four of five families opted for face-to-face education for their children, while this rate goes to nearly 100% in some regions. This mainstream tendency is certainly driven by bad experience students and their families experienced during the former season.

8. PARTICIPANTS' RECOMMENDATIONS

One major measure which can partially contribute to quality and effective distant education lies in equipping teachers with necessary tools and adequate training. Students' access to ICTs is also a necessity in the information era. In order to ensure smooth teacher/school student communication and interaction, students are supposed to have access to free digital tools. In this regard, it is fundamental to combat rural-urban disparities in terms of educational accessibility, which has been starkly apparent in the pandemic time.

In addition, equipping schools with digital equipment has become prime necessity in the present day. Whether in online or face-to-face education, effective

21st century education requires basic learning and teaching facilities such as multimedia rooms, data shows, accessible online platform, etc. Interestingly, most of these stated recommendations have been the founding principles of the GENIE programmes launched in 2006. Yet, the pandemic has unmasked the poor reality and enforcement of the official discourse in this regard.

9. TEACHERS' AND STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS DISTANT EDUCATION

Teachers attitudes to teaching online is obviously similarly negative. Different factors came into play to shape teachers' perspective of distant education. The opinion study adopted in the Higher Council for Education's report. Reluctance to make use of personal laptop or smartphone for teaching, refusal of conducting online education for socio-economically heterogeneous students, apprehension about vulnerability of privacy, and concern about copyright of digital contents constitute the main factors which made teachers disapprove of online education. Yet, the most stressing challenge teachers have faced and shaped their perception of distant education is the lack of adequate training in digital learning and teaching technologies, not only for them per se but for their students too.

Students attitudes significantly accord with their teachers. The report stresses shows that students had a bad experience during Covid-19 Pandemic. The abrupt split from real life classrooms and absence of teachers as well as classmates brought about mental or psychological unease with the new confined life. In this respect, the report cites a UNESCO's report confirming the adverse impact of the lock-down on students worldwide. Not to mention other factors such (insufficient) accessibility to learning tools and homely disturbances, students have, therefore, failed to conceive and embrace the new mode of education and longed to return to their conventional classrooms.

10. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the national report of the Higher Council for Education has pointed to significant imperfections of online or hybrid education alike. The multitude of obstacles faced by teachers as well as students and families significantly reduced their motivation for any substitute to face-to-face education. The pandemic revealed a number of major problems within our educational and social fabric, the most prominent of which is the logistic and human capital unreadiness. The issue gets exacerbated with palpably disparate social classes, which eventually yield unequal chances and privileges. While the official report- reference of this review- rings the alarm bell on the status of our technologically feeble education system, the present review puts a summary of it in the hands of busy education stakeholders to remind them of this pressing problem. This is a wake-up call for policy-makers, educators, and students and their families upholding that Covid-19 is a lesson we should learn to face comparably uncertain future contingencies.

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