Covid-19 and education in Morocco as a potential model of concern for North Africa: a short commentary

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Abstract

The key problems and challenges connected with the Covid-19 pandemic in the field of education in sub-Saharan Africa are described in this paper. The study is based on the information collected from teachers and parents during the lockdown. The main problems connected with the organization of distance learning, such as the availability and accessibility of electricity and stable communications, were described. The main questions connected with the support of e-learning such as unequal access to distance education platforms and tools and readiness of teachers of public and private schools were described. Key social and demographic challenges and threats to sustainable e-learning, such as critical overload of teachers, child mobilization for domestic tasks, age, ethnic and gender-based harassment and violence were analyzed. It was found that the main risks are the rapid and uncontrolled commercialization of education and the decline of public schools, which leads to a decrease in the quality of education and increasing inequality. It was concluded that pandemic-induced risks in education are non-linear and heterogeneously spatially, temporally, and socially distributed. The successful strategy of these risks reduction aimed at sustainable education should be based on transition plans, which must include not only the development of sustainable education but also the fighting against inequality.

Keywords Covid-19 pandemic · Sub-Saharan Africa · Distance education · Private and public school · Social communication · Inequality and ethic education

The Covid-19 pandemic (Zhao 2020) shows how much the relational dimension is at the heart of educational success and the fight against inequality at school. In contrast,

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more than 1.5 billion students, and 63 million teachers of children found themselves confined.

The reality of “educational continuity”

On paper, all countries have claimed to implement this educational continuity via digital or distance support. In reality, it was sometimes quite another thing that happened. For example, less than 50% of people have access to electricity in sub-Saharan Africa and only 10% in some countries such as Chad and Burundi.¹ For distance education to work, the whole chain would have had to work, namely that all teachers and students had access to digital (electricity, internet, and equipment included, which is far from being the case for all in countries of the South, that the platform is operational and that families also have the opportunity to connect and the means to exploit the content). But that was not the case, and during this period contact was broken off with a certain number of pupils, starting with those who were already in difficulty. In some countries, notably in Africa, many children have returned to work or have been mobilized for domestic tasks. Girls have been particularly exposed to harassment and gender-based violence. Also was observed a significant inequality in the availability, accessibility and utilizability of distance education tools and platforms between private and public schools caused by its different financial capabilities. Public schools for ethnic minorities usually suffer the most from this type of inequality. Critical unpreparedness of public school teachers to use distance education platforms and tools in many cases leads to disrupt of the educational schedules and plans, to critical overload of teachers, and as the result, to reducing the quality of pupils' knowledge.

What lessons can we draw from this unprecedented experience?

Solutions had to be found since the schools were closed, but this is very unsatisfactory. All the information we have been able to collect from teachers and parents in Morocco goes in the same direction: nothing can replace the direct pedagogical relationship, face-to-face, between a teacher and his students. Yet free education does not necessarily mean free quality education. This relational dimension is at the heart of educational success and the fight against inequality at school. However, it has been observed that it is the best-cared for children who have suffered the least from this situation because they are more independent and more comfortable with school codes. This crisis confirms the effort that each country must make to reduce inequalities, even if this question often goes beyond school.

¹ For example, in the case of Morocco the classes were provided by internet but also with the reactivated teleschool.

Private actors have seen the closure of schools as an opportunity to sell their services remotely to parents worried about the success of their children. Is there an increased risk that the “education merchants” will gain further ground? Or even those states are disengaging from education by entrusting them with the reins?

Indeed, private operators have taken advantage of this context to sell offers by playing on the concerns of many parents concerned about the success of their children. In Cameroon, for example, tools were created hastily for the sole purpose of generating profit, to the detriment of the public education service. Again, this trend existed before. There is cause for concern because the World Bank has just taken a position to castigate the gap between the wage bill of the public service and its contribution to the GDP, seeing in it the need to privatize more. The crisis has thrown a more crude light on the problems which education meets in the world: social and inequality fracture, the opportunism of certain actors, risk that the share of the private makes rolls back the public school. As for the risk of State disengagement, yes, it is unfortunately very real: given the economic crisis that we are going to experience, State budgets will be reduced and the education sector is likely to have fewer means. Some countries may not resist the temptation to transfer more education to the private sector. This will inevitably weigh on the implementation of UNESCO’s Sustainable Development Goal 4, which was to allow all children in 2030 to access quality education free of charge.² From a rights perspective and ethically, education benefits both the individual and society and should, therefore, be preserved as a public good and protected from “commercial interests in privatized education” (Martínez-Frías and Mogessie 2012; Vasconcelos et al. 2015; Aubry and Dorsi 2016).

Has the health crisis weakened the status of teachers?

The crisis has indeed put teachers in great difficulty, especially those who work in the private sector with precarious contracts. It should be remembered that in Morocco,³ for example, 15% of schools are private and that teachers are very vulnerable and sometimes without social protection. Many of them ended up at home overnight without pay. With the gradual reopening of schools, they are now also very exposed, in a personal health sense, but also in terms of responsibility. Unfortunately, teachers in

² Thus, despite access policies that provide free primary education to all students, the growth of private education and the many hidden costs and costs of education undermine this basic right (Diyen 2004).

³ Private education in Morocco is purely lucrative unlike other forms of privatization that may exist in Europe. It is true that private education does not exceed 15% at the national level, which indicates that 85% of the educational offer is public, but this gives us a biased perception of the real development of private education in the country. The reforms of the past two decades mark the transition from education as a public good to private investment. However, in neighboring French-speaking countries, privatization has received a mixed reception. For example, in Algeria and Tunisia, countries that share a similar cultural history, colonial heritage and geographic location with Morocco (Montenay 2010), the number of students attending private schools at the primary level is considerably lower and increased only very slowly. For example, in Algeria, enrollment in private primary schools increased slightly, from 0.19% to 0.89% in 2016. Similarly, in Tunisia, enrollment in private primary schools increased from 0.51% in 1990 to a low percentage of 5.29% in 2016 (Macpherson et al. 2014; Abdous 2020).

most countries have had very little involvement in government decision-making, whether it is the implementation of educational continuity during confinement or the breaking out of confinement.

Concluding remarks

Disasters critically affect social communications (Varda et al. 2009; Reid 2013; Zhao 2013), catastrophes break stable social links, change patterns of group behavior, and affect the structure of collective decision-making (Kostyuchenko et al. 2020). Because education is based on the complex institutionalized social communications (Cornali and Tirocchi 2012), it is critically vulnerable to disasters, especially to pandemics, the minimization of which includes lockdowns, distancing, etc. Epidemic-induced educational risks are heterogeneously spatially, temporally and socially distributed, and can therefore cause further growth in different types of inequality.

Faced with the impact of this pandemic, we will have to build a strategy so that education and the fight against inequality are not forgotten. Public authorities must return to an ongoing social and political dialogue with teachers and the unions and organizations that represent them. This dialogue should make it possible to assess needs, define measures in terms of health, safety, physical and emotional well-being for students and their teachers, and propose a framework and resources to organize the return to school. Face-to-face teaching and to provide teachers with decent working conditions while respecting labor rights. By enabling unions to play this role of representing and defending staff, the authorities will be able to build more confidence, in the interests of staff, as well as that of students and their families.

In conclusion, by saying that to win this challenge, equity must now be placed at the heart of transition plans, because the pandemic first affects the most vulnerable. Support structures for those who have not had the opportunity to participate in e-learning must be put in place. Coping with the likely increase in dropout rates is our priority.

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Compliance with ethical standards

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