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EMERGENCY REMOTE TEACHING IN FRANCE: THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL BACKGROUND IN TEACHERS' CHOICES

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Abstract

The present study aims to investigate the extent to which the emergency remote teaching which took place beginning in the spring of 2020 in France was implemented differently by teachers working in schools serving students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Questionnaire surveys (n=351), 22 teachers' semi-structured interviews and observation of 19 of their videoconference class sessions showed significant differences according to social contexts in three main areas: parental involvement in remote learning, the use of videoconferencing, and learning requirements. Discussion will address the influence of social context in pandemic teaching and consider the contribution these results could offer to foster school equity in France.

Keywords: Primary school, remote teaching, Priority Education

1 INTRODUCTION

In 1982, France created a compensatory education policy providing underprivileged schools with more resources. This policy was expected to improve students' performance and, ultimately, to close the educational gap. Today, schools benefiting from this program are said to belong to the Priority Education Network (Réseau d'Éducation Prioritaire).

From March 17th to May 11th 2020, French schools locked down because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Subsequently, schools and classes were regularly closed, whenever a rise in Covid cases would appear. A second nationwide one-week lockdown took place in April of 2021. During these school closures, teachers were asked to teach remotely.

The present research aims to document this emergency remote teaching, with a focus on schools serving students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Priority Education Schools). How did unprepared teachers deal with this inadequate and hostile situation? What major differences in the implementation and the course of this distance teaching appeared between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged areas? What can we learn from these situations that could help foster school equity?

Three major studies documented teaching practices in France during the first school lockdown. [1], [2], [3], [4] However, these three studies, mainly based on online surveys, do not go into the details of this remote teaching in primary schools and barely question the differences related to student's social background.

In September 2020, all French first and second grade students were evaluated. The proportion of first-graders with a satisfactory mastery of skills dropped slightly compared to 2019, especially in the areas of reading and writing, and the performance gap between students enrolled in Priority Education and the others increased [2]. Several reasons could explain this gap. Previous research underlines that parents from Priority Education areas struggle to understand school system's functioning and requirements in ordinary school setting. [5], [6] Besides, remote learning, mainly using digital communication, can also be influenced by families' computer equipment [2], [7], [8], or parents' computer skills. [9], [10], [11] Finally, research shows that teachers in Priority Education Schools tend to lessen requirements and expectations [12], [13].

Therefore, our analysis will focus on the similarities and differences between Priority Education and ordinary schools in three main areas:

- 1) parental involvement;
- 2) the use of videoconferencing;
- 3) learning requirements.

2 METHODOLOGY

This study combines three quantitative and qualitative data sources in a mixed-method approach.

A teacher's questionnaire (n=351) was used to investigate declared practices during remote teaching and their perceptions of this experience. Questionnaire analyses were performed using R 4.0.5., comparing answers from teachers in and out of Priority Education Schools. Chi-square tests were used to determine statistical significance of differences between these two groups.

Our researchers conducted a semi-structured interview with twenty-two of these primary school teachers who had answered our call for volunteers issued in March of 2020, at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. Nineteen of their videoconference class sessions have also been observed (some teachers didn't use videoconferencing to teach during schools lockdown).

Teacher-student and teacher-parent interactions during virtual classes were recorded and transcribed, as well as teachers interviews. They have been called back here to illustrate and interpret the results of the questionnaire.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Parental involvement in remote learning

The younger the students, the more help from parents is needed to convey and explain the work proposed by teachers. Parents have implicitly been expected to assume both a technical and a pedagogical role during the remote teaching. Tab. 1 below shows teacher's perceptions of parental involvement and resources.

Table 1. Parents' involvement and resources (percentages in and out of Priority Education)

Parents...	Priority Education Schools	None of the parents	Between 1 and 3 parents	Between 4 and 6	Between 7 and 12	More than 12	X-squared	df	P value
Were efficient helpers	No	-	6.6%	13.6%	35.5%	44.2%	67.402	3	1.56e-14*
	Yes	-	28.2%	34.5%	24.5%	12.7%			
Were very involved	No	-	3.7%	10.7%	33.5%	52.1%	74.233	3	5.29e-16*
	Yes	-	19.1%	38.2%	25.5%	17.3%			
Were totally absent	No	15.3%	54.5%	19.4%	6.6%	4.1%	16.53	4	0.002385*
	Yes	11.8%	50.9%	10.9%	13.6%	12.7%			
Understood what you expected from them	No	-	4.1%	9.1%	35.1%	51.7%	74.251	3	5.245e-16*
	Yes	-	23.6%	30%	30.9%	15.5%			

Had enough digital skills	No	-	2.9%	17.8%	29.3%	50%	88.821	3	2.2e-16*
	Yes	-	30%	32.7%	27.3%	10%			
Shared their difficulties with you regarding remote learning	No	6.6%	18.6%	31.8%	21.5%	21.5%	3.7623	4	0.4391
	Yes	9.1%	25.5%	26.4%	21.8%	17.3%			
Had enough material resources (space, time, internet connection,...)	No	-	4.5%	11.6%	36%	47.9%	62.879	3	1.427e-13*
	Yes	-	25.5%	28.2%	30%	16.4%			
Had enough cultural resources	No	-	4.1%	19%	32.6%	44.2%	94.053	3	2.2e-16*
	Yes	-	35.5%	35.5%	20%	9.1%			
Had enough language resources	No	-	2.9%	16.1%	28.5%	52.5%	85.051	3	2.2e-16*
	Yes	-	30%	29.1%	28.2%	12.7%			

* significant differences between Priority and non-Priority Education Schools

All items but one show significant differences between teachers' perception of parents from "ordinary schools" and those from Priority Education Schools. For example, 52.3% of teachers from "ordinary schools" declared that more than 12 parents were very involved in helping their child with remote learning, whereas only 17.3% declared the same in priority schools. In these schools, teachers mainly declared that between 4 and 6 parents were involved (38.2%). In the same way, more parents are regarded as efficient helpers and more parents understood teachers' expectations in "ordinary schools" than in Priority Education Schools. As far as resources are concerned, teachers in "ordinary schools" declared that more parents had the required material, linguistic and cultural resources than teachers in Priority Education Schools. This difficulty experienced by parents from a disadvantaged background in helping their children was mentioned by many teachers in Priority Education Schools:

"Those who were really very present were those with parents of a certain social level (...) students who didn't participate were really children whose parents were detached from school from a social or even cultural point of view, most notably children of non-French-speaking parents who were not necessarily in social difficulty but who were not yet very comfortable in France and with French." (Capucine, elementary school, Priority Education)

However, interviews also mention examples of parents' involvement, including many positive examples in Priority Education. Many teachers feel that this remote learning experience allowed parents to have a better understanding of school work and led parents to acknowledge teachers' work. While teachers' relationship with families during lockdown seems to be closely related to teachers' prior relationships with families, many teachers underline the fact that this remote learning experience sometimes improved parent-teacher relations, even if this occasionally caused problems in terms of time and privacy.

"I also connected with the parents, with the grandparents (...) I was a little afraid, I thought, maybe I will be judged [laughs] but no, it went well (...) The parents wrote to me from time to time, when they were in difficulty, when they did not understand what was required. It happened quite rarely, but it happened once or twice. And I also had a lot..., it was very touching... of thank you messages » (Anne, elementary school).

3.2 Use of videoconferencing

Our study also investigated the use of videoconferencing during the lockdown. One-third of the 352 teachers said they had used videoconferencing during the first 9-week school lockdown, with no significant differences appearing between Priority Education and ordinary schools, as shown in Tab. 2.

Table 2. Use of videoconferencing during lockdown in and out of Priority Education Schools

	Yes	No
Ordinary schools	31.8% (77)	68.2 % (165)
Priority Education Schools	32.7% (36)	67.3% (74)
All schools	32.25% (103)	67.75% (239)

$$X^2=0.05352; df = 2; p\text{-value} = 0.9736$$

About half of them used it more than once a week, and 23% once a week (Tab. 3). This synchronous device, which allows teachers and students to interact in real-time, was especially used to keep in touch with students and families (Tab. 4), to prevent disadvantaged students from dropping out, as one teacher explains: “It allowed me to see students that I hadn't been in touch with for quite a while. I was surprised to see them and even to hear them asking for another virtual class the next day” (Ulysse, elementary school).

Table 3. Frequency of videoconferences

	Observations	Percentage
More than once a week	57	50.4%
Once a week	26	23%
For a few special occasions	16	14.2%
Not regularly	8	7.1%
Every two weeks	4	3.5%
Just once to try it	2	1.8%

Table 4. Videoconferencing allows teachers to stay in touch with students

	Priority Education	Not important	Very important	Essential
Videoconferencing allows teachers to stay in touch with students	No	0.0%	37.7%	62.3%
	Yes	2.8%	22.2%	75%

However, 54.9% of the teachers using videoconferencing showed some disappointment in the device, judging it “not at all” or “somewhat” useful (Tab. 5).

Table 5. Perception of the usefulness of videoconferencing

	Priority Education	No	Somewhat	Quite	Very much
I'm convinced of the usefulness of videoconferencing	No	19.5%	35.1%	32.5%	13%
	Yes	19.4%	36.1%	27.8%	16.7%
	Total	19,5%	35,4%	31%	14,2%

$$X^2 = 0,416; df = 3 ; p\text{-value} = 0,9368$$

For 53.3% of the teachers surveyed outside Priority Education, parents' presence during virtual classes was judged as quite and very helpful, whereas only 19.4% of teachers working in Priority Education Schools agree with this statement (Tab. 6).

Table 6. Parents' presence during videoconferences

	Priority Education	No	A little	Quite	Very
Parents' presence is helpful	No	19.5% 15	27.3% 21	31.2% 24	22.1% 17
	Yes	27.8% 10	52.8% 19	11.1% 4	8.3% 3

$$X^2 = 11,873; df = 3; p\text{-value} = 0,007$$

This discrepancy can be explained in part by the difficulty of parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to meet the school's expectations. Virtual class observations show how difficult it was for some parents to find the right balance, for example, in helping their children without disrupting the virtual classroom.

Moreover, both classroom practices and the children's difficulties were made visible to parents in the virtual classroom, making the situation uncomfortable for participants, as explained by Arthur (pre-school, Priority Education): "It complicated my life [...] it's annoying for the parent and it's annoying for the little one who has the parent next to them. It's not comfortable at all".

Despite this, the presence of parents is essential, especially in kindergarten where the youngest children lack autonomy and concentration. Virtual classes offered the opportunity to work on content that would otherwise be difficult to work on remotely, such as oral language and activities implying manipulation: "I tried to slip in one or two little games, for example: show a number with your fingers, come and show me an object of such color" (Charlotte, pre-school).

This study also investigated teachers' learning requirements during remote teaching.

3.3 Learning requirements

Several qualitative studies showed differences in real curricula between "ordinary schools" and Priority Education Schools in France, where teachers tend to offer their students less opportunity to engage with rich and complex content, they also tend to lower requirements. [14] One way to apprehend this dimension was to compare the content of these 7 weeks of remote teaching.

The French Department of Education required teachers not only to offer opportunities to review content and use previously-acquired skills, but also to work on new skills, to the extent that distance-learning conditions would allow. [15] Teachers were also asked whether they had mostly reviewed acquired content and skills during this time, or taught new ones. Answers show significant differences between teachers working in Priority Education and those working in "ordinary schools". Table 7 shows that there are significantly more teachers focusing on frequent reviews of old content (51.8% vs. 37.6%) in "ordinary schools" and significantly less teachers teaching new content (16.5% vs. 24.5%) in Priority Education.

Table 7. Teaching new content vs. reviewing previously-learned content (percentage of teachers in and out of Priority Education)

	Priority Education	never	sometimes	often/ very often	X ²	df	P-value
<i>Did you teach new content</i>	No	16.5% (40)	57.9% (140)	25.6% (62)	5.4242	2	0.0664
	Yes	24.5%	59.1%	16.4%			

		(27)	(65)	(18)			
<i>Did you focus on reviewing previously-learned content</i>	No	19.8% (48)	42.6% (103)	37.6% (91)	10.877	4	0.0276
	Yes	13.6% (15)	34.5% (38)	51.8% (57)			

One reason for focusing on reviewing previously-learned content is that teachers found it irrelevant to offer new content while some students were struggling with remote learning: "we did more practicing, I didn't want to introduce new content because (...) I had one fourth of the class (...) having some difficulties" (Lise, pre-school)

Another reason was the widespread idea that students could only learn remotely when parents were able to help them, which meant it should be avoided in disadvantaged areas:

"Some parents were not working, they could have helped their children, had they had sufficient knowledge. So, this is also the problem that arises, because we have families who do not speak French and who sometimes have trouble ... supervising their children, we have a lot of children who do not do their homework, we have a lot of children... who have trouble with the language." (Salomé, specialized teacher, Priority Education).

Finally, some teachers started by reviewing previously-learned skills but gradually introduced new content as it became obvious that this situation was going to last longer than expected.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Lots of families experienced material problems during the school lockdown, lacking computers, internet connections, printers etc. [2] However, our study shows that the differences related to social background go well beyond material shortages. Indeed, teachers perceived parents' lack of cultural and language resources as an obstacle to helping their children. Parents from disadvantaged backgrounds were found to be less efficient helpers, their lack of understanding of the functioning of the school system and requirement came to light both in questionnaires and in the observation of parents' interactions during videoconferences. To this extent, remote learning seems to reproduce the difficulties disadvantaged families encounter when students do homework, and can be expected to widen the gap between contrasted social backgrounds, as recent assessments have shown [2], all the more so as French teachers declare to have lost contact with 6% of their students on the average, and up to 10% in Priority Education [2].

Focusing on the review of previously-learned content over the introduction of new content, contrary to what is mostly done in ordinary schools, probably in connection with their perceptions of parents' ability to help their children, teachers in Priority Education contribute to reducing learning opportunities and to leveling expectations for these disadvantaged students, a phenomenon already documented by several qualitative studies. [12] [14] By doing so, they may contribute to deepening the learning gap between their students from Priority Education Schools and students from "ordinary schools". To this extent, pandemic remote learning sheds light on an existing situation, one that already exists in the case of homework for instance [5], and even acts as an accelerator, worsening the phenomenon. It also highlights the differences in teachers' skills in managing diversity and heterogeneity in students [16], or in using digital tools [7] [17], which also raises the question of professional development.

Pandemic emergency teaching seems to be closely related to teachers' existing relationships with families. The same can be noted for existing teaching practices, or for beliefs about social backgrounds, which can influence teaching and digital strategies, for example [18].

However, distance learning has been an opportunity for teachers to get to know their students in a different way, sometimes opening their eyes to the importance of enriching communication with families, an important factor in the success of students regardless of their social background. This new association of parents to schoolwork seems to have led teachers to understand the importance of offering parents a better insight into the schools' functioning, into the nature and requirements of

schoolwork, and into the school's expectations. This input from the pandemic experience is something the education community could build on to foster school equity.

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