



Distance learning during quarantine related to the COVID-19 pandemic: Reflections on problematic of rural areas, Morocco

التعليم عن بعد خلال الحجر الصحي المرتبط بجائحة كوفيد 19: تأملات في إشكالية المناطق القروية، المغرب

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Abstract:

The COVID-19 was recognized as a major danger worldwide. This led to the closure of Moroccan schools from 12 March 2020 until the end of the school year 2021-2020. During quarantine, students followed distance learning. This new teaching-learning method has encountered several problems and has generated wide discussion among educational stakeholders. This situation was more pronounced in rural areas where living conditions are more difficult.

This paper discusses the distance learning problems among students living in rural areas. Moreover, it provides a useful direction for identifying student requirements and for encouraging future research. We showed that the weak internet connection, and/or lack of technology tools (e.g., smartphones) were the foremost limitations to distance learning in rural areas. The quarantine impact on rural students seemed to be greater. Despite the efforts taken to guarantee efficient distance learning, special attention should also be paid to the psychological health of students especially in rural areas.

Keywords: Online courses, Quarantine, School closures, 2019-Coronavirus, Students.

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الملخص:

شكل وباء كوفيد 19 خطراً كبيراً معترفاً به في جميع أنحاء العالم. وقد أدى إلى إغلاق المدارس المغربية منذ 12 مارس 2020 وحتى نهاية الموسم الدراسي 2020-2021. أثناء الحجر الصحي، تابع المتعلمون التعلم عن بعد. واجهت هذه الطريقة التعليمية التعليمية الجديدة العديد من المشاكل وخلقت نقاشات واسعة بين المتدخلين التربويين. كان هذا الوضع أكثر وضوحاً في المناطق القروية حيث ظروف الحياة هناك أكثر صعوبة.

يتناول هذا المقال مشاكل التعلم عن بعد بين المتعلمين الذين يعيشون في المناطق القروية. علاوة على ذلك، فإنه يوفر اتجاهًا مفيدًا لتحديد متطلبات المتعلمين وتشجيع الأبحاث المستقبلية. أظهرنا ضعف الربط بشبكة الإنترنت و/أو الافتقار إلى الأدوات التكنولوجية (كالهواتف الذكية) كان العائق الرئيس أمام التعلم عن بعد في المناطق القروية. يبدو أن تأثير الحجر الصحي على المتعلمين القرويين أكبر على الرغم من الجهود المبذولة لضمان فعالية التعليم عن بعد، يجب أيضا إيلاء اهتمام خاص للصحة النفسية للمتعلمين خصوصا في المناطق القروية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: دروس الإنترنت، حجر صحي، إغلاق المدارس، فيروس كورونا 2019، المتعلمون.

Introduction:

The COVID-19 is an extremely infectious disease and infected cases have been reported in a large population of the world as the number of deaths caused by the related coronavirus has surpassed any of its predecessors (Roy et al. 2020. p. 2). The COVID-19 has been recognized, worldwide, as a major danger to population health and the overall economy, altering population's lives by influencing their daily behavior and triggering feelings of anxiety and depression (Jiao et al., 2020, p. 1). The unpredictability of its outcomes, the uncertainty of controlling the infection spread, as well as the gravity of threat is the most stressful factors in these circumstances.(Zandifar, Badrfam. 2020. p. 1)

Most studies that assessed the impacts of COVID-19 disease especially of psychological origin (Roy et al. 2020; Liu et al. 2020) focused on the overall population in a given region. However, the population is constituted by various social categories with different

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needs and thus can experience different reactions and attitudes towards these unprecedented circumstances. Among these various social categories, few studies have focused on students.(but see Oni. 2019) and none has tackled students in rural areas which remains largely ignored. Indeed, students and particularly those in rural areas are by far the hardest-hit in Morocco. The interruption of schools was an unexpected event, which likely may have serious psychological impacts on learners. Pandemics are recognized as exceptional challenges to both health care and education services.(Júnior and Pauna. 2020. p. 2)

According to UNESCO (2020), schools closures have been implemented nationwide in 186 countries in 2020. Over 74% of enrolled learners worldwide were out of schools. As COVID-19 is identified worldwide, and as several countries such as China, Italy and Spain, Moroccan government has imposed quarantine and travel restrictions on its population and others measurement have been rapidly installed. In early March 2020, the outbreak of COVID-19 disease was reported in Morocco, and since that time, the cases have experienced an exponential increase. Almost two weeks later, the government imposed a health emergency and all schools closed. Several actions have been taken to ensure academic continuity during confinement and the distance learning process has been adopted.

Distance learning or tele-education refers to a method in which courses, classes and conferences are conducted through distance using information and communication technologies.(Tomlinson et al. 2020. p. 1) Distance learning allows teachers and students to communicate using mainly smartphones and social Medias. This learning modality has been broadly used as a tool in facilitating the dissemination of knowledge and culture.(Júnior, Pauna. 2020. p. 1) However, the degree of student satisfaction about distance learning modality depends on student familiarity levels with numerical platforms and information technology.(Bavaresco et al. 2019. p. 5) The effectiveness of these methods can also be a function of individual

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differences.(Júnior, Pauna. 2020. p. 1) Nevertheless, online courses are commonly used as a complement in teaching-learning practice and do not remove the teacher's role in this process.(Tarpada et al. 2017. p. 1)

In Morocco, several studies have evaluated the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the learning process of teachers (Bouabdallah. 2020), universities (Benhima, Benabderrazik. 2020) and school students.(Naji. 2020) However, none of them have mentioned the repercussions of Covid-19 on learning process in rural areas.

The rural area has its particularities in comparison with urban areas, either at the socioeconomic, cultural, historical, or educational level. Ignoring these specificities has always had severe repercussions on the development of the population and of the whole country. However, under special conditions, like those in which the world is currently subjected, the situation is worsened. Indeed, COVID-19 pandemic and the associated health quarantine has an additional pressure on the rural population.

Therefore, in the context of the newly emerging COVID-19 disease, the present paper aimed to highlight the main problems of distance learning in rural areas during the quarantine period. We also discussed the psychological complications on the students in this period on these students and we provide directions for future studies.

1- Problematic of Distance Learning During Quarantine in Morocco

The Moroccan National Education Ministry has set up many digital tools and educational platforms for students to enable them to continue their courses at distance. Cooperation between the ministry, teachers and various partners in the education field made available educational websites for students in all levels and subjects. To reinforce these measures, local TV channels were also recruited to

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prevent the unavailability of necessary technological tools (internet connection and smartphones) Nevertheless, these tools have not received popularity.(Benhima, Benabderrazik. 2020. p. 45) On the other hand, the ministry did not specify how many hours neither how much content should be communicated by teachers in distance learning process, which further complicated communication between learners and their teachers.(Júnior, Pauna. 2020. p. 2)

Many regions of the world have benefited from the distance learning method, and in Morocco, a country without any earlier experience of distance learning in the education system (for both primary and secondary education). This modality has been perceived as a problematic in getting knowledge by students (Naji. 2020. p. 11) particularly in rural areas. On one hand, a massive discussion in the specialized media about how to deal with distance learning in the educational domain has arisen. On the other hand, parents and a wide range of teachers have questioned and even opposed to the use of remote learning as a solution during quarantine imposed by the government.

Teachers, as "men in the field" that are aware of the difficulties that rural populations have in accessing the internet network; have created groups through social medias to communicate with their learners. However, the disadvantages of communicating via the internet quickly emerged and caused disagreement among parents as well as teachers. The problem of unequal opportunities among different social classes has taken its place in this social debate. Access to the internet is not within the reach of all students, especially in rural areas. According to the HCP (2014), Morocco comprises twelve regions containing 1282 rural communes. In these rural communes, many families have no television and only 1.5% of households are connected by cable to the telephone network, 3.6% have access to the Internet and 5.7% have a computer (HCP, 2014). The question now arising is: how could their children follow the courses on the channels in the absence of television? According to the Ministry, in the absence

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of television official curricula are largely sufficient for learners. However, learners could not be able to get knowledge themselves in all school subjects or educational levels based only on official curricula. Even though numerous studies indicated new paths concerning the use of virtual methods for teaching-learning process, the limits to which the knowledge content should be offered are not known (Júnior, Pauna. 2020. p. 2) The fruitful use of distance learning in education requires it to satisfy the needs of students and it must be associated with the program as well as the circumstances in which it is used.(Júnior, Pauna. 2020. p. 1)

Faced with this issues, free access to official educational sites has proven to be the main student's requirement. Unfortunately, this decision, although announced by the government, has not been implemented. As a result, rural students have been neglected. Inequalities are not limited to the differences between urban and rural areas, but also within the urban area where inequalities were also present between public and private educational establishments. While teachers in public establishments limit themselves to deposit courses in digital form on the sites or communicating with students on social media for a few hours per day or week, private establishments imposed a tight daily program which could sometimes follow the learner's usual timetable.

During quarantine, a new responsibility emerged for the majority of parents that became subjected to additional pressure. Indeed, parents took the responsibility for reviewing with their children and following the daily learning process. If literate parents could be able to accomplish this daily responsibility although with some difficulties, this is not evident for illiterate parents. In Morocco, the illiteracy rate was estimated to 32.2% whose 47.5% was in rural areas.(HCP, 2014) Consequently, in many of these rural families, the high rate of illiteracy could be a limiting factor to achieve the distance learning objectives. Therefore, the motivation of children could



diminish since they lack a suitable environment to follow their courses at home.

2. Psychological complications

As COVID19 was a novel infectious disease and was showing the most overwhelming impacts worldwide, its emergence and spread, produced confusion, fear and anxiety among the population (Roy et al., 2020, p. 2). Anxiety and depression, intensified by uncertainties and rise of the information flow, will increase broadly.(Brooks et al. 2020. p. 919) Media tools especially social media affect the mental well-being and burden the level of anxiety.(Roy et al. 2020. p. 3)

Recently, Brooks et al. (2020) reviewed several studies investigating the negative psychological impact of quarantine related to the outbreak of diseases during the last two decades and highlighted a high prevalence of symptoms of psychological disorder and distress such as post-traumatic stress symptoms, anger, and confusion. The authors found that stressors comprised, among others, longer infection fear and quarantine duration.(Brooks et al. 2020. p. 912). Negative physiological impacts of stress will become more and more apparent (Dar et al. 2017. p. 4) For example, Liu et al. (2020. p. 6) found that the prevalence of posttraumatic stress symptoms a month after the COVID-19 outbreak for hardest-hit areas was 7%, particularly Wuhan and surrounding cities in China. In their review, Richards et al. (2020. p. 6) concluded that there was a bidirectional relationship between disturbances in sleep and anxiety-related disorders. Similar correlations between worry, depression, and anxiety symptoms were found by Dar et al.(2017. p. 9)

In this context, very little is known about the impacts of disease outbreaks on the mental health of children and adolescents.(Lee. 2020. p. 2) However, rural students may experience higher psychological disorders than others. Indeed, solitude, which increased under quarantine situation, likely had a negative effect on the teaching-learning process and, thus, on psychological suffering and

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pain.(Araújo et al. 2020. p. 2) In Morocco, at present, there were no findings evaluating the effect of quarantine on the mental health of learners. Furthermore, children who are living in hard situations could feel losing of a safe and stable ambience during school closures.(YoungMinds. 2020) Thus, students in rural areas should receive more attention whether from researchers or decision makers.

Conclusion and Future Directions:

All infectious diseases are characterized by distinctive properties regarding their causality, evolution and control actions.(Roy et al. 2020. p. 4) While the trajectory of the COVID-19 pandemic is impossible to predict (Paules et al. 2020. p. 2), operational response involves rapid action taking into account the particularities of Moroccan students in rural areas. Thus, the present paper has important practical significance. First, it expects that the impact of quarantine on students in rural areas would be greater than that of other students, and they are indeed vulnerable to the harmful effects of a pandemic outbreak. Second, given the susceptibility of this part of Moroccan population, they should be the first priority in the national development strategies particularly in the educational system. Despite its high benefits during the quarantine period, the distance learning methods have revealed several problems. Therefore, distance learning can be used as a complementary tool in the teaching-learning process in the next period in order to allow student and even teachers to familiarizing with these tools and prevent a future crisis.

There is no study to date that evaluated the distance learning constrains for student in rural areas during the COVID-19 pandemic in Morocco. It is important to assess this aspect in order to make effective intervention strategies for them. The effectiveness of distance learning in the public schools needs to be further investigated with studies having robust designs. Finally, besides efforts taken at different levels to prevent the spread of COVID-19, particular care should be paid to the psychological health problems of the student and

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in particular rural areas. To our knowledge, there is no study to date that evaluated the impact of quarantine measures on the mental health of learners. Therefore, it is urgent to conduct studies to assess the degree of psychological disorders among learners, and thus suggest a suitable framework to deal with and prevent a future crisis.

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