

COVID-19 and Changes in School-Parent Relationships in the City of Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso)

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Abstract: In 2020, the world discovers a new coronavirus disease (COVID-19). Faced with the rapid spread and the absence of scientific treatments, public health measures are being tested. They are mainly linked to the reduction of population gatherings and the closure of gathering places. One of the institutions affected by the closure is the school. This closure is at the origin of the remodeling of relations between the different actors in education. How have the actors organized themselves to maintain consultation relationships in the context of the closure of classrooms? We have mobilized a socio-anthropological approach to answer this question. It consisted of conducting interviews with the various actors and observing their behavior during the time when classes were closed. Field work shows communication technologies have been mobilized to maintain contact between parents and teachers in the context of class closures. However, this attitude was not observed in all parents. The factor that made the difference in the behavior of parents of students was cultural capital. Thus, the time of the closure of schools in the dynamics of the fight against the disease was a time of revelation of social inequalities.

Keywords: Burkina Faso, COVID-19, Parent-School Relations, Cultural Capital, Relationship to School

1. Introduction

School-family relations refer to the official and informal ties families maintain with the school institution. They refer to family responsibilities and the role of the school in updating parents' participation in the school monitoring of their children [1]. They stem from a long tradition of teachers serving as guardians of the national institution, often erecting a school against the wishes of the students' parents. The COVID-19 crisis has reconfigured family-school relations with the erection of barrier measures, particularly physical distancing. Due to its potential as a place to spread the disease because it welcomes many people, the school will experience a transformation of the relationships between its various actors in the dynamics of the fight against the disease. Indeed, educational establishments have experienced several successive changes to their school context, with the implementation of distance learning, then a resumption of face-to-face lessons, and the

application of an evolving health protocol.

This context has forced the parents of students to have a new relationship with the school. Relations are now deterritorialized with the use of electronic means of communication. But this new context affects the motivations of parents of students to participate in the school monitoring of their children and teachers' motivations to promote parental participation in school activities [2]. How has COVID-19 reconfigured parent-teacher relationships and parents' relationships to their children's schoolwork? What are the effects of this reconfiguration on student learning? To this end, this article proceeds from socio-anthropological research carried out between January and February 2022 in the commune of Ouagadougou. The study was carried out with parents of students, teachers, administrative officials in charge of education, and students to understand the reality of family-school collaboration in the context of COVID-19. A total of 37 parents, 11 teachers, 5 principals, and 3 inspectors were interviewed in this study. The sample was selected by

applying the principle of saturation. For Olivier de Sardan [3] saturation occurs when we notice quite quickly when, on a "problem", the productivity of the observations and interviews decreases. With each new sequence, with each new interview, we obtain less and less new information. We have then more or less "gone around" the representations for a given field of investigation, or gone through the range of strategies relating to a particular arena.

2. COVID-19 and the Reorganization of the School Field

The coronavirus disease called COVID-19 appeared at the end of 2019 in the city of Wuhan in China. It has developed and spread in all countries of the world. The first case was detected in Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso, on March 9, 2020. This city was also the focus of the spread of the disease. It accounted for 50% of cases [2]. Burkina Faso has followed the wave of barriers and restrictions. An announcement made on March 14 by the Minister of Communication, Relations with Parliament, Government Spokesperson announced the closure of pre-school, primary, post-primary, secondary and university educational institutions [4]. As soon as the first cases appeared, the government of Burkina took measures to prevent the virus's rapid spread. This is how in early March 2020, the authorities drew up a preparedness and response plan against COVID-19, including rapid interventions, epidemiological surveillance, diagnosis, and awareness. A restriction of movement and assembly precedes this response plan. Thus, the government decides the closure of places of assembly, including educational establishments, cinemas, and places of worship. The closure of classes resizes the relationship between parents, students, teachers, and the school. From now on, students have more access to the school and their parents. Even at the reopening in May 2020, only the pupils of the examination classes had access to the school.

With the schools closed, everything had become complicated. Even when they said they reopened, the students who were in exam class only had to continue to complete their year. (Interview with a student's parent, Ouagadougou, January 2022).

The closure of classes has led to innovation by providing educational platforms to students and hours of edutainment teaching on television programs. These programs are broadcast on national and private television channels across the country. Learning is thus deterritorialized, and opportunities for parents and schools to meet are reduced. A new type of relationship was born, made up of remote contacts in which information and communication technologies played an important role. Relations were also different depending on the status of the establishments. While in private schools, many parents maintained the same relationship with teachers, in public schools, the end of classes also signaled the end of the relationship between these two categories of actors.

3. The Structures of Parents of Students, Agents of Pressure Against the Government

After the health sector, the education sector is where responses to COVID-19 have been initiated the most. According to Wayack-Pambè, Thorsen, and Darkwah [5] the flagship measure taken to combat the pandemic at the level of school education was the closure of all educational establishments throughout the national territory, less than ten days after the appearance of the disease on Burkinabe soil. The remainder of the responses in this area focused on strategies to mitigate the consequences of this decision. A month later, the Ministry of National Education presented a response plan for educational continuity in the context of the pandemic. This plan is part of the dynamic of deterritorialization of learning through the production of digital educational content, the dissemination of learning through radio, television, and Android applications, the promotion of downloadable files, and the sensitization and provision of protective equipment.

Everywhere in schools, the state has provided students and education staff with hand washes, masks, and gel to protect themselves. Through communication (televisions, radios), advertisements were made on barrier measures such as hand washing, the physical distance of at least one meter, strategies when you want to sneeze, etc., to control the spread of the disease. (Interview with a CEB Ouaga I private primary school teacher, February 2022).

The government's good intentions, especially in the issuance of protective devices, are undermined by financial problems. Indeed, according to Wayack-Pambè, Thorsen, and Darkwah [5], the financial and logistical costs required by these devices could not be borne by the government alone. This leads the Ministry to preach wisdom if they wash your back, wash your stomach by asking for the involvement of parents of students and their associative structures. The parents of pupils and their structures are solid historical partners of the school. Legislative and regulatory texts regulate their participation in the life of the school. The role of parents of students in Burkina Faso was defined for the first time in 1958 through authorization n°27/INT of May 2. Parents' associations (APE) became widespread in 1991 with the adoption of decree no. 91-133/MEBAM/MESSRS/MAT/MEFP of October 3, 1991. Compaoré [6] recalls that "initially, these associations were created to support the government's efforts in managing educational structures. APEs should actively participate in improving school life by informing parents about the life and organization of schools and stimulating students and teachers. Through their responsibilities, the associative structures, therefore, contribute to creating living and working conditions favorable to the development of students. For the APEs and Association of Mother Educators's (AME), the real challenge is to ensure that the parents of students readapt to the COVID-19 situation and agree to accompany the

teachers voluntarily.

On May 8, 2020, the Ministry in charge of national education thus formally launched a request for assistance from school management committees (COGES) as well as parent-teacher associations (APE) relating not only to the water supply but in a context at a national level where it represents a rare resource, but also to the provision of handwashing devices to students in a context of precarious economic resources. The umbrella organizations of parent-teacher associations relay this request and direct the parent-teacher associations to support the Ministry. During a meeting with the Prime Minister, their spokesperson said:

Disease prevention systems may not be operational for all establishments throughout the country. In such a case, we strongly encourage parents' associations, which can do everything possible to ensure the protection of children (<https://kaceto.net/spip.php?article8414>, consulted on June 20, 2022).

The solicitation of the contributions of the parents of pupils is a pretext to ask the whole of society to act in such a way as to allow the school to function in the context of the fight against COVID-19. The first structures to be sensitive to this cry from the heart of the Ministry are the associations of former students of establishments and state institutions. By way of illustration, a few days after the call from the Ministry, several establishments benefited from equipment donations (https://lefaso.net/spip.php?page=web-tv-video&id_article=96950&rubrique491, consulted on June 20, 2022).

The structures of the parents of pupils intervened in aspects. Those who felt they did not have sufficient means to provide schools with materials preferred to invest in awareness-raising. Also, many students may experience anxiety about returning to school during the COVID-19 pandemic. To support children's mental health, APEs, AMEs, and COGES have played an essential role in raising awareness among parents of students on how they should encourage their children. During COVID-19 and school closures, parent associations have played the role of mediator by advocating on behalf of students and, above all, by lobbying to have schools reopened and then again making sure the year is not bleached. The relationship between parents of pupils and the school becomes eminently political in which their structures fight to safeguard what they call the interests of the pupils while hammering home that, as parents of the pupils, no decision concerning the life of the school cannot be taken without consulting them. The National Union of Parents' Associations of Post-Primary, Secondary, and Higher Education (UNAPES-B) and the National Council of Primary Parents' Associations (CNAPEP), two umbrella associations of parents of students, had campaigned for the reopening of classes by demonstrating their willingness to support parent-teacher associations.

We are for the reopening of classes to avoid sacrificing future generations, they declared before expressing reservations on the endowment of establishments with

disease prevention devices. (<https://kaceto.net/spip.php?article8414>, consulted on June 20, 2022).

During these periods considered difficult by those involved in education, parent-teacher associations have maintained a relationship of dialogue with education's administrative and political leaders. It was one of the times when these structures were more dynamic. With diplomacy and pressure, parent-teacher associations have helped find solutions to save the school year.

4. Maintaining the Relationship Despite the Closure of Establishments

It is by promoting cooperation with families and ensuring the quality of exchanges between adults that the well-being and success of students can be guaranteed. Parents tried to make this reality prevail even during the cessation of classes due to COVID-19. Initially, this collaboration aimed to maintain a learning situation despite the impossibility of attending school. It was, therefore, a question of developing distance education strategies and these informal networks greatly encouraged innovation [7]. For him, the formalization of collaboration between school networks can support the development of the capacity of teachers and can promote the strategy aimed at recovering learning losses and strengthening the resilience of students, teachers, and parents. Students to cope with the crisis. In most cases, the initiative came from teachers who feared that leaving would lead to serious unlearning. The authors of the contact initiative wanted not only to make parents of students aware of the sine qua non-continuity of learning during this time when classes are stopped, but also to make them agents controlling the action of their children's learning.

I have personally started calling most of the parents of students to explain to them the school's current situation and reassure them that the management will take the necessary measures to overcome the problem we are experiencing. I informed teachers and parents of students about the emergency aid available from the government and other organizations. I also provided financial assistance during this period (Interview with the Director of a Private Primary School of the CEB Ouaga I, January 2022).

In this context, social inequalities surface. While at the level of private schools, teachers and parents of students are fighting for continuous learning, in public, students are forced to go on vacation. In this last category of establishments, there are no initiatives during the downtime. The ambitions of permanent contact despite the suspension of classes were born in private establishments. The students who attend this type of school are students from privileged backgrounds or are children of the middle class. These people often have a positive relationship with the school, as shown by Ouattara & Soré [8]. They show that the wealthiest in the capital of Burkina Faso send their children to private schools. There is indeed this idea that private schools are more "serious" than public schools. These schools are

therefore attended by children from a social class close to the school, who understand the demands of school learning. This may also explain his willingness to maintain contact with teachers and the school during the break-in class. The learning continuity strategy that was used was to give students homework that they had to do with their parents' help. This moment was a time of solid relationships between the parents of students and the school. Indeed, each week, the parent comes into contact at least once with the teacher to retrieve the subject of homework or take stock of the student's behaviour. Information and communication technologies, particularly the telephone, served as a communication channel between these two actors.

For a long time, teachers and parents struggled to understand each other. Each side passed judgment on the other, concluding that their co-educator did not put forth sufficient effort in the children's education. But COVID-19 has led each partner to have another vision in the parent-student-teacher relationship and in supporting children. We saw parents who praised the teachers because they recognized that they make a lot of effort and that it is necessary to accompany them (Interview with a teacher from a public primary school in CEB Ouaga X, February 2022).

The historically tricky dialogue between the parents of pupils and the teachers is softened and engages the various actors in a work of co-accompaniment of the pupils. A rapprochement was created with the families who often had the feeling of being held at a distance. When the restrictions on movement and use of public places were lifted in certain private establishments, consultations were initiated between the heads of establishments and the parents of students. This dialogue resulted in the resumption of classes in certain establishments intending to catch up with the times.

5. When COVID-19 Boosts Parent's Participation

Families have reacted differently to the announcement of the closure of schools in the dynamics of the fight against the spread of COVID-19. While for rural families and those working in the informal sector, this is an opportunity to put students to work, for urban families and well-off social conditions, a new strategy had to be found to maintain learning and contact with the school. Measures against the spread of COVID-19 have also restricted the mobility of parents of students. They suddenly found themselves staying at home. This allows them to follow their children's relationship with school learning. The situation has thus created an opportunity for rapprochement between the parents of students and the children. They become actors who encourage students to take advantage of the school continuity strategy "my school at home" to keep their proximity to the learning context. Teachers sensitize the parents of pupils to motivate their children to learn and to follow the lessons given on the radio or television. Through telephone contacts, they call on parents to take over and not leave students in a

situation of ruptured learning. School-family relations, therefore, take on a completely different form. Parents who were distant from school find themselves to be essential actors in the learning of their children. Depending on their cultural capital [9], they either encourage their children to follow lessons on the radio or at home or control their learning. If this became possible, it was because the closure of establishments was concomitant with restrictions on the mobility of all citizens. Thus, the parents of students were also forced to meet at home without the possibility of going to work. This has helped bring some school activities closer to the children. Some students also took advantage of this presence to seek support from their parents. The request for parental consent is widespread among primary school students, unaware that their parents may lack the skills to support them in their learning. Teaching is indeed a profession that requires training, and some parents cannot fulfil this role. In the absence of this training, many parents encountered difficulties supporting students. Despite the pedagogical challenges they face, some parents have found themselves involved in their children's learning and have strengthened their closeness to the school. This category of parents of students has marked its presence alongside the teaching of students who are forced to be at home. However, not all parents of students were able to provide support for their children's education at home. Those who do are those who have cultural capital. The other parents, who do not have cultural capital, often keep their distance from student learning. Soré [10] has also shown that these types of parents have a negative relationship with the school and avoid getting involved in its operation. The cessation of classes and the experimentation with teaching via television and radio have revealed social inequalities. Material difficulties surfaced and destroyed the possibility of online learning in disadvantaged classes. Pupils from families who do not have televisions and radios have been forced to give up the option of continuing their knowledge, as noted by the Chief Inspector of the Ouaga X primary education district:

During the closure of classes, the government used televisions and radios to ensure that students continued to receive lessons. Also, the parents had to continue to review with the children at home. But it really does cause a serious problem. Firstly, there are parents of pupils who have not gone to school; they are the most numerous. Then, many parents of students are poor; they do not have televisions. Finally, even those who are educated have not had the teacher training that can ensure homeschooling. (Interview, February 2022).

During this time, some parents have developed a pleasure in teaching and have become householders to review with their children. To avoid or reduce child dropout in this health crisis, parents have built a conducive educational framework and have emphasized follow-up at home.

The state has developed distance courses to allow students to continue to receive lessons even while being at home. But as parents of students, we couldn't sit back when we didn't know precisely when classes could resume usually.

We accompanied them. (Interview with a parent of a student from a CEB Ouaga X public primary school, January 2022).

The health crisis has allowed an evolution of the often-difficult relationships between parents of students and teachers. Indeed, according to Lelièvre [11], there is a shift in the centre of gravity. For him, before this pandemic, teachers were at the centre, while today, because of this crisis, it is the parents. Parents become co-educators of the school. This was possible thanks to the reconciliation work done by the managers of the establishments. Indeed, enjoying respect and personal relationships with their students' families, school leaders are uniquely placed to guide them on how to support their children at home during this exceptional challenge.

I support teachers, parents, and students to be enthusiastic about implementing home or online learning. I remind them to take care of their health with barrier gestures, washing their hands with soap, wearing masks if they leave the house, and avoiding crowds during the pandemic. We have educated parents of students to have a handwashing device at home. (Interview with the head of a private primary school at CEB Ouaga I, February 2022).

Despite the shift in the center of gravity, not all families have maintained the same relationship with the school due to their social environment and ability to connect. Families who have strengthened their social ties with school are families from privileged backgrounds. These families have resources such as a substantial educational background, provide a framework and further implement educational principles. Conversely, the families who have lost the link with the school institution are families from the lower classes. Unlike families from privileged backgrounds, they show a lack of knowledge or mastery of the concepts studied, working or learning methods. They, therefore, feel illegitimate about participating in their children's school activities. As Reimers [7] says, from a social point of view, some parents simply could not follow their children in their work because they might not speak French and therefore could not read the lessons or did not have time. With them, the pandemic has not improved relations at school. On the contrary, some were distressed by the permanent presence of their children at home and their inability to support them in learning.

6. Homeschooling for What Learning

Homeschooling is a nonsense concept because school was a specific space and, as Meirieu [12] pointed out, an institution designed for learning but for learning together. Historically, the school has been a place of learning with a specific organization that does not allow individualized but collective teaching; to teach is to articulate the common and the singular. The confinement has modified the "traditional" functions of the actors: the teacher at school and the parents at home. In this new era, parents are faced with a new role: that of teachers, in addition to being parents, to reconcile the irreconcilable. This reconfiguration of the roles of these actors in the educational field can cause "pedagogical

tyranny" and "school overload" if parents decide to become teachers. The risk is that some parents will produce the opposite effects due to their incompetence in the pedagogical field. Also, some parents found themselves unable to meet the expectations and demands of the school institute. Homeschooling will quickly know its limits and become a myth conveyed by a religious discourse. Some were unwilling to do so, but many lacked the skills and materials. This reality is noted by a teacher from the CEB Ouaga X.

From the start, I doubted the feasibility of distance schooling since most parents of students live in economic precariousness. They are mostly illiterate, and even those who know how to read and write to help their children have not received any teaching training. Our governments wanted to copy the West. Otherwise, how can a country like Burkina Faso ask the parents of students to help teachers by giving lessons at home? In my opinion, this is practically unachievable (Interview with a public primary school teacher from CEB Ouaga X, February 2022).

If teachers find homeschooling unfeasible, it is because they believe parents do not have the pedagogical skills to support students in learning. In practice, some parents who tried to help their children faced the problem of self-control in front of students who had difficulty processing the exercises given. Even parents of pupils from well-to-do social classes who hire tutors find themselves confronted with this difficulty; the limitation of mobility has moved to the latter impossible. Some of them find it challenging to be guided, if not school teachers, by their children and resign themselves to giving them advice and encouragement.

7. Conclusion

The cessation of school activities during the time of COVID-19 did not distance the parents of students from the life of the school institution. Worried about the academic and social future of their children, the parents of pupils have, through their structures, been active in the search for solutions for the continuity of learning. The state took time to respond to the concerns of parents' structures but has developed a distance learning strategy to compensate for the impossibility of students and teachers going to school. The introduction of distance learning has further revealed social inequalities and announced differentiated participation of parents in their children's school experience. The socio-demographic profile, in particular the level of education, was the determining factor in the involvement of the parents of pupils in the learning of their children. Thus, the arrival of COVID-19 has had mixed effects on parent-school relations in Burkina Faso. While the parents of pupils with cultural capital have come closer to the school through the support and encouragement were given to the pupils and the creation of a dynamic dialogue with the school and the teachers, the others, those whose cultural capital is low, have kept their distance, if not moved away from the school. The connection to knowledge is the most important thing that has helped the school-parent relationship get better.

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