Organizing Classroom Management through group work in Remote Education

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Abstract: The sudden appearance of COVID-19 put an extreme toll on school systems in France and abroad which temporarily disrupted in-person education. Almost overnight, schools and teachers were required to adapt and adopt new strategies in order not to lose contact with students. The aim of this study is to give an insight on the challenges faced by all stakeholders in France (pupils, teachers, families) during this period and offer a few leads on how teachers tackled the complexity of classroom management in a virtual environment. The study data stems from a sample of 64 teachers from four different primary schools in the same geographical area in France. The data was collected mainly through questionnaires sent by emails as well as face-to-face interviews. The findings indicate that three major concerns were raised: 1) maintaining contact and recreating favourable learning conditions in a limited scope of action 2) adapting pedagogy to a challenging context 3) providing voice and space to students. The paper discusses the importance of implementing communication strategies designed to meet both the emotional and educational needs of students through group work activities during which teachers' main focus laid more on social skills rather than academic performance.

1. Introduction

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Remote Education, which in the context of this study should be understood as "teaching and learning model in which teachers and learners are separated geographically and communicate using technology" (Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2004), has become a necessary tool across teachers' pedagogical spectrum. The rapidity through which this change has occurred, has led institutions and teachers to invest additional time, effort and financial resources to be able to provide continuity in the curriculum. For many professionals of education, this way of teaching has created anxiety in how to lead virtual classrooms so that students continue to gain the skills and knowledge as defined by the curriculum (Son, 2018). If within a pretty limited amount of time, these worries may have been put on a second level to focus more on the social skills and well-being of students, they naturally reappeared on a later stage as a major challenge (Mardiani & Azhar, 2021). Consequently, new strategies in classroom management were to be successfully developed in order to meet both demands. From the physical space of the classroom where teachers and students could communicate through words and body language with reasonably little difficulty to a virtual space which rely on the absence of technical problems and on the skilled use of a range of tools such as audio, video, text chat, shared whiteboard, polls or file sharing, new rules had to be introduced in order to ensure communication (Mardiani & Azhar, 2021), (Nurfauziah &Suryaman & Mobit, 2022), (Khalid, 2022).

Traditional definitions of classroom management usually revolve around the notions of interaction and behaviour between students and teachers. For instance, scientists define it as "the process by which teachers encourage and maintain appropriate behavior of students in classroom settings." (Emmer & Sabornie, 2015; Everston & Weinstein, 2006). The goal is "to enhance the pro-social behavior if students and increase academic engagement across all subject areas and grade levels." Usually seen as the greatest professional development need, classroom management transferred to different settings can become quite challenging. The lack of mastery of technology, the technical problems, the lack of

appropriate material are all hurdles that need to be overcome in Remote Education. In this study, priority was emphasized on encouragement and a great deal of effort was put on maintaining a social bond with students. In order to do so, teachers of the panel designed lesson plans in a way that favours peer-to-peer interaction and promotes social skills mainly through group work activities and collaboration.

Even though group work has been anchored as a staple of education since at least the beginning of the twentieth century (Illris, 1978), group dynamics in a virtual environment require other qualities for both students and teachers and can serve other purposes than when implemented in the physical space of a traditional classroom. According to Ellice A. Forman and Courtney B. Cazden (1985), three main styles of working together can be defined. From parallel interactions during which students comment about the task but offer no exchange of ideas to associative interactions during which students share information but where no role has been officially coordinated to cooperative interactions during which students exchange ideas and are actively involved together in a co-creative manner, teachers can plan and anticipate activities and instructions according to the level of involvement needed for their lessons. The challenge lies in the difficulty to organize activities and tasks that allow students to find their place and voice while giving clear instructions to reduce risks of incomprehension, dropout or self-distraction. As previous studies demonstrate, setting clear expectations is capital to avoid misbehaviour and disengagement (Lowes, 2014), (Robert, 2016), (Khalid, 2022). Not to mention that instructions can also be directed on what teaches expect from collaboration. The question that therefore arises is how to organize classroom management in order to avoid the challenges mentioned in these previous studies. It seemed important to us to investigate what strategies would work and on what teachers should focus their attention to allow students space and place in a virtual environment. To collect the data, questionnaires were sent in two periods to allow teachers to reflect on the feasibility and sustainability of the strategies they used during distance learning.

2. Methodology of the research

A qualitative case study design was used in this study. Data were obtained through the conduction of semi-structured interviews and by questions sent to participants by emails in two distinct periods. Participants who were all primary school teachers from the same geographical area in Hauts-de-France received two series of questions which were sent within two months of one another to allow teachers to reflect on the relevance and sustainability of their strategies and for us to conduct interviews. The collected data was analyzed for both similarities and differences in teachers' experience.

3. Research results

Based on the questionnaires sent by email, the article discusses and analyzes the answers from the participants of the panel.

Q.1 According to you, what was the biggest challenge you faced in Remote Education?
Through the results shown in questionnaire statement no 1, 46 participants out of 64 claimed that the most challenging part of Remote Education during the pandemic was to maintain contact with their students. 51 participants out of 64 stated that due to the overall social and economic backgrounds of families residing in the area, students did not necessarily have the materials nor the conditions required to switch to virtual classrooms. The main emphasis was at first to be placed on accompanying families to this "radical" change by explaining the new modalities and requirements of distance learning.

Q.2 What problems were faced by students during this period and what impact did it have on your lessons?
Question no 2 highlights the importance to define a schedule adapted to the circadian rhythm of the students during this stay-at-home period. 39 participants out of 64 claimed that most students were sleep deprived and were not able to follow the same schedule as the one they had in the physical space of the school. Duration of lessons also had to be shortened to overcome the lack of concentration and the need for physical activity.

Q.3 Once in virtual classrooms, what was your priority and why?

In response to questionnaire statement no 3, 32 participants pointed out the challenges they faced to give each student the space to be actively involved during lessons. When interviewed, participants stated that students were often unable to abide by the rules and consistently seeked social contact rather than paying attention to what was being taught.

Q.4 Did you notice any difference in the behaviour of your students compared to in-person education?

Questionnaire statement no 4 shows that most participants spent a non negligeable amount of time to reassure students about the situation. Students were said to be stressed out by the pandemics and frequently required emotional support. When interviewed, participants added that families too required more contact with teachers and school administration. Parents were anxious to have information.

Q.5 What difficulties did you encounter while carrying out the activities you planned for your virtual classroom?

In response to question no 5, most participants highlighted the difficulty for students to focus on the tasks to be performed. Either it was due to the distractions caused by the environment at home or by technological problems, students were pretty often non-responsive to the instructions of teachers. Thus, participants stated that they had to spend some time before the lessons to make sure that both instructions and expectations were clear and reasonable enough for each student to be understood.

Q.6 Did you have to adapt your Classroom Management during your lessons online?

Participants overwhelmingly claimed that the way they implement classroom management online was significantly different from what usually happens within the physical space of the classroom. They stated that, as a necessity, other points of interest such as leaving more time and space to each student or solving technical issues had to be taken into account. Participants also emphasized on the fact that each instruction and rule had to be repeated several times before activities could start. Time management was therefore an important issue on how the lessons successfully progressed.

Q.7 How did you ensure that students benefited from the online lessons?

Answering question no 7, 57 participants claimed that students benefited from a succession of shorter activities which mainly relied on maintaining social skills between students. Activities were planned and designed so that they required from students a collective analysis of the tasks to be performed. Additional instructions were sent after the lessons in order to consolidate knowledge but during the lessons, students were urged to exchange views and opinions about the issues at stake. This way, students were manipulating concepts and knowledge while maintaining social contact with their peers.

Q.8 How did you use group work strategies during your lessons?

In response to question no 8, most participants stated that group work dynamics was used extensively after the first few lessons during which teachers were more individually oriented. The challenges faced by participants were mostly technical. Group work required the setting up of different virtual rooms in which students were divided according to the tasks to be performed. When interviewed, teachers of the panel added that implementing group work in a virtual context required more anticipation and attention than in face-to-face education. Yet participants agreed on the fact that group work dynamics allowed students to be more active in planned activities. Students also seemed to be more motivated and feel more confident to exchange ideas while in smaller groups.

4. Discussion

The results provided by questionnaires show that like in the previous studies mentioned in this article, the technology skills shown by teachers are crucial to distance learning.

5. Conclusion

The results of the research showed that Remote Education required teachers to adapt their teaching to the specificities of the virtual classroom. Classroom Management consisted of placing a greater emphasis on students' well-being and peer-to-peer communication. In order to do so, teachers designed activities which required small group work. Students performed better when these activities were short and when teachers left time for discussion and exchange of ideas. Teachers also had to ensure that technical issues did not interfere with the progress of the lesson. In order to do so, teachers collaborated with families to create the conditions necessary for students to accomplish their work.

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