

Instruction under the Influence of the Double Health and Security Crises (COVID-19) in Bamenda (North-West Cameroon): Adaptive Dynamics and Educational Challenges

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Abstract

The year 2020 challenged previously shared certainties around the world. The COVID-19 health crisis disrupted social, economic, cultural, political, and human life within communities. Schools, a major tool for socialization and the construction of critical capital in modern societies, also suffered from this crisis. In Bamenda, since November 2016, schools have become a means of contesting the republican order due to the actions of separatists. Despite the resilience of certain educational institutions, the coronavirus sounded the alarm for all. The school system has been shaken to its foundations since March 2020, leading to an educational crisis. The digital option was adopted as an alternative support for education. However, this adaptive dynamic faces multiple challenges. This article aims to explore the digital mutation, relying on functionalist and neo-Marxist theories. Data were collected through participant observation, group discussions on three WhatsApp platforms counting 250 students of the University of Bamenda each, 15 individual phone interviews with teachers and administrators from primary, secondary, and higher education institutions in Bamenda, and documentary research. The findings suggest that the COVID-19 crisis, far from sealing the fate of education in Bamenda, has also broadened its perspectives, albeit differentially depending on educational levels. While adapting to the context of the security crisis through digital means, numerous challenges temper the impact.

Keywords

Pedagogical Continuity, COVID-19 Crisis, Security Crisis, Educational Technology, Bamenda

1. Introduction

Bamenda, a cosmopolitan city and a stronghold of political and ideological opposition in the country¹, is the regional capital of the Northwest, one of Cameroon's ten regions. Educationally, it boasts a well-structured education sector from primary to higher education across various religious, secular, and public institutions. Unfortunately, these institutions have faced severe challenges since the onset of the so-called Anglophone crisis. Schools have been torched, looted, occupied as bases for operations; students have been assaulted, killed, and forcibly recruited into militias; teachers have been threatened, abducted, extorted, maimed, and killed. Despite this grim outlook, the education sector has not capitulated. It has remained resilient until the global health crisis brought about a new reality. Everything now evolves at the pace of the Coronavirus, even though the region was only affected starting April 20, 2020. Nonetheless, like other modern spaces, schools have attempted to shift to a digital mode. What can be said about the educational offer in Bamenda in the context of the coronavirus? This is the central question of this article that first presents Bamenda at the crossroad of the security and health crises, explores thereafter the impact on education, analyses the pedagogical continuity mechanisms induced and finally explores the technical approach of unaddressed educational challenges.

2. Methodological Considerations

Research Design

The research design employed in this study is a qualitative. It provided a comprehensive analysis of the digitalization of education in Bamenda. Participant observation conducted over an entire academic year allowed for the collection of contextual data regarding the educational environment, while group discussions and interviews facilitated direct engagement with participants' experiences and perceptions. This triangulation of data sources enhanced the reliability of the findings, enabling a nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding digital education in a crisis-affected region.

Population of Study

The population of this study comprises educators and students within the educational institutions of Bamenda, Cameroon. Specifically, it includes primary, secondary, and higher education institutions.

Sample

The sample for this study consisted of students from the University of Bamenda, selected from three WhatsApp groups, gathering each 250 students, 20 secondary school students, 20 primary school students, alongside 15 individual phone interviews with teachers and administrators from different educational levels.

¹Bamenda saw the birth of the SDF in 1990, a major opposition party in Cameroon. The city is its electoral stronghold. Due to its ideological positioning, it stands as a beacon of Anglophone cultural exception in a predominantly Francophone country. As such, it is a particularly rebellious city in terms of national politics.

Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants who are likely to provide rich and relevant data for the study. This method allows for the inclusion of individuals who have experienced or are currently experiencing the transition to digital education, ensuring that the insights gathered are pertinent to the research objectives. The use of WhatsApp groups for students facilitates easy access to a large number of participants, while individual interviews with teachers and administrators, chosen on the basis of convenient sampling technique, enable in-depth discussions that yield qualitative data.

Theories

The research was grounded in structural functionalism and neo-Marxist theories. Structural functionalism provided a framework for understanding the role of education in society, emphasizing how digitalization can serve to maintain social order and facilitate adaptation to changing societal needs or specifically the pedagogical continuity. Conversely, neo-Marxist theories critique the inherent inequalities within educational systems, particularly regarding access to technology and resources. By integrating these theoretical perspectives, the study seeks to analyse not only the functionality of digital education but also the socio-economic disparities that influence its implementation and effectiveness.

3. Anglophone Crisis, COVID-19, and the Challenges of Education in Bamenda

Cameroon was affected through international travellers who inevitably spread the disease within the country. Consequently, the country slowed down across all sectors: health, education, economy, culture, and social life. This article explores the educational challenges posed by the coronavirus pandemic in a city already burdened by significant instructional challenges due to the ambazonian secessionist movement. The education sector, once robust in its traditional structure, now had to contend with the challenges of redefining instructional modalities. Education now adheres to a virtual mode of knowledge transmission.

Until mid-April, COVID-19 was perceived as an “oriental evil” in Bamenda. The perception of others as an extension of the presence of the “intimate enemy” of French expression has somewhat shifted to viewing the “foreigner” as a potential vehicle for the viral health crisis; this malady fits into a lineage of neo-colonial conspiratorial initiatives. Measures such as territorial closures, assaults on individuals in the regional space, and heightened physical controls—both legal and illegal—fit into this narrative.

The dual security and health crises affecting the region necessitate a re-examination of the existing educational framework. These crises challenge the certainties of traditional instructional models and pedagogical transactions. The COVID-19 pandemic has indeed led to the widespread adoption of educational technology in secondary and higher education, replacing the previously estab-

lished face-to-face interactions, which had found some expression despite the separatists' repression. In primary education, classes for intermediate levels remain halted; however, there is a movement to support students in CM2 and Class 6, emphasizing the need to follow lessons broadcasted on national television. This trend towards examination classes is also observed in secondary education, albeit with a diversification of offerings. Lessons are delivered via national television, WhatsApp-created platforms, radio, and printed materials. Higher education is exclusively digitally oriented. Applications such as Google Docs, Google Classroom, WhatsApp, Facebook, Moodle, and Zoom have been utilized since the onset of the Coronavirus crisis. While these innovative pedagogical modes excite some stakeholders who see great potential for intellectual engagement, they remain poorly mastered by both teachers and learners (Djeumeni Tchamabe, 2010). This explains the informalities, resistances, and hesitations that underlie the various adjustments observed in pedagogical practices. Informal adjustments, less structured, challenge all principles of pedagogical transaction (learning and teaching situations), didactic provisions (disciplinary content), assessment foundations, educational philosophy, and even the sociology of education.

4. Health and Security Crises and Education in Bamenda

Crises, regardless of their nature, have always been moments that challenge certainties. According to UNESCO (2015), armed conflicts, health crises, and natural disasters are major destabilizing factors for children's education in Africa. This continent is indeed characterized by structural, institutional, geopolitical, and strategic weaknesses that are inherent to its underdevelopment (Kabou, 1991: p. 12). It is often not prompt or effective in managing emergency situations. The COVID-19 crisis once again highlighted these acknowledged deficiencies in management approaches, even though the disarray is not limited to tropical contexts. The coronavirus seems to continue its imperial progression to the farthest corners of the world, disregarding racial and developmental differences. Coupled with existing crises, the stakes can appear perilous for the country, particularly for mass education. Bamenda serves as a compelling case study due to the on-going security crisis for the past four years.

From September 2017 to May 2019, the Anglophone crisis resulted in 1850 deaths, 530,000 internally displaced persons, and 35,000 refugees in Nigeria, most of whom are women and children. Many schools were burned or closed, and over 170 villages were destroyed. Amnesty International's (2018: p. 12) report provides a more detailed account of the security crisis's impact on the education sector. For instance, it states that from February 2017 to May 2018, 42 schools in the Northwest and Southwest regions were attacked, with three (3) deliberately burned, 11 damaged by other types of attacks, two school buses burned, and students, teachers, and school directors harassed, kidnapped, and killed (at least 3 teachers). Lamarche and Fox (2019: p. 10), in their report, note that 4400 schools—85% of the schools in the Northwest and Southwest—were

closed, thereby depriving over 80% of school-age children of education. These attacks have not ceased, leaving only major urban centres operational, albeit under strict control. While schools in Bamenda were functioning in some of the more secure neighbourhoods, the COVID-19 crisis has definitively compromised those hopes.

Since the onset of the crisis in November 2016, schools have been the focal point of the separatist groups' demands, inaugurating a contemporary "education crisis." (Arendt, 2012). The *International Monetary Fund (IMF) (2020: p. 14)* now describes COVID-19 as an unprecedented health crisis that has the potential to destabilize regional countries and reverse the progress made in recent years. This institution forecasts that economies will contract by about 1.6%, a figure that lacks historical precedent. Thus, it anticipates severe repercussions for social sectors in the sub-region, particularly for already weak health systems. The education sector, heavily impacted by the government's containment measures, is no exception to the decline projected by the IMF. The plummeting prices of basic goods, extractive products, and tourism, along with border closures and movement restrictions, do not bode well for budgetary health.

The crisis in the social sector can only be a corollary. Learners have been confined to their homes since mid-March, and according to the Prime Minister's information, resumption is only anticipated from June 1, 2020. Schools under attack are now seeking a renaissance of education grounded in Anglo-Saxon heritage. COVID-19 serves to endorse this call for a re-foundation. Education, while continuing to adhere to the ideals of grouped instruction, no longer strictly requires the physical presence within classroom walls. From a sociological perspective, education refers to the actions of adults, leveraging their moral authority (Durkheim, 2013) over the younger generation to enable social reproduction, social transformation, and the promotion of social mobility, thus ensuring coherence in political and cultural society. It establishes continuity between generations, following the primary roles of the family. Education has gained power through its ability to polarize social and professional life.

Local education is therefore different in its content, stakes, and institutional figures due to the crisis. Despite its claims to universality, education, according to Durkheim (2013), has an eminently social design. This author argues that there are as many special educations as there are different social environments. In fact, the coronavirus now pushes for a fragmented approach (each from their own home), though with apparent central coordination. It is clear that students are now expected to navigate a society that has not methodically prepared them to live and study alone, even while remaining virtually connected to others. Thus, there is a multiplication of training venues, in a society that still hopes to see a consensus emerge, even if minimal, on social life ideals. This is the essence of the conclusion reached by Vermander (2020: pp. 7-15): "COVID-19 risks further weakening the resilience of the social body. It remains permissible to hope that it will instead release potentials that no one dares to identify today." The techno-

scientific education emerging from the pedagogical options spawned by the health crisis inaugurates a fragmented era of instruction, a period of re-founding the modalities of togetherness (Akana, 2020). Furthermore, the COVID-19 crisis arrives in an educational context held hostage by the system's unpreparedness to efficiently manage crisis situations. Since November 2016, the political society and its educational system have not managed to restore a sort of general normative framework for pedagogical transactions.

5. Pedagogical Continuity during the Time of Coronavirus

While one may accommodate the thesis of an education crisis, it is essential to draw attention to the dynamics propelled in the educational sector due to the coronavirus, particularly through the widespread adoption of digital offerings. In its action plan for education in crisis situations by 2030, UNESCO (2016: p. 8) reaffirms that pedagogical continuity should be a relevant lever for public action in times of crisis, particularly by designing "more resilient and responsive educational systems to conflicts, social unrest, and natural risks." The political society appeared sensitive to the need to salvage the academic year, as reflected in the government's response strategy to COVID-19, which recommended electronic teaching—a novel and unprecedented reality in Cameroon's educational system. Thus, they contributed to the dynamics of educational construction. These dynamics reflect a refusal to capitulate to the burdens of health and security challenges. In Bamenda, schools had managed to survive despite the barbaric threats from separatists through modalities that reflected more or less planned adaptations; the COVID-19 pandemic is engaged in a process of resetting the clocks. The adaptation methods inherent to this phenomenon have been primarily digital innovation. It is thus appropriate to present here the development and near-generalization of a digital public educational space.

The coronavirus crisis quickly presented itself as a crisis of social connection. It imposed social distancing as a general rule. In consequence, socio-political institutions started the quest for ways to recreate social transactions. Fame Ndong, Minister of Higher Education, in a press release on March 20, 2020, recommended: "From a pedagogical standpoint: mobilizing information and communication technologies to continue training activities online using digitized tools accessible to students, particularly institutional online teaching platforms and social media." This recommendation applies across the educational sector, as the interruption appears to be of indefinite duration. National television will gradually develop specific teaching programs aimed at students in examination classes after a floating period of about three weeks. Aside from the clearly neglected intermediate classes, there is now a digital educational offering alternative to traditional teaching. Some appreciate its benefits. Rodrigue, a teacher at the Bilingual High School of Bamendankwe, claims that he is achieving the best from his final-year students. He assigns them a program and guided work, and on the designated day and time, they proceed with corrections. If a student is absent, they read what was

done later and signal where they struggle, and he responds².

However, educational technology is still an emerging field in Cameroon. It is illusory to speak of its structuring at this moment. The digital culture in the educational field is being tested. The use of digital artefacts in adolescents' lives is increasingly becoming a structuring element of their social culture, but in academic terms, the trajectory is yet to be defined. Digital artefacts, due to their interactive nature, multilateral anchoring, and interconnectivity, still serve more for distraction and self-exhibition on social networks. The use of digital technology is primarily to escape social anonymity through self-marketing. It is only marginally that digital technologies are utilized for educational purposes. Radio and television, used in teaching, revive the centralism of the teacher as the source of knowledge, which, in a vertical schema, distils knowledge for students to assimilate. However, for UNESCO (2005: p. 27), the Internet brings immediacy to the interactive processes at play in pedagogical transactions, highlighting the bipolarity of educational exchange, which is the foundation of virtual communities, exemplified by discussion forums.

The near-generalization of educational technology should indeed prompt reflection on institutional, cultural, and practical changes within the education microcosm. In the tradition of research in educational technologies, the benefits of digital tools for instruction are often praised, particularly their positive effects on the development of learner and teacher autonomy; educational practices that would better reflect contemporary life. However, the limited diffusion of digital technology in remote areas of the country remains a limiting factor for the emergence of a true digital educational society. There is still a differentiated trend in the accommodation and use of digital tools between urban and rural areas, among modest and poor social groups, and across primary, secondary, and higher education, especially concerning learning and teaching.

Nonetheless, digital technologies represent a relevant modality for knowledge transmission in contexts of uncertainty and social crisis. They are an enhancement, but not a cure-all. Kongnyuy, an education specialist at the University of Bamenda, argues that it is pedagogically appropriate to teach using digital technologies, but it is essential to concurrently master pedagogical knowledge, didactic knowledge, and technological knowledge to demonstrate beneficial use for learners. He warns against the temptation to fall into the excesses of hasty and poorly prepared syncretism³. The Cameroonian educational environment is currently populated by technophobes, both among teachers and learners. The weaknesses in their techno-pedagogical training are cited by Kongnyuy to explain this state of affairs. The integration of technology into practical teaching suffers from fears of misdoing and other personal and structural variables. Depover et al. (2007: p. 173) observe that the introduction of technology into teaching is laborious in a context where society itself is more than challenged by new media. This is partic-

²Interview through Telephone on April 16, 2020.

³Interview through WhatsApp on April 19, 2020.

ularly poignant given that even teachers trained in the new school hesitate to integrate technologies into their teaching. Despite these challenges, an alignment with educational technology is feasible, provided there is adequate planning. It calls for the inventiveness of teachers to successfully fulfil their task: educating the younger generation. This is only possible in urgency through a transformation and adaptation of course content developed for traditional teaching modes into digital formats. Responsibility must be taken at all levels of the educational system.

6. Technical Approach or Unaddressed Educational Urgency

An ergonomic approach would allow for the understanding of the instrumental mediations arising from the use of techno-pedagogical tools. The ergonomic perspective is relevant here to explore the transformations in learning and teaching activities induced by the introduction of technological supports. However, the focus here is more on analysing the social processes inherent to the choice of educational technology. The assessment of the appropriateness, foundation, and balance of an educational system, even in crisis, according to Njiale (2006: p. 63), derives from the arrangement of several dimensions that integrate cognitive, psychomotor, and affective domains in relation to the sociological and political environment: “The effectiveness of an educational system lies in its ability to evolve to meet the demands of the context and changes.” This assertion leads to an observation regarding the country’s adaptation to the crisis data: there is a disarticulation between pedagogical and didactic theories that legitimize the integration of media in teaching/learning.

1) Disarticulation between Principles and Theories of Media Integration in Teaching

The emergence of the coronavirus constitutes an unknown variable in contemporary socio-educational dynamics. It has contributed to a significant disarticulation of institutions and teaching practices, including the “deep crisis of the pedagogical relationship” (Laval, 2006). The technical approach, logically preferred, emphasizes educational technology, although its implementation has not benefited from visionary planning that incorporates all dimensions of online teaching and learning: the fundamental norms, scenarios for organization, learning, observation, and evaluation.

- *Norms and Principles of Teaching and Evaluation*

Pedagogy outlines the principles and approaches to facilitate the transmission and assimilation of knowledge. Successful teaching at the primary and secondary levels depends on the instructor’s ability to grasp these principles (principles of success, achievement, competence, anti-failure, facilitation, remediation, equity, etc.). At the university level, a lack of understanding of pedagogy has always been a structuring variable in educational systems (Cayouette-Guilloteau, 2016: pp. 28-30). Competency-based approaches (secondary) and project-based approaches (primary) are strongly rooted in constructivist theories. For these theorists, indeed, “learning is primarily about constructing and organizing one’s knowledge

through action, rather than associating a reward with a specific response as in behaviourism” (Cayouette-Guilloteau, 2016: pp. 28-30). Teaching in the Cameroonian context adheres to these pedagogical models that encourage the organization of learning conditions aimed at mobilizing the competencies to be developed. These competencies may not be observed, stimulated, or validated because they are deemed suitable for the learner; they rely on the fabric of social life, drawing on knowledge and techniques assimilated through education to influence other sectors of individuals’ social lives, transforming them to meet social expectations. Thus, the renewal of individuals’ social environments hinges on the necessary connection between knowledge and real life. Competence calls for not just an inventory of knowledge, skills, and know-how, but their effective application at the right time in real life to solve concrete problems, as competence is inherently an act. The act is what gives existence to competence, but it does not solely express itself, as Le Boterf (1994: p. 129) notes. Knowledge for knowledge’s sake has been downgraded and is now viewed as an intermediate goal on the path to achieving other objectives: the ability to act decisively and efficiently upon one’s environment.

These pedagogical approaches are all recent and are therefore not yet fully assimilated by teachers, especially when the pedagogical transaction modality is mediated. Furthermore, the facilitator, the teacher, is not at the centre of learning; rather, it is the student. According to Cayouette-Guilloteau (2016: p. 33), the student is guided in didactic situations to “mobilize the skills necessary to solve the problem posed.” Therefore, these pedagogical approaches centre on competencies and the learner’s action. However, the current practice of distance learning still portrays students as empty vessels to be filled. In fact, the pandemic has led voluntary instructors to rise to the challenge of digital education, re-centring teachers in the pedagogical transaction, far from stimulating the competencies of face-to-face methods. While teachers in Cameroon still debate the realities and practices of these pedagogical approaches due to their incomplete mastery, COVID-19 adds further challenges to the existing ones. Introducing digital technologies, something already dreaded by many teachers due to their incomplete understanding of these emerging technologies, is compounded by the fear of self-incrimination through the public revelation of certain debilitating deficiencies during course material design. The challenge is thus significant for teachers due to the pandemic. The adjustment trajectories are divergent and distant from the fundamental provisions of pedagogy.

Similarly, the evaluation currently conducted through digital tools reflects a lack of seriousness surrounding it. Scenarios described by learners and teachers reveal this. Issues include the monitoring of the legitimacy of documents presented by learners during evaluations, the quality of individuals surrounding or participating in evaluations, the time allocated for the exam, the nature of the evaluation topics, and the grading of assessments. Teachers typically do not concern themselves with the first two issues but almost systematically reduce the evaluation time to the point where learners are unable to complete their exams. This

is particularly true for formative evaluations conducted on national television, where interviewed learners consistently report having issues managing their response time. At the University of Bamenda, many teachers merely assign home tasks to students, sometimes in groups, which diminishes the seriousness surrounding the quality of submitted reports and recorded performances. However, an increasing number of teachers at the University of Bamenda, previously trained, are using the Moodle teaching platform as recommended by the administration, which is better equipped to ensure the quality control of teaching and evaluation. Outside of these instances, however, improvisation still reigns.

- ***Organizational Uncertainties and Leadership Issues in Teaching and Learning Activities***

Planning is one of the pedagogical principles that should be observed in teaching to prepare learners for the day's classes. However, field observations reveal that the only certainties reside in audio visual programs on the CRTV (Cameroon Radio and Television). Programs often developed freely by teachers on social media, Moodle, Zoom, and Google Classroom are not always strictly adhered to by themselves or by learners, for various reasons: some personal (secondary work, unavailability, lack of internet credit, digital illiteracy, and distraction) and others structural (lack of power, internet connection, poor quality of connection equipment). Gwashi, a student at the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Bamenda, states:

“You can end up with fifteen hundred messages from four courses at once after doing domestic or field tasks. And it becomes discouraging to read them. When by chance you find yourself online, two or three teachers might be teaching at the same time. You may love what you do, but it ends up confusing.”⁴

As teaching increasingly relies on digital platforms, its success depends on learners' full capacity to connect according to a predetermined schedule to benefit from their facilitators' guidance. However, it has been observed that at the secondary level, many learners do not have personal smartphones and thus depend on a parent to access resources provided by the instructor. To address this, some parents have been integrated into the WhatsApp forums created for this purpose. However, some of them act as if they are students, sometimes leading to quarrels with teachers. Georges expresses his frustration when he states:

“Can you imagine that some parents come into the group to ask questions on behalf of their children? They tell you it's their phone, and if you want their child to participate in class, you should teach according to their schedule. They bring up discussions that have nothing to do with the lessons, and when you point it out, it sometimes ends in arguments.”⁵

This opinion from the teacher is supported by numerous other testimonies from instructors who feel listened to by parents during online classes, and some

⁴Group interview via WhatsApp on April 12, 2020.

⁵Interview through Telephone on April 14, 2020.

even feel influenced by them. They then believe they are no longer “masters” of the classroom. They are thus forced into behavioural theatrics to avoid personal attacks. These entirely new situations are merely pedagogical impostures, with remarkable effects on teachers’ motivation. The inability to know exactly who their learners are presents a significant contradiction in the pedagogical approach of the system designed for content development, which is based on prior knowledge of the target audience. The teacher thus cannot assert authority in applying methods to maintain order in their virtual classroom. This reflects that pedagogical dynamics have not always been accompanied by consequential administrative adjustments.

- ***Normalization of the Strict Minimum***

One of the major challenges of digitizing teaching/learning in a confinement context is awakening the intrinsic motivation of the actors for real optimization of interaction opportunities. Some teachers do not find the motivation to fully engage in teaching activities when there is no efficient mechanism for quality control and attendance in teaching. Each person being their own master, a certain laxity is observed. Adam, a teacher at the University of Bamenda, laments that the digital link with students has simply been a waste of time: “Teaching via WhatsApp with students has just been a beautiful way to waste my time. The students were so quiet that I often wondered if I was alone in the group. I assigned homework, I graded it myself. So, I realized that only a break would do me good, and I gave up.”⁶

Moreover, no one followed up with him on this as he declared. Like many colleagues, he merely hands out course materials to students and then nothing more. Learners also demonstrate an extremely low level of participation in some online classes, contributing to the consolidation of a mentality of doing the bare minimum. Afanwi, a teacher at the Bilingual High School of Down Town, expresses his dismay: “Students do not participate in the class; they remain silent despite my multiple calls and encouragements through bonuses. However, a small neighbourhood story will draw them out, but once we return to the lesson, they revert to silence.”⁷ Jeremy, a teacher at the Bilingual High School of Bamendankwe, believes that “among the few students who have access to an Android phone, less than half actually work and submit their homework on time. You give them an assignment for two hours, and they complete it two days later.”⁸ Thus, the educational technology chosen in a crisis context carries a host of contradictions. Not only is it prioritized solely for examination classes, thereby marginalizing intermediate classes, but also, learners who have succeeded in responding to the call to engage in online teaching are not systematically present during class hours, contenting themselves instead to read comments and notes afterward. They are thus completely deprived of the influence of the instructor’s character. This also limits interaction at the appropriate time, causing irrelevant and untimely references to

⁶Interview through Telephone on April 17, 2020.

⁷Interview through Telephone on April 18, 2020.

⁸Interview through Telephone on April 18, 2020.

previous activities. This is, in fact, presented as a barrier to covering content and programs effectively.

2) Contextual Challenges

Bamenda is currently facing a dual health and security crisis. This situation produces various challenges: internal displacement, refuge, poor energy quality, inadequate communication networks, impoverishment, precarious employment, idleness, and unemployment. UN Organization for Refugees (UNHCR) and Education, Science, and Culture (UNESCO) (UNESCO & UNHCR, 2016: Policy Paper 26) state that refugee adolescents are five times more likely to be out of school compared to their non-refugee peers, with 50% of refugee children of primary school age and 75% of secondary school-age refugees not attending school. Similarly, these institutions estimate that educational inequalities increase in contexts of insecurity and conflict. Thus, 39% of primary school children and 17% of secondary school children from poor families will complete their schooling, compared to 77% at primary and 37% at secondary for wealthier families. These statistics can be even more dramatic when considering the numerous cases of violence, rape, killings, threats, and assaults on students that the region has become a theatre for since the onset of the security crisis. The UN agency OCHA reports that in the Northwest, 3692 schools and 2436 community education and learning centres have been temporarily closed since March 18, 2020, to slow the spread of COVID-19, forcing 570,000 school-age children to stay home due to the dual health and security crisis. This includes 73,742 students from public schools and 197,200 learners from community education and learning centres (OCHA, 2020). It is striking to learn that since 2016, many of these children have not set foot in school, particularly those living in peripheral and difficult neighbourhoods. COVID-19 has merely compelled other children to join them in the streets, fields, and markets.

Primary school children and intermediate secondary school students are particularly affected by COVID-19. They are almost completely abandoned, as audio-visual lessons are only offered for the final year of primary school. Georges, a teacher at the Old Town Public School, expresses his frustration, stating, “Children and even some parents do not have access to smartphones. Moreover, we haven’t received any specific instructions to conduct online teaching. So we can’t do anything.”⁹ This situation is similar in all peripheral schools, where they have managed to operate. Government measures against COVID-19 have rather appeared as a pre-emptive anticipation of an indefinite break.

The situation is indeed complex at the higher education level, but there have been some advances, particularly in terms of online courses, remote assessments, and in-person educational activities lasting two to three weeks at most, which learners appreciate differently. Milena, a first-year Biology student at the School of Education in Bambili, claims:

“Online classes prevent risky movements and also improve our skills in e-

⁹Interview through WhatsApp on April 16, 2020.

learning. But the downside is that not all students participate. Many live in villages, without smartphones, without telecommunication networks, without TV signal, and without electricity. The issue of power particularly highlights the struggle.”¹⁰

Discussions with learners reveal that electricity is provided for an average of two hours daily in certain departments of the region, with total outages in peripheral localities far from the regional capital. Economic activity is also stunted due to insecurity, supply blockages, and property destruction, in a context where populations primarily aim to survive. Learners highlight the difficulties they face in attending online classes. Kenkia, a student at the School of Technology at the University of Bamenda, states, “Online classes are expensive. I spend an average of 500 francs for two hours of class on Moodle with one teacher. But we have ten courses this semester. My parents do not have enough money to pay for sufficient data.”¹¹ This complaint has been recurrent among learners who say they choose courses based on their financial constraints. Under these conditions, the conclusion is clear: the trajectories of educational technology (educational content, teaching methods, teaching platforms, evaluation approaches, etc.) still face challenges in truly addressing contemporary issues.

3) Inadequate Mastery of Technological Know-How

The explanatory frameworks for the limited technological integration of teaching in schools, even where it is possible, often highlight the inadequacy of teacher training regarding the pedagogical use of these tools. [Depover et al. \(2007: p. 173\)](#) observe that the “low techno-pedagogical competence” of teachers is a significant barrier to the integration of technologies in teaching, despite some governments’ efforts to equip their educational institutions with information and communication technologies. The sporadic use of advanced media in teaching is characteristic of schools in the country. The majority of teachers claim they have not been trained in the use of these media. Eric, a teacher at the Bilingual High School of Bamendankwe, expresses his reluctance to integrate advanced media into his teaching due to the fear of failure: “I am not ready for the adventure they are asking us to embark on. Online teaching is technical, and I have not been trained for that. I am not ready to be ridiculed by today’s students who know ICT better than I do.”¹² This reluctance is not an isolated case; many others say they limit themselves to WhatsApp because they believe it is less complex to use.

Since March 2020, the University of Bamenda has organized half a dozen pedagogical training seminars for online teaching for its faculty and has subsequently recommended that each teacher upload their courses to the university platform. However, an evaluation by the central administration in May 2021 revealed a timid response to this initiative. As a result, additional seminars are organized in various establishments to boost usage. However, the absence of continuous elec-

¹⁰Group interview via WhatsApp on April 16, 2020.

¹¹Interview through Telephone on April 17, 2020.

¹²Interview through Telephone on April 18, 2020.

tricity and connection equipment on campus, as well as the poor bandwidth capacity, are blamed by teachers. But, in reality, it is also the approximate mastery of using digital interfaces for pedagogical objectives that is obscured.

Taptue (2020) sadly recounts the Basic Education Quality Improvement Project (PAQUEB), which involved the use of the XO mini-computer in 51 primary schools in Cameroon. He notes that this initiative fell into neglect four years after its implementation, among other reasons due to what he describes as administrative inconsistencies and a paradoxical over-motivation of students, inversely proportional to the permanent demotivation of teachers (Taptue, 2020). Thus, the still insufficient and marginal initiatives to equip schools and train teachers in the use of advanced media do not always produce the expected effects; there remains a relatively shallow understanding of the principles and tools of distance education.

4) Family Environmental Inconsistencies Regarding Home Schooling Issues

The confinement due to COVID-19 has directly resulted in the transfer of classrooms into family homes. The emphasis on home schooling, even with the aid of educational technology, is fraught with various constraints. It requires a pedagogical approach different from traditional classroom teaching/learning modalities. Observations reveal that the family environment is often compromising, if not hostile, to educational activities. The nuisances are of various kinds, ranging from noise to interference from parents, children, television, and social networks. Helena, a first-year student at the Bilingual High School of Attiela, expresses her distress with these words:

“It is difficult for me to create my personal study schedule at home because my mother always tells me when we should go to the fields, when I should sell avocados, when I should prepare food, when I should take care of my younger siblings. Even if a teacher is teaching on WhatsApp, I have to do what she asks first.”¹³

In this case, the family environment is a real barrier to the learner’s participation in expected learning activities. However, it has also been observed in many other families that parents are enthusiastic about making special arrangements (generators, smartphones, etc.) so that their exam-level children can follow lessons broadcast on television or digital platforms.

Eric, a teacher at the Bilingual High School of Bamendankwe, emphasizes the factors of motivation and pressure to fulfil his online teaching responsibilities on time: “I find it hard to sit down to teach because I don’t feel the pressure, and on top of that, one or two things will always come to disturb me. Especially with social media, a message comes through quickly.”¹⁴ He adds that he only knows about eight of his students who follow him online out of the thirty he had in class. Thus, educational technology appears to him as a missed democratization of access to

¹³Interview through Telephone on April 14, 2020.

¹⁴Interview through Telephone on April 18, 2020.

educational knowledge, due to inequalities in access to digital tools and the pedagogical and didactic ambiguities that surround it in the Cameroonian context. Home schooling is a place that requires discipline, and when that discipline is compromised at its foundations, teaching too will inevitably be negatively affected.

5) Inadequate Pedagogical Scenarios and Didactic Content for Digital Teaching

Educational technology is an innovative practice still waiting for proper positioning within a genuine pedagogical scenario in the Cameroonian context. According to [Djeumeni Tchamabe \(2010: p. 94\)](#), a pedagogical scenario involves adopting “a pedagogical approach in the selection of appropriate tools that allow for a coherent training design.” Thus, it is still in search of an anchoring that enables it to ensure the continuity of learning with at least the same effectiveness as traditional approaches. The digitization of course materials is not widespread among teachers at various levels of the educational chain. Traditionally, schools have not required the digitization of teachings. The shift towards educational technology has left many of these teachers feeling bewildered. Their lessons are prepared on paper and notebooks and are not adapted to current challenges and digital pedagogy. John, a teacher at the Baptist Primary School of Mile Four Nkwen, notes, “My lessons are prepared in the notebook given to us at the start of the year; there are drawings, figures, and formulas that I cannot grasp.”¹⁵ It is worth mentioning that this teacher does not own a personal computer, and his school has only one computer available for the principal.

Whether among teachers or learners, traditional schooling still seems preferred. Samuel, a Mathematics student at the School of Education in Bambili, expresses this sentiment: “Mathematics cannot be effectively taught online. Our teachers are improvising on WhatsApp, but we can’t logically follow their reasoning. I think understanding the material is more limited compared to classroom teaching.”¹⁶ Jude, another Chemistry student from the same school, admits, “All our practical courses are on hold because we can’t do them online. Teachers only try to cover the theoretical parts of their courses because we don’t know how to conduct practical work otherwise.”¹⁷ Integrating digital technology into teaching and learning is thus a challenge that needs to be addressed systematically, starting from the educational goals, through pedagogical methods, management and evaluation systems, to the development of charters for the efficient use of technology in education in Cameroon.

The inaccuracies, hesitations, and indecisions in pedagogical supervision highlighted by [Taptue \(2020\)](#) reinforce the previous observations. From the negligence in mobilizing intrinsic and extrinsic motivational elements to the vagueness of controlling the pedagogical transaction processes, along with the observed weak-

¹⁵Interview through Telephone on April 20, 2020.

¹⁶Group interview via WhatsApp on April 16, 2020.

¹⁷Group interview via WhatsApp on April 16, 2020.

ness in the verticality of pedagogical supervision processes, marked by minimal control, and the apparent dilettantism in adapting to educational technology under the impetus of COVID-19, it becomes easy to conclude that the integration is poorly initiated (Taptue, 2020). OCHA (2020: p. 51) further adds to this by discussing the chronic vulnerability of communities, structures, and services, which supports the pessimistic projections of the UN agency regarding the successful adaptation of the Cameroonian socio-educational system to the challenges imposed by the health crisis. The clarity of pedagogical supervision processes is crucial for the anticipated quality of outcomes. As Taptue (2018) rightly states, “Technological innovations that impose additional efforts on educational actors for appropriation also carry affordances and risks of deteriorating the effectiveness of pedagogical supervision, which is not always well-managed.” Therefore, it may not be an exaggeration to say that the popular choice of digital technology as a legitimate response to the coronavirus crisis currently appears whimsical, given that long-term commitment is one of the cardinal principles of education in crisis situations, according to Chelpi-den Hamer, Fresia, and Lanoue (2010: pp. 3-22). The current hesitations regarding the establishment of pedagogical exchange platforms, the lack of mastery over creating pedagogical content compatible with digital teaching, and the passivity of many educational leaders concerning the implementation of alternative strategies to face-to-face teaching all indicate a context of improvisation.

6) Adaptive Practices that are not Inclusive

The issue of inclusivity remains acute in the Cameroonian school system. While primary and secondary teachers trained in differential pedagogy can implement its principles, this is not always the case at the university level. Carrière (2013: p. 2) rightly observes that university teachers must “solely rely on their adaptive skills to manage each case and collaborate to help students.” However, the question arises regarding the implementation of differential pedagogy by actors who are unaware of its pedagogical principles and the didactic implications of deficiencies. From the experiences of learners at the University of Bamenda, online teaching is not sufficiently inclusive simply because teachers have not yet integrated the principles of digital assistive pedagogy, in addition to the poor provision of assistive technology for learners. The premise of online teaching is based on learners’ equal access to digital tools that enable Internet navigation, which is not always the case for many learners, either due to poverty or visual impairment.

However, it is noteworthy that some non-sighted or visually impaired learners are capable of using computers and do not feel excluded from online courses. Nsagha, a special education expert, states that only visually impaired learners from affluent families and in research cycles have access to tools adapted to their disabilities and can thus access audio and digital content. The expert, who oversees the academic support of visually impaired students, concludes that “a good number of these visually impaired students are simply unprepared for the current ed-

educational systems being used.” (Nsagha)¹⁸ The statements of primary and secondary teachers corroborate the near-exclusion of learners who require special pedagogical support. These difficulties, already prevalent in ordinary classroom teaching practices, are exacerbated by the renewal of the pedagogical transaction stemming from the COVID-19 crisis.

7) When Digital Technology Empowers some Learners, but not for the Course

Educational technology presents a significant advantage, recognized by both learners and teachers at this moment. It allows everyone to overcome the embarrassment of speaking in public and the fear of others’ judgment. It creates a mental comfort for all, at least in terms of communication. Consequently, it helps to ease the relationships between teachers and learners. Solange, a student at the School of Education in Bambili, expresses this: “From my perspective, the advantage of digital teaching is that every student has the opportunity to express what they have on their mind without having to ask for permission. The fact is that not everyone is able to express themselves confidently in front of their peers.”¹⁹ The few teachers who speak positively about satisfactory learner participation find it beneficial.

On the other hand, sharing teachers’ phone numbers with learners has given some students an unexpected opportunity to emerge from their emotional shells. Some teachers report feeling disturbed by receiving calls and messages from their students. Some even liken it to harassment. This is the case for Gilead from the Bilingual High School of Bamenda-Ntamulung, who states, “One of my students told me in a private message, without hesitation, that she finally has my phone number and that soon, I will belong to her. Since then, she has been sending me suggestive messages despite my not responding.”²⁰ His experience reflects that of many other teachers who fear for their marriages because students call at odd hours with bizarre excuses, simply to interact with their teacher.

7. De-Confining Suggested Insights

The situation in Bamenda represents a unique case within the broader context of Cameroon, particularly in light of the on-going conflict instigated by rebel groups since late 2016. This conflict has precipitated a rapid shift towards digital technologies in education as schools and the Ministry of Secondary Education swiftly developed dedicated e-learning platforms. This adaptation not only legitimized the use of mobile phones among learners but also highlighted the resilience of the educational system in the face of adversity (Chiatoh & Chia, 2020). However, this transformation has not been universally experienced across the nation, particularly in rural areas, where access to technology and internet connectivity remains limited. The disparities in adoption reflect the socio-economic and infrastructural challenges that hinder effective learning and teaching in these regions (Tabuwe et al., 2013) and beyond, as many areas in Cameroon are yet to be covered by tele-

¹⁸Interview through Telephone on April 22, 2020.

¹⁹Group Interview on WhatsApp, 16 April 2020.

²⁰Whatsapp interview on April 18, 2020.

communication networks and electricity.

In contrast, regions such as the Far North of Cameroon, which have also faced security crises due to the chaotic attacks of boko haram, exhibit a slower pace of educational innovation. The educational challenges in the Far North are compounded by systemic issues such as poverty, limited governmental support, a perception that education is a subsidiary concern amongst the populations, mainly in rural areas (Ngoasong, 2018). Research by Ngwa (2020) highlights that while urban centers such as Douala have rapidly adopted digital tools, rural areas struggle with infrastructural deficits, thereby limiting the reach of digital education. This comparison underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of how conflict influences educational strategies in various regions and areas. While Bamenda's proactive approach to digital learning demonstrates a potential pathway for educational continuity amidst crisis, it also raises questions about equity and the long-term sustainability of such initiatives, particularly for those in under-resourced areas (Ollong, 2015).

Furthermore, a comparative analysis with other conflict-affected countries could enrich our understanding of these dynamics. For instance, countries like Afghanistan and Syria have similarly witnessed disruptions in education due to conflict, yet their responses have varied significantly. While some regions have leveraged international support to enhance digital learning, others continue to grapple with basic educational access (Minang & McCall, 2008). The continuous conflict in these countries led to a reliance on digital education as a means of continuing learning (UNESCO, 2021). A study by the Norwegian Refugee Council (2020) revealed that while digital platforms were adopted, access remained inequitable, particularly for girls and marginalized communities. The use of mobile learning in South Sudan (World Bank, 2018) helped to adapt to the security crisis therein, but the challenges faced are similar. Such comparisons underscore the universal challenges of digital education in conflict zones, including issues of access, equity, and the digital divide.

8. Conclusion

Through its trajectories, education under the skies of Bamenda has long worn the mask of a balancing act. It has surfed through the multiple crises faced by the institution to establish its own identity. Through numerous adaptations, improvisations, and adjustments, the school has managed to maintain its operations. However, the major public health crisis experienced since March 2020 has called these achievements into question. Everything now needs to be invented and created regarding its pedagogical principles and didactic modalities, dictated by the techno-scientific imperative. This is the logical consequence of the choice to adopt educational technology in response to the lockdown imposed by the government in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic threat. This research explored the process of functional rebalancing of the educational institution as it adapts to contextual challenges. Yet, barely has educational technology been explored, it already faces

another crisis: the inherent inequalities in access to digital resources. COVID-19 has thus far spoken the language of dispossession, deregulation, and the fragility of human societies. These societies have seen their certainties vanish and new reflexes develop under the urgency's dictation. This pandemic virus may be the impetus for inaugurating a new society. But in the meantime, it is an era of multifaceted improvisations and juggling in the educational sector of Bamenda in response to pedagogical and didactic challenges.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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