GOING DIGITAL...
• RESPONSIBLY
• IN COLLABORATION
• AT SCHOOL
• AT HOME

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GOING digital!
LEARNING AT HOME:
A major challenge for students... and parents.

The educational environment from March to June 2020 was genuinely surreal due to an unprecedented number of children no longer attending school because of Covid-19. In fact, at one time or another, more than 2 billion learners from more than 180 countries had been confined.

It was in that context that the team of the Canada Research Chair in Technologies in Education, with the invaluable collaboration of the Quebec Federation of Parents’ Committees, carried out a vast study to better understand how parents and students dealt with schooling at home.

More than 10,000 people participated in this research: 4,830 parents and some 5,747 students, including those in kindergarten. All subjects answered an online questionnaire, and many participated in online sessions using Zoom, making it possible to conduct several group interviews with parents from across Quebec.

With this survey, we specifically sought to better understand the challenges encountered by parents and students during a situation that forced all of them to learn from home. Results from the questionnaire and group interviews revealed five principal difficulties encountered: access to digital devices, lack of communication from school or teachers, the work-family balance, student success, and academic motivation. We will only present here an extract of the numerous results resulting from this survey, which is currently available on the website of the Canada Research Chair in Technologies in Education.

Access to a digital device: The main problem?
Some 32% of parents believe that access to digital devices has been a challenge for distance learning. Most often, the number of digital devices available at home was much less than the number of people who had to use them daily:

“We have only one computer at home and three children. So it is complicated to set up learning because everything is done by computer.” (parent)

Today we see that several steps have been taken to face this first challenge encountered by so many Quebec families during the pandemic. Indeed, one can celebrate the investments by the Quebec government for the purchase of digital devices for students: $150 million in June for computers and tablets, as well as a reserve of 30,000 devices announced last August. These unprecedented investments for Quebec students should at least in part, alleviate this challenge, provided that all devices are given to students who need it most, along with training to use them for them and their teachers. The key to successful integration of digital education is based on these three essential and complementary steps.
School at home: A lack of communication from schools or teachers?

What really seemed to irritate parents during the pandemic was the level of communication or information received from schools or their child’s teachers during the pandemic. These are 17% of approximately 4,830 parents surveyed, who say they have received no communication from the school or their children’s teachers during the first seven weeks of the pandemic (Figure 1):

“There was radio silence for about 3-4 weeks in elementary school and a good month in secondary school from the teachers. Also, from the point of view of communication via the portal or via emails, it was the same thing, radio silence on both sides. [...]” (parent)

For others (17%), there was only one communication in seven weeks. Almost half of parents (46%) said they received on average one communication weekly, either from a teacher or the school. Only one in five parents report having received two or more communications per week during the first seven weeks of the pandemic. Finally, we must also note - and this can be explained by the context but was nevertheless a challenge for parents - the occasional contradictory communications received from teachers or schools:

“I would say that what emerged was chaotic communications, that is, difficulties in communicating clearly, either on the part of the administration or on the part of the teachers: missing information, missing files, non-functional hyperlinks.” (parent)

School at home and parents’ work: Irreconcilable?

Another major challenge faced by many parents was reconciling their own work with their children learning from home. Due to time factors, among other reasons, 60% of students indicated that they were more or less accompanied by their parents when doing schoolwork. With online learning for students and telework for parents, families have been confronted with new issues relating to the work-family balance, as the home has become the principal space to learn and work simultaneously. In this sense, the survey data reveals that conciliation of “home school” and work is a headache for parents:

“I am alone with the children and teleworking full-time from Monday to Friday, trying to manage all of this.” (parent)

“It was very difficult to try to lead them while working; I felt incompetent in all areas.” (parent)
In addition to the time issue related to parents’ work, many did not feel competent enough to help their children:

“I would say the challenge is my teaching skills ... I’m really not a good teacher!” (parent)

Schooling at home and academic success: A troublesome marriage?

One challenge raised by some 25% of parents is the issue of their child’s academic success:

“When the pandemic began in the beginning there was nothing... We received nothing from the school, and I had fears about the academic success of my youngest child.” (parent)

This concern was also shared by students but to a lesser extent (21%). Like their parents, they are either afraid of having “learned less” at home, “of having increased difficulties” when they return to class, perhaps even failing their school year:

“I’m afraid of having difficulty next year, because of the delay [...].” (student)

The question here is whether this concern is greater than what is found in a normal school year, without a health crisis. Research on the issue shows that parents’ and students’ concerns are similar to those noted in our survey.

Can distance learning and academic motivation live well together?

Another issue eliciting many opinions is that of student motivation. Did it really decrease during the pandemic? This worried almost a quarter of parents questioned, and with good reason it seems, since some 46% of students themselves felt that their academic motivation had diminished for a variety of reasons. Several parents have also spoken at length of situations where their child was demotivated by the exceptional circumstances:

“There is no more motivation, zero. I have to haggle with him just to sit in front of the screen to listen to his teacher.” (parent)

That said, there are still 26% of students whose academic motivation remained unchanged, and even 28% insisting that it increased during the pandemic. These results must also be taken in context: Research shows, overall, that academic motivation decreases between the beginning and end of the school year. That it decreased at the end of the year is perhaps therefore, not so surprising. It is also likely that we can find anecdotes similar to those told by parents in a completely normal health context.

However, the problem of school motivation in a context where children are at home, was still more pervasive for parents.
Conclusion
Conducted during unusual circumstances, our survey made it possible to identify the five main challenges faced by parents and students during the pandemic: digital access, communication from schools and teachers, work-family balance, academic success, and motivation. We must draw lessons from these difficult weeks when many families remained confined at home, to better prepare for a possible second wave, or even quite simply to help our children in their school career.

Has the problem of accessing a digital device been resolved? Are schools and teachers sufficiently sensitized to the importance of regular communication with pupils and parents? How do you find effective strategies to reconcile work and school at home? What can be done to support your child in their academic success and help maintain their academic motivation?

These are the challenges.

1 http://karsenti.ca
3 https://www.lapresse.ca/actualites/education/2020-08-12/quebec-cree-une-reserve-de-30-000-appareil-informatiques-pour-les-eleves.php

L’équipe de la Chaire de recherche du Canada sur le numérique en éducation contribue à « aplanir la courbe ». Afin de garder nos employés, nos familles et nos communautés en santé, nous avons opté pour un environnement de travail virtuel.

Pendant cette période, plusieurs de nos activités se poursuivent, mais à distance. À titre d’exemple, nous avons participé – et participons toujours – au développement de ecoleouverte.ca

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