

CRISIS AND THE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION OF EDUCATION IN HAITI: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

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Introduction

Crises are often experienced, presented, and analyzed as a structuring feature of Haitian society¹. This can be seen in the expressions and conceptual figures researchers use to characterize and understand them. For example, Leslie François Manigat (2009) speaks of a "political crisis," a "crisis of the modernization process," and a "crisis of survival"; Frédéric Gérald Chéry (2005) and Rose Nesmy Saint Louis (2011) speak of a "permanent crisis"; Fritz Dorvilier (2012) uses the expression "development crisis" proposed by Jean (1988) Sauveur Pierre Etienne (2007) suggests the expression "*crise structurelle biséculaire*". The education system is no exception to this analytical perspective. It is common to consider the Haitian education system as being in crisis (See, for example, Dorvilier 2012, chap. 2; Louis-Juste 2003; Jean 1988). Research and official reports from the Ministry of National Education and Vocational Training (MENFP) help to describe an educational system that is "obsolete," "turned to the past," and "in crisis" (Souffrant 1995; MENFP 2006; Prou 2016) and therefore incapable of fulfilling its social and political functions. From this perspective, crises are a defining criterion for society and the education system.

These discourses of crisis, which reflect the organizational dysfunctions of Haitian society, often conceal the fact that the events, phenomena, and periods presented as social and political crises also represent challenges to be overcome by the education system. Observation shows that the crises affecting Haitian society, whether cyclical or structural, often place constraints on the education system that exceed its organizational capacities, forcing it to adapt. This adaptation, which largely depends on interactions between individual players (educational entrepreneurs, parents, students), fills the void left by the absence or inadequacy of public policies in the field of education. As a result, its characteristics, functioning, and reproduction are determined by how it adapts organizationally.

For example, in the second half of the last century, "lekòl bòlèt" (or *borlette* schools) - essentially informal and arbitrary educational institutions offering poor quality education - emerged in response to the increased demand for education resulting in part from urban demographic transformations in Haiti (De Ronceray 1979). These schools, representing the vast majority of Haiti's educational provision, now cater to "more than 75% of the school-going population" (UNESCO 2021). In this sense, they play a crucial role in Haiti's social production of education. They are criticized and decried by researchers (François 2010; Joint 2006) and by

¹ This chapter comes from a contribution presented on June 22, 2022, at the second KIX Virtual Conference Latin America and the Caribbean: Educating in times of crisis and coping with emergencies.

the MENFP (MENFP 2020b; 2006). However, in the face of deficient educational policies, they continue to consolidate their position as an essential component of education in the country. Therefore, It is understandable that the education system's current situation derives mainly from a social response emerging from the dynamics of interactions between social actors (entrepreneurs-school owners, parents, students) outside the governance of the government entities responsible for national education.

In recent years, the education system has had to cope with significant constraints linked to the political upheavals of the "peyi lòk" (blocked country) (in 2019) and the COVID-19 pandemic. These constraints, which threatened its temporality, led it to embrace the digital to produce ad hoc solution elements using its modalities of resilience in the face of crises. A whole framework of social action can be seen here to transform education in Haiti digitally. From this point of view, how has the pandemic and political upheaval affected the use of digital technology in education in Haiti? Accelerated during the pandemic, digital use in education has recently offered a new environment for producing and distributing school knowledge while transmuting the relationship between key stakeholders (teachers, students, families, schools, and authorities) (Oliveira and de Souza 2021). This question is particularly relevant as it invites us to explore digital education's new meanings, discourses, and practices in the Haitian context characterized by limited access to electricity, internet, and computers.

This contribution, which stems from an ongoing study at the *Centre haïtien de recherche en sciences sociales* (CHARESSO), sets out to provide some answers to this question using a simultaneous mixed-methods approach². In this respect, in addition to the quantitative survey of 120 schools (n=120), the qualitative analysis takes into account educational videos hosted on the YouTube channel PRATIC MENFP TV, content from the website of the *Plateforme de ressources éducatives et d'apprentissage par les Technologies de l'Information et la Communication* (Pr@tic) <http://pratic.menfp.gouv.ht/app/> set up by the MENFP (MENFP 2020c) and a series of six interviews with school stakeholders³.

1. The Haitian education system in the face of recent crises

Over the past two decades, Haitian society has experienced multiple periods of intense instability against a backdrop of structural crisis. These periods have been characterized by waves of demonstrations coupled with a structuring of violence across the country. As instruments of political struggle, demonstrations are places for expressing social and political demands capable of disrupting daily activities (Walgrave 2013). When carried out repeatedly, they lead to the dysfunction of educational institutions along their route. For its part, armed violence used as an instrument of political control since the Duvalier dictatorship (1957-1986), has recently been transformed into a mode of sociability that governs social life in many city

² The study "Crises and transformations of education in Haiti" began in January 2022 and will end in December 2022.

³ The interviews were as follows: two school directors, two students, and two teachers. They were carried out between May 12 and June 20, 2022



neighborhoods and even in the rural world (Gilles 2012; Corten 2002; Noel and Pierre-Louis 2022).

In this context, a few months before the COVID-19 pandemic, social and political upheavals in Haiti repeatedly led to a phenomenon commonly referred to in the national language as *peyi lòk* ("closed country"). *Peyi lòk* resulted from the initiative of a section of the political class who believed that a total freeze on daily life activities could put pressure on the government of the day to respond to their demands. Armed violence, or the threat of it, was used to impose this situation. As a result, schools and other services were closed. The closure of schools posed a significant problem for education, as schools operate according to their timetable, articulated around the notion of the school year, which extends over ten months (from September to June). In this sense, *peyi lòk* posed a particular challenge to the education system. How to respond? The MENFP, which was also affected by the stoppage of activities, could not propose a rapid solution to guarantee the continuity of educational activities. It should be noted that for most of the country's private schools, payment of tuition fees is often conditional on pedagogical continuity or the appearance thereof. In this context, for most educational institutions, it was imperative to continue operating to "save the school year," as school principals and teachers interviewed for this study put it. Indeed, these schools could only convince parents to continue paying school fees with pedagogical continuity. Thus, "saving the school year" had a particular meaning.

However, ensuring pedagogical continuity at a distance took a lot of work. Haiti remains a country with a considerable technological backlog. Electricity is relatively scarce: in 2020, only 46.9% of the population had limited access to electricity (The World Bank 2022a). The guaranteed standard of living allows only limited access to connected technological tools such as computers and smart cell phones. Internet access is also limited: according to the World Bank (2022b), in 2020, only 35% of Haitians had access to the internet. The internet is structurally distributed to satisfy basic instant communication needs, essentially via WhatsApp. Indeed, the two cell phone companies currently operating in Haiti offer "daily plans" that balance consumers' needs and purchasing power⁴. As a result, most users consume the internet on a limited daily basis. It should also be noted that educational institutions generally need more administrative, technological, and cognitive prerequisites that would enable them to set up a distance learning system. In this context, the WhatsApp instant communication service seemed the tool for maintaining a certain pedagogical continuity during weeks when it was impossible to visit educational establishments physically. The spontaneous choice to use WhatsApp as a teaching platform gave rise to WhatsApp pedagogy. This expression refers to the improvised pedagogical practice of using WhatsApp to transmit educational content designed for structured face-to-face teaching.

Discussions with school stakeholders have shown that WhatsApp pedagogy is about creating WhatsApp groups that bring together learners and, generally, the teacher of a

⁴ Daily plans generally cost less than 10 HTG, equivalent to 0.078 USD.

particular school subject. The teacher publishes educational content as an audio message (commonly known as "voice"), and the learners take notes in their notebooks or listen passively. In return, they can send text or audio messages. However, as in the ordinary pedagogical space, the teacher remains the key player in the classroom. WhatsApp is also used in some schools to assess learners' knowledge formally. There are no specific standards or regulations governing the use of WhatsApp. The use of these tools is subject to the same general rules that are common sense in the social space of formal education. When asked about the effectiveness of this tool, all the actors claimed it was ineffective. "WhatsApp is not effective for teaching and education. But without this tool, we would have lost the whole school year", asserts a School Director in Port-au-Prince interviewed on May 12, 2022. This statement aligns with a student's assessment in Saint-Marc: "WhatsApp is not a good pedagogical tool." (interview conducted on May 20, 2022).

Even if not considered adequate, WhatsApp pedagogy was accepted as a legitimate distance learning tool for schools that adopted it during break times. This legitimacy was reinforced because only certain schools could access it. Out of 120 schools considered, only 42, or 35%, managed to use it.

In December 2019, the Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale et de la Formation Professionnelle (MENFP), as the government body responsible for governing the education system, proposed its response to the crisis by rearranging the academic calendar and making substantial curricular changes. These changes essentially consisted of shortening teaching programs. For example, they published the Minimum Competency Programs online. According to the introduction common to all the programs, "Overall, it's a question of evaluating the number of school days missed during this period and taking into account the essentials in each discipline, i.e., the disciplinary themes that will validate the academic year for each level of teaching." (MENFP 2019) These new Programs did not consider the latest pedagogical practices emerging in using WhatsApp over the previous months by many schools.

It's worth noting that there is a certain distance between official discourse and the practices that underpin the production of the Haitian education system. The emergence of the *lekòl bolèt* (borlette) schools mentioned above illustrates this distance. While they make up the bulk of the educational provision - over 75%, according to UNESCO (2021) - we recognize that their characteristics, curricular practices, and modes of operation do not correspond to MENFP standards. This distance is linked to the fact that the social reality of schools is rarely considered in producing normative discourse, teaching content policies, and frameworks for action. Thus, faced with the new reality generated by the *peyi lòk* (closed country) and the pandemic, the Ministry proposed a response that largely ignored the reality of schools. For their part, the schools created their solution to the crisis without considering MENFP.

The spontaneous experience of distance learning via WhatsApp shows us two essential elements. Firstly, we can observe the resilience of the system and its ability to respond to exceptional situations of disruption through the use of a particular collective creativity on the

part of actors and institutions. Secondly, by using technology as a key means of distance education, some schools have taken an important step that can help lay the foundations for the digital transformation of education in Haiti. This second element would appear to be the appropriate solution to the crisis caused by COVID-19.

2. Pathways to digital transformation in education in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

When the COVID-19 pandemic threatened educational continuity in early 2020, Haitian education authorities, echoing the global trend, rushed to announce the implementation of a digital platform called Plateforme de ressources éducatives et d'apprentissage par les Technologies de l'Information et la Communication (PR@TIC) (MENFP 2020c) to provide a strategic response to the new challenges facing the school system. This platform promised much regarding the digital transformation of the Haitian education system. However, despite the rhetoric surrounding it, it is still far from being able to make a significant contribution to the digital transmission of educational content in Haiti.

PR@TIC was announced in March 2020 as a strategic response to ensure pedagogical continuity in the context of containment and social distancing recommended by health authorities to slow the spread of COVID-19 (MENFP 2020a). It was to complement the distance education activities offered by MENFP through television programs broadcast on Haitian National Television and community radio stations across the country (UNESCO 2020). However, unlike the television and radio broadcasts, the PR@TIC platform promised an interactive, web-based learning environment based on formal pedagogical exchanges. In addition to Internet access, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO 2020) informed that educational content would be available on USB media in the relevant departments and technical directorates to benefit students. MENFP states, "PR@TIC is a digital support tool enabling students and teachers to stay in touch through a wide range of educational and pedagogical resources to avoid any break in the teaching-learning process already underway." (MENFP 2020a)

Analysis of the <http://pratic.menfp.gouv.ht/app/> platform website reveals three key elements.

Firstly, the choice of Moodle to host the platform indicates the desire to build a structured pedagogical space with controlled access⁵. Moreover, it presents itself as a strategic solution, "a digital support tool enabling the student and teacher to keep in touch through numerous educational and pedagogical resources to avoid any break in the teaching-learning process already underway." (MENFP 2020a). This definition, found in the footer of its website,

⁵ The MENFP does not offer any technical information on this subject, and we noticed this by inspecting the source code at the base of the site <http://pratic.menfp.gouv.ht/app/>. Note that Moodle is open-access software allowing the creation of an online education platform. This tool applies to multiple educational scenarios. It is widely used in digital education around the world.

suggests that it would enable pedagogical interactions between teachers and learners to guarantee pedagogical continuity. At the time of writing, however, it has not (yet) materialized as a pedagogical platform in the strict sense of the term. Indeed, to date, it essentially contains official curricula and a few educational videos without the overall pedagogical logic that usually characterizes online distance learning platforms. It's also interesting to note that Pr@tic, which has been inaccessible for several weeks without warning or explanation, has remained unfinished and still contains dummy content such as "This is an example course." This content, generated when Moodle is installed on a server, is intended to be removed and replaced by actual content before the platform is made accessible to the public. Therefore, dummy content indicates that the necessary essential work on content has yet to be carried out. In this sense, the platform hosted on <http://pratic.menfp.gouv.ht/app/> has remained, up to the moment we finish this text, unfinished.

Secondly, PR@TIC still needs to be discovered in the Haitian school community. Of the 120 school actors interviewed for the study, only 6 (5%) claim to have heard of it. Three of them said they had visited the site, but none of them had used it. Since it contains only educational programs, videos that don't fit into a conventional educational framework, and fake content, even its use would not have enabled distance learning at a time when face-to-face school activities were interrupted.

This may seem surprising since the platform was supposed to enable schools to ensure pedagogical continuity in times of crisis. However, this reality appears consistent with articulating relations between MENFP and school stakeholders. Instead of serving the system in practice, the platform, or the appearance of it, served to reinforce the MENPF was working to solve the problems of the education system. For example, we find it in posters popularizing the idea of technological modernization of education, but also of the urgency of the school propelled by the "*Lekol pa ka tann*⁶" campaign. In this way, the platform does not exist as a pedagogical platform that can be used and accessed by learners, teachers, and school managers. It exists in appearance and is used in political and institutional discourse to reinforce the public image of the Ministry of Education and its representatives.

Thirdly, the platform is not limited to its website <http://pratic.menfp.gouv.ht/app/>; it uses YouTube to distribute pedagogical content⁷. Indeed, it relies on YouTube to broadcast educational content in a vacuum. Its YouTube channel, created on April 27, 2020, called PRATIC MENFP TV, contains 98 videos and has 4570 subscribers⁸. The last video was published over a year ago, on June 26, 2021. These data indicate that the channel was active for fourteen months, between April 27, 2020, and June 26, 2021.

⁶ "The school cannot wait".

⁷ It also supports Facebook and Twitter. At the bottom of the site page is a link to the Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/Pratic509/>) and its Twitter account (<https://twitter.com/practic509>). We also find a link to a dummy page from Pinterest (<https://www.pinterest.com/yourpinterestname/>) and Google + (<https://www.google.com/yourgoogleplusid>). These links were verified on August 29, 2022.

⁸ The channel can be accessed here: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC17Hyi3hdRdUg4eU0AvnLjw>

All the videos on the channel indicate a desire to produce educational content that can be integrated into a distance learning platform. This can be seen in video titles such as "Sciences experimentales (sic) 3e AF, mon corps je le connais"⁹ or "Français 4e AF communication associer une action à un métier"¹⁰. However, apart from this categorization attributable to school levels, it is difficult to observe any continuity in content. Conventionally, a subject contains several chapters, sections, or parts that must be covered in order. This can be seen, for example, in the Minimum Competency Programs mentioned above. The YouTube channel does not offer this logic. Interestingly, although the channel contains a link redirecting the user to the platform site, the latter includes no reference to the video content hosted and available on YouTube.

School actors had not waited for the MENFP to try to respond to the challenges posed by the forced closure of schools. When the government announced social distancing and the temporary closure of schools in response to COVID-19, school actors faced a similar situation in peyi lòk. Remember that pedagogy via WhatsApp emerged spontaneously to ensure pedagogical continuity during the disruptions caused by this crisis. They, therefore, provided a similar response.

At the time of the disruption to school activities caused by the peyi lòk phenomenon and the COVID-19 pandemic, WhatsApp was the primary tool used in practice to guarantee relative pedagogical continuity. As we saw above, the online pedagogical platform offered by MENFP had no impact on the system. On the contrary, WhatsApp showed an unparalleled technological advantage. It's a communication tool used by most learners and teachers. Learners who didn't have personal access to these tools used a friend's or family member's phone. It was immediately available without any particular installation. Since the teacher could explain a notion as if he were speaking in the classroom, it didn't require any additional pedagogical preparation.

So, while the MENFP was content to plan and talk about a pedagogical platform for the benefit of learners, the practices of the actors had already found a way to ensure pedagogical continuity. MENFP ignores these practices. In the same way, the PR@TIC platform proposed by MENFP is ignored by schools.

Conclusion

The recent crises linked to Haiti's socio-political situation, on the one hand, and the COVID-19 pandemic, on the other, have provided an opportunity for the digital transformation of education in Haiti. The analysis enabled us to understand that the organizational dysfunctions inherent in the education system and the technological characteristics of Haitian society generated unstructured and unreconciled solution proposals. On the one hand, WhatsApp pedagogy has spontaneously offered many educational institutions a basic

⁹ Available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oeXzjs_SZel&ab_channel=PRATICMENFPTV

¹⁰ Available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WkzlnO4jT6g&ab_channel=PRATICMENFPTV



technological framework to ensure a certain pedagogical continuity. On the other hand, the MENFP's initiatives in terms of instant curricular revision and a failed attempt to set up an online pedagogical platform had a limited impact on the digital practices that enabled pedagogical continuity in some schools. This analysis leads us to three conclusions.

Firstly, PR@TIC failed as an online education platform serving Haitian schools. However, introducing the idea that the education system needs a centralized pedagogical platform to guarantee pedagogical continuity in times of disruption laid the foundations for advancing the digital transformation of education in Haiti.

Secondly, "pedagogy through WhatsApp" has offered a vital opportunity that can contribute to the digitization of education. Offering a digital pedagogical space to most schools that have operated during periods of crisis (peyi lòk and COVID-19) has created new standards and norms for circulating school knowledge. However, when used alone, this tool's intrinsic limitations and technological barriers can negatively affect teaching, learning, and assessment practices.

Thirdly, the two preceding elements lead us to understand that the aggravated manifestations of the crises in Haiti over the last few years have pushed the education system towards a slow and fragile digital transformation. This transformation is dominated by the creativity of school actors acting under constraints. In this context, it is necessary to understand the experiences of digital education in Haiti and to work with the players concerned to think about the future of the digital transformation of the education system.

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