
Where Do We Go from Here? A Postcard from France in the Grip of the Pandemic

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ABSTRACT Patricia Floriet, who taught for 22 years at the Institute for Political Sciences in Grenoble, sends these observations and reflections on the way the pandemic has affected all those connected to education in her village in south-east France.

Here is Clelles en Trièves, a small commune on the edge of the Vercors with cows and corn and very little coronavirus. For years, we had the usual nineteenth-century village school on the ground floor of the *mairie*, boys on one side, girls on the other. The twentieth century brought the sexes together and added preschool children. The twenty-first century gave us beautiful new schools with windows you can look out of and room to play.

Here and now is post-confinement, a strange time when all our traditional habits have been shaken. Our school serves four villages, some 1200 inhabitants, with children attending from 3 to 11 years old. During lockdown, all schools were closed. Now, they are welcoming the little ones again, not necessarily for their benefit but so that their parents can go back to work.

Now I'm getting on the school bus to go and see the teachers and ask them how they feel – about now and the future and what they want to change. Many of them took an interest in finding new ways to teach with the Internet, radio and television, turning living into learning and getting the older children to teach their little brethren what they know.

The little ones were the first to go back into schools, which had piled up their desks, tables and chairs so that there should be the designated space separating the children from each other. Buildings underwent spring cleaning and furniture was disinfected before and after school, as were toys and such like. Hands were being washed all day long. The teachers nobly wore masks and avoided touching their pupils.

The first years of secondary schools followed, the last year of primary schools and the fourth and fifth forms. Those preparing their baccalaureate were expected to continue working alone on their computers but, thanks to deconfinement, could now form small groups. They are promised oral assessment before the end of term.

Rather than prolonging the school year, the powers that be are planning a pick-you-up week at the end of August before the official back-to-school date in early September. They will have to negotiate that with the teachers' unions. We shall see what we shall see.

Jean-Michel Blanquer, our Minister of Education, declared that the coronavirus was 'a worldwide educational catastrophe'. Nevertheless, he spoke gladly of the *bonheur* of going back to school and of the care France takes of its teachers, who are 'among the best paid in the world'. We must take his word for that, but what is sure is that 90% of our teaching staff were hard at work throughout our lockdown, helping children and parents to cope.

Added to the exhaustion is the feeling among teachers that they were not respected as such and, technically, little aided. There is also no guidance as to what will be done in September and the autumn term – which pupils will be coming into their classes and how they will be teaching.

'Where do we go from here?' has become the general feeling. It is accompanied by a sort of 'have to wait and see' disposition, and the foremost need to take time for oneself and have some real summer holidays!

PATRICIA FLORIET, née Evans, was born in Greenwich in 1931 and attended Eltham Hill school. She married Bernard Floriet in 1950 and worked in the movement for the creation of the Théâtre Populaire in Saint-Étienne and later Grenoble, at whose university she presented her doctoral thesis. In the 1980s she was active in the beginnings of palliative care in France and the development of homecare for the elderly. She is still a volunteer visitor in the villages around her home. *Correspondence:* patricia.floriet@gmail.com