

<https://doi.org/10.34142/2709-7986.2021.26.2.02>

## WHEN “FACE-TO-FACE” IS NO LONGER AN OPTION: CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMICS

Received: 23/03/2021

Accepted: 28/04/2021

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### ABSTRACT

*The article examines the current context of teaching online or in a hybrid environment and provides recommendations pertaining to some of the classroom management techniques primary and secondary school teachers might find useful in their activities during the COVID 19 pandemics.*

*The main **aims** of this article are to analyse the challenges posed by online teaching in relation to class management; to provide a toolkit for educators in relation to class management in an online teaching environment; and to better understand how the various learning styles of the students should be responded to by teachers as part of their classroom management techniques.*

*The **methodology** which the current paper relies on involves both a critical analysis of classroom management techniques currently employed in traditional (i.e., face-to-face) and online education, as well as empirical methods pertaining to our own daily activities as educators (observation, questionnaires, conversation,*

dialogue, self-assessment of the learning outcomes, evaluation sheets). Building upon such methods, we formulate practical recommendations as to how an efficient classroom management should be handled to ensure that online teaching is performed at its best during the COVID-19 pandemics.

The following **results** were attained as part of our research: the identification of the main challenges that the educators must deal with when managing the online class; a potential toolkit for the educators when managing their class in an online environment; a clearer understanding on how to best approach all students according to their styles of learning.

The **conclusions** allow asserting that the educators have an essential role in adapting the online class management to the learning styles of the students and to the concrete particularities of e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemics, creating an optimum environment for the teaching and learning process.

**KEYWORDS:** *Class Management, Learning Styles, Teacher's Toolkit, Online Teaching.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemics raised important challenges to teachers all over the world. Given the social distancing restrictions imposed by nowadays societies in response to the rapid spread of the new coronavirus, teachers found themselves in need to quickly adapt to a reality that most had never considered before – that of an online teaching and learning environment.

As a natural consequence, various teaching related contents needed adjustment to ensure a clear understanding of all issues in this new learning environment. Classroom management techniques are, without a doubt, among the most relevant matters to require special attention during these complicated times.

That is, certain basic norms pertaining to classroom management apply to both the traditional (i.e., face-to-face) teaching context, and to the online one. Others, however, raise more specific (i.e., online teaching-related) questions as to how classroom management should be handled in online education.

As such, the current paper focuses upon some of the most relevant matters that define an appropriate classroom management in online teaching, to offer primary and secondary school teachers a more comprehensive perspective on some of the relevant matters to be considered when approaching the online teaching and learning environment.

More specifically, reference is made to the management of time and classroom space, as well as to the management of the student behaviour and to the instructional strategies to be considered when teaching an online class. Building on past work and our own teaching experience, we propose a toolkit of different classroom management strategies and we argue for a student-centred education that provides the necessary means for all students to fulfil their native potential.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Classroom management refers to teacher's actions to create a learning environment that encourages positive social interaction, active engagement in learning and self-motivation (Burden, 2020).

Several matters have emerged throughout the years as essential to a good classroom management. Teacher's ability of establishing rules and routines, their capacity to develop positive relationships with students, parents and the community, their ability to organize the learning environment so that it best suits their purposes, their capacity to implement and manage engaging instruction, as well as their ability to address in an adequate way potential discipline issues represent only part of the many talents great teachers should be endowed with (Garrett, 2014).

Indeed, the educator's ability to establish fair, well accepted by students, classroom rules and behavior expectations, and his capacity to bring such rules to life (Brady et al., 2015) represent an important component of classroom management. Their capacity to develop positive relationships with students, parents and the community is also quite relevant (Garrett, 2014), given that a good classroom climate is one of the main prerequisites for a good cooperation (and implicitly for a good class performance).

The management of the actual space in the classroom is equally important (Erwin, 2004). Aspects such as seating arrangement, actual space available for the envisaged activities (group and ongoing activities, individual workspace, the storage of materials and of the records) are obviously relevant. Without a doubt, the visual overall appearance of the classroom is of special importance (Diller, 2008).

Moreover, an efficient use of the available time represents another important variable when supporting students to reach the learning goals (Erwin, 2004). Indeed, all instructional strategies the educators use must fit into strict time frames – as do non-instructional routine procedures, various transitions between activities or classes, and so on.

Clearly, a good classroom management is not restricted to preventing educational challenges, but it also implies a good capacity to actively and properly address the actual problematic behaviors in the classroom. Being able to raise to the challenge and help children surpass student behavior problems is obviously important.

Although most matters relating to classroom management have been intensively researched throughout the last couple of decades, we are yet to fully understand how disciplinary matters can be prevented or solved, particularly given the new challenges raised in the context of the COVID 19 pandemics. Indeed, all these issues have a different significance and relevance when discussing the online classroom management. In such a context, the medium of communication is changed, whereas the physical presence is no longer contained in space (as it is in the case of the classroom).

No doubt there, the challenges faced by the educator in an online environment are various. As such, the current article will focus on some of the issues that relate to teaching in an online environment, thus offering some possible solutions to these inherent educational challenges.

## METHODOLOGY

Building upon past work on classroom management in traditional (i.e., face-to-face) and online environments, while also relying upon several empirical methods (i.e., observation of online educational activities, questionnaires, conversations with teachers involved in online teaching (N=13, grades 5-8) and evaluation sheets to better understand how one could respond to the challenges relating to online teaching), we make several recommendations as to the techniques that educators might find useful to a proper online class management.

A small investigation of student's learning styles using the Learning Styles Inventory (Oakland et al., 2015) that explored student's perceptions as to what works for them in online contexts (N=19), followed by extensive discussions with the students' teachers, was equally employed to better understand how teachers can ensure an efficient teaching experience for children as a function of their learning styles.

## RESULTS

As already mentioned, the online teaching and learning context offers several challenges where classroom management techniques are concerned. Then again, such challenges can be surpassed and even used to teacher's benefit, at times, if they are indeed considered from the right perspective.

With reference to the time factor, for instance, a good understanding of online classroom management techniques is obviously important. That is, the educator needs to consider the various activities according to their framing in time, while equally acknowledging the potential technical difficulties or obstacles which might occur in the actual communication or in the usage of all the tools available online. Just like in traditional environments, a good organization is quite important.

For instance, the teacher must advise all the parties involved beforehand and ensure some very practical and pragmatical rules are to be followed.

In our experience, one of the main challenges pertaining to this matter comes from the newly experienced lack of barrier among children's private and school related environment. Indeed, the pandemics turned children's own personal environments (their rooms) into school related contexts. One can easily understand the potential pitfalls of this change. To counteract some of these

potential problems, we suggest a set of practical recommendations to children, and also to their parents, that might help all those involved surpass the challenges raised by online education.

Indeed, parent's approach of their children's online learning and the various mechanisms through which they can contribute (when willing) to the educational act are a potentially relevant part of teacher's planning of a proper classroom management.

Although the recommendations related to this point are the ones of a more practical nature, pertaining to the ergonomics and well-being of the student involved in online classes, the parent's importance in ensuring their children's well-being during classes (i.e., their ability to focus on the educational context) is obviously not to be ignored.

A first recommendation to this point pertains to the actual seating arrangements of the student. That is, the student should be seated at his/her desk during online classes, a desk which should be equipped with an adequate chair, to ensure the student's comfort during the long duration of a school day.

The educational devices (tablet, laptop, or desktop computer) used to access and execute the online lessons should be properly located on the desk, to be easily reachable by students. Importantly, though this is often the case, the mobile telephone is not recommended as an educational device, due to the small screen and to the lack of certain relevant features – both, aspects that might impair with a good educational act.

Another important recommendation is that the student's tablet, laptop, or computer always be connected to a power source during the school programme, so that the battery does not suddenly discharge during

the hour, thus cutting off the student from the online lesson.

Similarly, all the course books, notebooks and writing materials should be placed at hand and ready to be used without needing to move throughout the house (from one room to another) to reach such educational materials.

A source of water should also be provided nearby, to ensure that unwanted interruptions are avoided (e.g., a bottle of water could be available to the student at the beginning of the lesson).

Most importantly, parents should offer their assistance as much as possible throughout the day. Indeed, given the current pandemic period, similarly to their children, many parents are nowadays (at least partly) working from home. As such, if willing, they can be of real assistance to the teachers, thus helping their children surpass the potential technical difficulties associated with online learning.

As one can easily acknowledge, parent's willingness to serve as the teacher's right hand during online educational activities is obviously important. Then again, some rules also concern students themselves. Part of these regulations could (and should) be negotiated with the students from the very beginning, thus creating a democratic and trustful environment in the online classroom management.

At its turn, the school itself should also provide certain guidelines pertaining to the regulations and rules that define one's online behaviour in the classroom, thus ensuring a unitary perspective on how online classes are to be handled at a more general level.

One such useful rule might require, for instance, that all students connect with their full real name throughout the entire

school day. Although such a regulation is sometimes less appealing to children, such a method might help teachers better control their classroom environment, as it offers them a clearer perspective on who is present or not for a particular activity.

Exceptions can, of course, be made when the situation allows. An alias may be used, for instance, on certain days or classes, leaving the children the option to express themselves throughout their choice of name when activities allow it.

Another helpful regulation (provided that such an agreement is decided upon between school educators and children's families) would be for the video camera to always be set as on during school classes, thus allowing the teacher to observe the student's behaviour during activities, as he / she would normally do in the traditional classroom environment.

Should this be the case, if the student refuses to comply, he / she would be informed that his / her parent is to be notified if not resolving the matter when asked.

The electronic device's sound, on the other hand, should be set as off most of the time, being set as on only if the teacher nominates a student expressly. The students should also be instructed (how) to raise their hand when they have something to say (just as they did in the traditional classroom environment).

Alternatively, they might also be instructed to write in the chat box their inquiries when they have any questions related to the lesson, so that they do not interrupt the activities, but they are still able to find answers to their questions.

Importantly, a good classroom climate should also represent an important concern of educators, particularly in the online

environment. The teacher is (and should be perceived as) more than an avatar. Authenticity helps at creating a good rapport with one's students, in online contexts and in face-to-face ones alike.

It also helps at the consolidation of trust and of respect, and a good teacher should see to it that his / her students always enjoy their online activities and are able to communicate in a relaxed, positive manner, regardless of the channel used.

Certain classroom management techniques that teachers use in traditional settings are also quite useful to their online activity (Erwin, 2004), and there are numerous contexts where this rule applies.

For instance, the teacher should be approachable, regardless of the considered context (or, perhaps, even more so during online classes). Teachers should avoid overfilling the lesson with facts, knowledge, material that students are not able to properly comprehend, and they should grant space and time to their students when this is needed. It goes without saying, the teacher should listen to his / her students when they have something relevant to say, thus encouraging children to express their opinions and acknowledging their contributions to the educational act.

Another strategy that can help establish a good rapport with one's students is to treat each student as a unique, special individual. Indeed, teachers should remember that students all have names (particularly in the somewhat "less personal" online context), and they should acknowledge that each student has his / her own potential to fulfil.

Moreover, when establishing a good rapport, it is also important to focus on the positive aspect of things, so that there are grounds for further development. At the end of the day, teachers should remember only the positive things about their students.

Indeed, when present, such a focus on the positive side of things entails a chain of changes in the behaviour of the students. Having a better self-image increases student's motivation and triggers change for the better, which is obviously relevant to a good educational performance.

Of course, the teachers should equally show interest into their student's lives (passions, hobbies, pets, events, etc.), both during online classes and traditional ones. A good teacher is an empathic one, and this quality should reflect in his / her lesson planning, structure and in choosing the adequate content according to their student's abilities, but also through a good knowledge of what motivates his / her students in and out of the classroom context.

Importantly, studies show that, like in traditional contexts, teacher's sense of humour within the class also has positive benefits when online teaching is considered (Yen, 2020). On a related vein, good teachers must also remember that sarcasm can negatively impact students, thus its use should be kept to a minimum, in online classes as in traditional ones.

Then again, although maintaining a positive atmosphere in the (virtual) class is obviously important, teachers should nevertheless acknowledge that they are human beings too and, therefore, they need not pretend to be happy and cheerful when this is not the case. Children feel the lack of authenticity, and sanction educators that are not true to themselves (and others).

Besides, everyone has got their moments of sorrow, and the teacher should be able to teach children that it is ok to sometimes be tired, sad, or disappointed, what is important –not to let one's negative feelings take over their life, and to always find the silver line in one's daily experiences.

The last, but not the least, given the current multicultural environment due to the overall increased globalization, one should also pay attention to the cultural sensibilities and differences. Teachers should indeed remember this when dealing with students from various cultural contexts.

From a complementary angle, teachers should equally acknowledge that online classroom management is also about the management of educational resources and tasks (Erwin, 2004). Given the change of environment, the working procedures also need to be adapted to ensure an effective education, and teachers should make sure that the strategies they use are indeed the ones likely to most benefit their students.

For instance, teachers can (and should) adapt the content to be taught and adjust it to be clearly and easily acquired by students in the (perhaps) more complicated to handle online context. They should mostly consider tasks involving different skills of students (e.g., the writing, reading, listening, and talking skills), to ensure a varied and interesting online learning. Each task should be explained step by step, and instructions should be clear and succinct, adapted to the students' overall level of understanding.

Moreover, after explaining a task, the teacher should designate a student to reformulate into his / her words exactly what is to be done – this can be a great manner of both checking if the explanation was clear enough, and of bringing the task to the other student's comprehension level. The teacher might also want to provide students with questions with multiple choices at the end of a lesson to check if the students do indeed understand the task offered as homework. As experience proves, open-ended questions and questions which

are far too general might be less efficient in such contexts.

Like traditional, face-to-face, classroom management, when group tasks are involved, the teacher might choose to monitor the groups of students, their teamwork, keeping notes on student's responses and contributions to the task resolution. Such information can indeed prove important to the teaching act, and educators might want to take advantage of the many opportunities provided by the online environment in this direction.

Then again, one should remember that even when involved in online education, some working tasks can take an individual form. That way, students can take a break from the screen and turn their attention to a sheet of paper, thus clearing their heads and allowing their eyes the much-needed time to decompress.

This can be a good opportunity to change the tempo and to bring more of the traditional way of work into the online class environment (Visoi, 2019). Teachers should also remember that the correction of the tasks should ideally follow each class, and feedback should be sent individually to each student, thus ensuring a truly effective education.

Certain educational resources used in online teaching and learning can also prove relevant in checking the level of understanding of previously taught contents. To this point, teachers should bear in mind that the gamification of certain tasks makes their practising more pleasant and joyful, and the learning process is thus streamlined.

Moreover, turning online classes into a living game can increase student's satisfaction, motivation, and engagement (Urh et al., 2015), and online contexts offer all necessary conditions for such experiences

to occur. In an ideal teaching and learning environment, easier tasks should be balanced with more difficult ones, thus creating a balancing within the online classroom (and not only).

Recommendations such as the ones provided above should prove useful to educators when aiming to build a comprehensive online classroom management. One should nevertheless acknowledge that, regardless of the learning environment (be it traditional, “face-to-face”, or online), students are all unique individuals, and no teacher should ever forget that.

As such, when planning for an effective classroom management, educators might want to equally consider issues pertaining to matters such as their student’s individual learning styles, for instance (particularly when considering online activities).

Indeed, our research using the Learning Styles Inventory (LSI, Oakland et al., 2015) to better understand student’s educational needs (N=19), followed by extended discussions with teachers as to how one better adapts to each particular style of the students they teach, offered relevant insight as to how the different learning styles of students can help teachers to ensure an effective online education.

Indeed, as teachers confirmed, the simple fact of learning more about their students learning style significantly increased the efficiency of their educational act. Better understanding how different learning styles can have a positive, but sometimes also a potentially negative, impact on various learning contexts that can obviously be of use for teachers when planning their classroom management strategies.

Students exhibiting an introverted style of learning, for instance, usually prefer working on tasks alone (i.e., individual

reading, writing or research assignments). They enjoy their privacy and being offered the time to think (rather than being asked to always keep busy). They need to be complimented on their careful work and be allowed to pursue an interest in depth, when such an interest emerges.

The students belonging to this group work well in small, rather than in large groups and prefer to learn more about a new concept before performing an experiment. In traditional environments, they enjoy having a special, quiet place in the classroom where they can work without being disturbed.

As record shows, they thus usually enjoy online classrooms, given that such an environment offers them the possibility to retreat and to not be bothered by the other, noisier, colleagues. The pitfalls of this category, however, refer to the neglecting of the development of interpersonal skills, especially in the current epidemic context. To prevent this, such children should be gently exposed by teachers to appropriate interpersonal skills, and they should be encouraged to practice them in private or among peer-groups.

The students exhibiting a practical style of learning, on the other hand, seem to learn best when being offered assignments that increase in complexity and when they do hands-on work that requires detailed observation, object manipulation or direct experiences (rather than practical thinking). They work best when they are given very specific and direct instructions for their individual assignments.

That is, students belonging to this category are less likely to enjoy work that does not seem to have a goal, lessons that emphasize theory, rather than practice, work that does not respond to with their practical side. The students with a preference for the practical

style enjoy an environment that stimulates the senses, and they like activity centres, science experiments, visuals – all aspects that teachers can rely upon when the educational act is done online.

The downside of this category relates however to the avoidance of abstract thinking. As such, the teacher should focus more, especially in an online teaching environment, on using game techniques or brainstorming activities that respond to such children's learning styles and allows them the opportunity to develop their abilities in an online education context.

The students who exhibit a feeling (affective) style of learning usually prefer subjects dealing with people. They enjoy taking part in personalized discussions, playing games, receiving praise and encouragement. The students who exhibit such a style of learning perform best when they are given examples.

They feel at ease when flexible classroom rules are used, ones that allow for exceptions and second chances. They prefer it when they are given the opportunity to work with their friends and when they are offered assignments that require them to express and analyse their thoughts and feelings on a topic. Such students are less likely to respond well to competition, to an atmosphere of tension and hostility, to lectures which lack any personal meaning and to classrooms in which the contact with the others is restricted.

Students from this group may feel at home in an online teaching environment, provided that the teacher acknowledges their need to communicate and truly interact with others and take steps as to ensure that such needs are handled properly.

On the downside, students belonging to this category may become discouraged when

they are criticized, and they can be easily distracted from their work. Moreover, they stop working hard if they feel the teacher does not take a special interest in them. When teachers do however take such matters into account in their planning of online classroom management matters, online activities can work just fine for such students too.

The flexible learning style is focused on the enjoyment of surprises and the need for as much experience as possible. Students belonging to this group enjoy performing, they are flexible in their opinions and commitments and they can adapt to life as it comes. With reference to classroom applications, these students learn best when they are exposed to lessons and activities that seem like fun to them.

They like to take part in competitions and games and are less likely to respond well to inflexible lesson plans and schedules, to inflexible standards of right and wrong, to questions which have only one correct answer, or to classes (especially online ones) which seem abstract and lack any practical use. Such students perform well under stress and pressure.

As such, online contexts can represent a good educational environment for such students, provided that these needs are well understood by their teachers. The downside of this category, however, relates to its habit of putting off its work and spending a lot of time and energy trying to get around the rules.

Consequently, in an online classroom environment, such students risk failing to do their share of a group project. They might even prevent others to do their work or disappoint them by not keeping their commitments and by only doing enough work to get by, and teachers must ensure that this is not the case.

The students belonging to this category also sometimes tend to become the “class clown”, especially when also exhibiting an extroverted style. As such, a good teacher should be able to motivate such children into doing their part and pay attention to the potential pitfalls of such a learning style, particularly in the (less obvious to control) online context.

Indeed, like all other learning styles, the flexible one can also represent an asset to children (and teachers alike), provided that the educators understand its particularities and are able to adjust to children’s needs and ensure the best possible learning environment in online contexts, as in traditional ones.

## CONCLUSIONS

A proper classroom management is paramount for an effective online education. In online teaching contexts, the interaction between the student and the content, between students and teacher or simply among students (when working in groups) is of obvious relevance. Engaged learning stimulates students to take part in an active way to the educational act, thus implicitly gaining more knowledge.

Students cannot be passive knowledge-absorbers who rely on the instructor to feed

information to them. In an online course, it is imperative that they should be active knowledge generators who undertake the responsibility for constructing and managing their own learning experience.

As such, in a student-centred environment, be it in traditional environments or in online contexts, one of the most important responsibilities of the teacher is to generate motivation for learning.

Moreover, the teacher can adapt the material and the tasks more easily when considering both the students’ leaning styles, and the specific particularities of online education, thus ensuring that student’s needs are properly cared for.

Despite the obvious challenges along the way, nowadays availability of numerous online educational resources and the multitude of easily adaptable to online contexts resources make this task attainable. Indeed, as studies suggest, whereas teaching experience indeed has a significant effect on classroom management efficacy, school setting does not (Potter, 2021).

Be it online or in a traditional environment, good teachers perform good teaching. One’s classroom management approach is obviously of great importance to the matter.

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## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

## FUNDING

The authors declare that this study received no specific financial support.

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**АНОТАЦІЯ / ABSTRACT [in Ukrainian]:****КОЛИ «ВІЧ-НА-ВІЧ» ВЖЕ НЕ ВАРІАНТ: ВИКЛИКИ УПРАВЛІННЯ КЛАСОМ ПІД ЧАС ПАНДЕМІЇ COVID-19**

У статті розглядається сучасний контекст викладання в Інтернеті чи гібридному середовищі та надаються рекомендації для деяких методів

управління класом вчителям початкових та середніх класів шкіл, які можуть виявитися корисними в їхній діяльності під час пандемії COVID 19.

Основними **цільми** цієї статті є аналіз проблем, пов'язаних з онлайн-викладанням з управління класом; забезпеченням інструментарію для вчителів з управління класом в Інтернет середовищі при викладанні; краще розуміння того, як на різні стилі навчання учнів мають реагувати вчителі, розуміючи їх як частини різних прийомів управління класом.

**Методологія**, на яку спирається дане дослідження, включає як критичний аналіз методів управління класом, що застосовуються в даний час у традиційній (тобто очній) формі, так і в Інтернет-освіті, а також емпіричні методи, що стосуються повсякденної діяльності педагогів (спостереження, анкетування, бесіда, діалог, самооцінка результатів навчання, оцінні листи). Спираючись на такі методи, ми формуємо практичні рекомендації, як слід опановувати ефективно управління класом, щоб забезпечити найкраще проведення онлайн-викладання під час пандемії COVID-19.

В межах нашого дослідження були отримані наступні **результати**: визначення основних викликів, з якими можуть стикатися вчителі, керуючи онлайн-класом; потенційний набір інструментів для вчителів під час управління класом в Інтернет-середовищі; чіткіше розуміння того, як найкраще знайти підхід до кожного учня відповідно його стилю навчання.

**Висновки** дозволяють стверджувати, що вчителі відіграють важливу роль у адаптації управління онлайн-класом відповідно стилів навчання учнів та конкретних особливостей електронного навчання під час пандемії COVID-19, створюючи оптимальне середовище процесу навчання.

**КЛЮЧОВІ СЛОВА:** управління класом, стилі навчання, інструментарій вчителя, викладання в Інтернет.

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#### REZUMAT / ABSTRACT [in Romanian]:

*Articolul examineaza contextul actual de educatie online / in sistem hibrid, oferind recomandari menite sa sprijine cadrele didactice din invatamantul gimnazial in vederea unui bun management al clasei in timpul activitatii educationale aferente pandemiei de COVID-19. Lucrarea analizeaza potentialele provocari ridicate in managementul colectivelor de elevi de activitatea educationala online si propune o serie de tehnici simple de gestionare a clasei, evidentiind, in acelasi timp, importanta stilurilor de invatare specifice elevilor in conturarea unor strategii eficiente de management al colectivului in mediul online (si nu numai). In concordanta cu cercetarile anterior realizate, articolul pledeaza in favoarea adaptarii modalitatii de gestionare a clasei de elevi particularitatilor aferente contextului educational actual (online), pe de o parte, si stilului de invatare specific fiecarui elev, pe de alta.*

**CUVINTE CHEIE:** *managementul clasei, stiluri de invatare, tehnici de gestionare a clasei, invatamant online.*

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**CITE THIS ARTICLE AS (APA style):**

Manea, C.-N., & Gări-Neguț, O. (2021). When “Face-to-Face” is No Longer an Option: Classroom Management Challenges during the Covid-19 Pandemics. *Educational Challenges*, 26(2), 13-25.  
<https://doi.org/10.34142/2709-7986.2021.26.2.02>

