COVID – 19: Educational Setbacks, Lessons Learned and the Way Forward in Kenya

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Abstract

The COVID – 19 pandemic and its effects on education is a new phenomenon to all on a global level. In Kenya, the situation in schools was not only challenging but also exposed many challenges facing learners, teachers and parents alike. This paper employed a literature review methodology with study objectives exploring a myriad of educational setbacks and challenges experienced by schools as a result of COVID – 19. It highlights some educational needs exposed by COVID – 19 including: economic and social challenges to learners and parents, schools being forced to put up remote or online learning infrastructures, hence showing the huge discrepancies between public and private schools. Children reading skills dropped by 68%, while the changed school calendar and disrupted term dates and school closures had a negative effect on girls. In addition, the changing roles of the teacher and the need to increase parental involvement in education of their children are explored including the lessons that, "one size fits all" type of education does not apply in schools any more. Lastly, the paper took a closer look at the way forward in form of what the government has done to calm things down in schools during COVID - 19. That many schools have worked hard to make technology available for their teachers and learners enforces the need to recognize that online learning is here to stay and that anything being done to support remote learning is a step to the right direction.

Keywords: *COVID-19; Educational Setbacks; Remote Learning; Teachers' Roles; Lessons Learned; Parental Involvement; Way Forward for Schools.*

Introduction

The Kenyan Government like other governments globally places a high premium on education and training of all citizens as a vital tool to attainment of the Kenya's Vision 2030, a catalyst to achieving the 'Big 4 agenda' and SDG 4 on education. Every country, Kenya included works hard to ensure quality, equity, access and relevant development of education, skills and training to all citizens for national development in each and every sector (Ministry of Education Sessional Paper, 2019). However, COVID – 19 related challenges rolled back many educational gains on both global and national levels, leading to an almost complete halt of school activities. According to a UNESCO (2020) report, about 2 billion learners were out of school by April 2020 with many international examination bodies in basic, middle and college levels suspending their examinations due to school closures.

Study Objectives

The objectives of the study were to establish the setbacks brought about by COVID – 19 pandemic to schools, examine changing roles of teachers and the lessons learned and determine the way forward for schools looking at what worked

Methodology

The study reviewed existing literature and used personal experiences as educators and observation in developing the research.

Setbacks Brought About by COVID – 19 Pandemic to Schools in Kenya

The COVID – 19 pandemic brought about many setbacks that affected schools in both negative and positive ways. First, economic and social challenges to learners and parents were experienced. Secondly, schools had to change from face to face learning to online learning where learning institutions were forced to step up remote or online learning structures and enhance technological skills of both learners and teachers. Tthe difference between public versus international or private schools during COVID-19 pandemic were exposed, basic reading skills by children dropped by 68% leading to increased learning gaps, school calendars were changed disrupting the term dates and the school closures negatively affected girls.

Economic and Social Challenges to Learners and Parents

According to Areba (2020), parents were not able to finance school related expenses during the COVID – 19 pandemic including learning materials, meals, uniform, fares to and from school, school kits and other related supplies. Consequently, the Kenyan government asked schools and colleges to embrace remote learning through online education delivery. Schools adopted the use of radio and Television programs and internet learning especially in those areas with internet network coverage. In some other parts of the country (UNOCHA, 2020)

several agencies came together to provide COVID – 19 response activities including: providing learners with information about available radio programs, back to school campaigns to prevent school dropout, school fumigation, hygiene support and hand washing guidelines.

A list of other education and school related areas that were affected by COVID – 19 including digital learning, learner debt, learner homelessness, food insecurity, poor access to childcare, health care, internet, housing, sexual exploitation especially to the underprivileged in the urban centres and poor disability services were articulated (Areba, 2020; Gathuru & Mweyeri, 2021). All theses had serious negative effects to underprivileged children and their households. Consequently, learning, nutritional care and child-care were disrupted due to human and financial challenges which were made worse by cessation of movement and lock-downs incapacitating people's ability to work.

Stepping up Remote/ Online Learning in Learning Institutions

Remote learning was the only way to continue learning during the pandemic thus, teachers and learners were grounded due to cessation of movement, lockdown and social distancing protocols. During this period, the Kenyan government came up with a 3-factor approach in support of those who had to work or suspected to be vulnerable including: adhering to international and national guidelines for social distancing, quarantine and self-isolation. In addition, the Ministry of Education through Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) developed some online content and programs for school going age which were accessible from home through different channels: TV, radio, phone applications and internet to ensure continued learning (MoE, 2020). Among the challenges reported by the school fraternity in implementing the government measures included: prolonged school closures that were not expected with little planning for such an eventuality, marginalized children were unable to access the TV, radio and online content by the Ministry of Education (MoE, 2020; Gathuru & Mweyeri, 2021). There was no supply of ICT tools such as computers or phones for schools to foster online learning in Kenya (Ngari & Ndung'u, 2020). According to Mabeya (2020), the groups that were totally locked out of access included and were not limited to: learners with disabilities, those in urban slums, informal settlements; marginalized groups, remote locations, asylum seekers and refugees, and those whose families have lost livelihoods as a result of job cuts or businesses closures.

With internet learning, parents were forced to invest in online learning gadgets for their children comprising smart phones, computers, electronic tablets and laptops to ensure access to online classes (Mukora et al 2020). The demand for learners to acquire these learning tools exposed the challenge of educational inequality in respect to access and quality among marginal groups and poor households in the country. According to Human Rights Watch (2020), the many online learning platforms that Kenyan schools employed included Zoom,

Esoma, Eneza Education, Longhorn, Ubongo Kids and Google Classroom, and online learning resources from Longhorn publishers, the Zeraki Learning App, National Geographic Kids, Kytabu and eLimu, among others.

The challenge of making online learning a reality in Africa and Kenya in particular was and still remains an uphill task as depicted by a UNESCO report (Abidjan, 2020). The report further stated that, 89% of leaners in many countries in Africa lacked access to home computers, 82% lack internet connectivity and more than 56 million learners live in places with no mobile networks (Abidjan, 2020). In Kenya, the Nation Media Team observed that only 17 million Kenyan leaners mostly in urban centers were able to access digital gadgets when schools closed down leaving out those from rural areas and Learners with disabilities.

Public versus international/ private schools during COVID-19 pandemic

Learning went on without disruption in a number of private schools in Kenya while a majority of the public schools faced closures. Although public schools in the country struggled to put up remote-learning structures and received support from KICD especially in rural schools, international schools did not face any challenges and just switching from face to face classes to online learning (Gathuru & Mweyeri, 2021). These were and are adequately equipped with online learning resources, internet and digital structures hence COVID – 19 did not have much effect on their learning. Many private schools followed the same route because they were already equipped with computer labs and internet connectivity. Although some private schools needed to train their teachers on how to develop and deliver online classes digitally (Gathuru & Mweyeri, 2021), others closed down completely because they could not afford the many school related levies and the laid down COVID – 19 protocols and standards. For example, keeping social distance in some schools implied constructing new classrooms, dormitories, administrative blocks and buying new desks which was a costly affair (Abidjan, 2020).

Remote learning during COVID – 19 pandemic period had its fair share of challenges including a wide learning gap between disadvantaged groups leading to digital divide (Abidjan, 2020; Gathuru & Mweyeri, 2021). Barasa (2021) however, pointed out that many private schools in Kenya lacked the economic muscle to support digital learning and teacher salaries during the pandemic due to heavy dependency on tuition fees making them financially vulnerable hence such private schools closed down.

To circumvent future crisis that could lead to total lockdowns, learning institutions need to heavily increase internet access for all children including those in low-income countries, remote areas, non-formal settlements and hard to reach places where access to internet is currently limited. As digital learning materials and technology progress, deliberate efforts should be made to ensure that they are accessible to learners with functional difficulties and

other marginalized groups, and that these materials are also culturally and linguistically appropriate.

Basic reading skills by children dropped by 68% leading to increased learning gap

UNICEF (2020) observed that basic reading skills among learners in 12 countries globally Kenya included dropped by 68% due to COVID – 19 lockdowns which forced children to stay out of school.

According to Gathuru and Mweyeri (2021) stated that staying away from school and inability to access online learning by many learners led to an increase in learning gap. Inadequate internet connectivity and unreliable electricity connectivity in rural areas and in non-formal settlements in urban areas were among the major causes of children in these areas being left behind in learning. Expensive school-related bills such as daily internet bundles, learning tools – smartphones and laptops were also mentioned as barriers to parents from poor households. These factors combined to increase the learning gap between children from poor households and those from weaker families.

Changed School Calendar and Disrupted Term Dates

When the first case of COVID -19 pandemic was reported in the Kenya, the Government launched numerous initiatives to curb its spread. Some of the measures included limiting in-person school instruction, revising academic calendars, and postponing national examinations (Girls Center, 2022). The GOK created health and safety guidelines for school re-openings and sponsored remote and technology-mediated learning tools and programming. Since the schools' opening in January 2021, the school calendar and term dates have never normalized to pre-covid -19 period. Thus, schools are still trying to recover the loss of time and learning. While some grades reported in 2022 for their 2nd term sessions, others were reporting back to take examinations which are normally taken before the December holidays. In addition, term dates have been revised making school holidays shorter than before. Both teachers and learners are tired and fatigued with little-to-no time to rest. Schools are facing many indiscipline cases and mental health related challenges among learners. Because of the calendar changes, schools have had to deal with short end of term breaks, complex work of managing different groups of learners and social challenges including drugs and substance abuse.

Gendered Impact of COVID-19 and School Closures

Girl Center (2022) highlighted the undesirable outcomes of school closures in relation to COVID – 19 pandemic in Kenya which negatively affected girls and young people in rural areas. School closures exposed adolescent girls to mental health issues, insecurity, early marriage and gender based violence leading to teenage pregnancies (Girl Center, 2022).

However, the Center lamented about the Government of Kenya and non-state actors' inability to fully mitigate the impacts of school closures for adolescents, teachers and schools to alleviate the negative impacts of school closures and proposed the need for continued efforts to support vulnerable students in the country.

High levels of school drop-out were reported after schools re-opened. Thus, UNICEF (2020) observed that 16% of Kenyan learners aged between 10-19 years did not return to school after re-opening. The number was higher in girls than boys particularly due to teenage pregnancies. According to Baker (2020), children from poor households, underpriveledged, homeless, non-formal settlements in urban areas and those from remote rural places were 5 times more likely not to report back to schools after the COVID-19 closures and the impact often remains a life-long disadvantage due to the lost opportunity.

Teachers' Lessons and Changing Roles

Today, it is glaringly evident that the teacher who was in the classroom before COVID – 19 pandemic is no longer the same today because they had to learn new skills, methods of teaching and ways of relating with learners and parents as well as handing mental health issues related to extensive school closures.

Teachers' Changing Roles

Online teaching has greatly changed the teachers' roles from the "fountain of knowledge" to a facilitator and a learner in the classroom (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). While teachers before COVID – 19 pandemic had their notes, lesson plans and list of class activities ready, this has changed a lot with online learning. Today, the online teacher is obliged to develop creative initiatives which assist in overcoming limitations of virtual learning (Doucet et al., 2020). The online teacher is kept on toes on looking for new knowledge and ideas of engaging and motivating the learning. According to Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021),

Thus, teachers are actively collaborating with one another at a local or international level to improve online teaching methods. There are thus, incomparable opportunities for cooperation, creative solutions and willingness to learn from others as well as trying new tools as educators. Parents and students share similar experiences. Many educational organizations are offering their tools and solutions for free to help and support teaching and learning in a more interactive and engaging environment. Through these experiences, teachers have been transformed to lifelong learners.

"One shoe fits all" Phenomenon no Longer Working in Schools

Globally, many schools were largely using a common way of teaching where business was as usual – children were grouped according to their ages and taught in the same class. With

the learning crises ushered in by the pandemic, teachers needed to transform themselves from assessing learning levels, regrouping children by level rather than grade and age, and targeting instruction. Learners on the hand needed to get comfortable about being in class again, about being with their peers and about the teacher taking them through some concepts before they start learning again. For this to happen, the syllabus and the curriculum have to be shelved since learners may not learn in their groups according to age but may need to be regrouped in terms of what they know and what they have forgotten and revise and remind themselves what they forgot during the long pandemic closures. According to Angrist (2022), teachers have to be creative by making remote education a vehicle to make up for learning lost during school disruptions.

Teachers' Lesson: Technology not Sufficient for Effective Remote Learning

A great lesson for teachers employing e-learning is that technology for remote learning in schools is important but it is not sufficient (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021) thus other factors need to be taken into consideration for effective learning to occur. These factors include among others; (i) Teachers' level of exposure to online teaching, (ii) the strength of online teaching infrastructure, (iii) that use of suitable and relevant pedagogy for online education may depend on the expertise and exposure to information and communications technology (ICT) for both educators and the learners (iv) that there is no agreed upon process and supervision method yet, hence a lot of trial and errors going on in learning institutions due to existing uncertainty and confusion among the teachers, students and parents (v) that continuous access to face to face online interactions for learning consumes more internet data packages andbecoming a disadvantage to learners from poor backgrounds thus, teachers get confused whether to pre-record lessons and share with learners or to go for the zoom calls and Google meet classrooms where every learner can respond to discussions in real time and (vi) that great online experience heavily depends on the teachers' creativity in making learning more interactive and interesting including collaborating with other teachers to share skills and ideas.
Notably, all these factors need to be taken into consideration by teachers and other stakeholders for effective remote learning to take place in schools.

The Government COVID-19 Emergency Response Plan

The Government of Kenya, through the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology took up the role of coordination and keeping check on the education sector response and recovery efforts with support from development partners. This collaboration gave birth to strategic COVID-19 emergency response plan that was geared towards upholding access to quality, equitable and inclusive education for all. Through this plan the government put in a strategy

to cover the June 2020 to December 30, 2021 curriculum needs by spelling out short-, medium- and long-term mitigation measures in the education sector. The short-term focused on ensuring access to learning through remote, alternative and distance learning solutions, the medium-term, to assist learners that have fallen behind in their learning while the long-term, was designed to develop capacities to mitigate future shocks to the education system (Barasa, 2021).

Through this plan, learning through remote, alternative and distance learning solutions were put in place.

Tax Relief and Waivers on Learning Gadgets and Broadband
To provide workable programs for online learning in the country the government should device ways of producing free learning gadgets and provision of internet services especially in the marginalized areas with limited internet and electricity connectivity (Gathuru & Mweyeri, 2021). The Kenya Information and Communication Act of 2020 is monitoring progress on information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructural improvement and working towards improving online learning at all levels of education in Kenya (Government of Kenya, 2020). The government is looking into reducing or waiving taxes on computers and broadband internet for affordable computing in the country. Tax waivers on computers and broadband will enable schools to acquire the necessary equipment, access online content and launch online learning programmes (Mukora, et a; 2020). Another very important gesture that was a great relief to parents was tax relief policy to all Kenyans by the president. Thus, the President of the Republic of Kenya introduced a tax relief policy with the aim of easing the financial burden among Kenyans on income tax, corporate tax and value added tax. Although tax relief was not directly focusing on education, parents and other stakeholders were able to support their families including school children.

Mukora, et al (2020) further suggested that the government should offer incentives to tech-preneurs and tech-companies to support development of online computer-based training services in the country. This move will attract local public and private investment in online learning while guaranteeing availability of computer-based gadgets to facilitate digitalization in the education sector, as well as ease access and increase educational inclusion of vulnerable and marginalized groups. Other methods on making online and remote learning more sustainable and cheaper to many learners in Kenya could be done in partnership with all media houses to share some courses on radio and television as well as uploading instruction materials on You Tube and sharing electronic textbooks and articles.

Increased Parental Involvement in the Education of Children

Online learning needed more supervision than the face to face schooling. Where possible, parents and teachers needed and still need to provide support in terms of computer skills

training to be in a position to supervise online learning. Thus, the more the parents are involved in the learning of their children, the more they appreciate the schooling process and the role of teachers. Learners making use of electrical gadgets and internet need to be trained about online safety, a role which parents and teachers are well placed with the ability to regulate internet access. There is also, need to train more ICT experts to supervise online learning and offer training on the same to learners (Mabeya, 2020). Since many parents were not able to supervise online learning because they lacked the necessary skills which in many cases forced schools not offer examinations to students.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the effects of the COVID – 19 pandemic on education in Kenya. The situation in schools was not only challenging but exposed many challenges facing learners, teachers and parents. This paper has employed a literature review methodology, highlighted study objectives and explored a number of educational setbacks and challenges that schools had to grapple with at the peak of COVID – 19. It has further highlighted some educational challenges exposed by COVID – 19 among them economic and social challenges to learners and parents showing the huge difference between public and private schools and leading to 68% drop in children's reading skills in the country. The changes in school calendar among them disrupted term dates, had a negative effect on the girl-child, the changing roles of the teacher and the need to increase parental involvement in the education of children are highlighted. One key lessons for teachers and schools is that, "one size fits all" type of education does not apply in schools anymore and last but not least, the paper has highlighted the efforts employed by government to address the challenges and proposed way forward for schools based on what the government has done to support learning during COVID – 19 through availability of learning technology for teachers and learners and the need to strengthen online learning recognizing that it is here to stay.

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