

SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IN THE SHADOW OF PANDEMIC IN NIGERIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

David Jimoh Kayode

*Department of Educational
Management
Faculty of Education,
University of Ilorin, Nigeria*

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INTRODUCTION

The importance of education in human development has been well documented, with studies highlighting education's catalytic roles in national and human capital development (Fägerlind & Saha, 2016; Griffin, Care, & McGaw, 2012). Education is a means of self-development through the transmission of knowledge, skills, and habits from generation to generation. The value of education in a nation's economic, social, and moral development cannot be overstated. It is incredibly concerned that education at all levels has been jeopardised since the novel coronavirus disease in 2019 (Covid-19). The coronavirus disease is a highly infectious disease that has afflicted the global population since December of 2019. The disease spreads via droplets (World Health Organization, 2020) and has infected over 9.1 million people, resulting in approximately 473,000 deaths worldwide (Aljazeera News, 2020). As a result, countries have relied on various containment measures, including physical and social distancing measures, to flatten the epidemiological curve and prevent morbidity and mortality from COVID-19 (Barasa et al., 2020; Viner et al., 2020).

Different countries have taken various measures to implement physical distancing, such as complete economic closure, including educational institutions (Nicola et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2020). The pandemic is affecting all levels of education, from pre-school to higher education, with far-reaching educational and economic consequences (Lindzon, 2020). For example, a four-week school closure in New York City had an economic impact of between \$10.6 and \$47.1 billion (Lindzon, 2020). A 12-week nationwide school closure costs 1% of GDP (Araz et al., 2012), while prolonged closures can cost 3% of UK GDP (Keogh-Brown et al., 2010).

Though school closures were intended to control virus spread within schools, prevent transmission to other vulnerable individuals, and maintain public health, these closures have had widespread socioeconomic consequences (Lindzon, 2020; Wren-Lewis, 2020; Cauchemez et al., 2009). Furthermore, the far-reaching effects of social/physical segregation and the associated lockdown measures, as well as school closures, have hampered the education sector and are expected to leave an indelible mark on the education system (Yinka & Adebayo, 2020; Nicola et al., 2020). Over 188 of the world's 195 countries have implemented nationwide school closures and limited educational facilities (Nicola et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2020).

It is estimated that the closure of educational institutions has affected more than 1,576, 021, 858 learners worldwide, accounting for approximately 91.3 per cent of all learners (Nicola et al., 2020; Brown et al., 2011; UNESCO, 2020). Aside from the impact on students, school closures have significant economic, health,

and social costs (Cauchemez et al., 2009; Brown et al., 2011; Wu et al., 2010). Prior to the pandemic, most countries, including Australia, Italy, Germany, and Hong Kong, had implemented timely responses to online learning (Crawford et al., 2020). Nonetheless, researchers have demonstrated that the pandemic has posed significant challenges to education in these countries (Crawford et al., 2020). As a result, it is expected that the pandemic will have a greater negative impact on schools that did not have online learning platforms before the pandemic (Zhong, 2002; Kachra & Brown, 2019). According to Zar et al. (2020), the pandemic's indirect effects include disrupted schooling and a lack of access to school, particularly in low and middle-income countries.

The impact of COVID-19 on education is especially dangerous in low and middle-income countries, where education systems have been operating on subpar platforms (Dan-Nwafor et al., 2020; Yinka & Adebayo, 2020). It is also difficult to provide a safe learning environment for students in these overcrowded, resource-constrained schools (Zar et al., 2020). The pandemic has a peculiar dissipating impact on education in Africa and other countries, widening the existing divide in learning access and outcomes, and increasing school dropouts (Blundell et al., 2020; Dorn et al., 2020). The threat to education in Nigeria is exacerbated by unique vulnerabilities such as poor health systems, poverty and inequality, hunger, internally displaced populations, high population densities, urban-rural divide, and an out-of-school population (Obiako & Adeniran, 2020).

Prior to COVID-19, Nigeria had one-fifth of the world's out-of-school children. In Nigeria, approximately 10.5 million children aged 5-14 years were out of school, and only approximately 61 percent of children aged 6 to 11 years received regular primary school education (UNICEF Nigeria, n.d.). As a result, while Nigeria is dealing with underlying educational challenges that have kept the country behind in terms of preparing young people for dynamic workplaces (Dan-Nwafor et al., 2020; Obiako & Adeniran, 2020; Yinka & Adebayo, 2020), COVID-19 impacts exacerbate this problem.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, all schools in Nigeria were closed beginning March 27, 2020, as part of the Federal Government's efforts to limit the disease's spread. This resulted in a contextualised state-wide school closure across the country's 36 states. In response, the Ministries of Education in various states have released modalities for radio and television schooling, as well as internet-based learning, for students in public primary and secondary schools. Though these efforts may be effective, based on experience from developed countries, they may have a far-reaching negative impact on the education system in developing low-income countries such as Nigeria (Obiako & Adeniran, 2020). For example, while the COVID-19 pandemic is transforming digital and online education around the world, primary and secondary school students in rural and underserved communities are falling behind due to a lack of skills and resources to adapt or transition to new learning avenues. Learning remotely (including radio, TV schooling, and online learning apps for primary and secondary learners, virtual libraries, and online classes in universities)

is thus practically impossible in the majority of Nigerian communities.

Poorly resourced institutions and socially disadvantaged students with limited access to technology and the internet, as well as students' inability to engage in an online environment, jeopardise the government's response (Zhong, 2020). Obiako and Adeniran, 2020 (2020) discovered that the pandemic has had a significant impact on education in three ways: missed learning for the majority of pre-pandemic students, loss of access to vital school-provided services, and leaving more children behind. As a result of the country's school closures, these effects are likely to widen the gaps in educational quality and socioeconomic equality. This is due to the fact that a smaller percentage of learners in urban areas, who are more likely to come from higher-income families, have a better chance of accessing education during school closures through technology (Obiako & Adeniran, 2020), leaving the majority of learners from poor homes and underserved rural and suburban areas of the country behind (Zhong, 2020). Aside from that, students in schools that lack the resources or capacity to transition to online delivery are currently missing out on learning opportunities (Leung & Sharma, 2020).

Learning in the home can also be a challenge or present learning challenges. This is dependent on parents' educational attainment and other commitments, which leaves a larger proportion of the learner population behind. All stakeholders in education are deeply concerned about these issues (Crawford et al., 2020). As a result, even though most states in the country are currently responding through radio and television, a significant number of students are still facing difficulties in

their education. Furthermore, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, no study has investigated the impact of Covid-19 on education, specifically in primary and secondary schools, from the perspectives of education stakeholders (educators, parents, and learners) in Nigeria. As a result, this article relied on the perspectives of stakeholders to deconstruct the educational challenges posed by Covid-19 and how those challenges have impacted education and learning in primary and secondary schools.

EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES POSED BY COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The challenges and barriers to education imposed by Covid-19 include school closure/loss of academic session, poor learning, and unequal access to education opportunities and difficulties associated with homeschooling, urban-rural divides in resource distribution and poor knowledge/skills on the part of the teachers and parents.

Shutting Down of Schools and Loss of Academic Session: Many students are lost a school session and became strongly challenged due to Covid-19 pandemic school closure. Many students stayed at home for about two school terms due to total school closure. This meant that students were not sure whether they would be promoted from their extant grade. There was also uncertainty in students being promoted to the next grade levels and the associated modalities such as assessment. The school closure could lead to irreversible academic, economic and social challenges for the children, families and society. It informed decreased physical activities on the students, poor mental health, sedentary lifestyle and tele-addiction, poor nutrition and elevated risk

of abuse and neglect (Kayode & Naicker, 2021). The school closure is the worst of all the challenges the pandemic has created to education.

The foregoing is similar to the studies that have outlined the negative impact of school closure (Esposito, & Principi, 2020; Selbervik, 2020) and Covid-19 on the education system (Ogunode, 2020). Furthermore, Burzynska and Contreras (2020) pointed out that the shutting down of schools during the Covid-19 pandemic widened the gender gap through girl-child abuse and neglect. In addition, Francis and Pegg (2020) alluded that school closures have halted school nutritional programmes in some localities in Nigeria. Van Lancker and Parolin (2020) observed that Covid-19 was a social crisis which resulted in school closures, a situation that impacted the education of approximately 80% of school-age children globally.

Inadequate Learning Opportunities

School closure impacted on the children's learning and achievement. Although the online efforts were commendable but they were not just adequate due to poor internet facilities, costs on parents and its attendant distractive tendencies. Getting involved in effective online teaching and learning was almost implausible for average Nigerian in primary or secondary schools, unless those in private schools. This implied that the stakeholders were of the opinion that online learning cannot completely stand in for the regular school contacts, especially for primary and secondary schools in Nigeria. Selbervik (2020) outlined barriers related to school closure in developing countries like Nigeria to include unavailability and inaccessibility to

adequate internet facilities/services. Oboh, Ighiyisi and Oboh (2020) also noticed that students in secondary school poorly utilised available online teaching and learning process.

Abysmal Access to Education Opportunities

Poor/unequal access to education opportunities was also a major challenge to education and learning during Covid-19. There was poor access due to poor infrastructures such as technological gadgets, electricity and network issues that were almost general issues in Nigeria as teachers and parents in Nigeria were rarely well prepared to handle online learning thereby limiting access to education. Learners in the rural areas had little or no access to online facilities than those in the urban.

Poor/unequal access to educational material was a daunting challenge to the educational progress during Covid-19. Many students could not access educational materials from their schools during the school closure, experienced difficulties schooling from home, and did not engage in any planned learning experiences. It is also succinct to note that many of them had no communication with their teachers since the school closure and therefore got no assessment for their promotion. Majority of the students were poorly connected or had poor access to learning opportunities during the pandemic. Francis and Pegg (2020) as well as Obiakor and Adeniran, (2020) also observed poor access of students to ample learning opportunities during the period of total lockdown of Nigeria's citadels of learning. It was such that as learning became strictly online, poor funding and poor competence on the part of the students and the teachers, insufficient

resources and access to educational materials really limited the plausibility of effective access to education (Habibu, Abdullah-Al-Mamun & Clement, 2012), especially in developing countries like Nigeria.

In addition to the foregoing, external variables, such as accessibility to the internet and constant power failure inhibited e-learning assessment (Klenowski, 2011; Mafenya, 2016). This suggests that in Nigeria and other developing countries, where the internet and power supply are big huddles, e-learning during a pandemic was not be feasible and was overly divided according to social class.

Snags in Homeschooling

Challenges in homeschooling the learners was another bane resulting from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic that led to the closure of all schools nationwide. Effective homeschooling was difficult for both the parents and the learners, and in isolation, did not support considerable academic growth. Homeschooling was not feasible in the Nigerian context as the parents were under enormous pressure of economic threat – how to meet up with daily up-keep of the family. Parents are conditioned mainly to help follow-up what has already been done in the school and not to stand in as a teacher. Homeschooling the Nigerian child during the Covid-19-informed lockdown era was difficult constituting a considerable challenge to both the students and their parents. The students encountered difficulties learning from home, and only a few of them engaged in planned learning experience, while the majority did not involve in any serious learning experiences from home.

The difficulty in homeschooling means that what is learnt individually from home could not serve as the basis for making educational decisions in terms of promotion and placement (Kaden, 2020). Since homeschooling depends to a great extent on the parents' educational level, and other factors like socioeconomic factors, as well as attitude of those involved, it was difficult to ascertain the extent of achievement (Brom et al., 2020). There was also an achievement divide in the direction of parental involvement. Brom et al. (2020) in a study of parents of school-age children found that parents complained about lack of time, issues with technologies, and inadequate teaching skills and content knowledge as challenges they face in homeschooling the children.

Paucity of Technology for Distance Learning

Although the use of technology such as phones, television and radio for online learning is being acclaimed by the government who introduced diverse initiatives during the school closure period, the participants in this study underlined the lack of or unavailability of supporting technologies for learners in primary and secondary schools and their parents. Moreover, these technologies were unaffordable to a majority of families with school-age children. Most teachers and parents complained of not being able to adequately access the internet amidst recurring epileptic electricity supply. Distance learning was almost impossible for secondary and primary school as many students were not permitted to own phones and IT gadgets prior to the Covid-19 lockdown. Teachers were also poorly equipped with the required infrastructures. Every teacher should own a laptop but

many of them were bereft of this basic facility.

Furthermore, poor access to technology is a considerable constraint to education during the school closure period. Many learners had lack of technology as a profound challenge. Only a small percentage of the students were engaged in online learning during the period of school closure. This is not unexpected, given that the need for distance learning during schools closure overwhelmed the existing technologies for remote education. Transitioning learning from classrooms to homes needs a period of preparation in making available the enabling technologies (UNESCO, 2020). When majority of the learners and teachers lack the tools for virtual learning, it becomes practically implausible to embark on distance learning (Iqbal, & Ahmad, 2010; Olutola, & Olatoye, 2015).

The pandemic caught the education sector off guard, so there were no guidelines for planning and delivering online learning for primary and secondary schools especially in a developing country like Nigeria (Phelps & Sperry, 2020). Hence, there is the need to provide technological tools for learning in all primary and secondary schools. In a thematic analysis of teachers' perception of online learning during Covid-19 in Indonesia, Aliyyah et al. (2020) found four themes, including: instructional strategies, challenges, support, and motivation of teachers; urban-rural divides in resource distribution; and access.

The difference in educational resources between the urban and rural areas was a major challenge to effective education during Covid-19 school closure. Many parents and teachers were affected

by the urban-rural disparity in access to educational resources while majority of students had difficulties relating to poor access, such as poor internet network and electricity and poor skills and competence for using technologies. These apparently suggested poor access among the students, parents, and teachers residing in rural areas. Learners in the urban areas were at (an) advantage. Organising radio and tele-learning in village squares for children in remote villages was literally implausible due to poor infrastructural facilities in the remote parts of Nigeria.

Studies by Karlidag-Dennis, Hazenberg and Dinh (2020) have also shown the unequal effect of location on different dimensions of education. One of the major effects of Covid-19 was on exacerbating inequities in education. Much has been made of alternative forms of learning, such as online classrooms, web-based courses and homeschooling, but these were inaccessible to most children in rural areas and those from poor economic backgrounds (Simba et al., 2020).

Gross Inadequacy in Knowledge/Skills on the Part of the Teachers and Parents

Poor knowledge was a significant challenge to learning in primary and secondary schools. Several studies have shown that most teachers are not skilled in using e-learning facilities. Many teachers are novices in operating computer and android phones. Such teachers, therefore could not engage in e-teaching. This assertion agrees with studies that indicated that e-learning facilities were under-utilised in most public tertiary institutions in Nigeria due to challenges including lack of /inadequate training of users (Eze, Chinedu-Eze and Bello, 2018; Kayode, Alabi, Sofoluwe and Oduwaiye, 2019).

Further, adopting e-learning during this Covid-19 pandemic called for up-skilling of the users within a short time (Anu, 2020). This is because e-learning is complex (Vingsle, 2014), and developing and, more importantly, implementing online information to plan instruction is highly challenging (Andersson & Palm, 2018). Hence, considering the unexpected nature of the Covid-19 outbreak, most teachers, parents and learners were not prepared for e-learning, especially in primary and secondary schools where it was rarely used before the pandemic.

Reduction in Enrollment and Increase in School Dropout Rate

School closure hurts students' enrollment. During the pandemic lockdown and school closure, many students were lost to teenage pregnancy, businesses and other distractions. Students in underserved areas took to various money-generating ventures that their transition back to school at resumption became a hassle. The lockdown also posed a challenge in school enrolment. Some teenagers in secondary schools who went to urban areas for businesses were observed to have very low tendencies of returning to their former area of residence or classroom upon the resumption of schools after the year-long lockdown.

School closure resulted in high dropout and poor enrollment in secondary schools after the pandemic. This is particularly the case of protracted closures when the associated economic stress causes school children to work and generate income for their family upkeep (Obboh, Ighiwiyisi & Obboh, 2020). Apart from this, some students lost interest in school with longer stay at home to the extent that some students even forgot the names of their schools when asked (Obboh,

Ighiwiyisi & Oboh, 2020; Scott, 2020; Soland, Kuhfeld, Tarasawa, Johnson, Ruzek & Liu, 2020; Williamson, Eynon & Potter, 2020).

Widening Achievement Gaps and Inequality in Education

Inequality in education was found to get widened with the protracted school closure in Nigeria. Vulnerable populations such as those with learning disabilities, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and those in rural areas were considered to have experienced unequal challenges to their learning compared to their counterparts, without disabilities, from high socioeconomic backgrounds and urban areas during the school closure informed by Covid-19. Before the Covid-19, inequality in education has been identified as a major challenge of education in Nigeria and other developing countries (Nwogu, 2015; Olibie, Eziuzo & Enueme, 2013; Onwuameze, 2013). One of the major effects of Covid-19 has been on exacerbating these inequities in education. The alternative forms of learning, such as online classrooms, web-based courses, and homeschooling are inaccessible to most children in disadvantaged groups. Women and girls who often experience the highest illiteracy rates and school dropouts are further incapacitated and underprivileged (Phelps & Sperry, 2020).

It is also succinct to note that students from poor backgrounds and those from rural areas are more vulnerable. In Nigeria, school opportunity is correlated to income level and public schools differ from private schools in the populations they serve (Oboh, Ighiwiyisi & Oboh, 2020). Hence, until the schools were reopened, majority of students, especially

those in public schools, were not learning anything academic. Thus, this would have a longer-term impact of deepening educational inequality, such as inequality in access to educational resources during the school closure. This inequity in access could add to the existing disparities in learning achievements along socioeconomic lines and the urban-rural divide. Moreover, for students with learning disabilities and those living in fragile and conflict-affected regions, the effect is more depressing. Given the technological scenery and the apparent digital divide, distance learning opportunities were available but were underutilised by students in public schools (Oboh, Ighiwiyisi & Oboh, 2020).

Poor Academic Achievement

Research findings have shown that the school closure resulted in poor academic achievement in primary and secondary school learners. Furthermore, the poor achievement of the students, in turn, affects their performances in both external and internal examinations. Students were definitely unable to achieve as expected, and this affected their internal and external examination results negatively, as evident in the poor performances in the recently released UTME 2021 scores. The prolonged school closure translated to abysmal achievement and mass failure in external examinations. This is due to the fact that many students had already lost what they have learnt before the school closure due to a long stay at home. Since e-learning for primary and secondary schools students in Nigeria has been rated as a very poor method of teaching (Ngwu, 2015; Onolemhenmhen, 2014; Eguavoen, 2016; Ubulom, Kayii & Dambo, 2016; Oboh, Ighiwiyisi & Oboh,

2020; Wylie & Lyon, 2015), most students did not make effective use of it.

On the other hand, students that availed themselves of the e-learning opportunities admitted that they did not learn all they were to learn because the assessments done during the lockdown period has not been effective (Oboh, Ighiyisi & Oboh, 2020). It has been established that e-learning results in poor students' achievement in primary and secondary schools in Nigeria (Onolemhenmhen, 2014; Ngwu, 2015; Eguavoen, 2016; Ubulom, Kayii & Dambo, 2016).

Implications For Policy And Practices In Nigeria's Education Sector

The foregoing has explored the impact of Covid-19 on primary and secondary education in Nigeria. Particular attention had been drawn to the challenges and difficulties of lockdown and how it had impacted different dimensions of the schooling. During Covid-19, education was faced with many challenges in Nigeria, such as school closure/loss of academic session, poor learning, poor/unequal access to education opportunities, difficulties associated with homeschooling, poor/lack of technology for distance learning, urban-rural divides in resource distribution and access, poor knowledge/skills on the part of the teachers and parents. In addition, Covid-19 negatively impacted school enrollment and created or widened achievement gaps and inequality in education, among others.

This paper therefore has serious implications for education policy, practice and development regarding pathways to the adoption of e-learning or digital learning. Firstly, as the schools gradually reopened, there was the need to re-think

education in the areas of what, where, how and when learners should learn. In addition, information and communication technology has revolutionised learning and teaching at all levels. Therefore, students in primary and secondary schools should be introduced to IT-enhanced learning approaches such as blended learning, computer-assisted learning, and technologies.

There is an increasing need to revalidate and adapt teaching and learning methods for all learners. This would help in overcoming access and poor learning during emergency situations in the future while ensuring that distance barriers do not hinder education and engendering uninterrupted academic sessions. As such, it is necessary that primary and secondary schools be provided with online infrastructure, learning resources, learning tools. If the learners and the teachers are well skilled and equipped with ICT gadgets, learning can occur irrespective of time and distance. School funding is necessary and will be of utmost significance in respect of e-learning under emergency.

With the reopening of schools, efforts should be geared toward reducing the gaps between urban and rural schools in learning and the provision of e-learning resources for enhanced learning. This can be ensured by providing learning materials and resources online and providing internet facilities to rural areas for learners from low economic backgrounds. For instance, in China and Portugal, efforts are being made by the governments to give computers to students from low-income households and offered mobile data packages and telecommunication subsidies. Mobile learning materials such as working sheets can be delivered through postal services to

students who do not have access to the internet at homes. Although some states in Nigeria embarked on local media channels such as radio programmes, this paper suggests that the programmes were ineffective due to logistics and lack of access. Additionally, the government can provide supports such as solar-powered educational devices, pre-loaded with offline academic resources, to students in disadvantaged and vulnerable communities to alleviate the negative impact of the pandemic on education.

The skill deficits pinpointed in this paper suggest there is a glaring need to make training services available for teachers and students as well as robust synergies between government, enterprises and schools. Teachers and learners need training on ICTs and e-learning facilities as to how they can be used to support learning. Both in-service teachers and the student teachers in educational institutions should be well trained in blended teaching and learning method.

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