



Managing Nigeria’s Education amidst the Covid- 19 Pandemic Era: Implication on Educational Funding

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Abstract. This theoretical paper examined the management of Nigeria’s education amidst the COVID-19 pandemic era and its implication on educational funding. It was revealed in the paper that COVID-19 which is a disease with origin from China got into Nigeria in February, 2020. The Presence of the disease led to the closure of schools in Nigeria on the 19th of March, 2020. This led to a disruption of educational activities in all learning institutions in the country. These disruptions affected learning modes, access to school related activities and parenting routines. The paper also revealed that the three main obstacles for learners in the midst of school shutdown were a lack of access to technology, an unsuitable home learning environment and a lack of access to learning materials. It was also revealed that the use of blended learning, innovative partnerships and accelerated digital skills through on line learning were used in managing education during the pandemic. Furthermore, revenue inflows dwindled for government, households and developmental partners in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic. This fall in revenue negatively affected the education sector in Nigeria. For Nigeria to overcome the challenges of COVID-19 and effectively manage the pandemic in the educational sector and its implication on educational funding, the paper recommended among others for the provision of infrastructure for learning, keeping students safe online, improved educational funding and reduction in taxes to educational institutions by government.

Keywords: COVID-19, Education Sector, Funding, Pandemic

1. Introduction

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, which is a blueprint for creating a just World, has

named “quality education” as its fourth goal. One target of that goal according to Grahl, Johnson & Holland (2020) is ensuring that by the year 2030, all children have the means to complete a “free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education.” This is a monumental goal. Even in the best times, educating children is far more complex which requires adequate funding than just getting them into a classroom.

Countries were striving to achieve this goal before the advent of COVID-19. COVID-19 being an infectious disease that is caused by Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome known as Corona Virus 2 began as a cluster of pneumonia cases from an unknown virus in Wuhan, Hubei Province in China in December, 2019. After subjecting it to laboratory tests, the disease was named corona virus disease 2019 which was abbreviated to “COVID-19”, while the virus has been named “SARS-CoV-2”. Wuhan, which is known for a large seafood and live animal market, imply that corona virus was transmitted from animal to human. The first confirmed case of COVID-19 started experiencing symptoms in Wuhan, China on the 1st of December 2019.

The disease, which was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) in January 2020, has since spread to over 196 countries across the globe, registering its presence in every continent. Health experts have however suggested that the best way to curb the spread of COVID-19 is through social distancing, personal hygiene and restriction of movement from one place to another. Even though there are ongoing efforts to curtail the spread of the disease globally, which is transmitted almost entirely through human to human contact, as at 8 December 2020, COVID-19 has accounted for 65.8 million

confirmed cases and 1.5 million deaths worldwide since the start of the pandemic (W.H.O, 2020).

On 27th February 2020, the first case of COVID-19 was announced in Nigeria, Africa's most populated country with a population of approximately 200 million people through an infected Italian citizen who came to Lagos the commercial nerve centre of the country. The disease then spread to other residents of Lagos and subsequently to other parts of Nigeria. As at 10 December 2020, the country has recorded 70,195 confirmed cases and 1,182 deaths of COVID-19 cases (N.C.D.C, 2020).

The closures of schools is said to have impacted over 70 percent of the world's inhabitants. The heads and managers of educational institutions have become fully conscious of the fact that there could be a future where the outbreak of COVID-19 and other interruptions might become a part of our everyday lives. This also means implementing change in learning and teaching.

Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the lives of many individuals, negatively impacting the global economy and sources of livelihoods. Due to measures to contain the pandemic, about 1.2 billion learners are out of school and 73.8 percent of the world's school population has been affected by school closures (UNESCO, 2020a). Although this has affected education access, quality and equality, it has propelled the reshaping of education delivery across the world. On March 19, 2020, the Federal Ministry of Education in Nigeria approved the closure of all learning institutions (Nlebem, 2020).

This abrupt closure led to significant disruptions in the education system in Nigeria; including learning modes, access to school related services, parenting routines, and crisis management capacities of the federal and state ministries of education. Students were at home for several months in 2020, causing relevant stakeholders to adapt quickly and develop solutions to minimize the potential learning slide resulting from the pandemic. According to UNESCO (2020b), the closure of schools has affected 36,400,000 primary and secondary school learners across Nigeria, including those in internally displaced camps. Few of these learners who are mostly from financially privileged households, have access to quality learning opportunities from the comfort of their homes.

Major causes of this inequity include limited or non-availability of smart phones or computers and internet services in most homes, and the large number

of schools that lack the financial and technical capacity to transit from in-school to remote learning facilitation. Many schools are limited in their capacity to purchase the required infrastructure for remote learning and often do not have teachers with the appropriate digital skills. For schools that may be better resourced, it has been challenging facilitating practical-oriented subjects and courses that typically engage students through laboratory experiment. With the closure of schools, there were very few schools that could afford to set up and maintain virtual science laboratories where students and the teachers or lecturers could work together to simulate experiments (Abbey & Hoxley, 2020). These students had to make do with learning the theoretical aspects of science subjects alone, until schools were re-opened.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also threatened the education of children or youths with special needs and disabilities. Without a crisis, this group of the society already experience some form of marginalization. Hence, the likelihood of losing learning opportunities during the COVID-19 pandemic era, due to combination of factors including the socio-economic income of their families, the non-availability of special needs teachers and the inexperience of parents or guardians in facilitating their learning needs. For children with disabilities, remote home-schooling not only requires access to adequate information technology (IT) resources and internet, books and other learning materials; but also, access to specific assistive devices or special education curricula that allow for a continuous education at home and accommodates the child's specific learning needs (UNICEF, 2020a). The COVID-19 pandemic presents unique challenges for Nigeria's already fragile education system. Obiakor and Adeniran (2020) disclosed that before the pandemic, there was an estimated total of 10.2 million out-of-school children in Nigeria. The outbreak of the disease compounded this problem in Nigeria's fragile educational sector.

2. The State of Nigeria's Education in the COVID-19 Era

This is the right time for educational institutions in Nigeria to reorganize what the prospect of education would look like and take realistic steps towards adopting a blended learning format that will improve the standard of education in the country. This is because UNESCO reported that 89 percent of students in Nigeria do not have right to use home computers and 82 percent do not have internet access (Anifowoshe, Abdullahi, Ayodele, Akinjo & David,

2020). This means that these online classes cannot accommodate all students. In spite of these, the challenges with this access have seen some innovations in circumventing the bandwidth challenges; these include pre-recorded lectures on these zero-rated e-learning platforms, among others. However, these efforts are still faced with challenges.

Nigeria's education sector is diverse and so too are their challenges. Private education has a different challenge to public, just like urban has to rural education. While the issues may differ among states, there is one important commonality: the scale of the issues is different at different educational levels. Research has shown that less than 20 percent of Nigerians attend university. Less than 40 percent finish secondary school, while more than 80 percent attend primary education (UNESCO, 2020b). It is the primary level which is least able to cope with the disruption of schooling during COVID-19 era. Primary children, in general, have little experience of study outside the classroom, they are unlikely to have adequate provision for learning at home or access to internet-enabled devices and many parents will not have the ability to provide sufficient support to their learning. So, those most in need of support are the least likely to be able to access it. And if a child drops out of primary school, they are unlikely to return to full-time education.

The Nigerian Government closed down its educational institutions early. With very little warning, the whole approach to education through classroom teaching became unviable, with little planned to replace it. This problem was faced by governments worldwide but has been particularly severe in Nigeria where there is a wide disparity in provision for the 'elite' and for less advantaged people, mostly in rural areas. While educational programmes on television and radio were quickly launched by many state governments, they were only accessible to those with access to a television or a radio sets. Similarly, online learning was only accessible to those with internet access.

While the need for distance learning was clear from the outset of the pandemic, achieving effective reach to students was more complex. Schools were left to their own devices, at both the primary and secondary school levels; priority was often accorded to continuing with examination classes that is those classes taking the primary and secondary leaving certificates. Neither students nor teachers had any prior experience in teaching and learning outside the classroom.

UNESCO (2020a) revealed that, the three main obstacles for learners in the midst of school shutdown were a lack of access to technology, an unsuitable home learning environment, and a lack of access to learning materials. For teachers, the main impediment was the lack of appropriate training to design and manage distance learning programmes. This was compounded by a lack of infrastructure: electricity, connectivity, devices; and a lack of appropriate learning materials: books, television and internet-enabled devices. In most cases, poorer students and those most geographically dispersed are mostly at risk of missing out on education if there is no conventional school to attend. In addition to these difficulties, most teachers were as inadequately prepared and ill-equipped to deal with this new situation as their students were. Parents were also ill-equipped to support their children's education at home. While some governments provided 'sensitization' for teachers and parents, many did not. The current school curriculum also did not lend itself to distance delivery.

The state of education in Nigeria during the COVID-19 era can therefore be summarized thus:

- There was widespread closure of schools at the peak of the pandemic but they were reopened in October, 2020. - These closures were seen as essential in tackling the pandemic.
- A lack of access to technology is considered to be the biggest barrier for learning during the current pandemic in Nigeria. This is because learners in rural communities are those most likely to be disadvantaged as a result. The main limitation in this case is the lack of availability and affordability of connectivity.
- Early childhood and primary level students are seen to be most likely to be disadvantaged by the crisis and least likely to be able to access the technologies required for learning.
- A large majority of educators have not received financial support for teaching and learning tools to help them continue teaching in the crisis, and do not feel there has been sufficient preparation to help them adapt.
- It has led to more widespread use of technology in education in the future. However, this will lead to significant challenges for the most marginalized and may increase inequality.

3. How to manage the educational sector during the COVID-19 pandemic era

The closure of schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic presents an opportunity for education stakeholders to play their part in developing and executing strategies that will position the education system to prepare students to compete in the global scene. The educational sector can be managed during the COVID-19 pandemic era in the following ways:

Blended learning: Schools can develop frameworks that allow them to provide a blend of traditional classroom and distance learning opportunities for their students even after the pandemic. Majority of teachers now prefer a blended teaching approach where they can have both physical and online teaching with their students. This provides an opportunity for school owners to minimize operating costs of running traditional schools and also explore flexible school fee payment arrangements with parents. This period of home-schooling also presents parents with opportunities to better diagnose their children's academic strengths and weaknesses and make more informed decisions.

Innovative partnerships: Several avenues for the government and the private sector to partner with education technology companies and internet service providers to create online academies and provide related services that would cater to the learning needs of students have risen as a result of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Investment opportunities: The current situation also presents investment opportunities for the private sector. These opportunities can be maximized by private investors and individuals interested in education franchising (Ikoku, 2020). This would be a chance for these companies to make exponential profit while also creating a social impact in the educational sector. It would also allow internet service providers to engage in more meaningful corporate social responsibility projects. The online education business has grown massively over the last decade and the COVID-19 pandemic has seen even more people accessing education online. The internet has provided the opportunities for many online school owners to access students from all over the world.

Accelerated digital skills acquisition: The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a higher adoption of digital teaching learning and innovation amongst teachers, students, parents and private organizations. Much more than was ever before, stakeholders in the education sector have been exposed to digital skills because of the pandemic. Some parents reported that their children have adapted well to learning online

and this has improved their digital skills. As the world changes during the COVID-19 era, these skills are likely to become even more important for the future of work and the productivity of workers (Olisah, 2020).

4. Implication on Educational Funding

The outbreak of COVID-19 negatively affected educational funding in Nigeria. The fiscal space to fund education has further shrunk with the decline on government revenue and economic downturn arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. Generally, Government, households, and development partners are the main funders of education. The ability of each group to fund education was affected by COVID-19 in different ways. Nigeria's Government budgetary allocation to its education sector has always been below the 26 percent recommendation of UNESCO. For example, Adeyinka (2020) disclosed that in the Nigerian budget of N10.33 trillion for year 2020, only N691.07 billion representing 6.7 percent of the budget was allotted to the education sector as compared with 7.04 percent in 2019.

For year 2021, Mohammed (2020) asserted that out of the N13.08 trillion budgeted for that year, N742.5 billion was allotted to education. That is just 5.6 percent of the budget, the lowest percentage allocation since 2011. What this indicates is that the education sector does not have enough budgetary allocation to drive the changes associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. This will make it difficult for the provision of virtual learning platforms and other technical infrastructure.

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a massive income shock for many households in Nigeria. The household income of many families declined as rates of unemployment and underemployment increased. Given the global nature of the pandemic, inflation reduced the incomes of households to the extent that their capacity to purchase dwindled significantly. In many households, particularly poor households, these declines in household income reduced their investments in education. Furthermore, reductions in income and the need for greater health spending occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic have made it difficult for some families to cover education costs.

Previous economic crisis in low-income countries like Nigeria have reduced incomes, lowered household education spending, and led to lower rates of school participation (World Bank, 2020). Declining incomes may also lead to shifts in enrollment from private schools to public schools, adding

further pressure on public education budgets. The overall implication of shifts of this kind without adequate funding will be to reduce quality, for example, by increasing class sizes.

Development assistance for education has only recently recovered from the financial crisis of 2008/09. UNESCO (2019) revealed that in the five years prior to the financial crisis, aid to education increased in real terms by approximately 10 percent per year, but in the five years afterwards, it fell by about 2 percent annually. Aid to education only reached the levels seen prior to the crisis in 2016 that is seven years after the onset of the crisis. These trends were not only a result of reductions in total development assistance. Between 2007 and 2016 for example, the share of all aid going to education declined from 11 percent to 8 percent.

Aid volume to education was negatively affected by the sharp drop in economic growth associated with the pandemic in some of the largest donor countries. For example, the United Kingdom (UK) is one of the largest bilateral donors to basic education and has committed itself to meeting the UN target of allocating 0.7 percent of GDP to development assistance. However, the UK economy is forecast to contract by 6.5 percent in 2020, which could reduce the government's aid commitments by approximately US\$1.4 billion (UNESCO, 2019). This implies that the advent of COVID-19 affected the educational assistance coming to Nigeria from donors and other partners.

5. Conclusion

Although COVID-19 significantly disrupted education like other sectors of the economy, the responses of educational stakeholders in Nigeria provided a quick cushion to reduce the learning slide among Nigerian students. A number of challenges with regards to rural learning included lack of infrastructure, accessibilities of digital tools and internet facilities for learning. Children from wealthier households may access more learning online than their counterparts in poorer households. This raises the need for the government to ensure learning for all children in Nigeria; by creating measures to ensure that no child is left behind, support is required for different groups of students, from financial to infrastructural to alternative remote learning options. Measures that ensure that teachers and parents are well equipped with the necessary skills and tools for supporting the continuous learning of children should be top of the government's priority at this time. On the whole, education remains

important to the success of any nation and its people; even in the midst of a global pandemic, managing and funding the sector is key for leaders who prioritize education and knowledge.

6. The way forward

For Nigeria to overcome the challenges of COVID-19 and effectively manage the pandemic in the educational sector, the following are recommended:

The effectiveness of rural learning is highly limited by the infrastructural deficiencies in Nigeria. The government and other relevant education stakeholders need to intensify investment in accessible and quality internet connections, stable electricity, and remote learning tools like television sets, radio sets, mobile phones, laptops among others. The lack of these infrastructural provisions continually excludes students from public schools and low-income households.

In making education policy and planning decisions, it is important for educational stakeholders and decision makers to note that no platform is a panacea, and different learning platforms could complement each other depending on the learning context. Hence, it might be more beneficial for educational stakeholders (governments at all levels, researchers, proprietors, parents and teachers) to continually observe and engage a range of learning platforms/innovations, while generating evidence on which is more suitable in specific contexts. This should be done bearing issues of equity, quality, inclusion and safety in mind. All educational stakeholders must commit to establishing, monitoring and evaluation frameworks to generate measurable outcomes on the effectiveness of their different learning interventions.

Teachers' welfare cannot be over emphasized. Given the pedagogical, financial and infrastructural support that teachers require, school owners and administrators need to increase investment in teacher training to increase their capacities for using digital tools and ultimately create a pipeline of teaching talent to curb the massive learning loss during the COVID-19 era.

As students spend more time with digital technologies, there are also increasing concerns about the optimal amount of screen time and associated digital safety risks for children. Children and youths spending more time on digital learning platforms are at risk of being exploited by online predators if appropriate measures are not put in place to

safeguard them. Digital learning platforms should have inbuilt security measures to prevent the invasion of online pedophiles or marauders. Ministries of Education and schools should also have back-end access to all e-learning platforms within their regions to monitor activities going on. Most importantly, parents also have to protect their children by limiting their exposure to online platforms.

In light of increasing demands for parents to be more actively involved in their children's learning, it is important that they are equipped with tools and resources to effectively navigate this "new" terrain by understanding their children's learning needs and how to best meet them. Parents need active and contextual support (such as learning groups, help lines, tutorials, how-to guides, WhatsApp group chats and so on) especially in dealing with issues like online safety, screen time, distractions, among others. Home schooling and play-based learning methodologies can be explored by parents who want to engage their younger children at home at this time. Furthermore, the unstable economic conditions have made it financially straining for many parents. Governments and relevant stakeholders can provide economic palliatives for parents such as interest free loans, free/heavily subsidized online learning materials, and subsidized digital devices, among others.

Private schools have generally been responsive to the learning needs of students in the educational system amidst COVID-19. There is also a growing demand for more home-grown solutions that are sensitive to the socio-economic realities of Nigeria; for instance: mobile apps that require minimal data. With an enabling environment, greater financial support, and strategic partnerships can be provided by government, corporate organizations and well spirited individuals. This will go a long way in improving the standard of education in Nigeria.

The national curriculum planners in Nigeria should plan and adopt a curriculum that can easily respond to such pandemics in the future. This can be done to enable more effective distance learning in Nigeria's educational system at all levels.

More funding is required to keep learning going or scaled- up education support programmes as part of the government's palliative measures. For the government, reducing costs will require re-prioritizing its plans in the light of this new reality. This needs to be complemented with innovative sourcing of learning infrastructure during this period. For example, reaching children through existing

school and home appliances and gadgets will be more cost-effective. Greater involvement of domestic philanthropists and digital entrepreneurs can reduce the financial burden of sustaining learning through the crisis. In addition, the government could delay or reduce tax collection for educational institutions to help them recover and reposition themselves.

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