



THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION DURING POST-COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

COVID-19 and early childhood education are sometimes disregarded subjects. Despite the fact that they serve children, families, and society, childcare programs are among the most severely impacted and underfunded businesses. COVID-19's spread has already had a heavy human cost, and with public health systems unable to keep up, these costs will only rise. Government measures in various nations to restrict COVID-19 transmission have resulted in a large demand and supply shock. This has resulted in substantial trade disruptions, commodities price decreases, and financial circumstances tightening in many nations. These consequences have already resulted in a significant increase in unemployment and underemployment rates, and they will continue to endanger the viability of many businesses throughout the globe. The epidemic will provide substantial educational problems, with the biggest and most immediate consequences on schooling in the nation. This pandemic issue has the potential to be inadequate or to deteriorate educational circumstances. Furthermore, the urgent need to priorities responding to the public health emergency and reinforcing safety nets is likely to diminish resources available for other public expenditures, such as education. There is substantial doubt regarding the COVID-19 pandemic's overall educational effect. Its length and intensity will be determined by the efficacy of steps to block the virus's spread and how fast economic activity and education in the nation can be stabilized. COVID-19 will have a variety of effects on stakeholders' abilities to pay education. Even though it is difficult to predict how COVID-19 will affect each funding source and each nation, this study will concentrate on what is known about potential remedies.

Keywords: Early Childhood, Education, Post-Covid-19, Pandemic

Introduction

The early years of life are the most important to the formation of intelligence, personality, and social behaviour in a child. The years before a child reaches kindergarten are among the most critical in his or her life for influencing learning. That is why modern societies show serious concern for the education of their young by providing needed support to prepare them to succeed later in school (Ejeh, 2006). It is common practice in most societies to make provision for early childhood education programs of various sorts for children below the official school-going age (usually 6 years), mainly to prepare them for education in primary schools (Obidike, 2012). The Federal Government of Nigeria recognizes the importance of early childhood education in Nigeria and, as a result, it was given prominence in the National Policy of Education (FRN, 2004) as one of the programmes in the Nigerian educational system.

The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, also known as COVID-19, in Wuhan, the ground zero of the virus and the capital city of Hubei Province in the Republic of China in September 2019 and which later spread to other parts of the world, has affected the entire world populace and businesses (Kim, 2020). Most importantly, the outbreak of the pandemic has impacted negatively on schools' resumptions that have long been closed down in virtually all nations of the world, including Nigeria (Oluka et al., 2020). Following the February 27, 2020 declaration of the first case of the virus in Lagos, Nigeria by the Federal Ministry of Health, Nigerian students seem to have been made to pay the price for this global debacle, a war of bioterrorism, as alleged by the conspiracy theorists, and one that has impacted negatively on the system of education in the country. Since the commencement of the directive of the Federal government to close down 2 schools in the country, precisely on March 19, 2020, things have never been the same for parents and students alike (Amorighoye, 2020). While medical experts justified the continued closure of Nigerian schools in the face of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, some critics, analysts and scholars argued that the continued closure of schools, despite the fact that markets, churches, mosques, businesses, and public offices have been long reopened for business, has negative

impacts on Nigerian students who are already exposed to a declining standard of education (Oluka et al., 2020). Some have also argued that the continued closure of schools across the federation would amount to unnecessary abuse or violation of the rights of Nigerian students to education, as well as obstructing the annual school academic calendar and truncating the expected year of entry; and delaying the promotion of students to the next level of studies and graduation from schools, colleges, and universities.

Early Childhood Education in Nigeria: A Historical Overview

Until recently, structured education for children under the age of elementary school in Nigeria did not get the attention it required. The notion of baby schools was introduced in Nigeria by missionaries in the early twentieth century, when such institutions were established in Nigeria's Western and Eastern regions. Early Childhood education, often known as nursery school or pre-primary education in Nigeria, is predominantly a post-colonial creation. The Kindergarten and infant classes, which comprised of groups of children regarded not yet ready for basic education, were resemblances of it throughout the colonial period. Because school teaching was not age-based at the time, some children as old as six may be found in some of the baby classrooms (Tor-Anyiin, 2008). With the elimination of baby classes, several parents saw the necessity for nursery schools. During that time (pre-independence), all efforts to provide early childhood education were restricted to the volunteer sector, with little or no official backing (Tor-Anyiin, 2008). The value and necessity for early childhood education was officially recognised and associated with the child's educational success in primary school for the first time in 1977, with the adoption of the National Policy on Education by Nigeria's then military government. Early childhood institutions gradually persisted, and by 1985, Nigeria had around 4200 early childhood educational institutions. By 1992, the figure had risen to over 8,300. Early childhood educational institutions are now located in a variety of locations and buildings, including university and college campuses, the premises of some industries and business organisations, church premises, and residential buildings, with unprecedented growth due to the high demand for early childhood care and education by parents (Ejeh, 2006).

Care and Education for Young Children as a General Concept

According to Maduwesi (1999), early childhood care and education is education provided to children who have not yet reached the statutory age for commencing primary school. He went on to say that it is a semi-formal education arrangement, usually outside the home, in which young children as young as three years old are exposed through play-like activities in a group setting to mental, social, and physical learning suited to their developmental stages, until the mandatory age of government-approved formal schooling. Early childhood care and education (pre-primary education) is defined by FRN (2004) as education provided at an educational institution to children aged 3-5 years prior to enrolment in primary school.

The goals of education beginning in early childhood

According to FRN (2004), the goals of early childhood education are as follows:

1. Make the transition from home to school as easy as possible.
2. Prepare the youngster for basic school.
3. Provide proper child care and monitoring while their parents are at work (on the farm, in the market or offices)
4. Instill societal standards
5. Instill in the child a spirit of curiosity and creativity via exploration of nature, the environment, art, music, and play with toys, among other things.
6. Foster a feeling of collaboration and teamwork.
7. Develop healthy habits, particularly good health habits.
8. Use play to teach the fundamentals of numbers, letters, colours, shapes, and forms, among other things.

The Effects of Covid-19 on Early Childhood Education

The pandemic of COVID-19 has had a tremendous influence on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECE). This fast response offers current research on the pandemic's effect on the ECEC sector in England, as well as the impact of changes in access to ECEC on pre-school children. It also discusses the government's financial support for early childhood education recovery, as well as stakeholder viewpoints ahead of the next Spending Review. It supplements the POST note on Early Childhood Education and Care, which summarises the data on the relationship between ECEC and child development in England, the effect of government-funded ECEC on families and the sector, and stakeholder views on public policy goals.

The COVID-19 epidemic has had a variety of effects on the ECEC sector, including temporary and permanent setting closures, decreased demand for ECEC spots, and personnel issues.

The number of youngsters returning to institutions is growing. According to the most recent Department of Education statistics, 697,000 children attended early years childcare facilities on September 16, 2021, accounting for around 76% of the typical daily level of attendance in the Autumn term. Before the epidemic, childcare providers' budgets were already strained in numerous areas. Despite government assistance to the industry during COVID-19, closures and decreased demand have heightened financial strains, and stakeholders are concerned about the pandemic's long-term effect on financial viability. Prior to the epidemic, there had been long-standing challenges with attracting and maintaining workers, particularly highly skilled staff. The epidemic has worsened this, and some stakeholders are concerned that it may jeopardise the quality of ECEC in the long run. Changes in access to ECEC seem to have influenced pre-school children in a variety of ways, including social, emotional, and behavioural development, mental health, physical development, and school preparation, according to available research. However, data shows that children and families experienced the epidemic in many varied ways, which has impacted any beneficial and negative effects on development. Changes in access to ECEC are more likely to have a negative effect on children's development and mental health for underprivileged children, children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), and vulnerable children. Several stakeholders have urged for more financial assistance for the ECEC sector ahead of the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review, which is scheduled to be released on October 27, 2021. The House of Commons Petitions Committee issued its report on the Impact of COVID-19 on new parents: one year on in October 2021, calling for the Government to undertake a review of childcare financing and affordability.

COVID-19 Effects: Dimension and Scale

There are various aspects to the pandemic's influence on children, just as there are multiple pathways through which it affects children. The impacts might be divided into four categories:

Decline into poverty

The physical separation and lockdown procedures required to preserve lives and prevent viral spread have resulted in a considerable drop in economic activity across all major countries, as well as a worldwide recession. The severity of the recession is unknown, but the socioeconomic consequences have been detailed in the [title policy brief on the socioeconomic effect] (Shared Responsibility, Global solidarity: UN Report on responding to the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19). According to IMF3 projections, global income would fall by 3% in 2020, assuming the epidemic ends in the second half of this year. An already dire scenario may quickly deteriorate if capital outflows from emerging and developing nations spark a chain reaction of disorderly state defaults. The income collapse threatens the welfare of millions of homes with children throughout the globe. Inputting the IMF optimistic scenario predictions into an IFPRI poverty model. The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI, 2020) results in an increase in severe poverty (PPP\$1.90 per day) of 84 to 132 million persons this year, with almost half of them being children, compared to a pre-pandemic counterfactual scenario. These preliminary estimates only account for the consequences of a worldwide slump on impoverished families, neglecting the localised effects of family breadwinners being obliged to stay put or go back to their rural areas, leaving their customary livelihoods. Financial diaries from 60 low-income families in central Bangladesh's Hrishipara neighbourhood document the dramatic drop in daily wages when lockdown measures are implemented (Hrishipara Daily Diaries, 2020). Historically, girls have borne a disproportionate share of the cost of such shocks on families. Even if the economic shock is only brief, it may have severe consequences for children, especially those living in low-income homes with little assets. We have witnessed significant growth of social assistance programmes in several nations to compensate families for lost income. As of 10 April 2020, 126 nations have implemented or modified social protection measures, with 83 explicitly supporting children and their families (Gentilini et al., 2020). However, coverage of impacted households and income loss is far from full. The length of today's lockdowns is unknown, as is the possibility of lockdowns being reinstated in reaction to future COVID-19 breakouts.

Learning

There is no parallel in history for the global closing of schools. 188 nations have implemented nationwide closures, impacting almost 1.5 billion children and adolescents (UNESCO, 2020). In contrast to past illness outbreaks, school closures were implemented ahead of time: in 27 nations, closures were implemented before cases of the virus were reported (CGD, 2020). With many schools anticipating longer lockdowns, at least 58 nations and territories have postponed or rescheduled exams, while 11 have cancelled exams entirely (UNESCO, 2020). The potential losses in learning for today's young generation and the development of their human capital are difficult to comprehend. Many schools are giving distant learning to their students in order to reduce these losses. This option, however, is only accessible to a select few. While more than two-thirds of nations have implemented a national distance learning platform, just 30% of low-income countries have (UNESCO, 2020). Because girls have

less access to digital technology than males, their access to and participation in online learning may be limited. Children living in informal settlements, camps with little infrastructure, and without internet access are especially vulnerable. Confinement and mobility limitations may provide incentives for warring parties to occupy, plunder, or damage school and medical facilities, while unoccupied schools may be targeted for military purposes. Children with disabilities and special needs are particularly difficult to serve through distant programmes. Distance learning quality and accessibility are likely to differ widely between and within nations. Only 15 nations provide distant education in more than one language (CGD, 2020). Those losses will be highest for children who drop out of school entirely as a result of the epidemic, which becomes more likely the longer schools are closed and the deeper the economic downturn caused by the virus. In Kenya, experience with HIV reveals that children who lose a parent have a lower chance of returning to school (UNESCO, 2020). In times of ongoing war, children who are no longer enrolled in school may be encouraged to join armed forces or organisations, extending the cycle of violence.

Life and health

The direct effect of COVID-19 infection on children has so far been much less severe than for other age groups. Preliminary data from observed cases in China and the United States imply that hospitalisation rates for symptomatic youngsters are 10 to 20 times lower than those for the middle aged and 25 to 100 times lower than those for the elderly (Obiakor & Adeniran, 2020). Children are the least probable of hospitalised patients to need critical care. In China, the proportion of symptomatic children who die from the virus is believed to be one in 25,000, which is 30 times lower than that of the middle-aged and 3,000 times lower than that of the old. Given the low coverage of extant datasets and the many settings in which COVID-19 is now at large, inferences from this data should be made with great care. The virus's epidemiological effect is likely to vary over time and in various circumstances (Baird et al., 2011). In contrast to the direct impact of COVID-19, the pandemic's wider consequences on child health are severe (Angba, 2022). Reduced family income forces impoverished households to reduce necessary health and food expenses. Using the IMF's prediction for global economic growth and the historical association between GDP growth and infant mortality in the poor countries, hundreds of thousands more child deaths might occur in 2020 when compared to a pre-pandemic counterfactual scenario. This would virtually undo the previous two to three years of progress in lowering infant mortality in a single year. These estimates are limited to the impact of this year's global recession on child health and do not take into consideration the many ways in which the pandemic is directly disrupting health care. This includes a lack of access to critical reproductive, maternal, new born, and child health treatments such as prenatal care, skilled delivery attendance, and pneumonia treatment. It also involves the suspension of all global polio vaccination efforts, delaying the decades-long battle to eradicate the wild virus from its last two survivors, Afghanistan and Pakistan, and to address recent outbreaks of the vaccine-derived virus in Africa, East Asia, and the Pacific.

Furthermore, measles vaccine efforts targeting more than 78 million children under the age of nine have been halted in at least 23 nations (UNICEF, 2020). Meanwhile, children and adolescents with chronic diseases, including HIV, have restricted access to medications and treatment. Child nutrition is a critical issue. 368.5 million dollars Children in 143 nations who formerly relied on school lunches as a dependable source of daily sustenance must now search elsewhere. The World Food Programme (WFP, 2020). This difficulty is exacerbated by the economic shock that families are experiencing, which will have a severe impact on the diets of youngsters, pregnant women, and nursing moms. Furthermore, rushed lockdown measures risk disrupting food supply networks and local food markets. If these impacts are not addressed immediately, they might have serious ramifications for food security. If schools stay closed and females drop out, we can expect an increase in adolescent pregnancy in the next year. A new meta-analysis of the frequency and predictors of teenage pregnancy in Africa found that adolescent females who are not in school are more than twice as likely as those who are to begin childbearing (Kassa et al., 2018). Lockdown tactics may also impair water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services, creating further risks to children's health via water-borne infections. Every day, over 700 children under the age of five die from diarrheal infections caused by insufficient WASH services (UNICEF, 2020), and this figure might skyrocket if present services fail. This is particularly concerning considering the crucial importance of hygiene in avoiding infection and regulating COVID-19 dissemination. Another source of worry is the impact of physical separation and mobility limitations on children's mental health. Children today confront concern about the epidemic's devastating effect on their lives and communities, as well as uncertainty about the future: how long today's abnormal conditions will last and how the pandemic will be addressed. Acute stress may impede cognitive development and induce long-term mental health problems in children who are experiencing severe hardship.

Safety

Home is a source of security and protection for the majority of youngsters. However, for a small percentage, the reverse is sadly true. The most prevalent kind of violence faced by children is violence perpetrated by caregivers (UNICEF, 2017). Domestic violence against women, the rates of which are estimated to have grown in many countries, is also often seen by children, as outlined in the policy brief on the effect of COVID-19 on women (United Nation Policy Brief on COVID-19). Such violent crimes are more likely to occur when families are trapped at home and under extreme stress and worry. In nations where a complete or partial lockdown is in effect, 60 percent of all children live. Lockdowns, sadly, provide a chance for child abusers to hurt children. Children are seldom in a position to report such heinous crimes. Despite this, children no longer have the same access to teachers to report problems at home, and social work and associated legal and protective services for children are being halted or reduced down. The dependence of children on internet platforms for distant learning has also increased their vulnerability to unsuitable information and online predators. Growing digitalisation makes children more vulnerable to violence (Angba, 2022). In high-risk nations, just as the combined impact of school closures and economic difficulty is likely to cause some children to drop out of school, the same combination is likely to push youngsters into child labour, child soldiers, and child marriage. Children who do not have parental care are more exposed to exploitation and other bad coping strategies. Poorly designed or performed containment and mitigation procedures pose extra dangers to children's safety and rights violations, particularly when steps to care for the most vulnerable are not also implemented. Forced closures, curfews, and mobility restrictions have resulted in the abrupt closure of refugee camps and residential institutions, as well as the dispersal of slum inhabitants, including children. Surveillance methods used to impose quarantines and social distance, as well as to allow contact tracking, have shown to be an effective tool in reducing the spread of the virus in certain nations, but have sometimes infringed children's private rights. This includes the public disclosure of infected children's personal information or sufficient information for their personal identity. These measures risk eroding legal safeguards and rights, which may be difficult to restore.

Conclusion

According to the findings, the continuing closure of schools has put basic education in the nation in a precarious position, aggravating an already ill-equipped, confused, and unhelpful learning environment, particularly in public schools. Furthermore, studies have revealed that the virus's outbreak has diverted the government's attention away from other pressing national issues such as public infrastructure development, government-owned schools, and the fight against insurgency and toward the fight against the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of the worldwide economic downturn and the precipitous reduction in crude oil prices on the international market, the country's primary source of money has been transferred to the battle against the virus's spread, leaving other areas of the economy, including education, underfunded. This has also made it difficult for the government to offer enough relief to public schools in order to build on the Federal government's e-learning initiative. Obviously, addressing the challenges caused by school closures in the nation becomes one of the fundamental boosters of education, which implies that all of the necessary infrastructure and learning facilities for studies must be in place. The physical condition of a school has a direct impact on the morale and efficacy of instructors, as well as the overall learning environment. In normal circumstances, deficient educational facilities in Nigeria represent a danger to the right to education, and the situation is exacerbated now that COVID-19 has spread. Nigerian schools are often ill-equipped and unsuitable for learning, and the lack of finance and the ongoing closure of schools has put basic education in jeopardy.

Despite the directive to school heads and proprietors to initiate digital ore-learning to students, access to basic education in the country has been severely hampered by insufficient funding and ill-equipped infrastructure in public and some private schools, making learning difficult for Nigerian students at all levels. Enterprises were shut down to address and control the spread of the virus, but this has left some businessmen and women and families out of 13 businesses, and others are still recovering from the entire shutdown imposed by the federation's government. Families who are self-employed or rely on the revenue from their daily activities have yet to recoup from the losses caused by the entire shutdown of companies, air transportation, and border closures to export and import goods, all of which have raised commodity prices in the nation. Following the facts above, the researchers summarise the following as the immediate and long-term consequences of Nigerian school closures: Possible job loss and non-payment of wages or wage cuts for workers, particularly teachers, instructors, and lecturers in private schools or institutions; Massive drop out of school children and low enrolment in the post-COVID-19 era; Loss of businesses and sources of income for traders and business men and women; and, most importantly, disengaging students from the formal learning process may have the potential cost of reversing gains in learning results. However, stakeholders in education and philanthropists may devise strategies to support children who are already

absent from school as well as those who are enrolled, since the likelihood of welcoming all students back to school is high.

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