

SCHOOL CALENDAR AND ELECTRONIC LEARNING IN NIGERIA: AN ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The onset of corona virus COVID-19 sent waves of panic across Nigeria, like in every other country. Coronaviruses are a family of viruses that cause illnesses ranging from common cold to more severe diseases such as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and the Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS). As a result, many countries are suggesting various levels of containment in order to prevent its spread. With these worries, schools and universities are closing down and moving abruptly to online (e – learning) platforms and remote education. But no one knows whether the move to online learning could be the catalyst to create a new, more effective method of educating students. The knowledge of e-learning will expose both lecturers and students to the reality of the world outside the classroom since the world is a global web. The article made use of newspapers, internet materials, textbooks, reputable journals etc. While the methods adopted were critical analysis and expository methods.

Keywords: COVID-19, E-learning, School Calendar, Nigeria.

Introduction

Globally, the world is faced with the Covid-19 pandemic which has held the economy at ransom not exempting the educational sector. It has brought about recent changes and disruptions in the educational sector which serves as a catalyst for the development of any nation. Initially, the spread of the Coronavirus through the globe from China initially spared Nigeria like many other African countries with zero recorded case as at January 2020. By 28 February however, Nigeria reported their first case, a Nigerian UK returnee. Nearly two months later, there are 373 confirmed cases, 99 recoveries and 11 deaths. So, many countries are suggesting various levels of containment in order to prevent the spread of coronavirus, or Covid-19.

On 19 March 2020, the Federal Ministry of Education announced the temporary shut-down of all schools in Nigeria, effective 23 March in a bid to contain the spread of the Coronavirus. (<https://worldliteracyfoundation.org>). That is to say that all learning facilities were closed in order to safeguard the health and general wellbeing of our children, youths, teachers, and educational personnel. The school closure measure means learners previously in school are no longer going to school. The temporary school closures mean educators, funders and policy makers are rethinking the way learning is delivered and accessed. And children being out of school has long been the reality in Nigeria education sector with about 13.2 million school-age out of school, the highest in the world. On the global scale, more than 1.5 billion children and young people have been affected by school and university closures. In Nigeria, the nationwide school closures have disrupted learning and access to vital school - provided services for a record number of students. Almost 40 million learners have been affected, of which over 91% are primary and secondary school learners. This is similar with the experience of Sierra Leone where the Ebola crisis led to school closures for about 9 months. According to the report by UNESCO (2020), the closure of educational institution has impacted over 91% of the world's student population and it comes with high social and economic costs with severe impact on children from disadvantaged background.

However, Covid-19 disrupted the school calendar and also changed the method of teaching and learning. The developing countries evidence from the Nigeria experience are posed with the challenge of shifting from the traditional teaching method to e-learning during the pandemic. This prompted a set of questions: Do households have the facilities to engage their children in remote learning? Do teachers have the skills and facilities to deliver live lesson or record massive open online course (MOOC) styled lessons? (www.soas.ac.uk) The answer is yes and no. for instance, in America, universities such as Harvard University have embraced e-learning platforms but in most African countries such as Nigeria, traditional forms (physical contact) of learning has been the norm.

Meaning of coronavirus

Coronaviruses are a family of viruses that cause illnesses ranging from common cold to more severe diseases such as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS). Covid-19 is an acronym: CO stands for Coronavirus, VI stands for virus, D stands for disease, 19 stands for the year it was discovered 2019. Covid-19 symptoms includes fever, breathing

difficulties, cough etc and it can lead to pneumonia, multiple organ failure and even death in severe cases. The first human cases of Covid-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus causing Covid-19 subsequently named SARS - Cov-2 were first reported by official in Wuhan City, China, in December, 2019. Retrospective investigations by Chinese authorities have identified human cases with onset of symptoms in early December, 2019. While some of the earliest known cases had a link to a wholesale food market in Wuhan, some did not. Many of the initial patients were either stall owners, market employees, or regular visitors to this market. Environmental samples taken from the market in December, 2019 tested positive of SARS-Cov-2, further suggesting that the market in Wuhan city was the source of this outbreak or played a role in the initial amplification of the outbreak. Then, the market was closed on 1 January, 2020. (20200423-sitrep-94-covid-19-1)

The name coronavirus coined in 1968, is derived from the “Corona” like or grown like morphology observed for these viruses in the electronic microscope. In 1975, the corona-viridae family was established by the international committee on the Taxonomy of Viruses. Recently, at the 10th International Nidovirus symposium in Colofado springs, Colo, in June 2005, it was proposed that the coronaviridae family be divided into two subfamilies, the coronaviruses and the toro-viruses, the latter of which cause enteric diseases in cattle and possibly in humans. The coronaviridae family, along with the Arteriviridae and Roniviridae families, formed the Nidovirales order. The Arteriviridae family includes swine and equine pathogens and the Roniviridae family is composed of invertebrate viruses. (www.ijidonline.com/article)

Coronavirus crisis

The Covid-19 pandemic poses an enormous risk to the health and safety of learners, teachers, parents, school administrators, education practitioners and the wider community. It may not be the last crises that will threaten school continuity in Nigeria, given the increase in the number of infectious diseases worldwide or the conflict in the Northeast. The crisis has pointed to a number of fundamental action steps, two of which are crucial now and beyond (1) the imperative need to embed appropriate technology into learning and (2) the urgency to bridge educational divides that currently exist, and could further be exacerbated with a shift in education approaches. However, opportunities to learn within the homes are also limited, given that a parents ability to produce education support to their

children will be shaped by their own level of educational attainment, general literacy level, and other commitments. (<https://media.africaportal.org>)

The novel Coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) which originated in Wuhan City of China has spread rapidly around the world, sending billions of people into lockdown. The coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic gripped the world with a shock, thereby overwhelming the health system of most nations. The pandemic has caused global social disruption by limiting global social relations. In the views of Amzat and Razum (2018) The idea of “social distancing” negates regular social interaction, which is the bedrock of international society. For most people, Covid-19 infection will cause mild illness, however, it can make some people very ill and in some people, it can be fatal. The vulnerable citizens face the hunger-virus amidst the coronavirus lockdown. As of 3 September, 2020 more than 20 million cases of Covid-19 have been reported in more than 188 countries and territories, resulting in more than 863,000 deaths, more than 17.2 million people have recovered. (*Covid-19 Dashboard by the centre for systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) at John Hopkins University (JHU). Retrieved 3 September, 2020*).

The coronavirus pandemic (Covid-19) has no doubt adversely affected the global economy. It has forced many business to temporarily shut down and governments across the world to place a restriction on movement while exempting providers of essential services who are to strictly observe social distancing rules while providing services as a way to contain the spread of the virus. (nairametrics.com). In the education sector, it has disrupted the landscape of learning. It has magnified the education inequality in Nigeria such only those with access to digital learning resources will keep learning in the comfort of their homes while those without access with the majority are left behind. This learning crisis is widening the social gaps instead of narrowing them. In the future, this gap will show up as weak skills in the workforce, thereby making it less likely for this category of young people to get well paid and satisfying jobs. When this happens, these young people will become nuisances in the society, championing courses that aren't noble, just to make ends meet. This reminds me of the saying by Late Chief Obafemi Awolowo which goes thus: “The children of the poor you failed to train will never let your children have peace”. (nairametrics.com/2020/04/i8/covid-19-is-exacerbating-the-problem-of-educational-inequity-in-nigeria).

Electronic learning

The word “e” should refer to “everything, everyone, engaging and easy” in addition to “electronic”. (Parks, E. (2013) *what’s the “e” in e-learning?* Askinternational.com). The term e-learning connotes electronic method of learning which is associated with computerized learning in an interactive interface at the convenience of both the learners and lecturers. E-learning education in the views of Eze et al (2018) is concerned with the wholistic incorporation of modern telecommunication equipment and ICT resources into the education system. Several e-learning platforms have been adopted by universities and they include zoom, Microsoft teams, google hangout (met), skype, google classroom, Adobe Captivate, Elucidat, video lessons, massive open online courses (MOOCs) and broadcast through radio and television. The success of these recommendations hinges on the use of high technology or low-technology solutions which are based on the reliability of local power supply, internet connectivity and digital skills of teachers, parents and caretakers. (nairametrics.com)

Why Electronic Learning

Education sector globally is seen to be shifting towards e-learning in order to cushion the effect of this pandemic. Virtual interactions are increasingly adopted to replace face-to-face engagements and limit the total disruption to many sectors. Although this decision came as a shock to many educational institutes as many of these institutions were not prepared for the sudden disruption, others have seen it as a step in the right direction. Electronic learning brought distance learning through adopting multiple learning modalities such as television, radio and SMS-based mobile platform. Introducing innovative technology into classrooms could help in improving learning outcomes across the board. With over 80% of the adult population having access to radios and phones it would be possible to reach most children left behind with targeted instructions via these mediums.

Other benefits of the e-learning in the views of Adeboye et al include better context delivery, interactivity, quality content delivery and confidence of both learners and lecturers in the educational sector. According to them, the e-learning system will completely reduce the issues of insufficient classrooms for lectures, as students can easily take the lectures online without any disruption at their convenience. It provides a platform for students to interact with themselves through the discussion forum which eliminates the barrier of participation. The knowledge of e-learning will expose both lecturers and students to the reality of the world outside the classroom since the world is a global web.

Akorful and Abaidoo (2014) discovered that the cost benefit of e-learning in training students is lesser than that of physical (face-to-face) contact. Almost all the private universities have also embraced the e-learning platform to continue with the academic calendar due to the financial commitment to their workforce as shutting down will bring about difficulty in revenue generation. (www.rsisinternational.org). Also, it is important to note that learning online can be more effective in a number of ways especially for those who do have access to the right technology. (www.weforum.org)

Electronic learning problems

The electronic learning platform has various problems associated with them even though it was the only option during the Covid-19 era. The Covid-19 pandemic is revolutionizing digital and online education globally but kids in rural and underserved communities in Lagos State, Nigeria are being left behind as they are not equipped to adapt to the new methods of learning. (www.weforum.org). While several private schools have begun to initiate distance learning programs and taking advantage of the myriad of ICT learning opportunities provided by the international community, the government limited by funds and persistent deficiencies in planning, is yet to announce any official plans for providing distance learning opportunities especially for public schools. The implication being that these students in public schools currently have no formal learning plans and could be missing learning altogether. For Nigeria, the reality is simple – while the school closures are necessary to curtail the spread of the covid-19 virus, until the ban on movement is lifted and schools are reopened, majority of students will not be learning.

Therefore, the adoption of e-learning during the Covid-19 pandemic has exposed a lot of lapses and gaps to be filled in the Nigerian educational system. Other challenges include the varying degree of preparedness of the institutions, lack of infrastructures, paucity of funds, poor budgetary allocation, corruption and unpreparedness are contributing factors to the inability of many public tertiary institutions to embrace e-learning during the global covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria.

The constraint in the full actualization and utilization of this e-learning platform is due to the dynamic Nigeria environment. The unstable poor power supply has caused a major setback for technological advancement of many universities in Nigeria. Most rural areas in Nigeria where some students are resident are not even

connected to the national grid and as such, this student will experience difficulty in utilizing the e-learning platform effectively. Also shortage in power supply have brought difficulty in powering of educational gadgets such as smartphones, laptops and desktop computers needed for learning. In some cases, - the internet service required to connect to this e-learning platform sometimes requires a lot of data. The cost of purchasing the data bundle in the views of Adeboye et al is so high which might be difficult for both students and lecturers. Furthermore, poor Internet connectivity has resulted in low attendance of students during the online classes. This low online class attendance has also been linked to the poverty situation in the country as some families and students might not be able to afford basic needs such as food and clean water let alone the expensive gadgets or resources to sustain them for online learning.

Coronavirus and education

The Coronavirus pandemic has exposed the huge socio-economic inequalities in the Nigeria education system. One major issue that may stem from this inequality is that these kids who currently cannot keep up with their peers because of inaccessibility to digital tools may never catch up and will continue to fill the effect of this gap, long after the pandemic is over. This lured many wealthy families in Nigeria send their children to private schools given the poor resources and facilities in public schools. While learners from vulnerable and disadvantaged communities without access to computers and other devices outside school will were left struggling. Inevitably, this digital divide will exacerbate learning disparities among these children.

In Nigeria, some state governments made a lot of efforts to ensure learning continuity. For instance, Kwara and Lagos state use local media channels such as radio programmes to reach out to learners in remote communities. An estimated 80 million children, youth and adult learners in the system are deprived access to schools and have very limited alternative learning facilities during the pandemic. Enhance, it brought further deterioration in facilities and capacities for the delivery of quality education. The ugly situation is that if there is no effective response, the impact of Covid-19 will further aggravate the already weakened Nigerian education sector which lacks required resilience. Of all sustainable missions surely the most pressing is to improve lives and there is no better way to do so than proper and sound education for all. The ripple effect of this pandemic has been felt by both the educators and students in primary, secondary, colleges

and universities as academic sessions were disrupted after the coronavirus was declared a public health emergency. This has left many students and educators in a rude shock as some of these institutions were at the point of preparing for examination, admitting of freshmen, beginning of a new semester, amongst others. (UNESCO 2020).

Way forward

Having seen the effects of the disruption of the school calendar by the Covid-19 pandemic and pros and cons of the electronic learning platforms, the article recommends the following as the way forward.

- ❖ Government needs to be more firm in their handling of public universities administration and help prepare them for the adoption of ICT and e-learning in Nigerian institutions.
- ❖ UNESCO has recommended the use of distance learning programs, open educational applications and platforms by schools and teacher to reach learners remotely.
- ❖ To curb the widening of the existing education inequalities, there is an onus on the Nigerian government to put in place measures to ensure continuity inclusion and equity for all learners during this pandemic. In China for instance governments provide computers to students in low income households and offer students mobile data packages and telecommunication subsidies. In France, efforts are being made to lend devices to learners who do not have access to computers. Similarly, Portugal is partnering with the post office to deliver worksheets to students who do not have access to internet at home.
- ❖ The government could further mitigate the negative impact of covid-19 on education by investing in the provision of solar-powered education gadgets, preloaded with offline academic resources to learners in disadvantaged and vulnerable communities.
- ❖ The government should also partner with telecommunication companies to offer free or subsidised mobile data packages for learners.
- ❖ It is important that all learners participate in an inclusive arrangement, irrespective of their locations, access to internet and socio economic background. (*Covid-19 Guideline Safe Reopening*)

- ❖ PPPs (Public-Private Partnerships) can do much to improve the quality of and increase access to education for poor children in underserved communities.
- ❖ Help in increasing awareness of the pressing need for the country's children to be educated especially those from low income families, will benefit the country's economy in years to come.
- ❖ Government should create holistic contingency plan that goes beyond addressing school based safety measures, but also identify ways to ensure learning continuity and provide support for both students and teachers during times of crisis.
- ❖ Conscious effort is also required to bridge the digital divide by ensuring that the cost of technology adoption is low.

Conclusion

The electronic learning platforms have the simplest answer to the problems associated with the disruption of the school calendar by the covid-19 pandemic. Hence, the government should infuse more monetary resources in Nigeria's educational sector so that its institutions can compete globally.

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