



INFLUENCE OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON SCHOOL GOING CHILDREN IN KENYA - A REVIEW PAPER ON THE CASE OF BUNGOMA-WEST SUB-COUNTY, BUNGOMA COUNTY, KENYA

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Abstract:

COVID-19 has impacted entire nations worldwide, and Kenya was hit the hardest by the pandemic economically, socially, and even politically. This review paper concentrates on social effects, specifically examining the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on school-going children in Bungoma West Sub County, Bungoma County. The reporting of the confirmed first COVID-19 disease case on 14th March 2020 forced the government of Kenya to close down all learning institutions. This action caused a significant negative impact on the school-going children in most households, particularly in Bungoma West. The poor, vulnerable, and marginalized groups could not access education through only remote learning by The Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD). This only benefitted children from well-off families in urban centres, excluding those from vulnerable and poor households. The gap in the inequality in the provision of education widened. Financial inadequacy made the government fail to fund school-related services such as capitation, food and learning materials. House confinement impoverished parents financially. Most children never have access to equitable, all-inclusive, and quality education. Many suffered from psycho-sociological challenges. This review paper examines the challenges school-going children face, gives the way forward, and proposes solutions to future crises, if any.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, school-going children and negative influence

1. Introduction

Education is meant to improve manpower quality of life in society. It is, therefore, a central factor in development worldwide (Nimmyel P., 2017, Monoji Gope, 2023). Children at school learn to become holistic and productive members to add value to life in their society. Like in other countries globally, Kenya needs highly skilled capital and

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human resources to support economic development and even for export. Education is a key social pillar of the vision (Maina, 2023), and its blueprint for development is just like EFA, UPE and MDGs. Therefore, anything interfering with the school learning of children is a denial of the child's rights because it is one of the key influencers of quality life in society (GoK/UNICEF, 1990).

Currently, human beings are living and surviving the severe threats globally because of the global Covid-19 pandemic. It has become and still is a silent killer with no medicine but only vaccines and boosters so far. Most countries, including Kenya, have closed down learning/training institutions as one of the measures to contain the rapid spread of the virus.

COVID-19 is believed to have originated in a Chinese city called Wuhan and was reported in Kenya on 13th March 2020 (Sunday Standard, June 2020). It was reported in China in January 2020, spreading like wildfire. Covid-19 is an infectious disease caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-COV-2) (Wikipedia). The virus causes illnesses ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases.

2. Research Question

- How has the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the learning of the school-going children in public primary schools in Bungoma County, particularly Bungoma West Sub County, Kenya?

The reporting of the confirmed first COVID-19 disease case on 14th March 2020 forced the government of Kenya to close down all learning institutions. This disrupted the school calendar and learning activities, making learners stay at home with their family members in confinement. Covid-19 was declared by WHO as a pandemic worldwide (Sajad *et al.*, 2020). The virus spreads like a wild forest fire between people during close contact through coughing, sneezing and talking. So far, no vaccine nor antiviral treatment for the disease has been available (WHO Report). Like it was in other parts of the world, most children experience serious academic challenges due to not being at school, which may affect their current performance. Most families were at risk and threatened as per the complaints raised on social media (National Government Report, 2020).

Further, from the review, the COVID-19 pandemic has transformed life and the acquisition of education globally, forcing many countries to modify their way of learning in Asia, Europe, the Middle East and the United States, not leaving out Africa. In Jordan, the government closed down all schools to curb the rapid spread of coronavirus (Hannahan P., 2020). The closure of schools has had short-term and long-term effects on the cohorts affected. Since 2020, education has been undergoing serious crises and changes in delivery throughout mankind's history.

In South Korea, homeschooling started through new inventions as an innovative solution to the acquisition of education. The Chinese switched to a new cloud-based, online learning and broadcasting form. In Hong Kong, a number of educational

organizations, media publishers, and other professionals provide education assets at specific centres for free to enable learning to continue (Gloria and Diana, 2020). In Nigeria, learning went on via Google Classrooms augmented, with synchronous face-to-face video instruction.

In Kenya, the government, through the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD), speedily adopted measures to enable learning to continue through online platforms, television, radio and even smartphones. This was the newest venture since independence when all learning institutions closed down, and learners were confined to homes due to curfews and lockdowns. It was against this background that the study review in this paper sought to take into account the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on school-going children in Bungoma County. A review has shown that despite the government's efforts to introduce remote learning options, access to education remained low and unequal (Emma C. *et al.*, 2022).

In economically stable nations, learning through technology has become a habit integrated into day-to-day life. Instructional lessons can be accessed anywhere, anytime, in a range of digital formats, especially in the USA, Japan, the UK, Germany and Italy. Digital learning has long replaced traditional in-person classroom learning, unlike most developing nations. It has led to interactive audio instruction, transforming classrooms worldwide.

In Bungoma County, specifically Bungoma West, the situation was worse. Many learners, significantly the 2020 KCPE/KCSE, were greatly affected by the closure of schools in Kenya. Most of them had not even covered the syllabus. These candidates, together with their parents, were psychologically unsettled and affected, having undergone stress and mental torture, especially the girl child. Research has shown that adolescent girls face many risks and vulnerable conditions that affect their learning, health and well-being (Julie *et al.*, 2023). Every aspect of life, including learning, was affected (Hannahan P., 2020).

Bungoma people generally rely on sugarcane and coffee economically which were and still are not paying farmers who were financially disadvantaged. As if this was not enough, most families were affected by floods and hunger. Coupled with poverty, curfews and restrictions in movements, most school-going children lacked support in terms of accessing online KICD learning materials (OECD, 2020). From the review, it was found that virtually no learning took place in many households.

Further, most families in Bungoma West lacked ICT tools like Laptops, Smartphones, Televisions and even Radios. Pupils, therefore, could not afford access to online KICD learning materials. Classes via video telephony were primarily benefiting children from a few well-off families in urban centres. Poor internet connectivity and unavailability of electricity in most areas of Bungoma West Sub County worsened the situation. Unlike today, by 2019, most areas, especially rural areas, were not connected to the main electricity grid line. Such areas were still landlocked in terms of Internet connectivity. Most households in the rural areas were therefore excluded from KICD online learning. Most parents who were and are financially unstable have continued

complaining about online learning. To them, online learning is still a dream only for the children of the chosen few in Kenya. This was worsened by the high cost of living, especially from 2020 to 2022, when even smartphones were beyond the reach of the poor and vulnerable families in Bungoma West (Damaris S. *et al.*, 2020).

Most families remained non-supportive to their children due to a lack of subject-content knowledge and access to online learning materials, especially with the current competent curriculum. To them, this is the work done by teachers at school. Most of them do not know how to read or write. Therefore, making routine follow-ups to assist their children in doing homework was not possible. Indeed, this has culminated in inequality in syllabus coverage per class per level despite the KICD online materials (Oreopoulos *et al.*, 2006). Currently, the junior learning classes and upper secondary have been hit the hardest by poor preparation in the lower grades. Home confinement of the school-going children detached them from their schools and their lovely teachers. They went roaming in villages and urban centres (National Government Report, 2020). Online learning requires expert skills, appropriate gadgets, and technical experts to assist children in learning well (Simiyu *et al.*, 2018). Children from the ages 6 to 14 years endured difficult times (The Standard, July 24th, 2021).

The closure of schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic forced school-going children to stay at home, forcing some into drinking, child labour and taking drugs. Some of them resorted to petty robbery, trafficking and child labour. Some teenage girls resorted to prostitution activities, working in bars, leaving their parents complaining, not knowing what to do. Such behaviours were destructive, resulting in cases of teenagers roaming around at night. They were involved in funeral dances locally referred to as 'disco-matanga' feasts in villages (DCC Report, 2023). This increased teenage pregnancy, culminating in high school dropout rates. Havworth and Simpson (2004) in their study confirmed that such behaviours pose serious socioeconomic challenges in most developing nations like Brazil, Mexico, Russia and the Middle East and in most African countries, including Kenya.

Cases of sexual abuse, sex exploitation and rape increased among the school-going girls (Durstun S., 2020). Some boys were involved in early marriage activities, especially after traditional initiation. Such a situation culminated in high school dropout rates by the time schools re-opened. This situation in Bungoma West agrees with the UN Study Report that children living in mass poverty may reach 86 million worldwide. Two-thirds of such are said to be living in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (World Bank Report). The study review established that children in most families were being affected by trauma or mental health issues. Such psycho-socio challenges may be well addressed by their well-trained professional school teachers when learning could be ongoing. Such children have become vulnerable, social misfits in society and unprotected in families because of not being engaged in activity learning in schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Children further were missing the useful social, peer interactions and play in school. Socio-interactions could help them to grow up all-round emotionally and spiritually. To some extent, online learning from KICD materials denies learners the

freedom to work collaboratively on their own and in peer groups on their projects in class. From extensive ICT-related research done by Simiyu and his colleagues in Bungoma County, children usually enjoy the company of their parental teachers while in class, who act as guides and fellow learners during instructional sessions (Simiyu *et al.*, 2019). Research done by Carlsson and his friends in Sweden (2015) proved that children who learn in class with others tend to score higher in tests than those who stay at home, as it was during the COVID-19 pandemic period.

The closure of schools further denied the children their nutritious, balanced diet taken in school as snacks and lunch. Most parents in Bungoma West are financially disadvantaged. Such children, especially those in lower grades like early-years learners (EYEs), ended up being malnourished, failing to grow up all around cognitively and physically. The situation worsened in Bungoma West due to famine (in the late 2020s) caused by floods that destroyed crops. Although the government came up with a programme of delivering food directly to homes, some children remained deformed (Baker, 2020). For the child to succeed in life, it takes more than just schooling. It is the holistic provision of a wide range of essential support and opportunities at and outside the school environment. This may entail healthcare, a balanced diet, security, suitable housing and a rich living environment outside of school. According to this review paper, there is a need to re-conceptualize what education is to our children in Kenya on the side of the parents and other education stakeholders in this era of CBC implementation.

3. Way Forward

The paper calls upon global education partners such as UNICEF and the World Bank to collaborate with the Kenyan government to assist in transforming the education system, particularly in Bungoma West, to enable children to access quality education services.

Kenya's government should come up with proper policies and proactive long-term programs to create a learner-friendly and protective environment that enhances children's potential for learning whenever there is a crisis.

KICD should be fully prepared to provide child-friendly learning materials that are workable and accessible to all learners everywhere, whether rural or urban.

Existing learning gaps through KICD remote instruction should be reduced drastically to provide all-inclusive quality education to Kenyan school-going children.

Both the central and county governments should fully address education-related issues and challenges.

The government should take precautions regarding how learning should take place before physically closing down all learning institutions in the country, as it did during the COVID-19 pandemic period.

4. Conclusion

COVID-19 hit the school-going children the hardest, causing many challenges. It increased school dropout rates and emotional, health, and behavioural difficulties, not forgetting their well-being. Further access to quality learning was interfered with, increasing inequality in accessing these services through remote learning, which widened the gap between the rural vulnerable and the urban well-off family children. School closures in Kenya exacerbated the existing inequalities for the poor and vulnerable learners against the Kenyan Constitution 2010. Worse still, child abuse, child labour and girl-child pregnancy escalated during school closure. The closure of the learning institutions in 2020 brought a lot of stress and mental health issues. The Central and County governments should design proper programmes focused on school-going children to enable learner-friendly and protective learning and living environments to enable the children to realise their full potential after having gone through the bitter experience of COVID-19.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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