

LITERACY IN THE ERA OF COVID-19 CRISIS AND BEYOND

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Abstract

Acquiring literacy skills has over the years been bedeviled with challenges such as poverty, insecurity and the resultant displacement of the people, lack of educational infrastructure, teaching aids and reading materials among others. However, research shows that the COVID-19 pandemic has created a vacuum of learning process in our educational system in human history, affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners in 190 countries. This paper highlights the challenges posed by the pandemic, notably the suspension of academic activities and closure of institutions; and outlines the strategies adopted by governments and other stakeholders in the educational sector to ensure that the acquisition of literacy skills do not come to a standstill during the pandemic. , These strategies include the use of the Mass Media like radio and television and distance learning programmes.. The paper suggests, among other things, that government should take the financing of education as top priority and funds meant for education should be used to ease literacy skills acquisition during the pandemic. Equally, government should support the production of electronic devices and materials among the communities.

Keywords: Literacy, pandemic, skills acquisition, learning,

education

Introduction

Literacy, traditionally thought of as the ability to read and write, goes beyond that to encompass the ability to understand, interpret and react to ideas expressed in writing (National Council of Teachers of English, 2020). It is the global metric used to assess the health and wealth of societies. It provides individuals with the skills needed to improve their lives so as to attain an improved standard of living and acquire the ability to earn a higher income. This is why bolstering literacy underpins all of UNESCO's 2030 sustainability goals (UNESCO, “The Sustainable Development Agenda”, 2020).

The great importance attached to literacy all over the world is seen in the declaration of an international literacy day by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) at the 14th General Assembly of the body in October, 1966. The day was first observed on 8th September 1967 and since then, it has been observed internationally every year, though celebrated with a different theme that reflects the prevailing realities each year. The primary purpose of observance of the day is to remind the world of the importance of literacy as a matter of dignity and human rights and to explore ways to advance the literacy agenda. The year 2020 celebration of world literacy day had as its theme, Literacy Teaching and Learning in the COVID-19 Crisis and Beyond. The focus was on the role of educators and changing pedagogies – methods and approaches - to teaching literacy. The choice of this theme was apt as it indicates the recognition of the devastating impact the global health crisis has had, not only on the teaching of literacy but on

education generally. It is also from this theme that this paper derives its title and focus. These challenges of teaching and learning literacy in the era of pandemic and the efforts made so far to tackle them are highlighted in this paper. The way forward are also suggested

Definition of Concepts

Corona Virus

Generally, coronavirus belongs to a family of viruses that range from the common cold to Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). According to Cui et al (2019), coronavirus is a family of viruses that cause respiratory and intestinal illnesses in humans and animals. These viruses usually cause mild colds in people but the emergence of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic in China in 2002 – 2003, and the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) on the Arabian Peninsula in 2012 show they can also cause severe disease (Cui, Li and Shi, 2019). Seven different types of coronaviruses have been found in people. The first four are less severe. However, the novel coronavirus (also called COVID-19) is among the other three types of viruses that are very severe and can cause death. In this severe group too is coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2; formerly called 2019-nCoV) (Medscape, 2020).

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) was first detected in Wuhan City in Hubei Province, China in December, 2019. Since its first cases in China, COVID-19 has spread to almost every country of the world, leaving in its trail scores of millions dead. On March 16, 2020, there were 167, 515 reported cases of infections worldwide with 6,606 deaths (WHO, 2020).

COVID-19 is quite contagious and can pass between people even before any symptoms appear. As part of the efforts to curtail the spread of the coronavirus, public institutions including schools were closed down so that learners could stay at home and prevent further spread of the virus. Closing down schools and other public institutions meant that people could limit their interactions with others and slow the spread of the virus, while the healthcare system copes with the pandemic. Other measures that were taken to slow the spread of the virus included social distancing, wearing of face masks, placing of limits on event sizes, frequent washing of hands with soap and water or hand sanitizing with alcohol-based hand sanitizers, and home quarantine when and where necessary.

Literacy

Literacy is most commonly defined as the ability to read and write. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, literacy is the capacity to communicate using inscribed, printed, or electronic signs or symbols for representing language (*Britannica*, 2021). But reading and writing abilities vary across different cultures and contexts, and these are also constantly shifting. UNESCO on the other hand defines literacy as a set of reading, writing and counting skills, as well as a means of identification, understanding, interpretation, creation, and communication in an increasingly digital, text-mediated, information-rich and fast-changing world (UNESCO, 2019).

Review of Related Literature

The coronavirus pandemic took the world by surprise in 2020. What started in Wuhan, China in late 2019 as a local health challenge soon became a pandemic of unimaginable proportions across the world. For instance, as at July, 2020, 98.8% of learners worldwide were affected by the pandemic, representing 1.725 billion children and youth, from pre-primary to higher education, in 200 countries (United Nations, 2020). Many countries were ill prepared for the sudden changes that were imposed on every system. In Africa, where most of the socio-economic systems are epileptic, it is devastating with complete dislocation of all socio-economic systems. The educational system had its fair share of this distortion and dislocation with the closure of schools across the continent. The impact of this closure on students, teachers, families are far-reaching to say the least. Some researchers had investigated these effects on the educational, socio-economic and other sectors of human endeavour in various countries with a view of finding solutions to the new global problem. However, being a new phenomenon, the research on the topic is ongoing. Scholarly engagements on the phenomenon is discussed further.

In the months of April to August 2020, Human Rights Watch conducted 57 remote interviews with students, parents, teachers and educational officials across African countries, specifically in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Kenya, Madagascar, Morocco, Nigeria, South Africa, and Zambia, to learn about the effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on children's education. The research revealed that school closures caused by the pandemic

exacerbated previously existing inequalities, and that children who were already at risk of being excluded from quality education have been most affected (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

Agbele and Oyelade (2020) studied the impact of coronavirus on education in an article titled, “Impact of COVID-19 on the Nigerian Educational System: Strengths and Challenges of Online/ Virtual Education”. The scholars highlighted the importance of online education in a time of global pandemic and natural disasters. They identified the strengths of online education which enabled teaching and learning across long distances, and they highlighted the challenges among which were poor internet connectivity and the problem of affordability and availability to the generality of the masses.

Darling-Hammond and Hylar (2020) in their study examined the need for policy makers to support educators in meeting the social, emotional and academic needs of students in challenging circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Among these are the issues of learning loss and unpredictable combination of distance learning, blended learning, and in-classroom learning. They thus suggested the adoption of equity-focused teaching and learning.

Studies have also been conducted on the effects of the coronavirus pandemic on the economy, particularly as it affects the incomes of families. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) raised the awareness that everyday people are losing jobs and income, with no way of knowing when normalcy will return. ILO estimates that 195 million jobs could be lost (UNDP Nigeria, 2020). Similarly, the World Bank projects US \$110 billion decline in remittances the year

2020 which could mean 800 billion people will not be able to meet their basic needs. (UNDP Nigeria, 2020).

Scott (2020) in his study stated that as businesses were closed down to help prevent the transmission of COVID-19, financial concerns and job losses were one of the first human impacts of the virus. He noted that not knowing how the pandemic would play out also affected the economic, physical and mental wellbeing of humanity. By extension, this situation also had an impact on the educational system.

From the foregone analysis, studies have shown that the coronavirus pandemic has had devastating impact on virtually all aspects of human life, including the educational, economic, mental and other aspects of life. Having looked at a few researches on the effects of the coronavirus pandemic on families generally and on education in particular. The study will further focus on the effects of the pandemic on the teaching and learning of literacy in particular.

The Effect of COVID-19 on Literacy Skills Acquisition (Teaching and Learning)

The teaching and learning of literacy skills has over the years been bedeviled with challenges such as poverty, insecurity and the resultant displacement of the people, lack of educational infrastructure, teaching aids and reading materials among others. However, research shows that the COVID-19 pandemic has created the largest disruption of educational systems in human history, affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners in 190 countries (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2020). This unprecedented situation has exacerbated the already existing challenges to teaching and learning of literacy. In addition to these pre-COVID-19

challenges, the pandemic led to what is widely known as 'lockdown.' This entailed the closure of spaces where people met regularly in large numbers such as places of religious worship, markets, grocery stores, as well as places where physical learning takes place. Invariably, as noted by Darling-Hammond and Hyler (2020), this has led to dwindling incomes of families as well as nations. This development threatens to erase several years of progress made so far in advancing world literacy.

Nations have responded to this situation with innovations to ensure that the teaching of literacy and education generally does not come to a total stop during the pandemic. The most prominent innovative responses are outlined and discussed hereunder:

1. Employment of the mass media such as radio and television to deliver lessons/lectures to pupils and students at home: This approach has brought to fore the role of the mass media in supporting education. In Benue State, for example, lessons were delivered in English Language and other subjects via the state owned radio station, Radio Benue. A similar approach was used in Lagos and the Federal capital territory, Abuja where both state owned and private television stations delivered lessons to children at home. It is noteworthy that while the radio has the advantage of being affordable and able to function with alternative power sources such as batteries, should there be no electricity supply, the television has the advantage of the learners being able to see what they are taught on the screen which takes the place of the chalkboard. The challenge with both media is however the inability of the

teacher to assess the learners and get feedback on learning achievements. There is also the challenge of a large number of people not being able to afford radio and television sets.

2. Distance/remote learning solutions: Computer programmes have been developed as quick response by experts to ensure the continuity of teaching and learning. The major problems with these solutions especially in developing and underdeveloped countries has been lack of the know-how to use the programmes by both learners and teachers, lack of access to computers and other ICT enabled gadgets by the vast majority of people, poor internet connectivity and the high cost of same. As a result of these challenges, the distance learning solutions have left majority of learners behind

Beyond the Pandemic

It is a hard fact that the COVID-19 crisis with its impact on the teaching and learning of literacy skills is not yet over. In spite of the introduction of vaccines and the commencement of their administration to tackle the virus, some countries are yet to re-open schools while some are opening in phases, with feelings of apprehension by governments, school owners, teachers, parents and the learners alike. Efforts have to be made to ensure that the few strides taken in relation to changing pedagogies are not entirely lost. To ensure this, the following submissions are put forward:

1. The financing of education has to be taken as priority. It is common knowledge that the pandemic has thrown the world into a deep economic recession. However, governments need to ensure that funds meant for

education are preserved as top priority. These funds should be used, among other things, to perfect the digital solutions developed so far to make them more accessible to all segments of the human population. It is strongly advised that even as plans are being re-opened, there should be continued efforts by governments to improve access to these solutions as well as continued use of a mix of approaches during the post-COVID-19 era so as to perfect the digital solutions developed and reap their gains maximally. Part of the funds should also be expended on efforts to prevent drop-outs by subsidising education especially for those whose means of livelihood has been affected by the pandemic.

2. Governments need to improve internet connectivity by investing in digital infrastructure such as fixed broadband, communications satellites, as well as user devices such as mobile phones and computers. Lowering connectivity costs, possibly through regulation and subsidy, would also greatly improve access to distance learning solutions as the current cost of data is unaffordable even to the middle class. Government would also do well to invest in digital literacy through training and retraining of its staff and other citizens and making computer studies compulsory in schools right from the primary level of education.
3. Digital learning can only be successful with the increased availability of digital learning materials such as e-books and educational videos. We therefore urge the government to encourage writers and developers of teaching materials in all subjects, especially literacy

materials, to make electronic versions of their materials available so as to support online/distance teaching and learning.

Conclusion

The effect of the COVID-19 crisis on education generally and the advancement of literacy has been unprecedented, affecting various classes of people to various extents. The poor are however the worst hit with lack of access to financial, human and infrastructural facilities to access the rapid response innovative approaches designed to ensure that teaching and learning continue during the period of the pandemic. It is however our belief that if the recommendations made above are given due consideration by government and other stakeholders in education, the society will not only regain the learning losses incurred during the pandemic but will secure a brighter future for the advancement of literacy.

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