



The Impact of COVID-19 on Education in Kenya: Challenges, Opportunities, and Strategies for Mitigating Learning Loss

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted educational systems worldwide, with Kenya being no exception. School closures and the transition to remote learning have posed substantial challenges, particularly in regions with limited access to technology. This paper examines the impact of COVID-19 on education in Kenya, highlighting the risks of prolonged learning interruptions on children's academic and future labor market outcomes. It also discusses the Kenyan government's response, including distance learning initiatives and policy interventions aimed at mitigating learning loss. The analysis reveals disparities in access to remote learning and the necessity for targeted strategies to support the most affected students. Recommendations include expanding access to digital resources, enhancing teacher training, and implementing remedial programs to address educational inequities exacerbated by the pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, Kenya, education, remote learning, learning loss, digital divide, policy interventions, educational equity, pandemic impact, remedial programs

INTRODUCTION

The key challenge that COVID-19 has brought on is the extended interruption of this process [1]. With the closure of schools and the shift of learning out of physical classrooms into the home environment, the risk is significant that children will fall significantly behind. Longer term, this may have lasting effects on their academic and labor market potential [2-5]. While we, as economists, have known that education is foundational to development, we may now witness the long-term consequences of failing to provide adequate access to learning to millions of students worldwide for an extended period [5-8]. We will already have lost an entire set of new entrants to schools in January, and we may stand to lose three forms of in-classroom education – potentially 30-40% of a child's entire primary and secondary years of school or four and a half years – for up to 189 school days, or more than 60% of a typical school year [8-11]. Due to the prolonged closure of schools and the lack of interventions during this period, the hard-won education gains over the last decade may become significantly eroded [7]. Two key policy questions arise. First, do specific government programs help address learning loss? If worries about erosion are confirmed, what interventions at scale can help reverse it? These are important questions and will play a role in defining what schools look like in the post-COVID-19 era. For the average primary or secondary school student, many of the most important effects of being in school accrue through the learning process [12-17].

Background of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Kenya

In its public health response, Kenyans have been required to adhere to guidelines from the Ministry of Health, which was also responsible for developing guidelines for schools. In an effort to protect the lives of learners and staff, schools were closed from March 18, 2020 [18-21]. These pronouncements altered the schooling of over 15 million learners who had been expected to undertake their national examinations in November 2020. Closure was first extended by 30 days on April 16, 2020 and again on May 16 for a further 60 days [20]. This was later reviewed by President Uhuru Kenyatta when he directed that reopening would occur in 2021 although those undertaking national examinations would resume on October 12, 2020 [18]. With the school calendar disrupted, the education calendar was expanded to February 2021 to ensure that the earlier scheduled curriculum is completed. On 31 December 2019, China alerted the World Health Organisation (WHO) to the outbreak of pneumonia of an unknown cause in Wuhan, Hubei Province. A week later, the disease was confirmed to be caused by a novel coronavirus, which was named COVID-19. By 11th March 2020, WHO declared that COVID-19 had evolved to be a pandemic due to a surge of over 118,000 cases in 110 different countries. Kenya reported its first case on March 12, 2020, that of a

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27-year-old female whose nationality was Mexican. In response to this case, the Kenyan Ministry of Health (MoH) established a 22-person National Taskforce which became operational on Friday, 6 March 2020 [22-25].

Impact of the Pandemic on Education

A survey estimated that over 400,000 students were at risk of dropping out or not returning to school [26]. Almost half of parents and caregivers surveyed had to take on the role of teachers to support their children, and they were anxious about the longer-term effect of lost learning on their children [27]. To mitigate learning losses upon reopening of schools, the government introduced distance learning through broadcasts from the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development - primarily accessible through radio, television, and online platforms [28]. According to the aforementioned online survey, of the 10,757 learners who participated, 99 percent accessed educational materials, 89 percent through the mass media channels [29]. However, access to these programs differed across gender, household wealth, and education levels of the parents. Word of mouth, dissemination through community leaders, and awareness from the school were the highest reference points for these programs [30-35]. As Covid-19 disrupted education in Kenya, the immediate concern was the safety and health of learners, teachers, parents, and the community at large [23]. The suspension of learning - and subsequently, the full closure of schools - was a necessary response to control the spread of the virus [27]. According to a nationwide online survey to understand the effect of the Covid-19 crisis on school going children in Kenya, over 95 percent of respondents were in support of the government's decision to close schools [36]. The national exams were postponed twice, and a revised school calendar would likely compromise the two or three extra months of learning that would have accrued before the final exams [37]. The ripple effect of this uncertainty included anxiety, absenteeism, teenage pregnancy, loss of motivation, and disconnect between schools and learners - especially those unable to access remote learning [38].

Disruption of Learning Activities

The impact of having children at home for an extended period of time—without much structure—was enormous: for the heavy emotional and financial burden placed on the parents for an extended period; for the severe lack of resources or knowledge on how to continue supporting their children's learning at home; the enrollment rates in schools, internal displacement, the loss/privation of learning by children, and rising cases of child labor, especially of the girl child which has increased and impeded their re-enrollment back in school due to the stigma and ridicule they face from their peers - aspects that the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology is not currently considering while focusing on the rehabilitation and reintegration of these students [39-44]. Within a very short time, the COVID-19 pandemic scaled up the rural-urban digital divide in Kenya. Due to the sudden interruption of learning activities in schools, many rural schools were not prepared to deliver remote learning to students at home, although some teachers attempted to keep in touch with students and provide some rudimentary instruction, and monitor the well-being of their students [45]. Nonetheless, some private and a few other primary schools provided learning materials to their students while a few well-off families could afford the necessary gadgets and data, which by then were quite expensive. Meanwhile, public primary school learners in poor households and in rural areas remained unengaged and without learning support during the COVID-19 pandemic [46-49].

Strategies for Mitigating Learning Loss

COVID-19 has changed Kenya's school academic calendar, and most students who are in grade 8 and form 4 have been retaking the national exams and were expected to report to school by January [50]. The new academic calendar has been issued that requires students to attend a full term to allow them to complete the academic year 2021. The remedial instruction requires expanded rights for students including the requirement for this group to return to school earlier and utilize the remedial instruction by starting the school calendar sooner [51]. These student groups have had a two-month gap before a full academic year and retain rights to a minimum viable instructional year, including the time to recover and develop any learning loss. This is essential to prevent students from being punished as an afterthought for the pandemic. While it will not cure the loss of time, it will ensure students at least have the opportunity for full instruction compatible with long-standing educational promises in Kenya [52]. The Ministry of Education has provided learning resources to grades 1 to 3 to replace the instruction. There are several challenges directly related to learning loss in Kenya [53]. These include illiteracy, educators who are unprepared, whole-school models without content, and a loss of social capital. Embedded, supplementary programs that deal directly with these problems will be offered as a way to mitigate the loss provided by the COVID-19. The MOE will partner with content creators for grades 1-3 reading and math materials [36]. The MOE will support the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) to provide supplementary television and radio instruction so students in schools without other instruction can benefit. In addition to KICD's direct content, the MOE has partnered with content creators to provide additional content for grades 1 to 3 learning in math and science. The MOE and National COVID-19 Education Secretariat (NCES) will work with the education consortiums that are mobilizing communities to provide support specifically targeting reading and math support to all students who are performing below grade level [54-57].

Remote Learning Initiatives

The online platforms featured video, audio, and print-based resources and included 215 e learning materials donated by the ATA, KFC, and the private sector [58]. The Education Cloud and the Kenya Education Cloud websites, managed by the KICD, had curriculum content across all subjects and with engaging digital learning resources [59]. Moreover, the KICD mapped out 27 lessons each day from Monday to Saturday through the online portal platform. Africa Digital Media Institute had pre-written games which supplemented lessons in the textbook and video lessons from Class 5 to 7. The long lists of other content providers can be accessed on the KICD website [45]. TSC CRC had an online learning platform for learners, parents, and teachers [49]. The KCDP had an education digital platform linking learners to ICT for learning. The KSG and the Kenyan Technologies had e-learning applications to mitigate against the disruption of classes. KCA University and XEMA software and connections employed mobile apps and web-based delivery platforms. ILP, Instiambit Education, Multi-media University, Naka's Academy, Reach the Youth Kenya, Techube College [50]. There were mainly two options for online delivery of the curriculum: national TV and radio stations and online platforms. On TV, 7 hours were dedicated exclusively to curriculum-based learning broadcast by Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development [51]. This initiative was in partnership with the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation, the Standard Group PLC, and Play-out Africa. The Standard Group composed of KTN and KTN Farmers TV (Kiswahili), and K24, KBC Channel I (English), and Y254 (Youth). All TV schedules of these stations were planned using a common template and it covered pre-primary, Classes 1-12, regions and languages as has been depicted in Table 2. Some subjects were covered in the weekday mornings between 0700 and 11:00 hours and others in the afternoon between 2:00 PM and 4:00 PM [60].

Challenges and Opportunities

One challenge that education technology may encounter is the sunk costs for educational institutions and reluctance of educational institutions to adopt proven and scalable tools to be able to capture efficiency gains [61]. There also remains a great need for adult training and education in low-income countries, and the use of smartphone apps and online platforms may provide great opportunities in this respect [62]. These countries can learn a lot from adapting education technologies for the low-educated, the unconnected, or those living in low digital infrastructure regions for advanced economies. Educational technologies, despite their growing popularity, still leave many countries behind. Most of the evidence generated by educational technologies is coming from developed countries, in particular when it comes to the application in low-income countries [63-68]. However, the educational deficit has been growing substantially over the past year due to extended closure of schools, and there is an urgent need to develop innovative methods and tools for reinforcing learning achievement pursuant to COVID-19, regardless of the income or context. While the COVID-19 pandemic has brought significant disruption to the education systems, especially the physical presence of learners in schools, it has increased interest in education technologies [69]. This is an opportunity for countries in the global south with a demand for flexible, efficient, and creative solutions given the limited resource base. Additionally, the ad hoc response to COVID-19 has been anticipated before but slower in rolling out because people tend to like to stay in their comfort zone and do not want to change existing practices and organization, even if they are highly inefficient or do not work at all [70-74]. The COVID-19 situation, which demanded ad hoc response from various authorities, was inspiring for educators and facilitated necessary innovations [49]. It is important to note that while assessment and online learning provide great opportunities, they are not perfect and may not work very effectively for some students when compared with school-based learning, which may be a predominant mode of learning. The absence of regular peer and teacher interactions can lead to various psychosocial shortcomings [55]. Therefore, the adoption of technology should be carefully assessed and implemented [75].

Access to Technology and Internet Connectivity

The number of students with access to technology and internet connectivity during the pandemic is limited. In rural Kenya, only 23% of the students in our sample have access to a tablet or computer at home, but only 5% have internet connectivity [77-81]. The limited access to technology and internet connectivity at home likely means that most students are utilizing the materials shared through traditional means, such as printouts [82]. In addition, the lack of own computers and internet connectivity might force students to share resources in order to complete their assignments [83]. This will expose the students to the potential risks of transmitting the virus and further limit their learning. Consequently, the students with limited access to their own independent resources might prefer to leave their households and reside with their "host" families in search of the available resources, as observed in the qualitative data [83-87].

Conclusion and Recommendations

While a variety of remediation strategies exist, the authors present simulations that show large potential benefits to summer programs held towards the end of the year, directly preceding the National Examinations. On balance, these could prove to be cost-effective interventions to help students catch up. These findings have important implications for financial allocation in Kenya this year and the goals the system sets for the coming academic year. With the immediate crisis now under control, the government needs to turn its attention to the task of addressing lost learning

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time and prepare aggressively for how students can catch up. This review examines the potential consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Kenyan education system and students' learning outcomes. The report suggests that while Kenya's response to the pandemic was relatively successful in stemming growth in infection rates, these gains may have come at a high cost for students' learning outcomes. Shutdowns, teacher transfers, and teacher absences mean that many children did not experience the high-quality instruction they would have otherwise. As a result, existing disparities in the system may have actually increased.

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