

Appraisal Of Educational Strategies Supporting Vulnerable Children During Covid 19
Disruptions In Public Secondary
Schools In Kenya: A Case Of Nakuru County

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ABSTRACT

Following the disruption of classroom learning due to COVID-19 pandemic, many vulnerable students suffered tragic loss in various dimensions. With no physical schooling going on, these children missed out on safe learning environment, lacked assurance for regular meals, and endured considerable levels of stress and abuse at home amidst deteriorating economic conditions. Despite government's commitment to provide seamless transition to virtual learning, most vulnerable learners lacked equitable accesses to learning due to the existing digital divide and low electricity connection in the rural areas. This study aimed at appraising the education strategies for supporting vulnerable children during COVID-19 disruptions in public secondary schools in Kenya, with specific focus on Nakuru County. The study's objectives were to evaluate the impact of distribution of online resources, addressing socio-emotional needs, and parental engagement on supporting vulnerable students during COVID-19 disruptions in public secondary schools in Nakuru County. The study used descriptive survey design. The target population was 4510 individuals, comprising of 294 principals and 4216 secondary school teachers in Nakuru County. Yamane formula was used to compute a sample of 374 respondents. Stratified random sampling was used to select 2 principals and 32 teachers from each of the 11 zones in the county, summing up to 22 principals and 352 teachers. Self-designed questionnaires of 5 point likert scales were used to collect data from the respondents. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics by obtaining frequency counts and percentages, and inferentially using t-test. The findings revealed that distribution of online resources and parental engagement considerably enhanced equitable learning of vulnerable learners during the pandemic. The study recommended that the ministry of education establishes a free complimentary platform where children who could not afford internet connection or have access to radio could receive learning resources during pandemics.

Keywords: Education Systems, Vulnerable Children, Online Resources, Equitable Learning, Parental Support, Socio-emotional Support

INTRODUCTION

Education is a basic need for every child and it is in the interest of the society that all children get equal access to quality learning. As emphasized in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), it is a right of every child, regardless of their nationality, gender, disability, age or family background, to receive quality education (CRC, 1990). The occurrence of Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) affected many learners in different ways including jeopardizing learning opportunities for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.

The United Kingdom (UK) Parliament (2008) categorizes vulnerable children as those in need, children in care and those on the periphery of care, whose development or health is likely to be impaired without the provision of social care services, including children from poor backgrounds whose parents may need care. Research indicates that vulnerable children, especially learners with special needs bore the biggest brunt of the devastating Corona Virus Disease – 2019 (COVID-19).

According to Lee (2020) in Hong Kong, children and young people with mental health needs were the most affected by the pandemic since they could no longer have access to resources available in a typical school setting. The onset of COVID-19 pandemic created one of the greatest disruptions of world education systems in modern history. A survey by Young Minds (2021) in the United Kingdom established that the pandemic had made the conditions of vulnerable children worse. The survey that involved 2011 children with history of mental health established that nearly 70% of the respondents felt that their situation had become worse after reopening of schools, compared to nearly 60 percent who reported to have had poor mental health before reopening of schools following the COVID-19 disruptions.

As the crisis escalated, education systems were so severely affected that over 1.6 billion learners in the world had their learning abruptly halted. Millions of teachers and school staff were equally impacted by the disruption of teaching and learning processes. Nearly two thirds of learners across the world are still suffering the effects of the disruption with schools in over 29 countries remaining partially or fully closed (UNESCO, 2021). While learning of the most vulnerable children in Kenya has been improving over the past decade following achievement of several millennium development goals, one issue that still needs to be addressed is education disparity. In a study carried out by UNICEF and Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS), some of the highest indicators of child poverty, which influences children's schooling, are the educational attainment of head of the family and living in the rural areas (UNICEF & KNBS, 2017).

Problem Statement

Following the closure of schools in Kenya due to COVID-19 pandemic, many vulnerable children suffered a tragic loss in various dimensions. With no physical schooling going on, these children missed out on safe learning environment, lacked assurance for regular meals, and endured considerable levels of stress and abuse at home amidst deteriorating economic

conditions. Despite the government's optimism on school preparedness to transition from classroom to virtual learning, many vulnerable students have had no equitable access to education due to the existing digital divide. Educators usually provide a safe place for vulnerable children through focusing on their socio-emotional wellbeing and collaborating with parents. With schools closed, vulnerable students were, other than learning exclusion faced with various negative consequences, including food insecurity, abuse, and anxiety among others. Little has been done to evaluate the efforts applied by education stakeholders to ensure equitable access to education and general wellbeing of vulnerable children during the pandemic. Thus it was important to assess the capacity of education systems put in place to support vulnerable students during COVID-19 disruptions.

Objectives of the Study

The study objectives were:

1. To evaluate the impact of distribution of online resources on supporting vulnerable students during COVID-19 disruptions in public secondary schools in Nakuru County
2. To assess the impact of addressing socio-emotional needs on supporting vulnerable students during COVID-19 disruptions in public secondary schools in Nakuru County
3. To determine the impact of parental engagement on supporting vulnerable students during COVID-19 disruptions in public secondary schools in Nakuru County

Research Hypothesis:

H₀₁: There is no significant difference between the means of teachers and principals' perception on the impact of distribution of online resources on supporting vulnerable students during COVID-19 disruptions in public secondary schools in Nakuru County.

H₀₂: There is no significance difference between the means of teachers and principals' perception on the impact of addressing socio-emotional needs on supporting vulnerable students during COVID-19 disruptions in public secondary schools in Nakuru County

H₀₃: There is no significant difference between the means of teachers and principals' perception on the impact of parental engagement on supporting vulnerable students during COVID-19 disruptions in public secondary schools in Nakuru County

LITERATURE REVIEW

As COVID-19 crisis escalated, education systems were so severely affected that over 1.6 billion learners across the world had their learning abruptly halted. More than one hundred million teachers and school staff were equally impacted by the disruption of the learning institutions.

Nearly two thirds of learners across the world are still suffering the effects of the disruption with schools in over 29 countries remaining partially or fully closed (UNESCO, 2021). According to UNICEF (2020), learning of children was still in crisis even before COVID-19 pandemic, which only escalated the inequities that have more acutely affected learners in poorer countries. The report indicated that one third of the school going children around the world could not access remote learning following the closure of schools.

Despite the alternative remote learning, and introduction of necessary tools for learning at home, such as technology, skill gaps and limited support among educators have made it difficult for inclusive learning. The school closures negatively affected instructional and learning time, subsequently impeding learning performance of students with desperate needs (García & Weiss, 2020). While the most privileged children and educators have managed to adapt to the changes associated with the pandemic, majority of children including the most vulnerable have had to endure one of the most challenging learning experiences (Espino-Diaz, Fernandez-Caminero, Hernandez-Lloret, Gonzalez & Alvarez-Castillo, 2020).

Prolonged closure of schools due to pandemic can be detrimental to various aspects of child development, including cognitive, physical, psychosocial and mental health (Cluver, Lachman, Sherr, Wessels & McDonald, 2020). Following the profound challenges facing children due to the pandemic related disruptions, it is imperative to have in place systems and services that can support learning equity, inclusion and general wellbeing of vulnerable children. Some research indicate that online learning and home schooling can be effective for catalyzing learning inclusivity if resources are sufficiently availed (García & Weiss, 2020). However, nearly a third of students globally today are still unable to access remote learning due to lack of digital devices, internet connectivity or sufficient skills to use digital content (UNESCO, 2021). Most of the literature regarding the use of digital and online learning assumes no divide in terms of equitable accessibility to requisite digital services. However, some studies have dispelled this notion. For instance García, Weiss and Engdahi (2020), in United States found that about 16 percent of learners in eighth grade lacked access to a laptop or desktop computer at home. Further the devices that would be used for homework before the pandemic would now be shared or engaged by parents who had to work from home due to pandemic (U.S. Census Bureau. 2020). This therefore means that not all children could follow classes from home during school closure.

Further, OECD (2020) report established that while the universal response to school closure was the introduction of online learning, some students still lacked equal access to information and communication technology (ICT) platforms. According to Liu (2020) in China, online

education occasioned by the pandemic was found to have widened the learning gap between the most vulnerable and privileged learners. The study found that about one out of every three learners in first to third grade could not access online classes due to lack of connection. The study also found that only a half of learners based in the rural areas had stable internet connection, compared to 80 percent of their peers based in urban areas.

Various countries have devised diverse strategies to ensure that vulnerable children have equal access to education as their privileged peers. In Colombia, an online platform was created, where children from low-income families were supplied with over 80, 000 pedagogical resources. The system was devised in a way that learners could have free access, making it possible for poor families to access the resources when they could not afford internet connection. In United Kingdom, the Department for Education (DfE) created a remote learning platform through which students with special needs could access pedagogical resources during the pandemic (DfE, 2020).

Other countries embarked on distribution of digital learning devices and materials. In Chile, for instance, the government provided free computers with internet connection to about 125,000 poor households across various cities in the country (*Government of Chile, 2020*). Other countries involved strategies such as parental engagement to support learning continuity of vulnerable children. In Ireland, numerous resources intended for parental support were provided through the ministry of education. The resources included materials tailored specifically for parents with disadvantaged children in primary schools.

School closures can negatively affect vulnerable students' learning achievement as such disruptions impact on the most significant factors of effective learning, namely emotional, cognitive and behavioral engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004). Teacher social support includes interactions that convey appreciation, respect, and caring within the teacher–student interactions leading to engagement (Wang & Holcombe, 2010). When students work collaboratively in the school environment with a well-developed sense of their student voice, they can expand their knowledge base through positive cognitive and emotional interactions (Cunningham et al. 2020; Järvelä et al. 2016)

The Department of Education (DoE) of the government of Ireland indicated that schools and teachers supported the parents through encouraging and keeping in touch with children, assigning work and interesting activities during school closures. On their part, the parents supported their children through establishing daily routines, talking to children and ensuring they had peaceful environment to work and regularly checking on communication from school (DoE, 2020). This approach is consistent with earlier studies that parental involvement

in child's education can improve learning outcome from early childhood and overall child development (Handerson & Mapp, 2002).

In Nigeria, Azubuike and Aina (2020) noted that inequality in education was likely to escalate during the pandemic disruptions. The study found out that various challenges, such as parents' educational background, knowledge as well as socioeconomic status impacted on children's remote learning. However, parents still got involved in supporting learning of their children through different approaches, such as downloading reading materials, reading with the children, encouraging them to read the materials and listen to radio broadcasts.

The literature indicates that the difficult times occasioned by the pandemic negatively affected learners' wellbeing, particularly those from poor families, subsequently impacting on such children's academic achievement. It is apparent that academic success is linked to learners' emotional and physical health, and education systems should be aimed at promoting learners' well-being. Indeed OECD (2020) recommended that countries needed to create programs for addressing children's socio-emotional needs, such as counseling and free meals. Schools can play a leading role in ensuring safety of vulnerable learners through offering psychological support and creating a sense of belonging in the community by responding to their social needs (Colao, Piscitelli, Pulimeno, Colazzo & Giannin, 2020).

In the context of vulnerability amidst the pandemic disruptions, a school is more than a learning place. Beyond being a place for learning, vulnerable children feel more secure and protected from various problems, including abuse, violence and hunger. In Uganda, the government introduced homeschooling, where learning materials would be distributed to children in their homes. The government also introduced classes through radio broadcasts in local languages (Byenkya, Ssenjobe, Ouma, 2020). Many vulnerable children who had fled perennial conflicts in the neighboring South Sudan benefitted from homeschooling programs, where teachers would move door to door in refugee settlements providing homeschooling and necessary support to learners (Poulsen, 2020).

Learners in Kenya just as in other countries have severely been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The challenges occasioned by the pandemic have affected the vulnerable children even harder due to the existing digital divide. This is also consistent with UNICEF (2020), in a recent report, which revealed that only 6% of learners in the region have access to internet. According to Orwa (2020), Kenya's vulnerable children especially those living in the rural areas as well as the orphaned children were the most affected by the pandemic. Although the Kenyan government tried to provide community learning, the initiative faced legal challenges and was before long discontinued through a court order.

According to Isbell (2020) access to the tools of remote education in Kenya was found to be unequal during COVID-19 shutdowns. The survey found that many Kenyan households owned technology devices that could be utilized during the shutdowns. This included 95 percent who had access to a mobile phone, 87 percent radio and nearly 60 percent who had access to a television set. However, the survey found that ownership of smart phones was rare among the poor households especially in the rural areas. Only 9% of the respondents without formal education had access to internet connection through a mobile phone, while only 26% of household heads with only primary education reported to have such access.

These disparities negatively impacted on the most vulnerable children due to the existing gaps in terms of connectivity and access to technology and communication devices. This paper therefore presents the findings on the appraisal of education systems supporting the vulnerable children during the pandemic with specific focus being Nakuru County.

METHODOLOGY

The study utilized descriptive survey research design. This type of research approach aims at casting the light on issues or problems under investigation through the process of collecting and analyzing data with the aim of describing various characteristics or behaviors of individuals being studied, or aspects of a phenomenon (Fox & Bayat, 2007). The study's target population encompassed all the 294 principals and 4216 secondary school teachers in Nakuru County, summing up to 4,510 individuals. A sample of 374 respondents was selected through Yamane (1967) formula as cited in Israel (1992), computed as $n = N \div (1 + Ne^2)$, whereby $n = 4510 \div (1 + 4510 \times 0.05 \times 0.05) = 367$. While 367 was the lowest possible sample, the number was increased to 374 for better distribution across the county. Stratified random sampling made it possible to select 2 principals and 32 teachers from each of the 11 zones in the county, summing up to 22 principals and 352 teachers. The study used self-designed questionnaires of 5 point likert scales to collect data from the respondents. Data was analyzed in descriptive statistics by obtaining frequency counts and percentages, and in inferential statistics using t-test.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Questionnaire Return Rate

Following the administration of questionnaires 20 for principals and 348 for teachers were successfully completed and retrieved for data analysis.

Table 1.0: Responses of Principals and Teachers on Education Systems Supporting Vulnerable Students during the Pandemic

SN	Summary of Test Items	Respondents	SA		A		U		D		SD	
			F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1.	Learning through digital devices during COVID-19 pandemic enhanced quality learning for vulnerable students	Principals	12	60	4	20	2	10	1	5	1	5
		Teachers	188	54.1	64	18.4	29	8.3	37	10.6	30	8.6
2.	Radio broadcasts helped vulnerable students access equitable learning during COVID-19 pandemic	Principals	6	30	6	30	2	10	5	25	1	5
		Teachers	233	67.1	71	20.4	15	4.3	18	5.2	11	3.2
3.	Web-based materials enhanced equitable access to learning during the pandemic	Principals	5	25	4	20	4	20	4	20	3	15
		Teachers	204	58.6	73	21.0	35	10.0	19	5.5	17	4.9
4.	Virtual counseling of vulnerable students	Principals	5	25	4	20	4	20	4	20	3	15

	during the pandemic enhanced equitable learning	Teachers	231	66.4	44	12.6	22	6.3	30	8.6	21	6.1
5.	Social support of vulnerable students during pandemic enhanced their learning	Principals	5	25	4	20	4	20	4	20	3	15
		Teachers	124	35.6	51	14.7	65	18.7	79	22.7	29	8.3
6	Maintaining contact during the pandemic enhanced learning of vulnerable students	Principals	11	55	4	20	3	15	1	5	1	5
		Teachers	147	42.2	36	10.3	61	17.5	85	24.5	19	5.5
7.	Engaging parents to encourage vulnerable students to read enhanced equitable learning during pandemic	Principals	12	60	4	20	1	5	2	10	1	5
		Teachers	176	50.6	92	26.4	39	11.2	21	6.1	20	5.7
8.	Collaborating with parents to help download materials enhanced equitable learning of vulnerable students	Principals	8	40	6	30	3	15	2	10	1	5
		Teachers	137	39.4	108	31.0	53	15.2	29	8.3	21	6.1

9.	Liaising with parents to provide digital devices to students during pandemic enhanced equitable learning	Principals	9	45	6	30	3	15	1	5	1	5
		Teachers	103	29.6	132	37.9	28	8.1	31	8.9	54	15.5

As shown in table 1.0, 80% of principals and 73% of teachers sampled were in agreement that use of digital devices to teach during the COVID-19 pandemic enhanced equitable learning for vulnerable students. Similarly on the second item, 60% of principals and 88% of teachers agreed that radio broadcasts were helpful in promoting equitable learning of vulnerable students. In response to whether web-based materials enhanced equitable learning of vulnerable learners, only 45% of principals agreed, compared to about 80% of teachers. Respondents were also asked whether virtual counseling of students during the pandemic enhanced equitable learning. In response, 45% of principals and 79% of teachers agreed. Regarding offering social support to vulnerable learners, 45% of principals and 50% of teachers were in agreement.

Responding to whether maintaining contact with students during the pandemic enhanced equitable learning, 75% of principals and 53% of teachers were in agreement. On the other hand, respondents were asked whether seeking parental support to encourage children to read enhanced equitable learning of vulnerable learners during the pandemic. In response, 80% of principals and 77% of teachers were in agreement. In response to the test item as to whether collaborating with parents to help download instructional materials enhanced learning of vulnerable students, 70% of principals agreed compared to 70% of teachers who were in agreement. Lastly, the participants were asked whether liaising with parents to provide digital devices to their children during the pandemic enhanced learning of the vulnerable learners. Out of those sampled, 75% of principals and 68% of teachers agreed.

Hypothesis Testing

To test the hypothesis that no significant difference on the impact of distribution of online resources in supporting vulnerable students during COVID-19 disruptions in public secondary

schools in Nakuru County, the means of principals and teachers' responses were subjected to independent t-test.

Table 1.1 Independent Samples Test on the Impact of Distribution of Online Resources

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Means	Equal variances assumed	2.315	.203	-1.617	4	.181	-.54000	.33385	-1.46692	.38692
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.617	2.660	.216	-.54000	.33385	-1.68353	.60353

As shown in table 1.1, there is a slight difference as shown on the p – value of principals and teachers' means equal variances assumed. It is therefore observed that p – value of 0.203 is greater than the level of significance (0.05). Since the significance value is greater than the predetermined level of significance, we therefore fail to reject the null hypothesis that there is no significant difference between means of teachers and principals' perception on the impact of distribution of online resource

Table 1.2: Independent Samples Test on Socio-emotional Support

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Scores	Equal variances assumed	.578	.489	-.620	4	.569	-.24667	.39811	-1.35199	.85865
	Equal variances not assumed			-.620	3.737	.571	-.24667	.39811	-1.38339	.89005

The independent t-test results further indicate that there is no significant difference between the means of principals and teachers at P – value of 0.489. This means that no significant

difference exists between the means of principals and teachers perception on offering socio-emotional and therefore we accept the null hypothesis.

Table 1.3: Independent Samples Test on Parental Engagement

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Score1	.940	.387	1.113	4	.328	.19667	.17676	~	.68743
Equal variances assumed			1.113	3.149	.344	.19667	.17676	~	.74445
Equal variances not assumed								.35112	

The results further indicate that there is a slight difference between the means of principals and teachers regarding parental engagement in supporting vulnerable children during the pandemic at a p – value 0.387. Since the p – value 0.387 is greater than the level of significance or p – value 0.05, it is therefore observed that there is no significant difference, thus we fail to reject the null hypothesis.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of the study are discussed as follows:

The study sought to appraise the education systems used to support vulnerable children during COVID-19 disruptions. The findings revealed that distribution of online or electronic resources during COVID-19 disruptions enhanced equitable learning of vulnerable children in Nakuru County. The study revealed that schools utilized information and communication technology to deliver learning materials to students during school closure, which enhanced equitable learning for vulnerable students. The findings revealed that schools utilized radio broadcasts and distributed web-based materials to students during school shutdowns, which were effective in making sure that all children accessed instructional materials.

The findings however revealed that use of web-based materials was not as effective in enhancing equitable learning. Out of all the principals taking part in the study, only 45%

responded in the affirmative that web-based materials enhanced equitable learning of vulnerable learners. The findings are consistent with García et al. (2020) who found that many children were still unable to benefit from online resources due to lack of mobile phone or computer. This also lends credence to a report by US Census bureau report (2020), which found that children had difficulties in following classes from home since the devices that were initially used for homework were being shared with parents who had to work from home.

The results revealed that addressing socio-emotional needs of vulnerable children during school closure can be effective in promoting safety and wellbeing of vulnerable learners thus promoting equitable learning. The findings showed that schools utilized school counseling leadership to virtually stay in touch with children and families to help them cope with traumatic experiences posed by the pandemic and school closures. The results support Colao et al. (2020) that during pandemics and emergencies, schools can be supportive to vulnerable learners by responding to their psychosocial needs so as to promote sense of belonging and safety. This is also consistent with OECD (2020) recommendations for schools to have in place programs that can address children's socio-emotional needs and general wellbeing.

The findings however showed that schools were not well prepared in other areas of addressing children's socio-emotional needs. The results pointed to weaknesses especially on the facet of providing social support to students during the pandemic. The results showed that maintaining contacts with students during school closure positively impacted on enhancing equitable learning of vulnerable students. The results however showed that schools engaged parents in a partnership to encourage children to study during schools closure. Collaborating with parents to help in downloading learning resources was helpful in supporting vulnerable students.

These findings corroborate DoE (2020) study in Ireland, where school leaderships collaborated with parents to support learning of their children through assigning them work and activities to do during closures. The study findings revealed that schools reached out and liaised with parents to provide children with digital devices that they required to access learning materials during the pandemic. This had positive impact on supporting the vulnerable children to have equitable learning based on the report by UNESCO (2021), which indicated that almost a third of students in the world could not access remote learning due to limitations of internet connectivity and lack of digital devices. The study null hypothesis revealed that there was no significant difference between the means of principals and teachers on the impact of

distribution resources, addressing students' socio-emotional needs and parental engagement in supporting vulnerable children during COVID-19 pandemic.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings the study made the following conclusions:

The study concluded that education systems put in place during COVID-19 pandemic were generally helpful, and enhanced equitable learning for vulnerable children in secondary schools in Nakuru County. The study concluded that digital devices used for remote learning during the pandemic enhanced quality learning and promoted equitable learning. The study concluded that use of radio broadcasts was helpful in reaching most of the children even in rural areas where coverage of internet and mobile network was poor.

The study concluded that distribution of web-based materials was not very effective due to lack of internet connectivity and availability of digital devices such as laptops desktop computers and mobile phones especially in rural areas. It was concluded that virtual counseling and maintaining contact with learners during the pandemic enhanced equitable learning. The study however concluded that providing social support was not effective in supporting vulnerable students' learning.

The study concluded that collaboration between schools and parents positively impacted on equitable learning during the pandemic. The study concluded that the collaboration enabled parents to fetch the materials supplied online for their children, provided them with the digital devices they needed to interact with online resources and assigned them tasks and activities.

The null hypothesis that there is no significant difference between the means of teachers and principals' perception on distribution of resources, addressing students' socio-emotional needs and parental engagement in supporting vulnerable children during COVID-19 pandemic was retained.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommended that the ministry of education establishes a free complimentary platform where children who could not afford internet connection or have access to radio could receive learning resources during pandemics. There is need for policy makers in the Ministry of Education to develop resources and remote learning platform to cater for learners with special needs during pandemics or emergencies. There is need to conduct regular workshops and continuing training for teachers on effective ways of using and integrating

modern technology to complement standard instructional delivery during pandemics or emergencies.

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