

## **COVID-19 and Learners' Studying in Kaberamaido District, Uganda**

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### **Abstract**

*The study was about the impact of COVID-19 on children's studying in Kaberamaido District and the objective was to explore the perceived impact of E-learning, self-study materials and parent-to-child relationship on learners' study process in Kaberamaido District. The study employed a basic qualitative research design. Forty-eight participants were purposively selected from a population of 874, these were: The District Education Officer, one District Inspector of Schools, three headteachers, seven teachers, 25 learners and 11 parents. The study used interview guides to collect data, and thematic analysis and percentages to analyse the data. The study found out that, E-Learning and self-study materials which were introduced by the Ministry of Education and Sports to mitigate the gaps in education during the lockdown had little positive impact on learners' studying in Kaberamaido District and there was also poor child-to-parent relationship.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19, lockdown, E-Learning, self-study materials, learners, parent-child relationship

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on educational systems worldwide, resulting into nearly total closure of educational institutions. Efforts to curb the infection rates of COVID-19 through preventive measures such as social distancing and self-isolation can be only effective when children are out of school and when the measures are enacted promptly. In a bid to contain the spread of COVID-19, most countries around the globe temporarily closed educational institutions. During the 1918 to 1919 influenza pandemic in the United States, school closure and the ban to public gathering were associated with lower total mortality rates. Closure of schools for a duration of 4 weeks in 43 cities, was also shown as one of the measures of controlling influenza in the US in 2004-2008 (Markel, Lipman, Navarro 2007).

As of 7<sup>th</sup> June, 2020, approximately 1,725 billion learners were affected due to school closures in response to the pandemic. According to Wyle (2020), 134 countries were implementing nationwide closures and 38 were implementing local closures, impacting about 98.5% of the world's students' population with only 39 countries having reopened schools (UNESCO, 2020).

School closures affect not only students, teachers, and families but also have economic and social consequences on service delivery. School closure in response to the pandemic have shed light on various social and economic services including students' debts, enrolment, early pregnancies, poor child to parent relationships, digital learning challenges, food insecurity, poverty,

increase in government expenditure on education, poor childcare, insufficient health care, disrupted house rent and other utilities payments like electricity and internet services (Reddy et al., 2020).

To address the challenges of school closures, it was recommended by UNESCO (2020) that distance learning, open educational programs and platforms should be established in schools so that teachers can use the applications in the teaching of learners remotely in a bid to limit disruption of education which was implemented by many countries, Uganda inclusive (Gulati, 2008). It was discovered that when learners briefly resumed school, there were high rates of infection among them which made it difficult to realize the impact of school closure (Kaffenberger, 2021).

### **Overview of Uganda's COVID-19 Situation**

Uganda confirmed its first case of COVID-19 on 21 March 2020 and as of December 2021, Uganda had 123,817 confirmed cases and 3,294 deaths (Ministry of Health, 2021). According to the Ministry of Health [MoH] (2021), from the time of the declaration of the outbreak of COVID-19 in China on 31<sup>st</sup> December 2019, the government swiftly put in place COVID-19 screening measures at Entebbe International Airport and at inland border points of entry to prevent the importation of the virus into the country. However, during the first half of 2020, many Ugandans returned home from several countries already affected by COVID-19 and integrated into communities undetected, largely due to lack of symptoms at the time of their arrival. This in turn dictated a change in strategy, from prevention of importation to suppression of transmission. To emphasize and strengthen this measure, the President of Uganda, in 18<sup>th</sup> March 2020, declared COVID-19 a national emergency and has since issued guidelines on preventive measures to suppress the spread of the disease throughout the country, including imposing lockdown and curfew, banning gatherings, closing schools and shopping malls, suspending public and private transport, prohibiting open-air markets in rural areas, prohibiting the marketing of non-food items in urban markets, and prohibiting entry into the country for newly arrived refugees and asylum-seekers. During the lockdown period, the country undertook a specific strategy of locating, quarantining and testing all travellers. Uganda's early containment measures, including mandatory quarantines in designated facilities, played an important role in containing the spread of the epidemic (Ssebuufu et al., 2020).

Education is seen as an agent of change on which all sectors in Uganda depend. It stimulates other forms of developments which involve; social growth, economic development, political transformation, shaping moral behaviour and helping to achieve development through innovation. Education in Uganda is a constitutional right, article 30 makes education for children a right, and article 34 states that all children are entitled to basic education by the state and parents. However, Covid 19 has not only disrupted studies but has also denied children their rights (The 1995, Constitution of the Republic of Uganda).

Like any other districts in Uganda, Kaberamaido registered cases of Coronavirus victims and death, and the situation in the district after the closures of schools on 20<sup>th</sup> March, 2020 became alarming. Over 41,184 pupils and students of primary schools, secondary, and tertiary institutions stayed home and a number of challenges were faced by learners, teachers, parents and other stakeholders. These challenges are characterized as; unemployment, poor child-to-parent relationship, poor child care, early marriages and pregnancy, rape, poor nutrition, domestic violence, inequity in learning among others (DEO's Report of 25<sup>th</sup> June, 2020).

It's against this background that the researcher was compelled to carry out a study on some of the above challenges i.e., learning inequity (E-Learning), child care, self-study materials, child-parent relationship and employment.

### **Scope**

Geographically, the study was limited to Kaberamaido District which is located in Eastern Uganda, 434 km from Kampala, the capital city of the Republic of Uganda. The time scope covers the period of 2020 and 2021, a period when due to the COVID-19 pandemic, educational institutions in Uganda remained closed for close to two years. The content scope of the study covers factors related to teaching-learning, family and workplace environment vis-à-vis the learners' studying.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to explore the perceived impact of COVID-19 on learners' studying in Kaberamaido District.

### **Specific Objectives**

The three specific objectives of the study include:

1. To find out the accessibility of teaching-learning resources by teachers and learners in Kaberamaido District.
2. To establish the perceived impact of accessibility of teaching-learning resources on learners' studying in Kaberamaido District.
3. To examine the parent-child relationships during the lockdown.

### **Literature Review**

Available literature suggests that the most accessible media service in Uganda is the radio, followed by television and only a small percentage of the population had access to mobile phone services.

### **Radio**

Currently, communication through radio stations has become very popular in Uganda. Uganda Communication Commission has so far licensed 292 FM radio stations country wide which are spread all over the country and even most upcountry towns have at least two (The Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa [CIPESA], 2018). According to research carried out by the National Information Technology survey 2017/2018, it was found that 65.3 % of Ugandan households owned

radios. In an attempt to maintain continuity in teaching and learning process, the government aimed at making the best use of these radio stations for teaching during the lockdown. However, this did not cater for learners with hearing impairment (Deaf) and not every home had a radio and could afford to buy battery every time.

### **Television**

In the past, Uganda used to have only one local television i.e., Uganda Television (UTV). Today, there are 39 operational television stations some of which are free while others are paid. The seven (7) Pay-Tv service providers include; DStv, Zuku TV, StarSat, Azam TV, StarTimes, GOtv and Kampala SITI Cable. Out of these, four (4) of them broadcast using satellite, two (2) Digital Terrestrial and one (1) uses cable as the mode of broadcasting (Mwesiga, 2015). Only the four using satellite (DStv, Zuku TV, Azam TV and StarSat) have a countrywide coverage. Due to the wide coverage of these channels, the Ministry of Education and Sports directed teachers to use them for teaching during the COVID-19 lockdown to cope with syllabus coverage. To effect this, Uganda Broadcasting Corporation National Education Program released a teaching timetable for remedial TV classes for core subjects i.e. English, Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Geography and History (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2021). The unfortunate bit is that most of the recommended TV channels that have wide coverage are paid for, and given the persistent high levels of poverty in most regions and many households, most people cannot invest in a television set, bear the cost of access to electricity and are unable to pay service subscription charges that range from a monthly fee of 11,000/= (\$2.89) to 219,000/= (\$57.54) (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2019). The use of television as a medium to aid in teaching and learning process has led to big disparities between the rich and poor. About 22% (21.8%) possessed Televisions sets. A case in point is Kaberamaido District where 10.4% of the households are totally poor and are not benefiting at all from teaching on television (Sabiti, 2016; Uganda Communication Commission, 2009). According to UBOS (2016/2017), 41.7% of households in Kaberamaido consume less than \$1.90 per person per day.

### **Mobile Phones**

In December 1994, Uganda started using ICTs as part of its economic development strategy as the first mobile phone (Celtel) was introduced. In 1998, the National ICT policy development process was initiated by the Uganda National Council of Science and Technology (UNCST) and the draft was submitted to the Cabinet in 2002 which was approved (Hannessy, 2010). The policy framework document recognized that Uganda would need to embark on the goal of lifelong education for all (Farrell, 2007). According to Uganda Communications Commission (UCC, 2014), in 2007, Uganda had 63.9% mobile penetration. The National Information Technology Survey (CIPESA, 2018) found that 10.8% of households owned telephones and at an individual

level 70.9% individuals owned a mobile device, and of this only 16 % owned a smartphone. About 11% of all households had at least one member who had Internet access. Of the households with internet access, 99.1% used their mobile phones to access the Internet while 5.9% had access to computers at home (CIPESA, 2018).

In Kaberamaido District, according to National Population and Housing Census Report of 2014, the majority of the households in the district are poor with 69% deriving their livelihood from subsistence farming, only 27% of the households depend on earned income, only one in every five households (20%) had access to electricity, internet connectivity is a big challenge due to poor network systems of various telecommunication networks. One in every nine households (11%) were having one meal per day (for adults), some of the households (11%) receive remittance from abroad in cash or in kind (National Population and Housing Census, 2014). Another survey was carried out by National Identification and Registration Authority (NIRA) during mass registration of citizens for National Identity Cards in Kaberamaido in 2014, only about 15% of population in Kaberamaido had smart phones (NIRA 2014).

Given the above data, most households in Kaberamaido District cannot afford to buy mobile phones, and lack money to meet the cost of frequent charging or even lack electricity for charging the phone and inaccessibility to internet. This has made it difficult to conduct lessons which require internet (Kaberamaido District Education Officer's Report, 2020).

### **COVID-19 Learning Materials Packages**

To enhance teaching-learning during the lockdown, the Ministry of Education and sports distributed self-study learning materials in form of hard copies to all districts in the country. Unfortunately, these learning materials were not enough for all the learners and they did not cater for some categories of learners like students of the tertiary institutions and learners with learning disabilities such as visual impairment. In addition, the Ministry of Education and Sports also continued forwarding holiday study-learning materials via the various phone applications (MoES, 2020; NCDC 2020).

### **School Closure and Children Parental Care**

According to the Ministry of Education's report as per 19 June 2020, due to the closure of schools, 15 million learners and 600,000 refugee learners were out of school (UNESCO, 2020). This meant sending children back to their parents, who failed to enforce discipline hence increasing on the rate of indiscipline among children in homes and rebelliousness to parents, further leading to poor child-parent relationships (New Vision, 2021).

UNICEF in partnership with the government of Uganda, developed key messages for children, caregivers, and communities on child protection during the COVID-19 crisis (including key topics such as online safety and the availability of services) to be shared via a range of channels. Messages for police and social welfare service providers were developed to ensure protection

of children during the COVID-19. Radio spot messages and talk shows were aired focusing on protection risks, and the identification of and response to violence against children/gender-based violence during the lockdown (Goldberg, 2020). Additionally, a U-Report poll was carried out to assess the level of understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on violence against women and children. It also clarified incorrect beliefs and increased knowledge of reporting channels for violence against women and children (Wyle, 2020). Poverty due to prolonged lockdown will lead to high rate of school dropout.

Kaberamaido was one of the three districts with the highest (over 25%) increase in teenage pregnancies from 2019 to 2020 (UNPF, 2021). From March 2020 to may alone, the rate of teenage pregnancy increased by 6.8% according to Kaberamaido District Health Officer's Report (2020). This high rate of teenage pregnancy is an indication of high rate of school dropout when the schools reopen (District Health Officer's Report, 2020). According to Gender officer Kaberamaido, Rogers Ejotu (The Independent, 2021), 1560 teenage mothers had been registered in the district.

### **Schools Closure and Workplace Environment**

Employment Act 2006, section 40 (1) states "Every employer shall provide his or her employees with work in accordance with the contract of service", during the period in which the work is binding and on the number of days equal to the number of working days expressly or implied provided for in the contract.

However, in Uganda, almost all the private schools and PTA paid staff had not been paid their salaries and wages since the closure of schools and this made life very difficult for most of the teaching and non-teaching staff in those schools.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

A basic qualitative research design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) was used in the study because it enabled the researcher analyse the meanings that people attached to their experiences.

### **Population and Sampling**

The study population covered teachers and learners of primary and secondary levels in Kaberamaido, the District Education Officer, District Inspector of Schools, headteachers, teachers, and parents. The sample included three headteachers, seven teachers, 11 parents and 25 learners, the District Education Officer and District Inspector of Schools. Respondents in this study were purposively selected basing on the information they possessed and the roles they played.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

The main instrument that was used for collecting information for the study was interview schedule. A documentary checklist was also used.

### **Data Analysis**

The raw data obtained from the study was reduced into manageable size, summarized, edited to detect and correct possible errors and omissions that occurred to ensure consistency across respondents. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data.

### **Findings**

Following the study carried out in Kaberamaido, the following were found out: -

#### **Accessibility of Teaching-Learning Resources by Teachers and Learners in Kaberamaido**

In Kaberamaido District, 3,466 secondary school students were not catered for in the distribution of self-learning materials. Learners were supposed to access COVID-19 self-learning materials but in Kaberamaido, the distributed materials were inadequate for the learners in both primary and secondary schools. To be specific, there were only 18,000 sets of learning materials which were distributed to only 18,000 learners in primary schools yet the total learners in the district is 37,000 meaning that the total of 19,000 learners missed (DEO's Report of May 2020). To make matters worse, brails for the blinds in primary schools were not brought at all. This means a total of 24 pupils with visual impairment were left out totally.

#### **Perceived Impact of Teaching-Learning Resources on Learners' Studying in Kaberamaido**

Radio broadcasting was used in Uganda as a measure of supporting teaching-learning during the lockdown. In Kaberamaido however, this program of Radio learning was not conducted at all. This means the learners in the district missed most of the lessons which were conducted over the radio as compared to other districts which had the program conducted (DEO's Report May, 2020).

Learners in Kaberamaido could have benefitted from the nearby radio stations if it were not for the challenge of language barrier. According to one Primary three pupil, "these radio stations were using local languages of their districts i.e., Iteso for Soroti and Lango for Dokolo which did not favour the learners in Kaberamaido who understand only Kumam language". This affected children in lower classes (Nursery – P.3) where the medium of instruction is the local language.

Learners in Kaberamaido also faced the challenge of content differentiation especially for radio and television provisions. In an interview carried out with the teachers and students of secondary schools in Kaberamaido District on uniformity of lessons conducted over radio and television, they said that there was variation in topics for a given class level in different schools and this showed lack of uniformity in content delivery in different class levels.

Lack of promotional examinations was also seen as problematic by some administrators. Much as there was learning going on by use of study-

learning materials which were distributed to the learners and on radios from the nearby districts, no promotional examinations were administered. To parents, education means teaching, examine and promotion of children to the next levels. So, most of the parents in Kaberamaido looked at this kind of learning as a waste of time. This concern was raised by the chairperson School Management Committee of one primary school.

### **Parent-Child Relationships During the Lockdown**

In a radio interview conducted by Kaberamaido District Inspector of Schools on 18<sup>th</sup> June, 2020, it was found out that most children were being overworked by their parents especially in garden work. The report stated that most of the children went to the gardens at 06:00am to midday on a daily basis and they had grown tired of staying at home because of hard work.

In an interview conducted with one of the concerned parents in a trading centre, a suburb in Kaberamaido District, it was found that most of the indiscipline cases caused by children were characterized as; smoking among boys, indecent dressing, rape, defilement, early pregnancies, coming back home late at night despite curfew being in place and refusing to listen to parents' directives. In turn, this led to poor relationships between the parents and children who looked at one another as enemies.

In a related scenario, over 864 teaching and non-teaching staff of private schools and staff on PTA payroll of government schools were laid off, which reduced their purchasing power to meet their family demands and caused family instability like domestic violence, divorce, quarrels, poor parent-child relationships and theft among others. Reported by one of the teachers of one high school, one of the renowned private secondary schools in Kaberamaido District.

According to the District Inspector of schools, "there is projection of high rate of school dropout when the schools reopen especially as a result of early pregnancy and early marriages". This follows the 1538 cases of teenage pregnancies registered at the health facilities in Kaberamaido District from June 2020 to June 2021, although the number of early marriages had not yet been established (District Health Officer's Report, 2021).

### **Recommendations**

The research recommends the following to bridge the gaps in education during the closures of schools as a preventive measure for COVID-19:

- The government and other stakeholders should support teachers, parents and learners. This support should be in form training the teachers on how to use computer applications to provide virtual learning to the learners and provide laptops to learners at affordable prices that the parents can manage.
- School administrators should develop distance learning programs which are based on current technologies and skills especially for live



streaming classes. This program should be inclusive for all classes and abilities but catering for differences in class levels.

- Distance education administrators should get students' feedback in terms of the effectiveness of their distance learning progress in addition to learning about students' academic achievements.
- Teachers at both private and government institutions should be provided with personal protective equipment like face masks, gloves etc. Teachers should also be provided with counselling services to recharge from the mental stress suffered from handling learners with complications from the virus in case of any outbreak at school.
- The government should plan for inclusive distance learning programs that cater for all learners including those with disabilities (the blind, deaf) and learners from low-income backgrounds. This can be done by incorporating teachers for the blind, deaf and other stakeholders (parents) in the planning for the management of Covid-19 in education sector.
- Government should come up with measures to support private schools such as providing subsistence wages, food and domestic supplies, reducing the cost of utilities and engaging mobile network operators to reduce Mobile money charges, reach out to the financial institutions to suspend interest on the loans for the duration of the pandemic.

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