



A Study on the Impact of Covid-19 on Education: A Case Study in Malawi

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ABSTRACT

This study titled the Impact of COVID-19 on Education in Malawi was carried out by the researcher in primary schools, secondary and tertiary schools. This study was carried out in Thyolo, Mulanje and Phalombe Districts. For this purpose, the study's data were collected through a questionnaire responded by 40 participants (students only from the upper primary, secondary as well as tertiary). The participants were selected using the stratified sampling method. The results revealed that there was a heavy impact of COVID-19 on education in Malawi at the education institutional levels like the loss of actual teaching and learning, unfairly distribution of online learning platforms, inadequate classroom facilities to address the issues of distance learning in classes, mental experiences faced by the students at the loosing of their guardians, fear having heard of friends being attacked by the virus, schools closures and stringent measures such as the lockdowns imposed by the government. The study has therefore made suggestions and recommendations that the government should look forward to address such shortfalls to ensure smooth continuous of teaching and learning during such or similar crisis in the future like investment for developing the online system, provision of text and reading books for smart classes and providing the data and information using the technology.

Index Terms: Impact of COVID-19 on education in Malawi

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the whole world and impacts the numerous sectors for longer period of time. It has been challenging for big and smaller business to run in such a situation where the demand has been low owing to the alteration in the social setting. The medical personnel in unlike countries have not found the suitable way to address the impact of this issue. The daily numbers of COVID-19 cases are breaking the record and increasing the difficulties for the world and raising many questions for industries, schooling, farming, import-export and supply chain at global level (Casero-Ripollés, 2020). The COVID-19 virus is attacking the general public mostly those with a weak immune system or having some co-morbidities already. The COVID-19 restrictions compounded by the unavailability of treatment options and insufficient medical and protective kits are hurting the practice of sustaining firmness in commercial and other areas including the educational sector. The COVID-19 restrictions are having a major impact on all sectors of societies at international level, and the populace is experiencing a very difficult time since they have clogged all the social, educational, business and economic areas. It is a tough time for the educational institutions to begin classes and guardians to send their wards to schools (both national and international), colleges and universities to progress with their schooling and finish the courses (Vladescu, 2016) due to the world-wide restrictions on social gatherings, school closures, movements and in other areas, lockdowns.

Education and learning are one of the major basic needs and individual rights of societies, and owing to this pandemic issue, the teachers and scholars are facing a hard-hitting situation to continue with their courses. Roughly 1.726 billion students worldwide are presently affected due to COVID-19 restrictions in response to the pandemic.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC IMPACT ON MALAWI EDUCATION CONTEXT

The World Health Organization (WHO) in March 2020 declared the COVID-19 disease 2019 (Novel Coronavirus) a pandemic. The first three Coronavirus cases were confirmed in the country on the 2nd of April 2020 (UNICEF 2020). The declaration of the COVID-19 as a pandemic led to immediate closing of schools and the evolution to distance and virtual learning in most countries, including some institutions in Malawi. Following this proclamation, the then President of the Republic of Malawi, Professor Arthur Peter Mutharika, hired a special committee on COVID-19 on 8 March 2020 and declared a state of disaster on 20 March 2020. The role of the special committee was to effectively respond to the COVID-19 crisis and prepare the National COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan (Obreque 2020).

Subsequent to the announcement of the state of disaster, all public and private schools, colleges and universities closed on 23 March 2020, two weeks before the scheduled midterm closure on 6 April 2020. The closure of schools, according to the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, was

done with the view to protect students, teachers and parents from contracting COVID-19. While efforts were then initiated to ensure that learning continued despite the closure of schools in Malawi, only a few from the advantaged families benefited leaving out the many disadvantaged school going population.

RESEARCH GAP

Even though there have been several literatures on studies assessing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions on the education sector, there have not been any studies specifically focusing on Malawi. As such, the present study, whose scope includes both public and private primary and secondary education, aims to study the impact of COVID 19 crisis on the education in Malawi, specifically focusing on activities towards providing continued learning opportunities for learners and actual or projected medium- and long-term implications of the pandemic in the education sector.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

UNIVERSE

The Universe of the study consisted of 548 (students, teachers, lecturers and Parents) in Lilongwe, Thyolo and Mulanje district.

SAMPLING DESIGN

The researcher used stratified sampling in his choice of the study sample. 11 schools participated from where data was collected from a sample of 40 participants.

TOOLS OF DATA COLLECTION

The collection of data for the research was done using the primary method as the researcher applied descriptive design, quantitative type and indicative approach. As indicated before, the questionnaire method via e-mail and physically was distributed to all respondents was used in order to collect the data. The researcher also used interface interviews as well as focus group discussions. Prior consent from the respondents and Ministry of education was sought for participation in the research. This study employed a mixed method study and the data was analysed statistically and thematically.

STATISTICAL TEST

This study employed a mixed method study and the data was analysed statistically and thematically. For the quantitative part, the researcher employed use of Ms. Excel and SPSS to analyze the data. First, the data was downloaded from Google form and then converted to Ms. Excel file.

The data then imported to SPSS and statistically analysed using SPSS. Both descriptive and inferential statistical analyses was conducted.

Descriptive analysis was carried out to find frequency, percentage and mean. Independent Samples T-test and One Way ANOVA tests was conducted to find out the differences in participants' responses by their emographic variables, i.e., gender, class, and age. Moreover, Regression

analysis was carried out to examine the relationship between students' perception of teaching and learning and the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on students' learning.

Figure 1: Shows gender of the respondents

Distribution of the respondents based on their Gender.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid male	19	47.5	47.5	47.5
female	21	52.5	52.5	100.0
Total	40	100.0	100.0	

The above table shows that the study had more than half female participants that represented 52.5%. Less than half were male participants (47.5%)

COLLECTION OF DATA

Researcher collected data from the respondents by using questionnaires, focus group discussions and interview methods.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

General Assessment of Covid-19 at an Institution.

Table 2: How has COVID-19 pandemic affected your institution?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	29	72.5	72.5	72.5
	Strongly Disagree	11	27.5	27.5	100.0
	Total	40	100.0	100.0	

The majority (72.5%) of respondents on the item how has covid-19 pandemic affected your institution reported that they have been impacted by COVID-19. Only one third (27.5%) students strongly disagreed that their institution had been affected as their place was open as usual with special measures put in place for COVID-19. This result could be surprising because at the time of the study, COVID-19 episodes in Malawi were with the lowest numbers of the virus and most schools had fully opened. In cases of reemergence of the disease in their respective areas some schools were disrupted by way of open and closure. These results are in agreement with a study by **Eze, et al** titled "Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on Education in Nigeria: Implications for Policy and Practice of e-learning" (2021). This study investigated the challenges posed by, and the impacts of COVID-19 on Education in Nigeria. A sequential exploratory mixed method design was adopted for the study. Results showed that the challenges of education during the COVID-19 pandemic include school closure, poor learning, unequal access to education opportunities and poor skills. Further, the pandemic negatively impacts education, causing poor school enrollment, inequality in education, poor achievement, poor school health and challenges in school assessment and transition. It was concluded that COVID-19 has negatively affected education in Nigeria.

Table 3: Do you have information board put in place easy communicate with students and staff on covid -19 updates?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Agree	1	2.5	2.5	2.5
Agree	15	37.5	37.5	40.0
Strongly Disagree	24	60.0	60.0	100.0
Total	40	100.0	100.0	

Information Communication

The majority of the institutions strongly disagreed (60%) and very few strongly agree (2.5%) and one third (37.5%) agreed on the item on having information board put in place for easy communicating with students and staff on covid-19 updates. This high percentage might suggest that schools did not have information boards in place.

In fact, even though the structures exist in one third of the institutions, numerous institutions reported that a sudden encounter caused by the lockdown was to ensure clear and effective communication streams with staff and students and this result means that there were inadequate or no information boards in the institutions of learning as observed on table and graph in figure 3. This means then that there was need for the schools to have a robust communication platform to have the staff and students communicate on educational related matters. These results are similar to a study finding by **Saka, T.W(2021)** who reviewed and analyzed on the "Digitalization in teaching and education in the context of COVID-19: Malawi.". In this study, the researchers' analysis and review found that the pandemic has made apparent the need for integrating Information and Communication Technology in teaching and learning and for training teachers in the use of technology. Malawi's education sector has a long way to go in this regard, as evidenced by the relatively high number of secondary school students that had no access to the learning platform during the pandemic. The planned development of an ICT policy in education will therefore be crucial to strengthening Information and Communication Technology use in education.

CONCLUSION

This result could be surprising because at the time of the study, COVID-19 episodes in Malawi were with the lowest numbers of the virus and most schools had fully opened with prevention steps or measures well put in place to curb the virus from further spreading. However, in cases of re-emergence of the disease in their respective areas some schools were disrupted by way of open and closure. The national governments have to continue spreading messages of hygiene and other preventive measures to ensure nonexistence of the virus in all the institutions. This would enable institutions to continue with learning and teaching across Malawi. Standards operation procedures have to be made available in all the learning areas. Therefore, no region, district, town, village, single citizen can catch the virus and discontinues to spread, and the students and their parents cannot be confined in a lockdown for long, without facing dire socio-economic and even cultural significances that might also produce other negative health emergencies. The only way to prevent the COVID-19 pandemic would be through prevention and treatment. Therefore, the vaccine should be continuously advocated for so as to have as many people as possible vaccinated in a quest to reduce or slow down the spread and contamination. The solution to the socio-economic crisis would come only through solidarity and a sense of community cohesiveness.

Suggestions and Recommendations

1. Measures to continue students teaching and learning.

Many countries around the world including Malawi should use a variety of options to render support to students teaching and learning during the crisis's lock downs since the students will be unable to attend school. Based from the findings of this study and other studies before, ministry of education and other stakeholders must implement or make available instructional packages (textbooks, worksheets and handouts), enhance radio education, educational television programs and level the online instructional resources to all areas in the rural and urban environments. While Malawi made several efforts to continue with students' education consultations failed dismally and the plan failed. Tools were not distributed to all the educational centres in the districts in order to reach the largest students' population possible. In the future the government of Malawi must collaborate and coordinate and consult with partner stakeholders and donors. Future researchers must look into importance and effectiveness of collaboration between government and other stakeholders.

2. Mental health support

On the issues of mental health and also looking at the responses from the study, students agree that in other areas government provided the school with counselors, the counselors were available but students did not make use of them. This study suggests that in the future the Malawi government should deploy many educational counselors to support the students cope with the crisis and also during the post recovery period. This will help the social workers to provide enough counseling pertaining to a pandemic. Therefore, the ministry should consider recruitment of educational counselors in its district education offices. Mental health drive related activities should be enhanced in the communities. In the rural and urban, these activities can be held in public places where professionals would go with various mental health activities to identify mental health drivers that have led to mental health conditions. These activities should also be held in public and private schools. Further studies should also be done on the effectiveness of educational counselors in the institutions of teaching and learning on the education of students. The researcher is quite aware that teachers are also counselors but they are overwhelmed with teaching work, hence our recommendation that government should fully employ social workers who are educational counselors to complement on the teacher's counseling role.

3. Crisis Management improvement

Some respondents stressed that their covid-19 crisis experience offers an opportunity to well make their institution to deal with other or similar crises in the future. All the stakeholders involved should be able to learn about crisis management as they may have been imparted with knowledge and necessary skills. If it is well done it may lead to a growing institution's resilience and agility when responding to unanticipated encounters in the future.

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