

Provision of Basic Education in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Kenya

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Abstract

The closure of all institutions of learning by the government in March 2020 upon the global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic led to a paradigm shift in education. Teaching and learning moved from face-to-face to the virtual mode to enable schools to complete their first-term syllabus. Despite this provision for continuation, learning ceased for many learners, particularly those from disadvantaged households and areas considered to be marginalized. This paper explores the ways in which COVID-19 has affected the provision of basic education in Kenya. Reflections in the paper indicate that while school closures and the subsequent shift to online teaching were well intended, they apparently exacerbated some already existing gender and regional inequalities and revealed the wide digital divide across the learners' socio-demographic conditions. These challenges notwithstanding, the paper depicts the pandemic as having presented an opportunity for deeper reflection on the provision of basic education, particularly the demand for flexibility in modes of delivery, which makes the integration of emerging technologies a requirement rather than a choice.

1.0 Background and Context

The novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) was first detected in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. The disease spread rapidly across the world and was thus declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020. The pandemic has continued to spread across the world, manifesting both immediate and long-term devastating social economic effects on national economies and individual citizens (Ngwacho, 2020). COVID-19 stands for coronavirus disease 2019, a disease caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus-2 and whose symptoms include fever, cough, shortness of breath, and breathing difficulties for severe cases. The disease is known to spread through physical contact as well as through indirect means such as surfaces and hence can be controlled through measures that include regular washing of hands with soap and water or using an alcohol-based sanitizers. People were also advised to wear protective masks and maintain social distance. Although scientific efforts have resulted in the successful development of a vaccine that has been approved for use, there is still an emphasis on strict observance of preventive measures given by the WHO to help curb its spread, particularly in Africa where the vaccine has been made available yet its supply is inadequate for the population.

The outbreak of this pandemic dramatically affected many aspects of society, including education, in profound ways. For instance, the pandemic disrupted people's livelihoods as well as learning in schools and colleges. In the education sector, school closures were used as a common tool in the battle against COVID-19 (Engzell et al., 2020), forcing millions of learners to physically stay out of school. These global closures of institutions of learning began at the end of January, increased before the end of February and progressively accelerated in March 2020 (Viner et al. 2020; Chapple, 2020). This certainly jeopardised the promise of Sustainable Development Goal 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education for all.

1.1 Education and the COVID-19 Crisis in Kenya

Upon the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Kenya, the Ministry of Education (MoE) announced the indefinite closure of 30,000 primary and secondary schools as part of the measures for containing the spread of COVID-19 across the country (MoE, 2020). This unexpected closure interrupted the learning of 18 million pre-primary, primary and secondary school students with fears that it would lead to loss of learning time, increased dropouts, and exacerbate inequalities in education (MoE, 2020).

Education in Kenya operates on the 8-4-4 system, meaning 8 years in primary school, 4 years in secondary or technical/vocational school and an average of 4 years in higher education. In this system, children begin school at 6 years and complete their primary education at age 14. The 8 years of primary and 4 years of secondary education are free and compulsory. However, following the variously identified weaknesses in this system, this system is being gradually phased out since 2017 in favour of a 2-6-3-3 system

(Amutabi, 2019; KICD, 2018). This new system divides the primary education curriculum into two categories: two years and six years before joining junior secondary school for three years and then senior secondary school for another three years (KICD, 2018). Unlike the former system, which has endured criticism as being more examination-oriented, the latter is more competency-based. The implementation of the new system is currently in the second cycle (in particular, grade 4).

Most school-going children in urban areas in Kenya (both in primary and secondary) commute daily to schools using public transport. This certainly increases their exposure to COVID-19 infection. The majority of school children (nearly 70%) reside in rural areas where they walk several kilometres to their respective schools. Schools in rural areas are characterized by poor infrastructure, large class sizes, long walks to schools, family members with low literacy to support learning and inadequate teaching and learning materials (Muyaka, 2018). This situation is not very different from that of children attending schools in urban informal settlements (Malenya, 2020; Muyaka 2019).

Similar to many other countries, efforts to adopt new learning and teaching paradigms to ensure continuity in learning with minimal interruptions during school closures became the order of the day in Kenya. The education sector leveraged the assets of home-based learning rather than trying to recreate school (Bryson & Andres, 2020). Accordingly, in May 2020, the Ministry of Education developed some guidelines to help in the overall readiness and response to emergency, including the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as interventions for mitigating its impact on the provision of quality education. Additionally, the State Department for Early Learning and Basic Education developed a COVID-19 Response and Recovery plan aimed at ensuring continued learning and promoting the health, safety and wellbeing of learners, teachers and education officials during and after the pandemic. In particular, the plan set out to, first; provide learners with access to quality, equitable and inclusive education during and after the crisis to ensure continued learning; second; facilitate the production of online teaching and learning materials as well as expand distance learning programmes; third; train teachers to effectively support distance learning, including monitoring and assessment, fourth; develop and implement intervention programmes targeting marginalized and most vulnerable learners, especially girls and learners with special needs and finally; provide psychological support to learners, teachers, education officials and other stakeholders (MoE, 2020).

With these guidelines, the MoE vision was to have seamless learning to ensure that learners do not lose essential learning time and that the education system recovers and smoothly transitions to the post-COVID-19 phase (MoE, 2020). Accordingly, the envisaged continuation of learning was pursued through alternative learning pathways such as online classes, radio lessons and educational television channels as a matter of priority. This was done through digital learning (following the enhancement of the Kenya Education Cloud), provision of teaching and learning materials for basic education (with emphasis on remote/marginalized areas) and sanitation infrastructure and knowledge of

hygiene.

At this point in time, the issue that dominated the educational discourse was whether all Kenyan children could access the internet and the digital devices required to make virtual learning possible (Nzuki & Wanyama, 2020). Studies done elsewhere have prominently associated school closures with academic learning losses (Larsen et al. 2021, Engzell 2020) and other unintended consequences. Accordingly, Kenyans had a divided opinion over this concern, with some maintaining that it was possible to provide access for all learners, thereby recommending measures such as zero-rating broadband, donations and establishing hotlines for teacher-learner consultation. However, others felt strongly that the digital gap in the country, including the lack of electricity in rural areas, had resulted in growing inequality that would compromise the effort (Parsitau & Jepkemei 2020; Ngwacho 2020). Therefore, criticism levelled against these efforts has pointed out that very few of the measures the MoE suggested to ensure learning continues during the pandemic address enhancing connectivity. Rather, while most measures focus more on how to make use of the facilities that are already in existence, such as the education cloud, live streaming and the digital literacy programme (Nzuki & Wanyama, 2020); the measures that address the digital gap are not clearly elucidated in the Basic Education Response Plan in Kenya.

Nonetheless, it is notable that at the time of closure of schools, the MoE was not prepared for such an eventuality. As such, there were no readily available alternative learning options. At the same time, even for the remote instruction that became the option, there was not adequate infrastructure to support it immediately. The situation was further compounded by the lack of health preparedness to handle a crisis of the proportions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, the paradigm shift to virtual learning was faced with a fair share of challenges including a lack of electronic equipment and internet connectivity in addition to the challenge of orienting learners, who were used to the face-to-face model but then had to cope with a situation where the teacher was not physically present to support learning. Undoubtedly, many of the learners thought of online learning as a lesser version of face-to-face education, not a different way to organize education (Zhao, 2020).

In addition to the virtual learning approach to teaching and learning, the Ministry of Education in collaboration with other stakeholders, such as the Teachers Service Commission (TSC) and the Ministry of Interior and Coordination of National Government, developed guidelines for another complementary model of learning: the Community-Based Learning Programme (TSC, 2020; People Daily Online Newspaper of 24 August 2020). This programme was designed to go beyond the formal syllabus and engage learners in the acquisition of good personal habits, competencies, skills and values during the period of their stay at home during the COVID-19 pandemic. The programme was designed to be rolled out after the establishment of community-based learning committees, mapping of learners, identification of venues, content and assessment as well as supervision and monitoring (TSC, 2020).

The content of teaching and learning for primary schools covered four main topics: life skills and values, health and fitness, learning area activities, environment and sanitation. Secondary schools had eight topics: citizenship, environment, creative arts, languages, games and fitness, life skills, home science, mathematics and financial literacy. This programme was not necessarily syllabus-focused but one that was intended to enhance students' life skills during the COVID-19 pandemic period. In the community-based learning classes, one teacher would handle up to 15 learners in their estates or villages of residence. The lessons would be conducted face-to-face and in open places or halls in strict accordance with the COVID-19 containment measures and would last for four to five hours per day.

Despite it being well intended, the programme faced resistance by some education stakeholders, especially teachers who, through their union, doubted the practicability of the programme describing it as a 'rushed knee-jerk' initiative imposed on them. To most of them, its implementation would produce barriers, as they had not been involved in the planning of the programme despite being the main custodians for learners (People Daily Online Newspaper of 24 August 2020). In fact, one parent reportedly challenged the rolling out of this programme in court, arguing that the continued closure of schools had already brought about severe pain and suffering following an escalation of teenage pregnancies (WUSC, 2020; APHRC, 2020), exposure to online pornography and delinquency since children often lacked parental care during the daytime, a situation reminiscent of the old adage, 'an idle mind is the devil's workshop'. The petitioner thus argued that the MoE should instead work out modalities of reopening schools (Daily Nation Online, 10 September 2020, Business Daily Newspaper–Online edition, Tuesday August 25 2020).

Just as it was in the case of the Community-Based Learning Programme, MoE's decision to reopen schools was met with some resistance from various stakeholders, including Kenya's Teachers' Associations, who felt strongly that schools were not well prepared to follow health protocols set out by the Ministry of Health in collaboration with the MoE to prevent the spread of coronavirus. Among the issues of contention was the apparent inadequacy of school facilities to enable them to maintain the prescribed social distance among learners. At the same time, it was observed that most schools lacked a source of clean water for washing hands, hand sanitizer and face masks to keep children safe in the learning institutions, as required by the ministry upon reopening. Despite these arguments, schools reopened as scheduled and began grappling with the envisaged challenges. By the fourth week of reopening, teachers' associations still raised concerns over the risk of infection, especially following media reports that at least 35 teachers and 17 students had tested positive for COVID-19 and that two teachers had died (VoA News Online, 11th January, 2021).

2.0 Nature and Scale of Disruption of Learning in Kenyan Schools

COVID-19 disrupted Kenya's educational sector in profound ways. One of the manifestations of this disruption was the closure of school to all children and the subsequent massive shift to online and digital home schooling, both of which were relatively new phenomena for most institutions of learning, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (MoE, 2020).

2.1 Shift from School to Virtual Learning and Homeschooling

Inspired by the UNESCO recommendation for more investment in distance and home learning applications, this shift elicited sharp reactions from different stakeholders in education. These included parents, teachers, and students who faulted the approach for not being sensitive to the circumstances of many learners. This is mainly because the platforms were not sufficiently inclusive, as they could not be accessed by the underprivileged majority (Obura, 2020; Kathula, 2020).

Indeed, according to the 2019 Census data, only 17.9% of Kenyan households have internet access, 56.9% have stand-alone radios and 40.7% have functioning televisions. At the same time, the MoE estimates that there are 16,528,313 learners out of school, from early childhood education to tertiary students (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2019). In view of the same statistics, having less than 10% of learners with access to digital learning materials such as computers, iPads, and laptops, 18% with access to learning through the internet and 26% with access to electricity in rural areas is indicative of glaring disparities in home learning. At the same time, the Communications Authority of Kenya estimates a mobile phone penetration rate of 116% of the population, with 22 million people having mobile broadband and 39.3 million data/internet subscriptions in Kenya. This translates to an internet penetration rate of 83%. In this respect, the situation illustrates the sheer inability of the government to take advantage of internet penetration to mount significant online learning through mobile phone technology.

From these statistics, it is apparent that while the alternative learning platforms sounded effective, there were still many learners who had no access to the internet, televisions, radios, computers, or mobile phones and could not afford newspapers and were therefore excluded from the learning process. More disturbing is the observation by the same stakeholders that opportunities to learn at home for these children were further limited due to the lack of a conducive learning environment, particularly those in the urban informal settlements and poor rural based households (WUSC, 2020; Engzell et al, 2020). Most of the children living in urban informal settlements come from households that live in single rooms, in which there is limited literacy and capacity to hire private tutors. Similarly, those in poor rural households face challenges that include, but are not limited to, the inability to access electricity, the fact that school work must compete with household chores and the presence of few role models. Additionally, smartphones are beyond the reach of most rural communities. Even when adults have smartphones,

tensions around privacy and children’s unsupervised internet use render access to these gadgets for learning purposes non-existent (Yusuf, 2020).

Consequently, anecdotal media reports continued to indicate that virtual learning remained inaccessible to millions of pupils enrolled in public schools as well as those from areas classified as lower-middle income mainly due to the apparent digital divide in the country, and also because parents did not have sufficient education to assist their children at home. According to Zollmann and BFA Global (2020), while some educational programming was broadcast on television and radio, the lower-income majority of learners were left on their own, often without access to computers, data bundles, or costly print-outs of assignment exercises distributed by teachers.

In view of all these circumstances, to keep the learners engaged and mitigate the loss of essential learning time, the government of Kenya, through the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD), put in place some measures to facilitate learning through different platforms, such as the Kenya Education Cloud, TV, radio, ed-tech apps, and mobile phones. Accordingly, while these are noble measures that were designed to ensure that no student was left behind, access to these services was patchy and many children were unable to benefit, in both urban and rural areas. Accordingly, for the vast majority of children, learning was greatly interrupted due to lack of access to electricity, internet connectivity, and digital technology. In other words, the closures and the subsequent migration to remote instruction exposed the glaring inequalities in learning across the socio-demographic spectrum in Kenya, further exacerbating inequities in access to and provision of quality of education. In this respect, the shift not only took the education of marginalized or underprivileged learners for granted but also began to derail the progress Kenya has, so far, made towards the attainment of UN SDG 4 which partly aims at ensuring basic education for all children.

2.2 Compromised Education Opportunities for Disadvantaged and Underprivileged Learners

While few particular studies were carried out to ascertain whether all learners had their educational needs met under the prevailing circumstances, available anecdotal reports and other forms of evidence indicated that learning mediated through ed-tech remained out of reach for a significant section of the population of learners considered disadvantaged due to connectivity (in terms of internet and electricity) challenges. For instance, according to Parsitau & Jepkemei (2020), households in remote parts of Kajiado, Narok, Samburu, Turkana, and Kilifi counties lack electricity, and as such, children in these areas remain largely excluded from online learning. Elsewhere, a survey on remote learning conducted by Uwezo Kenya (2020) established that access to learning was low and inequitable, parental awareness was disparate, the most utilized platform of remote learning was not the most accessible, and that public schools were the least prepared to support a digital learning approach.

Similarly, curfews and quarantines also tended to reduce and restrict the mobility

of girls and women, thereby negatively impacting their access to essential services such as protection and support networks and diminishing their autonomy. In this respect, the closure of schools pushed many children, particularly girls, out of the protective environment of the school for up to nine months. As a result, collaborative media reports consistently indicated that more girls, women and children living with disabilities who made attempts to go about their routines, as their male counterparts did, endured more unintended consequences such as sexual molestation and assault. For instance, according to UN Women Africa (2021), 35% of crimes reported in the first month of lockdown were classified as sexual offences, and over the course of 2020, Kenya's national helpline for GBV services recorded over 5,000 cases. At the same time, the Health Assistance Kenya (HAK) helpline set up for reporting all forms of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and violence against children (VAC) reported a steady increase in recorded cases in the months of March, April and May from 115, 461, to 753, respectively (UN Women Africa, 2020), adding that 67% of the cases of SGBV were experienced by women and girls. In the first three months of the pandemic, one county reported more than 4,000 cases of early pregnancies (Bhalla 2020, APHRC 2020).

Although the strict measures the Kenya government adopted to counter the spread of COVID-19 virus were necessary and well-intended, they had more profound negative consequences for women and girls, including elevating the risk of gender-based violence (Adhiambo, 2020). Arguably, the COVID-19 crisis magnified the structural violence and inequalities endured by the most vulnerable members of society, including women, youth, children, and persons living with disabilities (PWD) (Equality Now, 2020). Equally, the restrictions in place made it even more difficult for survivors to report abuse and seek help and for service providers to respond efficiently. This often resulted in devastating consequences, including sexually transmitted infections and escalated instances of unplanned teenage pregnancies, among others. This served to further interrupt learning, hence reducing educational opportunities, as seen when Machakos County reported 3,964 cases, aged 19 and below, within 5 months (African Population and Health Research Center 2020, UNICEF Press Release 6 October 2020), with 200 of these girls aged 14 and below (Africa News Online, June 2020). This was a trend that essentially consisted in the disempowerment of girls (Bhalla 2020; APHRC 2020).

2.3 Changes in the Basic Education School Academic Calendar

Following the disruption of the academic calendar, the MoE, in consultation with other stakeholders, reviewed and released a new academic calendar for basic education institutions that will cover to the end of 2022. Accordingly, the new calendar had profound changes in terms of term dates, school holidays and national examination dates. Usually, the academic year begins in January and continues through December with school holidays in April, August and December. National examinations – the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) and the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) – are usually administered at the end of the third term in November and December.

However, in light of the disruption by COVID-19, while the examination classes (class 8 and form 4) continued with their studies by way of remote instruction, the rest of the learners resumed learning in January 2021 for their second term for a continuation of the disrupted academic calendar, going up to March followed by KCPE and KCSE examinations for class 8 and form 4 candidates, respectively. The 2021/2022 academic year runs from July 2021 to April 2022 and is followed by two national examinations: KCPE and KCSE. Later in the same month of April, schools will open for first term of the 2022/2023 year and run until July, take a short break and proceed for second term until September, followed by a short break open for the third term towards the end of September, running until November 2022 when KCPE and KCSE candidates will sit for examinations followed by Christmas holiday. The normal academic calendar resumes in January 2023 when the new academic year 2023/2024 will begin.

This revised calendar was based on the projection that by 2023, the COVID-19 challenge will have been addressed to a level that is manageable. Nonetheless, a close examination of this calendar reveals two different but equally important features that cannot be ignored. First, two national examination seasons are scheduled within the 2022 calendar year. Second, apart from the March to May 2021 school holidays and those that come at a time when KCPE and KCSE examinations are on and which will last for 6 to 7 weeks, all the rest of the holidays are as short as 1 to 2 weeks.

In view of these two features, it is apparent that given the financial and logistical burden that comes with preparations for national examinations, this calendar is likely to pose considerable challenges to the Kenya National Examinations Council (KNEC). In this respect, KNEC has to contend with the rather daunting task of organizing for two national examination seasons in the same calendar year. At the school level, teachers will be expected to go an extra mile in preparing two sets of candidates for a national examination in the same calendar year. This will certainly pile unprecedented pressure on teachers, and it may not only work against their well-being but also compromise their effectiveness. Learners, particularly candidates, are likely to be the most affected, as all this pressure targets them. The struggle to withstand all this pressure and, if possible, do well in their examinations may lead them to be susceptible to burnout, stress, anxiety, fear and even rebellion, as has happened in the past, especially during mock examinations (Malenya 2016, National Crime Research Centre 2017). All these projected effects have implications for the quality of education within the period of the revised academic calendar and beyond. Similarly, at such a time when Kenya was in a curriculum transition dispensation, the pandemic certainly affected the timelines for the implementation of the new competency-based curriculum (CBC).

2.4 Permanent Closure of Some Private Schools due to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Unlike public schools that receive state funding, private schools in Kenya draw their revenues from fees paid by learners. Private schools became popular in Kenya during the 1980s when the government was struggling to provide enough schools for a ballooning

young population (Nishimura & Yamano, 2013). It is estimated that the private school sector accommodates at least 2.5 million learners: hence, it forms a strong pillar of the education sector (Wamalwa & Burns, 2017). However, there exists a misconception in Kenya that private schools are limited to high-cost exclusive schools but on the contrary, there is a large segment of private schools whose cost falls far below that of a typical public school in Kenya (Tooley & Stanfield, 2008). In fact, private schools in Kenya exist in a diverse range starting from the highly unregulated and unregistered non-formal schools mainly located in informal settlements and rural areas, formal private academies in middle and high-income urban areas to the few and often old traditionally exclusive private schools offering foreign curriculum such as General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) (Piper & Mugenda, 2010; Piper et al.2014; Malenya, 2020; Business Daily Newspaper-Online, Friday November 20 2020).

The closure of schools meant that they would not be able to raise any funds to maintain their staff, pay loans taken to fund projects or even pay rent where applicable. With schools closed for an extended period of nine months, many private schools were unable to sustain themselves due to declining cash flows. They were eventually forced to close down completely with some proprietors converting the premises to other forms of business, such as poultry keeping, shops, storage facilities and residences. According to Kenya's Private School Association (KEPSA), approximately 339 private schools were forced to close because of the pandemic, affecting 56,000 students (VoA News Online, 2021), all of whom were later expected to seek new admission in government-sponsored schools, further exacerbating the challenge of social distancing (Xinhua Net News Online, January 6, 2021) in the destination schools. This left at least 1,247 teachers jobless. In addition, KEPSA revealed that approximately 95% of the more than 300,000 private school staff were sent on unpaid leave and therefore had to do without any income for the entire nine months of school closure. Again, while some private schools turned to online classes to generate income to survive, most of the schools serving low-income communities were at a greater risk as such a venture was not sustainable given that the catchment communities were disadvantaged in many aspects.

As part of the government efforts to cushion private schools against the effects of COVID-19, the Kenyan government, in September 2020, pledged approximately 64 million U.S. dollars (7 billion Kenyan shillings) worth of concessional loans in support of private school resumption. However, since the schools reopened, collaborative media reports have indicated that, according to private school proprietors, this remains a promise yet to be fulfilled.

2.5 School Infrastructure upon Reopening

Upon government declaration of the reopening of schools, there was an accompanying ministerial directive in which all learners formerly enrolled in closed-down private schools were to be readmitted to public schools. The closure of such schools, coupled with loss of livelihoods, resulted in a decline in parents' income and pushed

parents to take their children back to state-funded public schools. This saw a continued increase in class sizes, thereby exerting pressure on the existing facilities, such as desks in those public schools, which, even under usual circumstances, were characterized by large class sizes. Accordingly, this posed a challenge to many public schools in terms of teaching the recommended class sizes and maintaining the stipulated social distance.

Cognizant of these challenges, the government rolled out a post-COVID-19 Economic Stimulus Program, part of which was the Sh1.9bn Locally Assembled School Desks Project. This component sought to deliver 650,000 desks to primary and secondary schools to compensate for the emerging need for more desks caused by the influx of children formerly enrolled in private schools. Apparently, not all the schools were targeted for benefit, and even for those targeted, the desks they received were still considerably inadequate.

Social distancing, as one of the public health protocols, requires a larger space. Accordingly, the existing classrooms in most schools undoubtedly became inadequate, thereby necessitating a re-imagining of the classroom, since the construction of more classrooms was not going to be feasible within the prevailing economic circumstances. Various stakeholders suggested different options, including the use of open tents to supplement the classrooms, thereby reducing class sizes or even setting up extra classes under trees, as suggested by the Cabinet Secretary for Education, especially when the weather is conducive.

2.6 Schools' Preparedness for the Implementation of COVID-19-Related Protocols

The decision to reopen schools, even when the COVID-19 threat was at its worst, was anchored on the idea that keeping children at home any longer would harm their well-being even more, resulting in long-lasting effects on their future lives (Nyamai & Muchunguh, 2020). Accordingly, school resumption required much preparation for a smooth transition. For instance, the mass movement of children formerly enrolled in private schools to public schools certainly pointed to a subsequent situation of overcrowding and hence the need for more facilities, infrastructure and even human resources (teachers) in destination public schools. As part of this preparation, the Teachers Service Commission (TSC) reportedly recruited 6,000 permanently employed and an additional 12,000 intern teachers (The East African Newspaper, 2020). Prior to the reopening, UNICEF also supported the MoE with a 'Back to School' campaign aimed at ensuring that all the children, including those who had previously dropped out, return to schools safely upon reopening (UNICEF, 2020).

In terms of infrastructure, many stakeholders observed that neither additional classes, ablution facilities, nor complementary funding for schools had been put in place to enable schools to resume their operations in a manner compliant with the public health guidelines. For instance, the MoE committed Ksh14 billion (\$127.27 million) for secondary schools and more than Ksh4 billion (\$36.37 million) for primary schools as capitation funds to schools ahead of the reopening date. Head teachers suggested that

capitation be raised from the usual Ksh1, 420 (\$12.90) to Ksh8, 077 (\$73.43) per learner annually given that crisis schools were facing (The East African Newspaper, 2020). While this appeared to be a positive indicator of preparedness on the part of MoE, a close examination of these figures reveals that they are actually the same figures that schools usually receive as capitation. Additionally, although the MoE promised to provide face masks to all learners upon resumption of studies, these had, by the end of the first month of resumption, not been delivered to the schools. In the same way, it was left to schools to ensure the availability of water for hand washing and sanitizer for the learners (Ambani, 2020). Consequently, there has been a growing feeling among stakeholders, particularly teachers, that despite all the planning, schools are still overcrowded and underfunded and hence considerably ill-prepared for effective implementation of public health protocols. Moreover, while the government has placed the burden of ensuring that COVID-19 protocols and safety measures are met in schools, the government has provided little or no meaningful support towards this end.

3.0 The COVID-19 Pandemic and Educational Policy in Kenya

The COVID-19 pandemic has undeniably necessitated various changes in the education sector. Among the main changes include the shift from face-to-face classroom learning to virtual learning during school closures and, upon reopening, a whole range of changes, such as wearing face masks, social distancing, regular hand washing and sanitizing, all of which constitute the ‘new normal’. Accordingly, despite the many changes and the associated paradigm shifts they intimate, this has not yet resulted in substantive policy changes. Even as the MoE makes these changes, some stakeholders have contemptuously described them as mere ‘knee-jerk reactions’, implying that despite making such changes, the ministry appears to be looking forward to the pandemic ending very soon and everything returning to normalcy. In fact, the changes are stipulated in documents whose duration of operation is described as ‘during COVID-19 era’ without any qualification that indicates the far future such as ‘and beyond’. Accordingly, these changes appear to be temporary rather than long-term. In the prevailing circumstances, therefore, the MoE appears to have adopted a ‘wait and see’ kind of attitude. Perhaps, to the ministry, it appears ‘rather early in the day’ to initiate associated policy changes. Nonetheless, in view of the likelihood of similar occurrences in the foreseeable future, educational discourse continues to exert pressure on the MoE to review some of the existing educational policies by, for instance, re-drafting them to include online learning pedagogy not as a lesser version of the traditional face-to-face education but as a complementary or even an emergency pedagogy, among other changes.

4.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

This section provides some conclusions derived from the foregoing discussions and the relevant recommendations.

4.1 Conclusions

Although necessary and well-intended, the school closures caused by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic appear to have had considerable unintended consequences. In many instances, they exacerbated previously existing inequalities. Instances of children who were already at risk of exclusion from quality education being further excluded are some of the sad illustrations of such consequences. Notably, the pandemic appears to have impacted on women and girls in ways that enhanced the risk of gender-based violence as well as the vulnerability of other already vulnerable categories of people in society, including persons living with disability (PWD). In particular, these closures exposed more of the girls to devastating experiences such as sexual and gender-based violence, including teenage pregnancies, which are likely to have life-long impacts.

At the same time, despite the relative success recorded in virtual learning, its nature of operation tended to work to the exclusion of disadvantaged and underprivileged learners such as those in marginalized counties, urban informal settlements and in rural areas. As such, the abrupt closure of schools and the subsequent paradigm shift to virtual learning exposed glaring learning inequalities and their real breadth and depth across the socio-demographic and geographic spectra of Kenya's school-going population. In addition, despite the promises the government made concerning the support to schools upon reopening, both private and state-funded schools are generally reported to be overcrowded, underfunded and hence ill-prepared for effective implementation of public health protocols.

However, as the old adage goes, every dark cloud has a silver lining. Despite the magnitude of suffering and disruption of learning this pandemic has caused, it has at the same time exposed some of the cracks in the (Kenyan) systems, thereby indicating the contours along which education in Kenya could evolve, particularly the digital learning component. In fact, the pandemic has presented an opportunity for schools to reflect on the state of online learning as a complementary approach to physical face-to-face classroom learning in this rapidly changing world of technology. Ultimately, it has clearly indicated that the integration of emerging technologies in education is no longer a choice but a requirement, particularly considering the changing learning terrain characterized by demands for flexibility in modes of delivery. It has thus presented education players with guidelines on how the education system can best adapt to a changing world. In the same breath, it is a sad reminder to us (Kenyans) of the failed digital programme famously referred to as the 'laptop project' launched by the government in 2013 as a lost opportunity that would have laid a strong foundation for virtual learning that would have helped address the existing disparities in online access. On a positive note, however, some

of the schools, particularly private schools and a few public schools, have set up good online platforms that will benefit students in the future.

4.2 Recommendations

At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the closure of schools took education providers by surprise, as they were undoubtedly ill-prepared to adapt to the new teaching and learning environment necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the COVID-19 era should serve as a learning experience for such eventualities that may occur and affect the provision of education in the future.

It is evident that schools conducted virtual learning with varying levels of success. There is now a large corpus of knowledge and experiences from various schools in terms of attendance, participation, use of virtual equipment, the nature of online interactions, assignments and even evaluation. Turbulent and challenging as virtual learning has been, a careful analysis of these experiences can yield incredible insights that would allow for an optimization of the learning environment both at the system and individual levels.

Since the development of the Kenya Education Cloud facility, it had never been rolled out on such a large scale as happened during the school closures. Accordingly, a thorough review of how learners utilized educational broadcasts and how they utilized the cloud would generate alternative approaches to a situation such as that of COVID-19 instead of closing schools, particularly considering the negative consequences of such closures.

One of the greatest weaknesses of the alternative teaching and learning strategy adopted, virtual learning, was that of inequalities in accessing virtual lessons. Learners from vulnerable households were left falling far behind in an arrangement that certainly disadvantaged them. For this reason, education stakeholders must, in the future, ensure that the alternatives they take are those that are not only cost-effective but available within the home and easy to use for both learners and their parents, who may have limited literacy.

Given the central role and responsibility shouldered by parents in facilitating the home learning situation, it will be necessary in the future to support parents in ways such as capacity building to enable them to meaningfully support their children's virtual engagement during learning.

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