
COVID-19 AND EDUCATION IN GHANA: A TALE OF CHAOS AND CALM

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ABSTRACT

Every sector of the world's economy has been affected by the novel corona virus and the world is yet to realize the full length of the damage of the pandemic according to a report by World Health Organization (WHO). Education in Ghana and many other countries in the world is in limbo. The COVID-19 pandemic now threatens to make education outcomes even worse. The pandemic has already had profound impacts on education by closing schools almost everywhere on the planet, in the largest simultaneous shock to all education systems in our lifetime. This article reviews the effects of COVID-19 on the various levels of Education in Ghana and suggest ways to minimizing the impact. It takes a look at the extent to which the pandemic has run life aground and measures set up by the government to curtail the spread. It critically discusses the emergency remote teaching and learning which has been adopted by the affected countries in place of the traditional face-to-face. It concludes that setting virtual online platforms for continuous teacher-learner interactions is the way forward, however, a lot needs to be done to make it possible in developing countries.

Keywords: *Corona Virus, COVID-19, Education, Emergency Remote Learning, Ghana*

INTRODUCTION

The corona virus disease with nicknamed COVID-19, an acronym CO-the corona, VI- the virus, D- the disease and the 19 stands for the 2019, the year the novel virus was detected (UNICEF, 2020). Corona virus disease (Covid-19), a novel pandemic has become an albatross on the

world's economy, public health, education, agriculture and so on of which Ghana is no exception. The corona virus is a disease that was first tested in china specifically in Wuhan city in the year 2019 around December. The pandemic has affected every sector of human life including religious activities, funerals, business, education, public healthcare systems, and socio-cultural events. On education, the COVID-19 pandemic will threaten education through two main types of shocks: the immediate impacts of schools and university closures and the impacts of the economic recession sparked by the pandemic response, which have already begun and will deepen for some time to come and unless countries mount major efforts to respond, the pandemic will have a long term effect on human capital and welfare. (World Bank Group Education Report, 2020). As the number of novel corona virus cases worldwide continues to grow, the WHO warned Africa could be the next epicenter. The UN Commission for Africa projected 300,000 deaths in Africa as the virus appeared to be spreading away from African capital cities (Nishiura *et al.*, 2020a).

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

The study is underpinned by the viral modernity theory by Michael A. Peters (2020). Viral modernity is a concept that is based on the nature of viruses, the ancient and critical role they play in evolution and culture, and the basic application to understanding the role of information and forms of bioinformation in the social world' (Peters, Jandri, & McLaren, 2020). This theory discusses the impact of information on infectious diseases and their consequential effects on education and socio-cultural activities of people. Peters explains that media play part in the fight against pandemics and identifies some journalists, and bloggers as messengers of inaccurate information on social media and described it as a ways of helping to fuel panic, hysteria and stigma that are associated with infectious diseases outbreak (Peters et al., 2020). This study used modernity theory to discuss the Epidemiology of COVID-19 in Ghana and its impact on citizens, schools and universities. It extensively discussed the measures and strategies set up by government to curb the spread of the pandemic.

THE EFFECTS OF CODVID-19 ON EDUCATION GLOBALLY

"Sometimes it takes a natural disaster to reveal a social disaster" Jim Wallis.

To date, COVID19-driven school closures have impacted over one billion students. In response to the coronavirus pandemic, UNESCO estimated that 107 countries had implemented national

school closure related to COVID-19 by 18th March 2020 affecting 862 million children and young people, roughly half the global student population (Russel *et al.*, 2020). Even more seriously, Bozkurt and Sharma (2020) reported that more than 1.5 billion learners of all ages from around the globe are affected due to the school and university closure owing to COVID-19 pandemic (UNESCO, 2020a & UNICEF, 2020). The affected number of students equal 90% of the world's enrolled students (UNESCO, 2020) and the shutting down of schools have widened learning inequalities and hurt vulnerable children and youth disproportionately. Despite the low rates of the infections among children, school closures are critical pillar of the social distancing tools to mitigate the spread of the disease and avoid an acceleration of cases that will put a strain on health services. Its effectiveness as a measure to slow down the spread of contagion will depend on the exact timing of the closure, the age structure of the population and the length of the closure (World Bank, 2020). Around mid-March 2020, governments across Africa through the Ministry of Health announced that all schools, colleges and universities closed indefinitely amid fears of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak that had reportedly ravaged most parts of China, United States of America, Italy, Spain and other parts of Europe and Africa (Sintema, 2020).

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON PRE-UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IN GHANA

Schools and Universities in Ghana were closed by Mid-March 2020 and restriction on movement was further imposed. The closure was announced at the time when Final year Basic school students were preparing for their BECE exams in June and the Final year Senior High School students were also warming up to take their WASSCE exams in May 2020. The fate of these students remains a mirage. The Ministry of Education do not seem to have any solution to the problem at hand. Parents are confused and teachers are depending on the Ghana Education Service for the way-forward. What is more worrying and confusing is that no one knows how these candidates will gain admission into Senior High Schools and Universities in September 2020 as suggestion of aptitude test and entrance exams for these candidates was rejected by the universities. Clearly the pandemic has come to expose the lack of planning and preparedness towards such emergency educational situations. We do not seem to have any alternative solution to a problem that is likely to draw the entire educational system back and further deepen the woes of vulnerable children and youth in the country (UNESCO, 2020a). According to the

WHO, domestic violence in the wake of the lockdown increased worldwide. Experts say lack of social activities and financial pressures are contributing factors. A recent report by Manusher Jonno foundation (MJF), a human right organization explained that, at least 4,249 women and 456 children were subjected to domestic violence in 27 out of 64 districts of Bangladesh in April, with 424 children facing violence for the first time in their lives. The case of Ghana is not known yet, there has not been an official reports and statistics of how many children have gone through similar ordeal but news bulletins have reported exponential rise in child abuse. Ghana National Council of Private Schools (GNACOPS) have estimated that, over 94,000 private school teachers have lost their jobs due to the corona virus outbreak as at May 2020.

THE EFFECT OF COVID-19 ON TERTIARY EDUCATION IN GHANA

Teaching and learning in the Universities and their affiliate colleges in Ghana have also suffered a shock. Even though, online learning on educational platforms such as Google classroom, Telegram, Zoom app etc. are not entirely new ways of engaging and interacting with students in our universities but the shift from traditional face-to-face to 100% online teaching and learning threatens continuity and requires much efforts to sustain high academic standards. The decision to go online was not immediately welcomed by all students and lecturers. Some university students through the Students' Representative Council demanded for the supply of internet data to enable them participate in the online learning. The decision also meant that lecturers needed enhanced knowledge in emergency remote teaching to be able to have effective online interaction with their students. Online training for University and College of Education lecturers was then organized by the Digital Society School, Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences in collaboration with T-Tel from 1st – 8th May, 2020 and the programme was worthwhile according to the participants. Currently, teaching and learning for university students is ongoing amidst infrastructural and technological challenges however, there are lessons to learn from this pandemic for the future.

EMERGENCY REMOTE LEARNING FOR SCHOOLS AND UNIVERSITIES IN GHANA

Emergency Remote Learning: a temporal shift of instructional delivery to an alternative delivery mode due to crisis circumstances (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, & Bond, 2020). Many stakeholders of education had earlier recommended online learning for Basic school children,

however, the numerous challenges that come in the implementation of emergency remote learning have overawed most education systems worldwide. An overwhelming lack of training for basic schools teachers, students, tools and devices for e-learning means that Ghana and other African countries can only rely on mother-nature to survive. For many years, the use of mobile phones by students in the Senior High Schools in Ghana have remained prohibited and any student who flouts this directive is dismissed particularly if the student is a second time offender. In villages and peri-urban areas some parents cannot afford the cost of a smartphone and internet data and even do not have the technical know-how to assist their children to participate in online learning. Even in the most advanced countries, not all students have the needed facilities for online learning. A report by Federal Communications Commission (FCC) indicates that over 20% (21 million) of students in California (US) do not have the means to get on the internet at home. Providing the devices and connectivity to students and teachers remains key to ensuring successful online learning in Ghana.

MEASURES TO CURB THE SPREAD OF COVID-19 IN GHANA

Due to the Corona virus outbreak in Ghana, The President H.E Nana Addo Danquah Akufo-Addo with recommendations from Ministry of Health, Ghana Health Service and Ghana Medical Association closed all the borders, ban all social gathering, closed all schools (Public and Private) in the country instituted a lockdown on Greater Accra and Greater Kumasi on 16th March, 2020 to prevent the spread of the virus. On 20th April 2020, the President Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo in his seventh address to the nation on measures put in place to combat the spread of COVID-19 announced an end to a 3-week partial lockdown imposed on some parts of the country. He indicated that the decision is backed by science and data and reiterated that the suspension of the partial lockdown was not to mean the government was letting its guard down in the fight however, his decision was met with criticism by the opposition party and some citizens who considered the President's decision as premature.

To deal with the disease, there are preventive measures that must be followed, which include; frequent washing of hands under running water, the use of alcohol based sanitizer (alcohol 65-80 %), coughing or sneezing into flexed elbow or a tissue and disposing it into dustbins, avoid touching nose, eyes and mouth with unclean hands, avoid touching untreated or unsanitized surfaces, maintaining social distancing, wearing of mask to cover the nose and mouth (WHO,

2020 & GHS, 2020). Citizens have been cautioned to stay at home to avoid getting infected with the virus and this was reiterated by The Minister of Education, Dr. Mathew Opoku Prempeh, when he said “the virus moves, when human beings move”. Among the measures put in place by the government to fight the virus included the following:

- Cost of living allowance for civil/public servants
- Reduction in cost of internet data
- Enhanced contact tracing and tracking
- Stimulus package to businesses
- LEAP support to vulnerable through mobile money
- 50% pay increase for frontline workers from May to July 2020
- 50% cut on utility bills (light and water bills) to motivate citizens to stay home

EPIDEMIOLOGY OF COVID-19 OUTBREAK IN GHANA

Ghana had its first two confirmed cases of the COVID-19 on 12th March, 2020 with two people believed to have returned from Turkey and Norway. As at 15th of May, 2020, total confirmed cases stood at 5,530, with 4,832 active cases, total recoveries stood at 674, and 24 deaths. Thirteen out of the sixteen regions have recorded cases of the disease. This was according to Dr. Badu-Sarkodie, in a press briefing on 15th May 15, 2020 (Ghana Health Service, 2020). The virus spreads through coming into contact with contaminated surfaces or with an affected person, thus through the droplets of saliva or mucus that comes when the person coughs or sneezes into the air or the hand. The virus can stay on surfaces example, tables, door knobs and handles, hands, phones, etc. and when an unaffected person comes into contact with any of these surfaces and touches the eye, mouth and nose, the person is likely to contract the virus easily because the virus can stay and survive on these surfaces for several hours. (WHO, & GHS, 2020). It is a dangerous disease with an incubation period of 7-14 days and can be fatal for people who have weaker immune system (Ghana Health Service, 2020). Symptoms of this novel corona virus according to Nishiura (2020), can range from mild (asymptomatic) to severe illness (symptomatic). Some of the symptoms include, fever, dry cough, common cold, headaches, running nose, sore throat, bodily pains, and difficulty in breathing.

Noguchi Memorial Institute for Medical Research and Kumasi Centre for Collaborative Research in Tropical Medicine (KCCR) has played a major role in the routine testing and contact

tracing of people who have come in contact with infected people. In total, these centres have tested over 200,000 suspected cases with 7,117 confirmed cases, 2,317 recoveries and 34 deaths (<http://ghanahealthservice.org/covid19> Retrieved on 17th May, 2020). The virus is still spreading rapidly, however, the number of recoveries give hope for the future.

CONSPIRACY THEORIES

There have been many conspiracy theories on the corona virus disease spreading across the globe that suggest that the virus is man-made or laboratory generated at some labs in USA and China. Some claim that the virus was created in a lab in US then sent to china to depopulate them and also to weaken their economic powers. It says that the virus was part of covert biological weapon program and that a Canadian-Chinese spy team had sent the virus to Wuhan in china. (B.B.C, 2020). Some Chinese believe that the virus has been originated from U.S, alleging it might have been the US Army that brought the virus to Wuhan (Global search on COVID-19, 2020).

Again, one of the conspiracy theories has it that, one of the world's richest men and philanthropist is responsible for the corona virus pandemic. The suspicion emerges from the fact that he predicted the outbreak about five years ago on TEDx Talk, a talk program, given the nature of the virus, its spread or mode of transmission, predicted the number of people that will be affected, number of deaths, its implication on the economy, education, cost to fight the virus and most importantly suggested measure to control the spread of the virus. Thereon, after the outbreak, his foundation has contributed huge sums of monies to help support the fight against the pandemic (CBS News.com, 2020). Mark Lynas (2020) opined that the conspiracy theories that behave like the viruses themselves spread amazingly like wild fire and as rapid online as the Spanish Flu and SARS-COV-2 does offline.

Another conspiracy theory cited 5G as responsible for the outbreak of the virus, however, Experts debunked it, and explained that it is impossible for the virus to be spread through electromagnetic spectrum. The WHO clarified that the virus cannot travel on electromagnetic and mobile networks and alluded that COVID-19 is spreading rapidly in many countries that do not have 5G communication network. The key allegation seem to be that 5G radiofrequency communications have a damaging effects on human health. As a result, many people in U.K had burned their phones and set fire into cell phone towers and other gadgets they believe have links with 5G communication networks. With the news around the globe on the infection and deaths

from the virus, still other conspiracy theorists believes that the COVID-19 does not actually exist and that it is a plot by globalist elite to take away the freedom of others. Lastly, some of the theories say that the pandemic is being manipulated by big pharmaceutical companies to produce and sell drugs. (Lynas, 2020). Wherever the Corona virus emerged, the world has suffered from it devastating and ravaging effects and it may take the world a couple of years to recover.

EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON SOCIO-CULTURAL ACTIVITIES IN GHANAIAN SOCIETY

On 1st May, 2020 The President of Ghana announced a ban on all public gatherings and further cautioned citizens to stay home and away from all events such as football, parties, funerals, weddings, religious activities, however, a total of twenty-five people could attend such events whilst observing social distancing protocol recommended by the World Health Organization and Ghana Health Service. Some recalcitrant citizens have already been fined and others gone to jail for flouting these directives by the President. With hundreds of dead bodies still in the morgue the plight of bereaved families waiting to organize befitting funeral for their love ones lingers on. Among the Akans of Ghana, funeral (*'ayie'* in akan) is way of honoring the dead and to pay homage to the departed soul. During funerals, friends and families come together to pay their last respect to the dead. It is time for family reunion and time for people to visit home after long absence. Funeral is a celebration of life especially if the deceased lived to see old age, however, restriction of public gathering means all such traditional practices cannot continue (Kusi, 2018). The situation has created emotional and psychological distress because relatives are not able to pay their last respect and mourn their dead relatives as they ought to.

Furthermore, traditional festivals like “Akwasidae”, “Homowo”, “Apoo”, “Aboakyir”, “Kundum” and others could not be celebrated, paramount chiefs and sub-chiefs have given local and traditional orders to halt the celebration of these festivals in a way to support the fight against the pandemic. These festival seasons are periods where communities embark on developmental projects, raise funds to support local projects, make merry, and fraternize. Again, religious festivals such as Easter and Ramadan, which are normally marked by communal prayers, conventions, family reunions, visiting places of interests, and social activities could not be celebrated because of the corona virus outbreak. Likewise, wedding ceremonies are periods where partners are supported by their families, friends and well-wishers to contract marriages,

but due to the outbreak wedding attendance have been reformed with conditions for families who cannot wait for the lifting of restrictions to perform the ceremony with a maximum of 25 people and strict adherence to social distancing policy by the President. Lastly, the entertainment industry have been greatly affected. Musicians, songwriters, actors, night club and bar operators have had their businesses collapsing and many industry players losing their jobs.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Students are global citizens and critical agents of change in the world, nations and the communities they live in, therefore they must be assisted to learn, cultivate the habit of compassion and ensure safer and caring environment or atmosphere for learning so they can achieve their potentials. With this, the government, educational bodies or agencies, parents and all stakeholders should put necessary arrangements in place to promote the continuity of education.

The study therefore recommends the following:

1. On the online or virtual learning, lecturers, tutors and teachers should be motivated and taken through online training programs to ensure smooth operation of the online or virtual learning which has become the order of the day in our educational system. The training should focus on educational platforms and their usage, lectures and presentations and mode of assessment, to benefit both facilitators and learners.
2. Although the virtual education are ongoing in some institutions and stations, there should be partnership/collaboration between governments, educational agencies, institutions and the telecommunication agencies to reduce or offer free data to lecturers and students, create free to air learning platforms and telecast educational programmes on our television and radio station so to benefit all learners in the urban, peri-urban and rural areas.
3. For students who are preparing for BECE and WASSCE, The Ministry of Education and Ghana Education Service should consult an examination body in the country (WAEC), to organize a common local and agreed examination to help bridge the gap that will be created by COVID-19 in our promotional system when all restrictions are lifted and also ensuring proper social distancing and other precautionary measures while writing the examination.
4. Till the time the ban on all restrictions are lifted, all public/private schools from basic to tertiary should be fumigated or disinfected to create a healthy environment for learning.

When the ban is lifted for social gathering and for academic calendar to begin, the educational bodies, and the institutions should ensure to implement health education, address and provide psychological support and provide necessary assistance to the vulnerable students in the schools. The various institutions should also make sure to provide ‘Veronica’ buckets, soaps, tissues and dustbins at vantage areas in the schools and the community to keep up with the precautionary measures.

5. Most importantly, all teachers and students must be provided with face masks, and personal alcohol base hand sanitizers and if possible reduce the number of students in each class and dormitories to make way for social distancing. There is the need to implement shift system of education if the existing facilities make students overcrowded.
6. While at home, parents and caregivers should encourage their wards to study on their own in the home by providing the needed and necessary logistical assistance for effective learning (home teaching and learning).
7. Parents should revisit the indigenous learning thus, storytelling, family education, drama, oral histories, songs, gastronomy, hobby education, nutrition, and patriotic education to help students learn to improve cultural values and norms, and instill in student the patriotic behaviours.
8. For pupils at the basic schools, G.E.S should allow teachers to use the continuous assessment as a basis to promote them to the next level of their educational pursuit as done in Estonia and other country.

In Ghana education is a right not a privilege, therefore while observing the protocols in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic, all stakeholders in education must come on board to offer assistance that gear towards the promotion of education and should not see this period of break by the pandemic in education as stoppage but rather an avenue for educational innovation. Teachers are the torchbearers of education in the country and must be motivated to assist students in any form they can to make teaching a noble profession to die for.

As citizens, we must preach and spread hope not fear, for we believe this too shall pass (President’s address, 2020).

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