

IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE NIGERIAN CHILD: CASE STUDY OF PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN IN A NIGERIAN REGION

BY

¹OKAFOR, A. E., ²EZEALI, M.M., *³OBIJIOFOR, E.O. & ¹EKEOKWU, H.P

*Corresponding author: OBIJIOFOR, E.O.

1. Department of Education Foundations (Early Childhood Education), University of Nigeria, Nsukka
2. Department of Early Childhood Education, Federal College of Education Okene, Kogi State
3. Department of Early Childhood and Primary Education, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

ABSTRACT

The study was on impact of covid-19 pandemic on the Nigerian child: case study of primary school children in a Nigerian region. Two research questions and two hypotheses guided the study. Descriptive survey design was adopted for the study and was conducted in South East Nigeria. The population for the study consisted of 184 early childhood education lecturers in South East Nigeria. The total population was involved in the study since the population was manageable. A 20 item questionnaire was developed from literature and used to obtain data for the study. The questionnaire was validated by seven experts in early childhood education while the reliability yielded 0.79 coefficient using Cronbach Alpha. The questionnaire was administered on 184 respondents and there was 91% return rate which equates to 168 early childhood education lecturers. Mean and standard deviation was used to answer the research questions while t-test statistics was used to test the hypothesis at 0.05 level of probability. The findings revealed 10 impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on the educational activities and 10 impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of primary school children in the area. Based on the findings, it was recommended among others that; In as much as face to face meeting is important in learning for young learners, the government for the time being should provide the resources such as stable electricity and ICT facilities required for interactions between the pupils and their teachers; and care givers should encourage children to continue to play and socialize with others, even if only within the family when advised to restrict social contact.

Keywords: COVID-19, Pandemic, South East Nigeria, Primary School Children

Introduction

The whole world is currently being ravaged by the outbreak of corona virus disease (COVID-19). It is caused by the outbreak of the novel severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-Cov-2) (Shereen, Khan, Kazmi, Bashir & Siddique, 2020). The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the new wave of infection with predominantly respiratory system symptoms a pandemic on March 11th, 2020 with most countries reporting increasing numbers of morbidity and mortality rates (Cucinotta, & Vanelli, 2020). According to the WHO (2020), the major drivers of the outbreak appears are both symptomatic and asymptomatic persons infected with SARS-COV-2 from whom the virus can spread via droplets or direct contact with contaminated surfaces. As a result, this has led to the enforced lockdown of many countries in the world. In combating the virus, the WHO recommended a multi-prong preventive approach that includes physical distancing, hand washing with soap and water for at least 20 seconds and respiratory etiquette as mitigating measures in addition to the lockdown to restrict on-going community spread of the virus (Whitworth, 2020). The resultant effects of these stringent public health actions have led to enormous economic losses, disruption of the usual physical and social contacts, massive loss of jobs and means of livelihood as well as increase in mental health issues (Torales, Higgins, Castaldelli-Maia & Ventriglio, 2020). However, the effects of COVID-19 on the wellbeing of children across Africa are of concern but seem to lag.

Africa at the beginning of the pandemic seemed to be the last continent hit by the pandemic. Unfortunately, while the reports of new cases and death toll (epidemic curve) appears to be flattening and decreasing in other continents of the world (Torales, Higgins, Castaldelli-Maia & Ventrigli, 2020), this cannot be said among the countries in Africa especially Sub-Saharan Africa, where testing for COVID-19 is still a major challenge and healthcare facilities are in deplorable states (Paintsil, 2020). Reports from China and other western countries demonstrate that children are largely unaffected and even for those diagnosed COVID-19 positive, severe disease and death is very unusual (Dong, Mo & Hu, 2020). However, children in developing countries in Sub-Saharan Africa such as Nigeria are undeniably caught in the predicament of COVID-19 especially in the aspect of their mental health and educational pursuits.

Nigeria is less likely to consider the impact of COVID-19 on children early in the course of the response, as has been noted in earlier outbreaks (Kalu, 2020). Presently, with the rising incidence of newly diagnosed cases in Nigeria, the well-being of children could pose a challenge as its leaders grapple with the most pressing needs which include food insecurity and economic burden of the pandemic (African Development Bank Group, 2020). The lockdown, therefore, makes primary school children in these resource-limited settings and their families alike the hardest hit by both the virus and the ongoing response especially in the aspect of their education and mental wellbeing (United Nations, 2010).

Corona virus pandemic has affected the educational sector. According to the United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) (2020), about 1.6 billion children and young people are unable to be physically present at school due to the temporary closure of schools that have impacted over 91 percent of students globally. Although some schools can endeavour to provide online classes, this is unavailable to the majority of children and young people in Nigeria (Garba-Yola, 2020). Since school closures, many families in Nigeria have found themselves unable to help their wards keep track with their education. Although learning platforms have been launched by UNICEF and Microsoft to assist children continue their education at home in other parts of the world, this is largely unavailable in resource-limited settings like Nigeria where many pupils lack computers or high-speed internet services, making a considerable number of families unable to afford or sustain its use as a means for educating their wards (UNICEF, 2020). Although some state governments in Nigeria, fully aware of these challenges have opted to have daily live teaching sessions on radio and television at scheduled time intervals in the entire country, there are many more children in semi-urban and rural areas without access to internet services and very limited electric power supply. These children are more disadvantaged because they have no access to formal education in this period. The impact of COVID-19 on education, especially in families in Nigeria that lack an access to online facilities could also affect the mental health of primary school children.

It is plausible that prolonged physical and social distancing, lockdowns and closure of schools could harm the psychosocial wellbeing of children and young adults. Mental problems ranging from stress to anxiety, depression and sleep disorders have been reported in children in epidemic settings (Oboh & Oboh, 2020). Children who also suffer from the effects of an abusive parent or guardian regularly because there is nowhere to seek help and avenues to let out their frustrations are very limited due to the closure of schools. What happens to children who eventually become COVID-19 positive, get treated, recover and are reintegrated back into their schools and the society remains to be seen. Although it seems to be a general consensus that COVID-19 has an impact on primary school children, no empirical study to the knowledge of the research has been done on impact of COVID-19 on primary school children in South East Nigeria.

The South East region is one of the six geopolitical zones in Nigeria. The region consists of the following states; Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo. The indigenes in this region are predominantly Igbo people. Many of the indigenes are involved in trading or civil service and have their children in primary schools. According to Federal Republic of Nigeria (2013) in its National Policy on Education, primary education is the education given to children aged 6 to 12 years. Egbosi and Offor (2016) stressed that whatever happens at this level can either make or mar the entire education enterprise. The aims of primary education in Nigeria are to inculcate permanent, numeracy and the ability to communicate effectively, lay a sound basis for scientific, critical and reflective thinking; as well as promote patriotism, fairness, understanding and national unity (FRN, 2013). Unfortunately, the aims of primary education might not be achieved if the Government continues the closure of primary school. On March 20, 2020, the Federal Government ordered the closure of all schools in the country and six months later, this is still the case. The closure of schools would likely have an impact on the daily activities of children. It is against this backdrop that the current study sought to ascertain the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on primary school children in South-East Nigeria

Purpose of the Study

The general purpose of the study was to ascertain the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the Nigerian child: Case study of primary school children in a South East Nigeria. Specifically, the study sought to ascertain;

- i. The impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on the educational activities of primary school children in South East Nigeria
- ii. The impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of primary school children in South East Nigeria

Research Questions

- i. What are the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on the educational activities of primary school children in South East Nigeria?
- ii. What are the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of primary school children in South East Nigeria?

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance;

- i. There is no significant difference between the mean responses of experienced (> 5 years of experience) and inexperienced (≤ 5 years of experience) early childhood education lecturers on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the educational activities of primary school children in South East Nigeria
- ii. There is no significant difference between the mean responses of experienced (> 5 years of experience) and inexperienced (≤ 5 years of experience) early childhood education lecturers on impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of primary school children in South East Nigeria

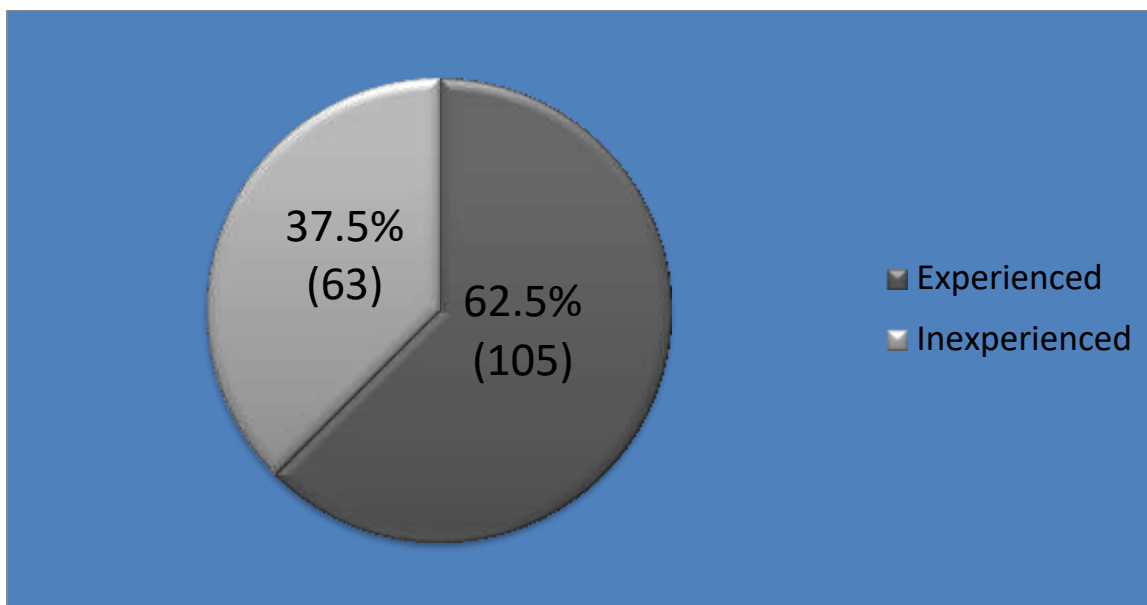
Methodology

Descriptive survey design was adopted for the study and was conducted in South East Nigeria. The population for the study consisted of 184 early childhood education lecturers in South East Nigeria. The total population was involved in the study since the population was manageable. A 20 item questionnaire was developed from literature and used to obtain data for the study. The response for the questionnaire was Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD). The questionnaire was face validated by three experts from the Department of Early Childhood Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka and four experts from the Department of Early Childhood and Primary Education, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. Cronbach alpha was used to determine internal consistency of the questionnaire which yielded a coefficient of 0.79. The questionnaire was administered on 184 respondents and there was 91% return rate which equates to 168 early childhood education lecturers.

Mean and standard deviation was used to answer the research questions while t-test statistics was used to test the hypothesis at 0.05 level of probability. Mean cut off point of 2.50 was applied in decision making. Hence, any item with mean value of 2.50 or above was interpreted as agreed while items with mean less than 2.50 were interpreted as disagree. For the null hypotheses, they were upheld if the calculated level of significance was greater than 0.05 or otherwise rejected.

Results

Figure 1: Distribution of Respondents Based on Experience



N = 100% (168)

Figure 1 revealed that out of 168 respondents, 105 (62.5%) of the population were experienced because they had experience greater than 5 years. The remaining 63(37.5%) were in experienced because they have experience equal or less than 5 years.

Research Question 1: What are the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on the educational activities of primary school children?

Ho 1: There is no significant difference between the mean responses of experienced (> 5 years of experience) and inexperienced (≤ 5 years of experience) early childhood education lecturers on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the educational activities of primary school children

Table 1: Mean ratings/t-test Analysis of Exp. and Inexp. Lecturers on Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic on Educational Activities of Children

N= 168 (105 Exp & 63 Inexp Lecturers)									
S/N	ITEMS	G \bar{X}	SD	\bar{X}_1	SD ₁	\bar{X}_2	SD ₂	Sig	Dec
1	Pupils have the tendency to be forgetful due to no school	3.04	0.99	3.14	0.94	2.88	1.09	0.24	NS*
2	Pupils find it difficult keeping track with their education	3.22	0.93	3.22	0.97	3.24	0.89	0.94	NS*
3	Pupils find it difficult studying due to distractions like cartons	3.60	0.75	3.51	0.82	3.76	0.61	0.12	NS*
4	The reading abilities of children seems to be reduced	3.34	0.97	3.17	1.07	3.64	0.70	0.22	NS*
5	Reduction in numeracy and mathematics abilities	2.86	0.98	2.70	0.95	3.03	1.03	0.21	NS*
6	Children without access to online gadgets lack the teacher-figure guide they need	2.81	1.08	2.73	1.06	2.97	1.11	0.30	NS*
7	Deepened educational inequality due to digital divide	2.81	1.05	2.85	0.96	2.76	1.21	0.71	NS*
8	Closure of schools could have long term effects on their academic capabilities	3.45	0.87	3.59	0.79	3.21	0.95	0.06	NS*
9	Lack of group discussions with								

	classmates could hinder working within a group in the long term	3.49	0.80	3.47	0.82	3.53	0.79	0.75	NS*
10	Closure of schools would hamper children from covering the curriculum	3.57	0.76	3.60	0.79	3.53	0.71	0.70	NS*

Key: N= Population, Dec = Decision, Exp = Experienced Early Childhood Lecturers; Inexp = Inexperienced Early Childhood Lecturers; \bar{X} = Grand mean, \bar{X}_1 = Mean of Exp, \bar{X}_2 = Mean of Inexp, SD_1 = standard Deviation of Exp, SD_2 = standard deviation of Inexp, S = Significant, NS= Not significant, * = Agree

The findings from Table 1 revealed that the values of the grand mean were within the real limits of 2.81 – 3.60 which were all above 2.50 indicating that the respondents agree that the items were the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on the educational activities of primary school children. Furthermore, the data presented in Table 1 showed that the calculated level of significance of all 10 items ranged from 0.06 – 0.75. Each of the significant level was greater than 0.05 indicating that there was no significant difference between the mean responses of experienced and inexperienced early childhood education lecturers on the impact of corona virus pandemic on the educational activities of primary school children.

Research Question 2: What are the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of primary school children?

Ho 2: There is no significant difference between the mean responses of experienced (> 5 years of experience) and inexperienced (\leq 5 years of experience) early childhood education lecturers on impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of primary school children

Table 2: Mean ratings/t-test Analysis of Exp. and Inexp. Lecturers on Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic on Mental Health of Children

		N= 168 (105 Exp & 63 Inexp Lecturers)							
S/N	ITEMS	G \bar{X}	SD	\bar{X}_1	SD_1	\bar{X}_2	SD_2	Sig	Dec
1	Prolonged physical and social distance could lead to stress among children	3.74	0.61	3.74	0.58	3.74	0.67	0.94	NS*
2	News about individuals infected with COVID-19 could lead to anxiety among pupils	2.92	0.94	2.86	0.92	3.03	0.97	0.42	NS*
3	Death of COVID-19 patients could lead to fear	3.46	0.80	3.61	0.67	3.20	0.95	0.07	NS*
4	Lockdown and failure to interact with friends could lead to depression	3.60	0.79	3.60	0.77	3.62	0.78	0.88	NS*
5	Sleep disorders among children due to lockdown	3.52	0.75	3.49	0.82	3.59	0.61	0.55	NS*
6	Failure to concentrate during online lessons	3.20	0.77	3.19	0.80	3.21	0.73	0.91	NS*
7	Increased juvenile delinquency due to boredom	2.82	0.95	2.80	0.96	2.88	0.94	0.68	NS*
8	Feeling of sadness because they are unable to see their friends	3.62	0.61	3.62	0.64	3.61	0.55	0.94	NS*
9	Fear of contracting COVID-19 makes children feel unease	3.44	0.74	3.44	0.75	3.44	0.75	0.99	NS*
10	Grief and mourning of loved ones could lead to post traumatic stress disorder	3.63	0.57	3.58	0.62	3.74	0.45	0.19	NS*

The findings from Table 2 revealed that the values of the grand mean were within the real limits of 2.82 – 3.74 which were all above 2.50 indicating that the respondents agree that all the items were the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of primary school children. Furthermore, the data presented in Table 2 showed that the calculated level of significance of all 10 items ranged from 0.07 – 0.99. Each of the significant level was greater than 0.05 indicating that there was no significant difference between the mean responses of experienced and inexperienced early childhood education lecturers on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of primary school children.

Discussion of the Findings

The findings on the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on the educational activities of primary school children revealed that COVID-19 affects the educational activities of primary school children in the following ways; pupils have the tendency to be forgetful due to no school, pupils find it difficult keeping track with their education, pupils find it difficult studying due to distractions like cartons, the reading abilities of children seems to be reduced, reduction in numeracy and mathematics abilities, children without access to online gadgets lack the teacher-figure guide they need, deepened educational inequality due to digital divide, closure of schools could have long term effects on their academic capabilities, lack of group discussions with classmates could hinder working within a group in the long term and closure of schools would hamper children from covering the curriculum. The findings are in line with Oboh and Oboh (2020) who found out that lockdown could lead to reduction in numeracy and mathematics abilities. The findings also agree with Cucinotta and Vanelli (2020) who found that COVID-19 could lead to deepened educational inequality due to digital divide. The findings further revealed that there was no significant difference between the mean responses of experienced and inexperienced early childhood education lecturers on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the educational activities of primary school children. The no significant difference in opinions could be because both groups of respondents have the same academic background.

The findings on the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of primary school children revealed that COVID-19 affects the mental health of primary school children in the following ways; prolonged physical and social distance could lead to stress among children, death of COVID-19 patients could lead to fear, lockdown and failure to interact with friends could lead to depression, sleep disorders among children due to lockdown, failure to concentrate during online lessons, increased juvenile delinquency due to boredom, feeling of sadness because they are unable to see their friends, fear of contracting COVID-19 makes children feel unease and grief/mourning of loved ones could lead to post traumatic stress disorder. The findings are supported by Kalu (2020) who found that lockdown due to COVID-19 pandemic could lead to stress and frustration among primary school children. The findings are also in cognizance with World Health Organization (2020) who found that fear of contracting COVID-19 makes children feel unease. The findings also revealed that there was no significant difference between the mean responses of experienced and inexperienced early childhood education lecturers on the impact of corona virus pandemic on the mental health of primary school children. The no significant difference in opinions could be because both groups of respondents have the same academic background.

Conclusion

COVID-19 has changed numerous things in today's world. Among the prominent changes is the need for social and physical distancing to curtail the spread of the virus. This has led to the closure of schools all over the world including primary schools in South East Nigeria. This closure has impacts on the educational activities and mental health of primary school children in South East Nigeria. The impacts on educational activities of primary school children among others include; pupils have the tendency to be forgetful due to no school, pupils find it difficult keeping track with their education, pupils find it difficult studying due to distractions like cartons and the reading abilities of children seems to be reduced. The impacts on mental health among others include; death of COVID-19 patients could lead to fear, lockdown and failure to interact with friends could lead to depression, sleep disorders among children due to lockdown and failure to concentrate during online lessons. These are negative effects and if allowed for too long, they might have long term consequences for primary school children. In order to mitigate these negative effects, some recommendations are made.

Recommendations

1. In as much as face to face contact with teachers is important in learning for young learners; the government for the time being should provide the resources such as stable electricity and ICT facilities required for interactions between the pupils and their teachers through the digital space. This will help primary school children keep up with their school programme especially in the areas of comprehension and numeracy skills
2. Care givers should encourage children to continue to play and socialize with others, even if only within the family when advised to restrict social contact. This would help relieve stress among the children
3. Parents and guardians should maintain familiar routines in daily life as much as possible, or create new routines, especially if children must stay at home. Engaging children in age-appropriate activities including activities for their learning keeps them occupied which could eliminate factors like depression

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- African Development Bank Group (2020). *Nigeria economic outlook*. 2020. Author
- Cucinotta, D., & Vanelli, M. (2020). WHO declares COVID-19 a pandemic. *ACTA Biomed*, 19 (1), 157-160.
- Dong, Y., Mo, X., & Hu, Y. (2020). Epidemiology of COVID-19 among children in China. *Journal of Pediatrics*, 145(6), 202 - 2070.
- Egbosi, I.B. & Offor, U.I. (2016). Application of access principle to primary education management in Anambra State of Nigeria. *Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 6(4), 43-50.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria (2013). *National policy on education*. Lagos: NERDC Press.
- Garba-Yola T. (2020). Due to COVID-19, Adamawa unable to pay March salary, N32, 000 minimum wage Official. *Nigerian Tribune*. 2020.
- Kalu B. (2020). COVID-19 in Nigeria: a disease of hunger. *Lancet Respiratory Medicine*, 8(6), 556-557.
- Lee J. (2020). Mental health effects of school closures during COVID-19. *Lancet Child Adolescent Health*, 4(6), 421 - 428.
- Oboh, S.O., & Oboh, O.J. (2020). COVID-19 pandemic outbreak and government policy on educational infrastructure in Nigeria. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 8(2), 1010 -1019. DIP:18.01.146/20200802, DOI:10.25215/0802.146
- Ozili, P. (2020). *Covid-19 pandemic and economic crisis: The Nigerian experience and structural causes*.
- Paintsil, E. (2020). COVID-19 threatens health systems in sub-Saharan Africa: the eye of the crocodile. *Journal of Clinical Invest*, 130(6), 2741 - 2744.
- Shereen, M. A., Khan S., Kazmi, A., Bashir, N. & Siddique, R. (2020). COVID-19 infection: Origin, transmission, and characteristics of human coronaviruses. *Journal of Advanced Research*, 16; 91-98.
- Torales, J. Higgins, M., Castaldelli-Maia, J. M. & Ventriglio, A. (2020). The outbreak of COVID-19 coronavirus and its impact on global mental health. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 66(4), 317 - 320.
- UNICEF (2020) *UNICEF and Microsoft launch global learning platform to help address COVID-19 education crisis*. Author

United Nations (2020). Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on children. United Nations, 2020:1-17..

Whitworth, J. (2020). COVID-19: A fast evolving pandemic. *Trans R Soc Trop Med Hyg*, 14(4), 241 - 248.

World Health Organization (2020). *Modes of transmission of virus causing COVID-19: Implications for IPC precaution recommendations*. Scientific brief, 2020.

