

Preparing Primary Schools in Uganda for the ‘Next New Normal’ Using a Comparison to India

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Abstract

The corona virus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic caused the postponement of interpersonal educational activities amongst primary school students in Uganda, especially after-school activities in the fields of vocational training and sports. This virus was first identified in Entebbe, three days after the first national lockdown was enforced on 20th March 2020. The lockdown banned all gatherings and travel in order to minimize the spread of this highly contagious virus. This lockdown forced all educational institutions to close for approximately 83 weeks/22 months. They were allowed to re-open on 10th January 2022. The roughly two-year study suspension disrupted students’ progress but the most adversely affected person was the rural primary school girl. In India, the first national lockdown was enforced on 22nd March 2020 and ran for 81 weeks/22 months. It was lifted on 18th April but subsequent lockdowns were enforced because of the virus resurgence until 31st December, 2021. Both countries had similar lockdown periods but dissimilar challenges and outcomes. During that lockdown, educational institutions in Uganda and India tried to use or used innovative virtual learning platforms to teach, examine and promote their students virtually because physical contact was banned. These experiences and many others forced and enlightened both countries to perform their regular tasks/work under the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. It was dubbed as ‘the new normal’.

Keywords: Uganda, India, national lockdown, primary schools, after-school activities, open distance learning platforms

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1. Introduction

Uganda is a young country with 70% of its total population (48 million) at the median age of 16.7 years. The current male to female ratio is 97:100 indicating that there are slightly more girls/women than boys/men [1]. In August 2019, Uganda Bureau of Standards (UBOS) deduced that 10.78 million students were studying in primary schools [2]. From March 2020 to January 2022, primary school students had increased to 15 million. They were prevented from studying at school and were forced to stay at home by the government because of the COVID-19 pandemic [3]. The directive adversely affected the rural girl student especially the ones studying and excelling in after-school-activities like sports, music, culinary courses, art and crafts. Their parents and guardians were not skilled in teaching these lessons and majority of the parents do not have or cannot afford the art and industrial design materials.

India has a much bigger and slightly older population whereby 67.4% of its national population (1.4 billion) is at a median age of 28.4 years. It has the second largest world population with male to female ratio at 52:48 [4]. Students were also forced to study at home because of the lockdown, adversely affecting the poor and disadvantaged in urban and rural communities.

2. Research Method

This will be a qualitative research study whereby I will highlight the challenges that primary schools faced due to the 83-week/22 months lockdown enforced by the Ugandan and Indian governments because of the COVID-19 pandemic. I will give for recommendations how Ugandan schools may prepare for future pandemics using ICT technology and after-school activities in comparison to Indian cases. Hopefully, findings from this paper will instigate further research on how primary schools, under the approval and guidance of the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) policies, can adjust to the ‘new-normal’ and enable students to continue studies in future national lockdowns.

3. Ugandan Primary Schools Caught Off-guard During the National Lockdown

Primary schools were caught off-guard during the lockdown. They failed to educate their students during and after the almost 2-year lockdown because they made several systematic errors:

3.1. Heavy dependence on external funding i.e., government grants and tuition fees, as their main source of income.

By August 2019, 10.78 million students were in primary schools, 1.95 million in secondary schools and 2.05 million in pre-primary schools. All government schools are fully funded by government grants or are heavily subsidized. According to the 2008 Education Act Section 10 recommendations, there was a monitoring grant of UGX 2.3 billion to monitor and strengthen early childhood development (ECD) for pre-primary and primary schools [5]. Most private primary schools' funding are sourced mainly through tuition, uniform and examination fees. Due to the national lockdown, both government and private primary schools were at standstill because their sources of income were suspended. An estimated 3,500 schools were closed for good. The schools that generated income the pandemic resorted to after-school vocational activities e.g., carpentry, masonry, brick laying as well as other income generating activities e.g., farming, restaurant and hotel management, mining, trading activities like shop keeping, street vending and 'boda' (motorcycle taxi) services to keep afloat.

3.2. Little to no access to open distance learning platforms (ODLPs).

There were few investments in ODLPs for primary school children. These include some primary schools and universities in and around the capital city, Kampala. This is because the schools and pupils' parents had invested in laptops or desktops and affordable data bundles. Some rural schools tried to use mobile phone devices and services to conduct ODLP during the lockdown but the students and parents could not work out/with the technology and rejected and abandoned it [6].

3.3. Little to no after-school facilities that support vocational and talent development were implemented in rural primary schools.

Most schools consist of six section blocks – the teaching blocks, the administrative blocks, the kitchen, dormitories, showers and the toilets. There may be a patch of grass or open space in or around the schools for physical recreation during study breaks. Few to no crafts, sports, culinary courses, visual arts, performing arts, trade and farming training facilities were created or made available for after-school activities yet these same skills were used by these pupils and some of their teachers to survive the pandemic and generate personal and 'survival income. [7]. The absence of these facilities encouraged rural primary school children to pick up vices like drinking alcohol, taking drugs, gambling and prostitution. Some girl students were forced into early marriages and motherhood since they were unsupervised and sitting at home. Between March 2020 and June last year, UNICEF reported a 22.5% jump in pregnancies among girls aged 10 to 24, and a 30% dropout rate due to early pregnancies, child marriages and child labour by that was released to them by the National Planning Authority survey [8].

3.4. Schools were left in disrepair because of corruption.

Many rural schools deteriorated because of the omnipresent corruption culture that is rooted in centuries of foreign aid culture to Uganda. In the pre-colonial era of the late 17th century, the Buganda kingdom was a complex feudal society that had one king (Kabaka Daudi Chua) and 12 feudal lords. Together, they managed the educational, constructional, medical and farming facilities within the kingdom. The Baganda located in central Uganda thrived in agricultural and metallic products as the Bahima from the 'Kitwara' kingdom from South Western Uganda were prominent cattle keepers. Our ancestors were taught how to harness the natural resources for community sustenance, development and trade amongst neighboring kingdoms. They were also taught to replenish the earth after harvests so as to encourage agricultural longevity through activities like storage, irrigation as well as livestock reproduction. When the British colonizers made Uganda its protectorate from 1894 to 1962, it 'miseducated' (misdirected education) our ancestors to harness the available resources primarily for exportation, instead of community, educational and environmental development [9].

Large-scale cash crop production, the East African railway and the Owen Falls hydro-electric dam were loaned by the British protectorate/foreign aid to Uganda yet Ugandan monarchs were not aware nor in agreement to taking this loan. The racist maltreatment of the African workforce by the British officials and their henchmen created resentment for the protectorate infrastructure and personnel and British owned businesses were labeled as 'their things, not ours'. On the opposite side, in the British failed to fully assimilate the Africans into their culture. The destruction and looting of Ugandan cultural habits, relics and enterprises that were viewed by the British colonizers as ways to 'civilize native Ugandans from their primitive ways'. These conscripted and parasitic colonial loans created economic dependency culture of Uganda and Africa to Europe. Furthermore, these loans had high interest rates causing the situation of highly indebted countries today [10, 11].

In the EU and North American governments' defense/response, these donors claim that there are some corrupt local government, administrative and school authorities have completely stolen or underfunded education projects before and during the lockdown because they viewed them as not 'our problem but theirs'. For example, South Sudan spent a mere 0.85% of donation in their education sector in 2016 and 40 Kenyan education officials

stole 54 million USD from the UK DFID funds allocated for infrastructure and school supplies in 2011. Several school managers neglected, damaged and looted school property before and during the lockdown with the reason being they were not given funds to maintain them. These negative attitudes caused disruptions in after-school activities that would have provided and promoted creative, vocational and ODLPs skills [12].

3.5. Failed implementation policies between educational pedagogies, domestic value chains (DVCs) and global value chains (GVCs).

Jinja, an industrial city in Uganda, was once projected to be a major apparel production hub in 2004 and was even baptized the ‘future Detroit of Central Africa’ by the American Growth Opportunity in Africa (AGOA) act. Instead, the AGOA act led to the importation of used/second-hand clothes and shoes (dumping) from the US instead of the production and improvement of local apparel small and large-scale industries and markets. The Buy Uganda, Build Uganda (BUBU) products are not fully distributed nationally and are at times projected as inferior and/or fake yet these domestic apparel industries made seasonal profits during the lockdown by manufacturing quality PPEs (personal protective equipment) like face masks, cleaning materials and gowns. DVCs policies need to be strengthened so that the market can adequately benefit from BUBU products [13].

3.6. Poor timing.

Most primary schools assumed that the lockdown would be a few months instead of two calendar years. Some students returned to the same classes after the 83-week/22 months’ lockdown yet they had outgrown them. Other schools automatically promoted their students to higher classes to compensate for the lost time. Many of them failed to re-adjust and adapt to their classes because they had forgotten their lessons or could not grasp their new/higher classes’ information and demands. They had also ‘tasted money’ and had ‘outgrown their uniforms’ and preferred or were forced to drop out. Some head teachers and teachers tried to counsel some students back to school but it was too little, too late [14].

4. Indian Primary Schools were Better Prepared for their National Lockdown

4.1. Bigger population, bigger problems.

India’s rural to urban population ratio is currently 64:36 indicating majority students are poor and heavily depend on government educational facilities. India had 71.3 million pre-primary school-goers, 124 million primary school pupils, 177 million secondary school students and 122 million tertiary students listed in the AISHE web portal in 2020.

One in four students were unable to attend online classes because they could not afford a laptop, desktop, smartphone or tablet during the pandemic. It meant that 31 million primary school and 44 million students stopped studying for almost two years yet they were the most vulnerable group because they were poor. Some students with computers still failed to study or irregularly attended the open-distance platforms because lack of free or cheap internet services.

The students that successfully studied during the pandemic progressed in some theoretical courses because their course units and study materials were digitally accessible like the Bachelors of Arts in Business Administration and Masters in Business Administration. Practical courses were hard to conduct online as well as complex subjects. University students were able to benefit the most because they were able study two degrees during the lockdown.

Under the supervision of its national boards of education (CBSE) and NCERT, the National Repository of Open Educational Resources (NROER) portal, the Indian ODLP offered a plethora of resources for students and teachers to study and teach in numerous languages with books, interactive modules, videos and a variety of STEM-based games.

The Indian government began implementing ODLPs after the 2003 Bird Flu caused by the H1N1 virus that heavily affected them [15].

5. Recommendations

Since another pandemic or global challenge will probably ravage Uganda again, the following recommendations are made in order to prepare for it;

5.1. Emergency plans for the next 80-100 years to a century as medical scientists that global pandemics often occur in this sequence. The last one was the Spanish Flu/Great Influenza pandemic that began in February 1918 and ended in April 1920. It is said to have claimed 25-50 million lives and infected 500 million people.

5.2. Rural schools need to create alternate income-generating resources to reduce dependency on the staples like tuition fees and government grants. It became clear that it is detrimental for primary school authorities to fully depend on the sources to fund their workforce and activities. These income-generating activities will also enlighten students about financial literacy and stewardship that is urgently needed to eradicate personal poverty [16].

5.3. Introduction of ODLPs to support the in-person lessons in daily and after-school activities in rural primary schools should be started. The job market has modernized because of the ICT and some of these jobs are taken by Ugandans and foreigners who studied outside the current primary school curriculum. These activities also build social capital/soft power skills like teamwork, work pressure management and personal branding. Several private primary schools that introduced ODLP activities have seen a marked improvement in their students' cognition and confidence compared to the ones attending the current curriculum. These private schools also charge a pretty penny and/or are funded by NGOs to run these after-school activities [17].

5.4. Introduction of mobile phone-based activities in primary schools that cannot afford computers. The MoES and primary schools need to embrace mobile and smartphone technology soon so that they teach some online lessons to their students and survive the next epidemic. Smartphones and social media made virtual classrooms for primary schools in the Western and Eastern hemispheres, after the mid-2000s bird flu outbreaks. Mobile/smartphone technology available and price-friendly therefore students should harness it positively and constructively at an early age so as to navigate and manage it safely or risk being manipulated by it [17].

6. Conclusion

Global pandemics and disasters are unavoidable and unstoppable because they are some of the ways that mother earth resets herself. Ugandan primary schools and other educational institutions need to prepare ODLPs emergency response and rehabilitation systems for themselves and their students to ensure their services continue to work, no matter how dire the situations may present themselves.

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