

## Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on education sector in Ghana: Learner challenges and mitigations



### Research article



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**Adu David Tuffour<sup>1</sup>, Sophia Efua Cobbinah<sup>2</sup>, Brefo Benjamin<sup>3</sup> & Florence Otibua<sup>4</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Languages, Atebubu College of Education, Ghana

<sup>2</sup>Department of Languages, Komenda College of Education, Ghana

<sup>3</sup>Department of Languages, Agona S. D. A. College of Education, Ghana,

<sup>4</sup>Department of Languages, Offinso College of Education, Ghana

Correspondence: [adutuffour david@gmail.com](mailto:adutuffour david@gmail.com)

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2561-0617>

#### Abstract

In Ghana and the rest of the world, Covid-19 has negatively impacted economic growth with the poor, vulnerable, and marginalized households who depend on informal employment and businesses to fend for their children feeling the great impact. The pandemic has severely compromised their ability to finance school-related expenditures such as school kits, meals, and learning materials. With the adoption of remote teaching by the Government to facilitate distance learning and online education delivered through the internet, television, and radios, students from poor backgrounds face a great challenge as they can't access these mediums of learning and this leads to inequality in access and quality of education. Hence, it is necessary to look through these challenges to ensure there is continuous access to the provision of quality, inclusive and equitable education during and after the pandemic. Effective application of the suggested interventions by stakeholders and education managers will ensure uninterrupted learning in educational institutions in the future. This is the main idea to be tackled in this article. Since this is a theoretical review, it will depend on a review of secondary data material to examine and discuss the challenges and mitigations for COVID-19 in the Ghanaian education sector, in line with the learners. The theoretical review is guided by the Classical Liberal Theory of Equal Opportunities advocated by Sherman and Wood and the theory of justice and fairness advanced by Rawls John.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, inclusive education, mitigation, online education, pandemic

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### Public Interest Statement

Following the closure of learning institutions in Ghana due to COVID-19, the education sector is seriously impacted as several learners stay at home for an unspecified period. The disturbances affect many countries but the main impacts are felt by the underprivileged boys and girls who live in hard-to-reach areas, pockets of poverty in rural areas, urban informal settlements, refugees, and IDPs and thereby it is necessary to underpin these problems and mitigate the distribution of equitable, inclusive, relevant and quality education, research and training that enhances all-time learning opportunities for all.

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### Introduction

Globally, research, education, and training play a major role in national socio-economic transformation. In light of this, the Government of Ghana like other governments world-wide appreciates the fact that training and education of all individuals are important for the eradication of poverty and economic growth. For a country to achieve national development goals, quality education is key for the realization of the citizen development requirements of an economy that is transforming faster. On the other hand, major problems arise in facilitating and ensuring quality, equity, and relevance in education and training. The Corona Virus pandemic outbreaks globally in the year 2019/2020 is the more recent challenge in the sector of education.

The COVID-19 virus has affected the education sector globally, resulting in the near-complete closures of schools, colleges, and universities. As of 26th April 2020, about 1.8 billion students were affected owing to institutional closures in reaction to the pandemic. As per UNESCO monitoring, one hundred and eighty-nine states had affected nationwide cessations and five had affected local closures, affecting approximately ninth eight percent of the world's learner population. On 23rd March 2020, Cambridge International Examinations (CIE) gave brief shelving of Cambridge O Level, Cambridge International AS & A Level, Cambridge IGCSE, Cambridge AICE Diploma, and Cambridge Pre-U exams for the May/June 2020 series across all states. International Baccalaureate examinations were also suspended (UNESCO, 2020).

The closure of institutions affects learners, instructors, households, and also society and the economy. Some of the economic and social issues that have emerged as a result of institutional cessations in reaction to coronavirus include homelessness and food insecurity, digital learning, disability services, and healthcare. The underprivileged children are more susceptible to the impacts leading to disrupted learning, childcare challenges, nutritional challenges, and resultant financial cost implication to households who could not work.

The COVID-19 is a disease that is triggered by a novel strain of coronavirus which is a group of viruses that infects human beings. The coronavirus is spread through coughing droplets and close interaction of individuals with an infected person. The symptoms of the disease include fever, cough, shortness of breath, and other cold-like symptoms. According to (World Health Organization 2020), students are at high risk of being infected or affecting others because of their closeness with other learners and the teachers.

The virus originated in China with the first case detected in December 2019. China had reported 4636 deaths and 83,878 infected cases. Coronavirus was declared by World Health Organization on 30th January 2020, as a Public Health Emergency of Global Concern. Thereafter, the virus has widely

spread all over the world with immediate and long term social economic effects on national economies and their citizens. In Africa, the first COVID19 cases were reported by the beginning of February 2020. As at 28th April 2020, Africa had reported 33,389 cases. South Africa had reported 4,793 infected cases, 90 deaths, and 1,473 recoveries. Egypt had reported 4,782, infections, 337 deaths, and 1,236 recoveries. Ghana had reported 1,550 infections, 11 deaths, and 155 recoveries. Nigeria had reported 1,337 infections, 40 deaths, and 255 recoveries. Tanzania reported 299 infections, 10 deaths, and 48 recoveries. Uganda had 79 infected cases, 0 deaths, and 47 recoveries while Rwanda had 207 infections, 0 deaths, and 93 recoveries (Nation Media Newsplex Team, April 29th, 2020).

The COVID19 has since continued to spread across the world with immediate and long term social economic effects on national economies and their individual citizens as already underscored. The pandemic has interfered with the learning activities of more than 1.7 billion learners across the world. A large number of children will be orphaned due to the rise in the global death toll from the pandemic. The closure of schools and businesses has led to several problems such as widespread job and income losses, physical and psychological health risks, isolation, and economic vulnerability (Olingo, 2020).

## Literature Review

### Social-economic impact of Covid-19

Several studies have looked at the impact of COVID-19 on job losses (Adams-Prassl et al., 2020). The high level of unemployment observed in the US is due to lockdown (Rojas et al., 2020). Accounting for cross-state variation in the business closure timing and stay-at-home mandates in the US, Gupta et al. (2020) discover that the rate of employment in the US falls by about 1.7 percentage points for every extra 10 days that a state experienced a stay-at-home mandate during the period March 12 - April 12. According to Coibion et al. (2020a) the unemployment/job loss in the US is more severe than one might judge based on the rise in unemployment insurance (UI) claims, which is to be expected given the low coverage rate for UI regimes in the US. They also calculate a severe fall in the labor participation rate in the long run accompanied by an increase in “discouraged workers”. This might be due to the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on the older population. Aum et al. (2020a) find that an increase in infections leads to a drop in local employment in the absence of lockdowns in South Korea, where there were no government-mandated lockdowns. This number increased for countries such as the US and the UK where mandatory lockdown measures were imposed.

Adams-Prassl et al. (2020) researched the inequality in job/income losses in relation to the type of job and individual characteristics for the US and the UK. He discovered that employees who were not capable of working from home were at higher risk of losing their jobs. The study also reveals that young individuals and those without university degrees were more susceptible to experience drops in their earnings. According to Yasenov (2020), lower education level workers, immigrants, and younger adults do tasks that are less likely to be performed at home. Also, in line with Alstadsæter et al. (2020), the pandemic has greatly affected Norway economically as it has negatively impacted the financially vulnerable population, such as parents with young kids.

Studies conducted by Kahn et al. (2020) reveals that companies in the US have intensely reduced job opportunities from the 2nd week of March 2020. The study also reveals that job vacancy reduction was uniform across occupations and industries, except for those in front-line jobs like essential retail, nursing, and others.

### Health Impacts

Lu et al. (2020), states that lockdown/social distancing measures have high chances of affecting psychological well-being through discrimination, lack of access to essential supplies, frustration due to lack of information, financial loss, and boredom. They claim that maintenance of a positive attitude help reduce depression. Public mental health is also affected by the cognitive bias related to the diffusion of public death toll statistics (Tubadji et al., 2020). In line with the Canadian Perspective Survey Series, Béland et al. (2020b), people who are old and unemployed and have less education reported lower mental health status. Their assessment also discloses that those who missed work, not due to COVID-19, and those who were not employed, showed declines in mental health. In line with panel data in the UK, Etheridge and Spantig (2020) report a large deterioration in the state of mental health, with much larger effects for women.

### Impact on Gender and Racial Inequality

While men are more susceptible to recessions compared to women, according to (Adams-Prassl et al. 2020), it is evident from various research that COVID-19 has an uneven impact on the socioeconomic outcome of women. (Adams-Prassl et al. (2020). In line with Alon et al. (2020) women's employment is concentrated in sectors such as education and health care. Furthermore, the schools led to increased childcare needs, which would have a negative impact on working mothers/single mothers. Béland et al. (2020a) did an analysis of the domestic violence aspect of COVID-19 in Canada. He discovered that work arrangements like remote work are not increasing women's perceived effects of COVID-19 on the levels of domestic violence and family stress. Instead, women's concerns regarding their inability to meet financial obligations due to COVID-19 contributed to a significant increase in reported family stress and domestic violence. They also suggest that women's concerns about maintaining social ties are positively associated with concerns regarding domestic violence and family stress from confinement.

### Methodology

This being a theoretical review it relied on a review of secondary data material to discuss the challenges and mitigations for COVID-19 in the education sector.

### Theoretical and philosophical thought for the study

This theoretical study is grounded on the Classical Liberal Theory of Equal Opportunities advocated by Sherman and Wood cited by Njeru & Orodho (2003) who advances the perspective of the need for equal opportunities in education for every learner. The classical Liberal Theory of Equal Opportunities affirms that every learner is born having some amount of ability which to some bigger margin is congenital and cannot be substantively altered. Therefore, education systems and structures ought to be structured in a manner that removes challenges of any form that prevent

ingenious learners from lesser economic upbringings from taking full gain of innate talents, which fast-track them to social promotion. The Classical Liberal Theory insinuates that social mobility would be stimulated by the equal opportunity of educational structures. According to this theory, education systems and structures ought to be planned with a view to eliminating obstacles or challenges of any form, for instance, challenges based on socio-cultural, socio-economic, and ecological factors, and institution-based dynamics which inhibit students from gaining from their innate talents. The education delivered to marginalized and vulnerable students would accelerate them to social promotion as education is a great equalizer.

The outbreak of pandemics like COVID-19 and related infectious ailments, which send schools to unexpected prolonged closures, pose a lot of challenges to marginalized and vulnerable learners. While the parents for learners from well-to-do backgrounds afford good meals, decent accommodation, best medication, and robust digital gadgets to continue learning from the comforts of their homesteads, the contrast for the disadvantaged learners is true. Hence, for access and equity concerns, it virtually becomes incredible to disregard the premise that uneven involvement in education will finally complicate the status of the underprivileged and the susceptible learners (Njeru & Orodho, 2003). The classical liberal theory was established to be appropriate for this study as COVID-19 pandemic challenges affected more the poor, marginalized, and vulnerable parents and guardians consequently the effect trickled down to their children who cannot afford to provide the basic necessities both at home and school. The situation was worsened by the digital divide; as the fortunate learners were being taught through radio, TV, Youtube, among other digital gadgets, the less fortunate were busy laboring to put a meal on the table hence not having an equal opportunity to education.

This theoretical study was further steered by the theory of justice and fairness as advanced by Rawls John (1971) who is for the values of justice to govern modern social order. The theory gives a structure that explicates the importance, in a society presumed to comprise of equal and free persons of political and individual liberty of equal opportunity and cooperative organization that profit the privileged and less privileged members of the society. It advances the notion of justice from the perception that individuals are equal and free thus, educational structures ought to be planned so as to eliminate peripheral obstacles of any form (social, cultural, economic, political or, ecological) that inhibit ingenious learners from less privileged upbringings from maximizing innate talents which triggers them to social promotion.

The theory of justice and fairness stresses that all social key goods (income and wealth, liberty and opportunity, and the bases of self-respect) are to be shared equally so that everybody in society would equally have the ability to realize their interests. Any uneven sharing of any or all of these goods will be to the detriment of the underprivileged. Economic and Social inequities are to be organized so that they are, to the larger magnitude, profit the less privileged and also be issued to offices and locations accessible to all under rules of fair equality of opportunity. The theory of justice and fairness stresses that every citizen should be accorded, through education, a chance to exercise freedom and advance their social rank. By availing education to students from every social stratum, it is believed that one eliminates the barriers that are congenital by the virtue of being born in a less unfortunate background, marginalized or vulnerable. This theory supports the view that learners should have an equal chance at all levels of education disregarding their socio-



economic background. This will ensure that ideal conditions are created to implement the vision of equal opportunity, where every learner has admittance to the education being offered. The theory of justice and fairness was established to be appropriate for this study given that unequal provision of out of school education through the digital platform discriminates upon the poor families in their quest for basic education as they cannot afford to purchase the digital infrastructure to equally learn from home just as their counterparts of means hence not giving them equal opportunity and this perpetuates inequalities.

## Results/Discussion

### COVID-19 Learner Educational Challenges in Ghana

#### 1. Widened Physical contact between the Teacher and the Learner

One of the chief impacts of COVID-19 on learners is the absence of physical contact with teachers for content delivery. This has been occasioned by the Ministry of Health's (MoH) regulations of social distancing to avoid the fast spread of the virus. This has been momentarily substituted with digital learning. However, inaccessibility of technology or quick, dependable internet access has barred learners in rural regions and those from underprivileged families. The paucity of access to technology or sound internet connectivity is a hurdle to continuous learning, particularly for learners from underprivileged families. In reaction to institutional closures instigated by COVID-19, UNESCO recommended the utilization of distance learning platforms and open education applications and any other platforms that institutions and instructors can utilize to get in touch with students distantly and minimize the interruption of learning (UNESCO, 2020a).

#### 2. Schools as Social Protection Hubs

Schools play a significant part in the protection of learners, especially girls in poor, vulnerable, and marginalized communities. With over 32, 000 schools closed over 18 million pre-primaries; primary and secondary school learners, and over 150,000 refugees are now confined at what they may call 'home'. The risks which the schools they reside in protecting them from are now staring at them bluntly. These learners require home-based learning in the so-called 'homes' which is hardly available. Similarly, their teachers are at home and require support to help them to remotely learn and ensure continuity of the learning process which is impossible (MoE, 2020).

#### 3. Upsurge of Ant-social Behaviors by Learners

Long-time closure of schools subjected parents and guardians to stress due to provision of childcare and distance learning management while learners are out of their schools. Due to lack of alternative, parents who are employed usually leave their children on their own when institutions close and this can cause development of hazardous behaviours by the children due to peer pressure. It has been proved that protracted closures of schools compounded with restricted movements with acute challenges around space among poor households have exacerbated cases of exposure to pornographic materials, drug and substance abuse, increased rape, Gender-Based Violence (GBV) including defilement of children (UNESCO, 2020b).

#### 4. Learners' Nutritional Challenges

Nutrition and food insecurity challenges are bound to be terrible. Diet is very important as far as growth and academic performance of learners is concerned. Most of the students globally rely on free meals at their learning institutions. When schools close, diet is especially compromised for students in institutions where food is provided. For instance, in US, after diet stamps, institutions lunch programs are the second-largest anti-hunger undertakings. Approximately 30 million students every year rely on school to provide free meals. Approximately half of the population of learners in Washington have registered for subsidized institutional meals. According to statistics, almost 520,000 learners may feel the effect of food uncertainty due to school closure. (McCary, September 2006). In Alabama, where the school cessation affected about 1 million learners, the state Superintendent declared that students who were more affected by the pandemic will be supplied with food. (Powell, 2020). Similarly, in Ghana, schools play a significant part in social protection and in particular the provision of basic needs for children from poor, vulnerable, and marginalized communities. Many children in marginalised areas depend on school meals delivered by the government and partners. With school closure, the learners who used to depend on those basic need will have a tough time.

#### 5. Negative Effects on Learners' Learning Outcomes

According to (UNESCO, 2020a) Unplanned closure of schools affected learners' learning outcome negatively. Being in School gives children a chance to get educated and hence develop and grow mentally. After the abrupt closure of schools, learners are denied this opportunity. The disadvantages are inconsistency for economically poor learners who tend to have fewer educational chances outside school (UNESCO, 2020b). When learning institutions close, parents and guardians are asked to help their children to continue with education while at home. This is usually impossible for most of the parents especially those of have limited knowledge and resources.

#### 6. Upsurge on Leaner Drop-out Rates

It is evident that the rate of school drop-out has abruptly increased as a result of closure of learning institutions. This is due to the fact that there is limited effort by the government to make sure that all the children return to school after the opening of the school. Learners who come from underprivileged homes are at a higher risk of not getting opportunity to go back to school and this disrupts their future career development (Baker, 2020). Institutions also facilitates social interaction among the students, when institutions are closed for a longer period, it hinders interaction among several learners and this is an essential part of learning and development. Moreover, long time closure of schools could lead to occurrences of early pregnancies, child labour and early marriages all of which may influence transition rates of learners in schools.

#### 7. Religious Effect

The religion sector all over the world have been negatively impacted by COVID-19 pandemic in several ways such as the suspension of the worship services in many worship centres and also cancellation of major festivals. Various worshipping centres play a very major role in society as it

helps the parents instil moral values in their children. Various religious organizations have also provided many forms of assistance such as donation of medical supplies to regions that are affected (Burke and Daniel, 2020).

### **Proposed mitigations**

This theoretical study outlines hypothetical interventions that will enhance prevention and response to educational needs during and after the COVID-19 crisis in line with the overall government health priorities. This section provides mitigation and learners' return to school interventions aimed at ensuring continuity of learning during the COVID-19 crisis. Some mitigations may be short term (immediate), medium-term (six months to two years), or long term (five to ten years).

#### **1. Grant of learners and educators open access to digital education resources**

As already underscored, the absence of restrictions and exemptions to copyright could also have an effect on the capability of learners to access the materials and textbooks they require to study. Some measures have been taken by some countries to grant that learners and educators can have accessibility to open education resources or comprehend copyright restrictions. The International Council for Open and Distance Education issued a special website to offer, tips for online instruction, webinars, and resources for educators (ICDE, 2020).

In New Zealand, a group of publishers agreed to allow for virtual public readings of their materials from libraries and classrooms (LIANZA, 2020). A similar agreement took place in Australia, where the Australian Publishers Association, the Australian Library and Information Association, and the Australian Society of Authors agreed on a set of exceptional measures to allow libraries to provide educational content (Books Create Australia, 2020).

An advocacy organization in the Netherlands launched a website to allow teachers to use free-licensed music and video for their classes. The Maricopa Millions OER Project launched a special emergency fund for building open educational resources. In Senegal Futur Media owned by the singer, Youssou Ndour during the pandemic gives lessons three times a day to all classes including Vocational education. Across Africa, some private and public colleges and universities are exploring distance learning via the internet amidst several pitfalls notably network challenges (Abidjan, 2020).

#### **2. Initiate Online and E-learning Infrastructure for all Learners and Geographical Areas**

Information Communication Technology (ICT) is critical in transforming education and addressing important challenges of quality, relevance access, and equity encountered by the education sector. However, this requires sufficient capacity to incorporate ICT in education, training, and research. The Government of Ghana has made some efforts though not fully done in integrating ICT in all sectors. Education, training, and research have leveraged the government initiative for future prospects in the efficient and effective delivery of curriculum, improved governance, and management, as well as delivery of quality relevant skills and services. Despite the little gains made in ICT integration in education, training, and research, there are inadequacies in internet connectivity, capacity among educators, digital content, as well as ICT standards and guidelines for



use in content delivery. Furthermore, unreliable power supply, attitude, and rapid change in technology are other constraints.

As a short-term measure for the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, the Government of Ghana through the Ministry of Education should synergize the already initiated online and e-learning programs to all learners and geographical areas to facilitate learning during the period that learners are at home by enhancing curriculum delivery through different media platforms like Radio, Television, YouTube, Zoom, among others. These platforms have proved to be alternative panaceas in the absence of actual classroom learning. They provide learners with out-of-classroom learning experiences if aligned to the school calendar. This will lead to increased hours of broadcast, continuous production of programs, and also continuous circulation of content so as to provide access to quality content across the levels of basic education.

### **3. Improvement on Water and Sanitation Infrastructure**

The MoE in conjunction with MoH should improve water and sanitation infrastructure, disseminate knowledge on health and hygienic practices in learning institutions to avert the possibility of infections arising from infectious diseases like COVID-19 and such like infirmities. Efforts should be made to debunk the myths on serious pandemics like COVID-19 and rely on scientific information provided by the MoH and World Health Organization. Such interventions will include the provision of handwashing facilities and sanitizers; provision of masks; introduction of School-based health programs and enforcement of social distancing in schools. Establishing learner-friendly messages for healthcare providers to provide information on perceptions and counter misinformation in messages that can easily be understood by learners through the development of pamphlets, posters, and fliers will be of great help. Food hygiene and preparation are also key in curbing the spread of pandemics like COVID-19 and related ailments to that effect efforts should be made to train school cooks on hygiene, sanitation, and safe food preparation. Education stakeholders need to champion for designing and implementation of comprehensive school health policies that will guide sanitation and hygiene practices during crises of new pandemics. Such policies will guide and inform the training of administrators, teachers, workers, and students on pandemic emergency responses and measures before they occur.

### **4. Conducting Mentorship and Psychosocial Counseling Services**

Ministry of Education to conduct mentorship and psychosocial counseling service programs for survivals of COVID-19 like learners, Teachers, its officials, and Gender-Based Violence (GBV) victims during the protracted school's closure period, teen pregnancies victims, drug abusers, and pornographic addicts among other psychologically and socially affected members of the school community. MoE should develop content on COVID-19 psychological support awareness and safety measures to disseminate to institutions for use. Strengthening of guidance and counseling departments and programs in schools through building the capacity of instructors and instructors in life skills, guiding and counseling to efficiently respond to variations in social behavior will be significant too. Further, MoE ought to enhance collaboration with the Department of Children Services to promote the safety and protection of children to increase awareness of reporting protocols for incidences of child abuse and neglect.

**Conclusion**

Conclusively, it is imperative to be ahead of the game purposely to envisage seamless learning in critical situations as evidenced by infectious diseases, like COVID19 and others, to emanate in the future to ensure that learners do not lose out on essential learning times that could have an impact on their developmental milestones. Therefore, continuing education, through alternate learning pathways, as soon as possible, must be a top priority for MoE to ensure that the disruption to the education sector is as limited as possible. Measures to mitigate any emerging challenges from the laid down strategies are also critical to ensure that MoE is able to provide access to quality, equitable and inclusive education to learners during and after the crisis to ensure continued learning and to keep pace with 100 percent policy.

**Recommendations**

MoE to conduct a study on Post COVID -19 risk factors at the national level for the purpose of building resilience and strengthen education systems and institutions against future shocks. This will be possible through conducting sample assessments at different grade levels to track progress for digital learning at all institutional levels. This is essential to know who was reached and how well learners were learning so that future intervention can be adapted accordingly.

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