

Chapter Twenty-Four

Closing the Educational Inequality Gap in the Post COVID-19 Nigeria

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Introduction

Education is no doubt an instrument for the socio-economic, political and cultural development of the human society and arguably the best asset any nation can possess. Thus, in the ideal world, quality education should be available to all, irrespective of gender, race or socio-economic circumstances. Provision of equal educational opportunities for children is the desired universal goal as expressed in the Declaration of Universal Human Rights (https://www.ohchr.org/EN/UDHR/Documents/UDHR_Translations/eng.pdf) . Article 17(1) of the African (Banjul) Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (<https://www.achpr.org/legalinstruments/detail?id=49>) also recognises and enshrines the mandatory equal right of citizens to education; stating that: "Every individual shall have the right to education."

However, we live in the real world where inequality stares one in the face whichever way one turns. The education sector is perhaps one in which inequality is most glaring and with most devastating effects on individuals and nations. Educational inequality is the unequal distribution of academic resources, including but not limited to; school funding, qualified and experienced teachers, books, and technologies to socially excluded communities. According to Field, Kuczera & Pont (2007), the educational system can exasperate inequality if it does not ensure fairness and inclusiveness. To them, fairness connotes that children can achieve their educational potential by being able to access educational opportunities regardless of their circumstances, while inclusion indicates an educational system that ensures a minimum standard all children should achieve upon completing the formal education system. This implies equality of educational opportunity as well as equality of educational outcomes and when any of these is lacking educational inequality results.

Inequality in educational opportunities from elementary class to the university level is a sad reality in Nigeria. According to Dogra (2011), these inequalities should be addressed and solved, if the future of the country has to be secured. But then what is an educational opportunity? According to Westen (1985), an opportunity is a relationship between an agent or a set of agents, and the desired goal, mediated by certain obstacles, none of which are insurmountable. For instance, a child has an opportunity to become educated if the only obstacles she has to overcome are enrolling at a school, the quality of her teachers, educational facilities available and working hard. Any other obstacle beyond these, especially those that put any other at an advantage over the child, has limited her opportunity.

Such obstacles that result in inequality of opportunities are mainly gender, ethnic and socio-economic related. For instance, being a female in many parts of Nigeria already predisposes one to the possibility of not getting any form of formal education or a very limited one, if at all (UNESCO, 2014).

As with most countries in Africa, there is, daily, gross inequality in all facets of Nigeria's social experience. According to Pandeya & Tiwari (2014),

Nigeria is primarily an agriculture driven economy with over 70% of the population involved in farming. 20 % are in the service sector and Industries take 10 %. It is abundant in oil and natural resources. The gap between the rich and the poor is huge. 10 % of the population holds 90 % of the revenue while the remaining 90% are left with 10 %.

The situation has not changed significantly. According to a 2019 Executive Summary on Poverty and Inequality by the National Bureau of Statistics (<http://nigerianstat.gov.ng/elibrary>), 40.1% of the population in Nigeria, Africa's most populous country and the largest producer of oil in Africa is classified as poor. That is, on average, four out of 10 Nigerians has per capita expenditure below \$400.

A UNICEF report (<https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/education>) states that 10.5 million of the country's children aged 5-14 years are not in school. Only 61% of 6 to 11-year-olds regularly attend primary school. Some states in the northeast and north-west of the country have more than half of the girls not

enrolled in schools as marginalisation ensures that girls are deprived of basic education.

With such staggering socio-economic inequality, the spread and depth of quality education, from basic to tertiary levels, has always been suspect. Besides, as a result of historical and socio-cultural reasons, Nigerian children of northern extraction are generally at the receiving end of perennial inequality, whether male or female, with the girl childbearing much more of the educational neglect brunt than their male counterparts. The UNICEF report further states:

“In the north of the country, the picture is even bleaker, with a net attendance rate of 53 percent. Getting out-of-school children back into education poses a massive challenge. Gender, like geography and poverty, is an important factor in the pattern of educational marginalization. States in the north-east and north-west have female primary net attendance rates of 47.7 percent and 47.3 percent, respectively, meaning that more than half of the girls are not in school. The education deprivation in northern Nigeria is driven by various factors, including economic barriers and socio-cultural norms and practices that discourage attendance in the formal education, especially for girls.”

As Ejike (2013) reported, children across Nigeria are socialized into their specific gender role almost right from birth. While male children are encouraged to engage in subjects and professions that have a technical and scientific leaning, the female children are prodded to learn domestic skills. Ejike acknowledged improvement in the situation in recent years but admitted that there is still much to be changed, especially through policies that encourage educational attainment for men and women based on merit, rather than gender.

Besides, the Education sector is one of the sectors that have suffered a prolonged budget inequality in the annual budget of Nigeria. According to the Citizens Wealth Platform (CWP), the allocations detailing the priorities of the government in the recurrent (personnel and overheads) and capital votes showed that the total allocation accruing to the Federal Ministry of Education is ₦448,443,102,614 which represents 6.14 per cent of the total annual budget for 2017. With this figure and percentage as presented by the Citizens Wealth

Platform, the education sector occupies the sixth position in the budget priority of Nigeria and falls sharply below the international standard of 26 per cent of the national budget or six per cent of the nation's gross domestic products (GDP) as prescribed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO).

This year has not been different. Budget in its 2020 Budget Analysis and Opportunities (<https://yourbudget.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/2020-Budget-Analysis.pdf>) reports:

It is pertinent to know that the FG still spends 686.8 billion naira (6.48%) of its budget on the education sector, indicating 'a reduced focus on education' (p. 30) contrary to the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) which recommends in its "Education for All EFA 2000-2015: Achievements and Challenges" 15-20% of total spend to be spent on the education sector. This is worrisome in a nation with 10.5 million out of school children, which according to UNICEF estimates, indicates that one out of every five out-of-school children in the world is in Nigeria (<https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/education>). Aside from the nation's adult literacy rate of 62.02% as of 2018.

In Nigeria as well, the high rate of inequality in the education system is partly caused by the increasing number of private schools which are owned by most of the economic stakeholders, decision-makers and policy formulators in Nigeria while some elite send their wards overseas. Meanwhile, children in rural and underserved communities in Nigeria are being left behind as they are not equipped to adapt or transition to new methods of learning. Attendance at elite private school can result in compounding advantages for some students to the relative disadvantage of others. For instance, smaller class sizes, more highly qualified teachers, and more extra-curricular opportunities may enable private school students to benefit from the compounding advantages of greater success in the college admissions process and subsequent labour market.

Other manifestations of educational inequalities in the Nigerian education sector, according to Olibie, Eziuzo & Enueme (2013), include:

- inequalities in the availability of educational human and material resources,
- inequalities in proper harmonization of activities in the education sector, and
- inequalities in access to quality education.

This inequality problem which, according to (OECD, 2012), often leads to major differences in the educational success or efficiency of these individuals and ultimately suppresses social and economic mobility has now been exacerbated by the COVID 19 pandemic and the attendant lockdown. On 30 January 2020, the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) a global pandemic. The nation's Federal Ministry of Health on 27 February 2020 announced that the first case of Coronavirus disease had been confirmed in Lagos State. From that point, frantic efforts at preparing for and combating the virus began by the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) which immediately activated its National Emergency Operations Centre. March 19th, 2020, the Federal Ministry of Education announced the closure of all schools from Monday 23rd March 2020 to prevent the spread of the Coronavirus (COVID19). A total lockdown of the nation with the dawn to dusk curfew followed; a development that brought both the national and individual economy to its knees.

The global impact of COVID-19 has been far-reaching, especially in the education sector. What was to be a month closure eventually extended till August 2020 when secondary school students in terminal classes were allowed to resume for their final examinations. Close to 46 million students were affected across the country. Despite all the efforts, though, Nigeria has recorded thousands of confirmed cases. While many were treated and survived after weeks of isolation, more than a thousand succumbed to the deadly virus.

Even before the pandemic, educational inequality had been alarming. However, with the lockdown that followed the global outbreak, learning came to a standstill for virtually all students in the nation's public schools. Some state government introduced television and radio learning, but an empirical assessment of the attempt would reveal a less than desirable results.

Digital Technology: The new way to go for education

The explosion in the use of information and communication technology (ICT) across the world in recent years has changed the way we relate, learn and work. ICT has significantly impacted on the modes of teaching-learning at all levels of education. This led to the evolution of educational technology, defined by Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT, 2007) as “the study and ethical practice of facilitating learning and improving performance by creating, using and managing appropriate technological processes and resources”.

Technology has changed the way how the education industry works. The traditional blackboard and books are gradually giving way to digital boards and smart books which can be accessed anytime and anywhere. Various presentation tools like PowerPoint and whiteboards are now available to teachers on Skype, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and several other virtual learning platforms. Learning is much faster and students can gain more knowledge through the internet. In many educational institutions across the world, the slogan is BYOD--Bring Your Own Device. With BYOD, learners can now share academic contents like audio, video, assignments, test papers etc.; spend less on stationery; access learning materials anywhere, anytime; increase their knowledge beyond what they receive from their teachers/instructors as they access a wide range of information on their device through the internet. Video conferencing system can be used by teachers to collaborate across diverse locations and institutions.

While digital technology is being rightly lauded for opening up unlimited access to information and ease of sharing such with colleagues and teachers as earlier highlighted, one should not be oblivious of the inherent dangers in its abuse, if its use is not properly managed, especially among pre-tertiary learners. A recent study conducted by American scientists showed that gadgets negatively affect the academic performance of high school and college students. When not properly managed, smartphones constantly distract even the most diligent of them. This often leads to students underperforming in school (<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/may/11/students-who-use-digital-devices-in-class-perform-worse-in-exams>). One of the reasons for this is that students can (and often) use their devices for purposes which are not related to the learning process. As a result of this, stakeholders like parents and even teachers and school administrators have always engaged in constant debate on whether smartphones should be allowed in schools or not. Countries

like France, Slovenia, some states in the United States of America and Germany, and Great Britain had laws prohibiting mobile devices in primary and elementary schools since the early 2000s. (<https://www.naijatechguide.com/2019/02/banning-gadgets-schools.html>). However, recent developments, no less in magnitude the COVID 19 pandemic, have necessitated renewed discussions about the feasibility of such strict restrictions on the use of mobile gadgets at that level. From the foregoing, the solution is not in banning gadgets for learning purposes, but moderating their use both at home and in class. When mutual understanding is fostered between teachers, students and parents, the learners will be able to develop the needed self-control and responsibility to maximize the benefits of digital technology as a learning tool.

Learning during Lockdown: The Nigerian experience

The lockdown caught the nation's public education system unprepared and it unmasked substantial inequities in the education sector. The strike action by the nation's university academics provided an alibi for inaction. The reality, however, is that were they not on strike at the time, there were no facilities on the ground for a partial or total shift to online learning. Learning across all levels of education thus ground to a halt. However, several private universities and highbrow private pre-tertiary institutions in the country almost immediately shifted to the virtual learning model. The not-so-elitist schools in the sub-sector also hurriedly began to adopt social media platforms, especially WhatsApp and Telegram, to offer some form of online interaction with their learners. Some States later introduced educational radio and television programmes to provide some stop-gap for the learners when the end of the lockdown appeared not to be in sight.

All the efforts of both the private and public schools met with varying degrees of success/failure. For one, as a result of epileptic power supply, many public-school children in homes with television sets could not consistently watch the educational television programmes while those in the homes without television sets were completely cut off this educational supply. Meanwhile, while the radio can be easily used to reach a wide audience, to power radio with batteries is a luxury that many homes could not afford in a nation where approximately 44% of the population is living in extreme poverty (National Bureau of Statistics (NBS)). Besides, there is the additional challenge of effectively teaching subjects like mathematics and other physical sciences which require

calculations, diagrams and other scientific manipulations which are better seen than heard.

Those in private universities did not fare significantly better. A study of a faith-based private university students' perception of the online classes organised by the institution during the lockdown (Olasunkanmi, 2020) reported that the students had negative dispositions towards online schooling. This, according to the report, resulted from the challenges of the non-conducive learning environment at home, higher data consumption, distractions from the neighbourhood, friends and relatives, erratic power supply and Internet network fluctuations that accompanied the online classes. Besides, 60% of the sampled students were reported to have complained of lack of concentration when watching uploaded videos or going through other online learning channels, compared to physical interaction in the classroom with their lecturers. The study further expressed surprise at the findings, considering, according to him, earlier positive reports (pre-COVID 19) from some other private universities in southwest Nigeria and advanced nations of the world in which students had expressed delight at their online learning experience. Besides, the assumption, according to the study, had always been that students would readily welcome online learning considering the near addiction of many of them to watching movies and the use of mobile gadgets for social media interaction.

One of the reasons proffered for the current negative reaction was the suddenness of the transition to complete online mode of learning which left no room for mental preparation. But aside that, teaching and learning is a two-way street. The material and manpower preparation that precedes the online transmission of teaching in the educational institution must be matched by similar preparation for the reception of such by the learners at home. Given the pervasive poverty in the nation, very few families can boast of a conducive home learning environment: private, quiet, well ventilated and illuminated room, with adequate furniture, uninterrupted power supply, and more importantly, adequate nutrition.

Perhaps, public libraries would have provided alternative learning locations for students to engage in online learning because of the serenity and learning ambience that such usually offers. Sadly, however, public libraries are few and far between, even in urban centres like Lagos State with 20 local government

areas and 57 local council development areas. Lagos State Library Board on its website claimed to have 12 libraries in the state. A website, <https://thereadywriters.com/23-privatepublic-libraries-in-lagos/>, on the other hand, listed 23 public and private libraries in Lagos State. In a recent 'letter' published in the online Punch Nigeria newspaper (<https://punchng.com/a-case-for-more-public-libraries/>) the writer, Daniel Ighakpe, lamented the paucity of public libraries in Lagos, citing how he had to travel a long distance to access the services of a public library. Some of them have lost the serenity of a reading/research centre. In the absence of conducive environment for learners outside the educational institutions, one can only wonder about the quality and effectiveness of online teaching cannot be effective, even in the few educational institutions that offer it.

The scenarios presented above summarise that while the pandemic is revolutionizing digital and online education globally during the lockdown, learners in public and many private schools Nigeria are left behind, unequipped to shift to the new methods of learning. Learning simply came to a complete halt for them. With the nation's poor and often highly politicized statistics, we may never be able to state the number of learners that fall into any of the little, less, least or no learning categories, but what is certain is that majority of Nigerian students who currently cannot keep up with their peers globally or locally because of inaccessibility to digital tools may never catch up and will continue to feel the effect of this gap long after the pandemic is over. This may result in a severely diminishing pool of young adults who have not garnered the necessary skills to stay ahead in the future. With Nigeria already behind in preparing its young people for the workplace of the future, the effects of the pandemic have further exacerbated the problem. Sadly still, all this happened while many advanced nations have taken the challenge in their stride and their tertiary institutions are even in the forefront of providing a cure for the virus - - another money-spinner for such institutions, their research teams and the nations.

Low digital penetration and the widening gap of Educational Inequality

Nigerian education system's poor performance compared to the rest of the world is partly traceable to the acute poverty of the citizenry, and poor power supply, the poor state of her ICT compliance and the lacklustre attitude of the government towards providing digital facilities for schools.

Two educational technology service providers, (Pandeya & Tiwani, 2014), published a report of their efforts to introduce virtual education facilities and training to various public and private schools in Nigeria. The report painted a dismal picture of ICT penetration at the time, such as many private schools with beautiful computer laboratories that were hardly used correctly to impart ICT to children; complex bureaucratic bottlenecks and greed preventing successful execution of projects; teachers displaying lackadaisical attitude to learning as a result of months of unpaid salaries, and teachers who had not seen a computer all their life. The report also mentioned Akwa Ibom State which boasted (then) of a state-of-the-art e-Library that had not been used to even its 5 % capacity at the time 'because of the lack of implementing strategies and using alternatives. Also, there were many schools with impressive structures but without any substantial evidence of investment in ICT or staff development for fear of such trained teachers demanding increased salary when they become proficient in the use of ICT facilities or being poached by other schools.

A critical gap that the report observed in the nation's efforts at implementing ICT in schools was that it not guided by research: the much needed "Initiation stage", according to Rogers (1995), that demands information gathering and planning was being overlooked in the urgency to implement ICT in schools. The result was that the teachers who are the implementers of the ICT drive were not bought in.

There is little evidence that the situation has changed significantly as at now. If anything, the pandemic and the attendant lockdown have only exacerbated an already precarious situation. The nation is the perpetual loser for it.

Going Forward

The pandemic has forced on us the change that we never prepared for in the education sector. However, whether in the long run, it will prove to be a blessing or a curse depends largely on the response given to it at all levels of the society, especially the government. Appropriate and timely response on all fronts and at all levels of government will ensure that we ride on the crisis to fix our infrastructural and manpower deficits. The following steps, most of which will have to be running concurrently, must be addressed with a strong sense of urgency:

- **Credible database:** A major step towards addressing the educational imbalance in the post-COVID 19 era is to develop a credible database for the nation's education sector devoid of political and 'national cake' mentality biases. Until we know how many learners we have at all levels, and our manpower and facility status at the moment, we cannot correctly predict or prepare for the current and future learning needs. But when credible figures are available, policymakers can then reduce systematically, the educational group inequalities by taking into account the complex patterns of educational inequalities when planning interventions to make sure that they target the most marginalized groups and help to reduce the most severe education gaps in Nigeria.
- **Safety measures for reopening:** There is a serious need for the government to adequately sensitize and enforce compliance with the safety protocol of the use of face mask, physical distancing and regular hand sanitation to ensure that the flattening curve of the infection and fatality does not take an upward swing again among learners, teachers and other school stakeholders. If the general attitude observed since the schools reopened for terminal junior and senior secondary terminal classes are anything to go by, many students, teachers and school administrators either do not believe that the virus is real or they believe that the pandemic is over already. Compliance with the laid down safety protocol has been poor at best or non-existence at worst. Most schools simply reopened as if nothing ever happened. Should this attitude persist and the epidemic is resurgent, the impact would not only take the educational system back by decades, but our very existence might also be threatened.
- **Curriculum re-alignment:** The Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) needs to lead the efforts in adapting basic and secondary education materials for blended learning and educational radio programmes that can complement the traditional model of classroom delivery and also make education available to hard-to-reach children. Educational agencies like National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE), National Board for Technical Education (NABTEB), National University Commission (NUC) should also commence intentional sensitization of the various tertiary institutions under their watch to make their curricular responsive to the digital demands of the Post-COVID 19

education. Priorities should include the introduction of courses such as coding and robotics which can usher students into the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and prepare them for jobs of the future.

- **Teacher training:** It takes teachers to engage in technology in teaching. How professionally ready are the teachers to deploy digital education technology in the classroom? In the post-COVID-19 era, it is pertinent that teachers are adequately retrained to deliver the kind of education that the future demands. Teachers should be given adequate training to acquire requisite skills to effectively facilitate online delivery of learning content. However, the focus should not be on practising teachers alone; rather, the investment in capacity-building opportunities should be extended to the pre-service trainee teachers as well. In other words, both the currently engaged teachers and those in pre-service teacher training institutions need massive re-orientation in teaching methodology, as the traditional overtly face-to-face approach can no longer suffice. By ensuring that the latter are well equipped with the necessary 21st century digital technology skills before they are absorbed into the classroom, we would be increasing the pool of highly-skilled personnel that can deliver both offline and online in the blended classrooms that is now becoming the norm.
- **Partnerships:** the government should facilitate partnership with donor agencies multinational companies and local business groups for providing access to digital platforms, especially for the hard-to-reach and vulnerable children and youths. They can be encouraged, for instance, to give out their old scrapped computers which, with minor changes in the hardware can be fixed for use in schools and help in some ways to bridge the digital gap at little or no cost. The IDP camps in several parts of northern Nigeria and other spots across the nation are brimming with this category of Nigerians whose continual denial of access to education does not bode well for them or the nation. Adequate orientation, motivation and training to acquire relevant skills to maximally benefit from online teaching and learning should also be given to other children who are not that disadvantaged, but who are equally returning to schooling differently from when they left it.

- **Energy:** The problem of constant power supply, which is critical to the deployment of digital tools, can be solved with the deployment of solar technology in schools as is being done in Lagos and some other states, while internet facilities can also be provided at subsidized data rates in schools.
- **Support for Private Schools:** As suggested by a World Bank Report, an arrangement should be made to provide support for the private education sector to enable them to invest in educational tools of the future, given that private schools are the lead education provider in the state.
- **Attitudinal Change:** The biggest challenge other than finance and qualified human resources, power, network and quality resources are attitude -- the tendency to want everything without the willingness to do anything. This has to change. Obviously, the digital need of even public schools alone (from primary to tertiary) is too much for the government at all levels to bear. When private schools and other non-formal schools are added, the burden becomes gargantuan. Without parents and individuals that are financially able taking responsibility for the provision of the needed digital tools for their children and wards, the nation may forever remain in the backwaters of economic development in a world that is riding on the wheels of technology.

Conclusion

Nigeria is a late starter in the ICT-mediated educational process with a lot of grounds to cover in order to tag along with the nations that are already in the race. COVID 19 pandemic has forced us into the realisation of the gross level of unpreparedness of the education sector for the new reality. The thinking that ability to use the smartphone and have an email or Facebook account for social media activities are synonymous with computer literacy must be jettisoned and replaced with a conscious need for the robust use of digital technology in education. Post- COVID 19, what is now needed is to maximise the ICT potentials through ICT policy, greater involvement of private and public in the funding of the facilities, tools and manpower development needed, followed by proper implementation and monitoring. The mindset of the primary stakeholders (school administrators, teachers, parents and pupils) must be changed through multi-level advocacy to accept and gradually adapt to the new world transformation. Achieving a shift would involve more than occasional awareness creation; a sustained effort to walk all stakeholders through the

change with a reward for compliance and sanction for infractions. According to Gates & Gates (2020), “Disease is both a symptom and a cause of inequality, while public education is a driver of equality.” And everyone must have equal access to it.

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