

Parental support for literacy development of early grade children during COVID-19 school closures in Northern Nigeria

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic that began in early 2020 has had consequences for children's education globally, as schools closed and parents found themselves playing the role of teacher, alongside their economic and other community roles. This study aims to explore the experiences of parents in northern Nigeria as they attempted to support their primary school children's reading development while schools were closed. We conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with 15 middle- and low-socioeconomic status parents in Kano State, Nigeria. Using thematic analysis, we identified challenges faced by parents as well as unexpected positive effects of the pandemic. Challenges included the lack of textbooks and other appropriate learning materials, time pressures, and lack of knowledge of strategies to teach reading. However, parents noted that the extra time they had spent together during lockdowns had led to improved relationships in the household, and that they had been able to spend more time discussing moral development and discipline with their children. In summary, this sample of parents believed that the pandemic would not have severe impacts on their own children, as they were making efforts to support learning at home. However, they had concerns for children in Nigeria more broadly, particularly those whose parents were not literate, as they would have little access to learning outside school. Recommendations for the Nigerian government and other stakeholders include making learning materials available for home use, increasing the use of educational radio and television programming, and developing simple literacy assessments for parents to monitor children's progress.

Keywords

literacy, primary grades, Nigeria, COVID-19, parental support

Introduction

Due to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Nigerian government closed schools across the nation on March 19, 2020 to reduce the spread of the virus (Dixit, 2020; Obiakor & Adeniran, 2020). The nationwide closure of schools has impacted over 39 million students in Nigeria, more than 27 million of

whom are pre-primary and primary school students (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2020). These closures are likely to worsen outcomes in a country already struggling to improve student performance on basic learning measures. Before COVID-19, only 17% of Nigerian pupils could read a complete sentence and comprehend it (Adeniran et al., 2020). Given the poor home literacy environments facing many Nigerian

children (Aika & Uyi-Osaretin, 2018), this situation is expected to deteriorate, as children spent months at home.

While many school-aged children in high-income countries have access to online instruction during this pandemic (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2020), those in low- and middle-income countries, including Nigeria, have limited access to television, radio, computers, internet, and data for them to engage in remote learning (Human Rights Watch, 2020; The Education Partnership [TEP] center, 2020). Gallagher (2020) asserted that the development of children's literacy skills is connected to success in school and later in life. In countries where school systems have not been able to adapt to distance learning, parents may therefore need to fill the role of full-time teachers so that their children's literacy skills can be continually developed at home during school closures. This has placed unprecedented burdens on parents, as they need to find ways to support their children's literacy development while also continuing to support their families economically.

Little is known about what parents are doing to support and develop their children's literacy skills amid school closures in low-resource contexts like northern Nigeria. Our study contributes to the literature with in-depth interviews with parents in Kano state on how they are assisting their early grade children in improving their literacy skills at home. Using data collected after more than two months of school closures, three research questions were answered in this study:

1. How are parents supporting the literacy development of their children at home during COVID-19-related school closures?

2. What are parents' challenges when supporting their children's literacy development at home during COVID-19-related school closures?

3. What are the perceived impacts of COVID-19 on children and families?

Background and Context

The impact of COVID-19 on education in low- and middle-income countries

Before the COVID-19 pandemic began, more than half of the children at the age of 10 in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) could not read and comprehend simple text (World Bank, 2019). With the movement of learning to remote platforms, the learning crisis in LMICs has likely worsened, especially among children who do not have access to online learning platforms (Sharma, 2020). While over 70% of middle-income countries have been able to move to online learning platforms (Jordan, 2020), less than 25% of low-income countries have been able to set up online learning platforms (Sharma, 2020). Many households in LMICs do not have access to the internet to ensure their children learn on the remote learning platforms (Sharma, 2020; Jordan, 2020). Niazi (2020) conducted a desk review and qualitative interview study to examine how COVID-19 affected students attending low-fee private schools (LFPS) in LMICs. The study found that many children in LFPS do not have the opportunity to learn online due to limited access to devices and the internet. The unequal access to the internet for children to learn would likely exacerbate learning inequalities (Sharma, 2020). Also, parents are expected to assume the role of a teacher to ensure their children are learning. However, with Sharma (2020) reporting that 82% of parents in LMICs experienced a decline in their earnings in the first month of the

COVID-19 crisis, they are likely to pay more attention to meeting the basic needs of their family and less attention to the continuation of their children's education at home (Sharma, 2020). Parents' reduced attention to their children's education during school closures in LMICs would likely reduce their children's learning capacity (Mayurasakorn et al., 2020).

A study recently simulated the effect of COVID-19 school closures on children's learning poverty in LMICs (Azevedo, 2020). Learning poverty is defined as the percentage of 10 year-old children who cannot read and comprehend simple stories or texts (World Bank, 2019). The simulations revealed that in LMICs, the learning poverty rate of children could increase from 53% to 63%. This 10% increase in the learning poverty rate means that out of 720 million primary school-age children, 72 million more are likely to fall into learning poverty (Azevedo, 2020). Countries in East Asia and the Pacific, Latin America, and South Asia are expected to have higher learning poverty than countries in sub-Saharan Africa (Azevedo, 2020). COVID-19, therefore, has placed roadblocks in the global progress toward increased access and quality of education.

COVID-19 and education in Nigeria

In Nigeria, many children lack the appropriate level of reading skills for their age and grade. On national assessments, the average literacy and numeracy scores for fourth graders were below 50% (Ogbunna, 2016). An analysis of the 2015 National Education Data Survey (NEDS) dataset showed that only 17% of pupils met the minimum proficiency levels in literacy (Adeniran et al., 2020). The reading outcomes of children in northern Nigeria are lower than those in southern Nigeria (Onwuameze, 2013). Pflapsen et al. (2016) reported that most sampled students from Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano,

and Katsina in northern Nigeria had zero scores in many Early Grade Reading Assessment tasks. Kano state, which is the focus of this study, has the highest population among all the states in Nigeria and the nation's second-largest city. Early Grade Reading Assessment results in Hausa and English carried out in Kano state showed that most pupils were unable to read (RTI International, 2014). Some of the contributing factors for these poor outcomes include large class sizes, inadequate teaching and learning materials (Adamu et al., 2020), and ongoing violent conflict in the region (Bertoni et al., 2019).

To reduce the widespread impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Nigerian Federal Ministry of Education closed the schools in the nation, introduced virtual learning platforms and gave out links to e-learning resources for students to learn (TEP Center, 2020). Most of the states in Nigeria also organized lessons on television and radio (TEP center, 2020). However, many children do not have access to this remote learning, especially those from low-income households (Amorighoje, 2020; Hussain, 2020; Mayah, 2020). Forty percent of the population in Nigeria lives on less than \$400 per year (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2020); laptops and internet access are largely out of reach for this group. The inequitable access to remote learning may exacerbate the gap in the learning outcomes of rich and poor children (TEP Center, 2020). In Nigeria, the National Bureau of Statistics [NBS] (2010, as cited in Adigwe and van der Walt, 2020) reported that the adult literacy rate is 56%. Considering that there are low parental literacy levels in Nigeria (Adigwe & van der Walt, 2020), at-home learning may not occur at all (Samuel, 2020). It is likely that many children were not learning during the school closures (Obiakor & Adeniran, 2020). This means that children's

reading outcomes in Kano state and other parts of Nigeria may get worse.

One large-scale survey has been conducted on this topic in Nigeria. The Education Partnership [TEP] Center (2020) carried out an online survey and phone interview with 626 parents across 31 states in Nigeria to examine how parents supported the learning of their children during COVID-19 school closures. The study found that 83% of parents reported assisting their children to learn. Those parents who supported their children said that they assisted them in reading, encouraging them to read on their own, doing online classes, downloading educational materials online, and listening to educational programs on the radio. Parents believed that the educational support that their children got at home would help to improve their academics. Parents who were not assisting their children were asked why they were not doing so. 38% said they could not assume the role of teachers as they did not have the necessary pedagogical skills to teach; 30% of them said that someone else is helping their children; and others said they were too busy to teach or they could not afford the cost of educating their children at home. The TEP study reported that parents complained that children were distracted from learning because they were not used to studying at home. Parents also said that their children mostly learn on radio, television, and WhatsApp.

Most of the parents in the TEP study were from Lagos state, where access to technology is relatively high, and included students through higher education. Also, the TEP study's design was primarily quantitative, with some supplementary qualitative data. This study identifies the need to have an in-depth understanding of how parents support their children's literacy development in Nigeria, especially northern Nigeria, where children's

access to technology and reading skills are low. Hence, we conducted an in-depth qualitative interview study with parents to ascertain how they support their early grade children in improving their literacy skills at home during COVID-19 school closures in Kano state, Nigeria.

Methodology

We conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with 15 parents in Kano State, Nigeria. At the time of the interviews in May 2020, schools had been closed for more than two months. We interviewed slightly more female (53.3%) than male (46.7%) parents. On average, participants had four children. Forty percent were bachelor's degree holders, and 73% were civil servants, such as public school teachers and university lecturers. Employment type and education level were used as proxies for parents' social class in our analyses. The majority of the sample (86.7%) were middle-class, while 13.3% were of lower socioeconomic status.

One of the authors conducted interviews, using a semi-structured interview protocol, with the assistance of two postgraduate research assistants. The interviews were conducted in both English and Hausa, with participants choosing the language they preferred. The interviewers sought the consent of the parents to audio record the interviews, and the recordings were later transcribed. The interview responses were translated from Hausa to English by one of the authors, and another author cross-checked the translations.

We used a thematic analysis approach to analyze the qualitative interview data. This method allows us to explore the perceptions of different parents, identify differences and similarities in parents' perceptions, and get unanticipated insights (Nowell et al., 2017). After we familiarized ourselves with the

interview data, we developed an initial codebook. Two authors sorted and collated the codes identified into themes and reviewed the themes to ensure that inadequacies are identified and adjusted in the initial codes and themes. Another author ensured that there was accuracy in the sorting and collation. After identifying themes, we developed detailed analyses of each theme and connected all themes to this study's research questions. We used Dedoose software to code our interview data. We quoted the participants' words intensively in this study to enhance the validity of our analyses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We discussed the results of our analyses with three of the interviewees to enhance the accuracy and validity of our findings.

Findings

The closure of schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic has posed an unexpected burden on parents in northern Nigeria. Parents worked with their family members to support their children to learn how to read despite their busy schedules, lack of teaching skills, and textbooks. Parents perceived that their efforts would improve the literacy skills of their children. More broadly, many parents believed that school closures had improved their relationships with their children and allowed them to spend more time on their children's moral development and other skills beyond academics. These themes are discussed in greater detail below.

How are parents supporting the literacy development of their children at home during COVID-19-related school closures?

Activities parents or caregivers engage in with their children

All fifteen parents in this study reported that they guided their early grade children to learn how to read during school closure. As one of the parents, a male with four children, said,

It is the sole responsibility of parents to guide their children to learn. Do these school closures mean the stoppage of your child(ren)'s literacy? The answer is no, because we, as parents, it is mandatory to oversee our child(ren)'s literacy not only during the lockdown but also after the lockdown (Parent 3).

Another male participant with three children said, "It is the parents' responsibility to guide their children to learn because if the parents do not support their children's literacy amid these school closures, the literacy of their children won't be developed at all" (Parent 12). Parents said they assisted their children in learning how to pronounce words fluently, read and answer short passages from textbooks, learn new words, do their homework, and review their books. Parents were not the only ones guiding their early grade children to learn how to read, however. Five out of fifteen parents said that older siblings also helped their younger children learn how to read. A male participant with seven children said, "His elder brothers are supporting him more than me. And they use two different periods (morning and evening sessions) to guide him" (Parent 14). Two additional participants said their extended family members helped them develop their children's literacy skills. One of them, a mother with a postgraduate diploma in education, said, "One of his Aunties supports his literacy during this phase from time to time. She used to dedicate much of her time towards completing his homework, and also do other literacy development related activities" (Parent 9).

In order for parents to make the teaching of reading easier for themselves, they bought textbooks and instructional materials to use at home. As a male participant with a bachelor's degree (Parent 2) said, "I bought some textbooks to upgrade his literacy. Some of these books are essential for teaching and learning of reading in early grades." One female participant who is a civil servant also stated, "I bought a new markerboard that enables him to write both English and Hausa alphabets" (Parent 10). In addition to buying teaching and learning materials, some parents incentivized their children to encourage them to learn. As a female participant with four children said,

For instance, when I assist my children in studying, I will tell them that whoever does his reading very well will be granted permission to watch kids' program on MBC station. As a result of that, everyone will be engaged in their study so that they will be allowed to watch the television program (Parent 8).

One male parent with three children reached out to a neighbor for guidance on literacy instruction. He explained, "I contacted a neighbor of mine who is the assistant headmaster at a local primary school to supply me with the current Universal Basic Education (UBE) syllabus so that I can teach my child" (Parent 7). The participant also discussed how his professional background helped him to support his child, saying,

I learned how to teach and handle the children's literacy in early grade. In my profession (teaching), I am handling senior secondary school students only, but due to these school closures, I took my time to learn how to develop children's literacy, particularly in early grades.

These comments highlight the advantage that educated parents had in supporting their

children. This parent knew not only that the UBE syllabus existed but knew how to obtain a copy and then how to use it to support his child's learning. This type of knowledge would be uncommon among lower-socioeconomic status parents.

Supports outside of the household

Despite the sample being well educated compared to the Nigerian population more broadly, many of the parents in this study acknowledged that they alone could not provide all the educational support that their children needed. Two parents reported that they enrolled their children in private tutoring so that a personal teacher could help their children develop their literacy skills. A participant said, "I have already employed one personal teacher to offer him an extra lesson at home" (Parent 3). While private tutoring is common in the upper primary and secondary grades in Nigeria, it was less common with younger students prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Various forms of technology also offered support for literacy learning. Some parents encouraged their children to watch or listen to programs on children's literacy, organized by the government, on television or radio. As one of the participants, said, "Most times, I encourage him to listen to the radio program on children's literacy, after which I always ask him questions on what he learned" (Parent 2). Parent 3 also said, "He is watching television stations that have children's programs on how to promote literacy. There are also cartoon stations that enlighten him on how to spell different words." In addition to this, two parents said they installed an application to enable their children to learn how to read on their mobile phone handsets. As one of the participants stated, "I have installed an educative application on my handset for him to learn how to pronounce some

alphabets” (Parent 3). While these supports did not replace schooling, they helped parents fill in the gaps between what children needed and what they could do on their own.

What are parents’ challenges when supporting their children’s literacy development at home during COVID-19-related school closures?

Participants in this study discussed challenges at three levels: parent, child, and external to the household. First, while all parents reported that they were supporting their children’s education at home, some reported barriers to these efforts. Some parents revealed that books were not available at home for them to teach their children how to read. Aside from the unavailability of books, three parents, all holding at least an ordinary diploma qualification—a two-year program offered at polytechnics, monotronics, technical colleges, and some universities in Nigeria— said that they did not have the necessary teaching expertise to assist their children in reading. One female participant with a diploma qualification said, “The foremost challenge is the lack of expertise in some important subjects. That’s why most of the time I ask his father to assist him. Honestly, this is one of my challenges.” (Parent 6). Again, given that these parents were comparatively well-educated, these challenges would be exacerbated among lower-socioeconomic status Nigerians. One low-income parent said she was not literate enough in English to teach her child how to read. As she said,

The challenge I am facing is that he is usually taught in the English language. I have little or no knowledge of it as I hold my secondary school certificate in Arabic and Islamic studies. So, there are at times when he may need my support in reading that I couldn’t assist due to my insufficient formal education (Parent 4).

Two other parents said their busy schedules hindered them from teaching their children how to read. A parent explained,

The major problem is too much commitment that I have. In this total lockdown, the government has announced only three days as ‘Lockdown free days.’ During these days, I will be out of my residence to work till the end of the day. I do not have time to sit with her to guide her to learn how to read during these days (Parent 7).

Other challenges reported by parents included the presence of multiple children needing support in the household, parents’ mobile phone batteries getting low while using apps and online videos, and parents getting tired of teaching their children while also meeting other commitments.

Second, some participants discussed barriers related to their specific children’s needs or behaviors. In some cases, children’s attitude toward learning and their inability to learn in isolation made it challenging for parents to teach them how to read. Five parents stated that their children found it difficult to learn alone, as they missed interacting with their classmates. As a female participant who is civil servant said, “My child lost interaction with his school colleagues as he does not go anywhere. This is making it difficult for him to learn because he is learning in isolation” (Parent 5). Another participant (Parent 12) stated, “He misses mingling and learning with his colleagues.” Parents also complained that their children had difficulty focusing on learning. As one of the participants said, “He wants to play while learning is ongoing, and sometimes, he can disrupt our learning by making gratuitous requests to ease himself” (Parent 2). As Parent 11 also stated, “My only problem with her is that she wants to take part in playing while learning is in progress.” Another parent reported that her child lacked

any interest in learning how to read. Since the children are in early primary grades, these challenges are not unusual, particularly the challenge of capturing and holding their attention for learning while at home.

Third, participants discussed challenges that were situated outside of their households, and therefore out of their control. During the lockdown, the Nigerian government organized television and radio programs that enable children to learn how to read; however, parents reported that some children in their communities did not have access to these programs for lack of equipment and/or electricity at home. Also, children who had access to these programs were not assessed to determine whether their reading skills were improving, so there was no evidence as to whether they were effective substitutes for formal schooling. As a female participant with four children asserted, “The current children’s radio program, for example, is helping our child to learn without testing his ability” (Parent 4). Some of the parents did not feel they were equipped to tell whether their children were learning.

What are the perceived impacts of COVID-19 on children and families?

Most of the parents in this study believed that school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic would have a negative impact on the literacy development of Nigerian children who did not get educational support during school closures. However, they did not generally believe that their own children would be impacted, due to the steps they had taken to support literacy development. As Parent 7 said, “I do not think the lockdown will negatively affect my child’s literacy development, as I support her always.” Another participant (Parent 3) explained, “No, I do not think the

school closures can have any impact on my child’s literacy because excellent measures were put in place to support his literacy development.”

Looking beyond the specific impacts of the school closures on literacy development, we asked participants what other impacts they had observed in their families and communities. To our surprise, the majority of the participants spontaneously identified positive outcomes of the pandemic. Parents reported that their children consumed more food daily and had more time to play. Twelve out of fifteen participants reported that the school closure enabled parents to learn how to be more patient, understanding, and have better relationships with their children. As Parent 15 said, “We are experiencing a more cordial relationship with our children. We are always together with them, which has helped to minimize disputes.” Another participant (Parent 1) asserted, “Before, he used to spend several hours in school before this lockdown, but now that he is spending a lot of time with his brothers and us, we have a better relationship with him.” Given the stress that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to many households (Power, 2020), we had not anticipated that family relationships would be reported as stronger in so many households.

Other positive outcomes included more time to teach children how to do activities such as cooking, household chores, and local crafts. As Parent 6 stated, “I taught her how to do some domicile affairs, such as sweeping the rooms and washing of dashes. She is now practicing all these activities because she has ample time during these school closures.” Another participant said, “He gains experience in the field of local crafts because it is one of the major occupations we have in Yalwa Quarters. He is now practicing how to make embroidered gowns before the school reopens” (Parent 4). These

skills will help children to contribute to their households and communities as they become adults.

Parents also spoke of the opportunity to attend more closely to the discipline and moral development of their children. Two parents stated that they have been able to instill more discipline in their children. As Parent 14 said, “We are monitoring their attitudes, and they comply with the instructions we give to them.” One parent discussed the connection between discipline and morality, stating, “Our experience has been great because we learned more about the good and bad deeds of our children due to this school closures, and we also put in place possible measures to reshape them” (Parent 8). Participants’ efforts to improve the behavior of their children could help the children to engage respectfully and positively with their peers and teachers when they resume schooling.

One concern raised by parents was the broader impacts of the COVID-19 school closures on examination results at the national level. Because Nigerian primary schools use examination results to promote pupils to higher classes (Ewa, 2015), parents were greatly concerned about the impact of school closures on the pupils’ examination results. Two parents feared that most Nigerian children would fail their examinations unless schools engaged in thorough reviews before the exams. Parent 10 said, “It will be nice to use a few weeks to review previous lessons with the children before the examinations. If the children begin examinations without doing so, the result may lead to mass failure.” Participants knew that many early grade students may have forgotten what they were taught before the long school closures. Therefore, they emphasized the need for schools to review the content that students were taught before the lockdown so that children can avoid repeating grades. Grade repetition can

decrease students’ self-esteem and motivation while also increasing the cost to the government of educating a child (Ndaruhutse et al., 2008).

Conclusion

This study examined how parents support their children in developing their literacy skills during COVID-19 school closures in Kano state, Nigeria. We found that parents actively assisted their children in learning how to read. This corroborates the finding of the TEP Center study (2020), which found that most parents are helping their children learn at home. Similar to the TEP Center (2020) study, we found that parents assisted their children to read their books and encouraged them to learn on the radio. Parents in our study believed that their efforts would ensure that the school closures did not negatively impact the literacy development of their children. However, parents believed that school closures would negatively affect the literacy skills of children who did not get educational support during school closures. This would be the case for many children in Nigeria, because most do not have access to remote learning (Amorighoye, 2020; Hussain, 2020; Mayah, 2020) and are waiting for schools to reopen before they start learning (Obiakor & Adeniran, 2020). Our finding that the school closure would likely decrease children’s literacy skills aligns with Azevedo (2020), who found that the percentage of children who cannot read and comprehend a simple story or text could increase by 10% in LMICs due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite the effort of the parents in this study to ensure that the literacy skills of their children continued to develop, we found that parents were faced with the challenges of getting textbooks and lack of expertise teaching reading. Also, parents complained that their busy schedules hindered them from helping their

children learn to read. This aligns with the findings of other studies that some parents were not teaching their children to learn at home due to time pressures (TEP, 2020). The parents in this study complained that their children got distracted easily when they were learning as they wanted to play while learning, another finding echoing the report from the TEP study (2020). Additionally, parents in our study found that it is difficult to motivate children to learn in isolation. Parents admitted that they did not know whether their children were in fact improving their literacy skills, due to lack of any ongoing assessment.

This study also found unexpected positive perceived outcomes of the pandemic-related school closures, looking beyond traditional academic learning. Parents reported that they were able to instill more discipline in their children and pay more attention to their moral development. The parents said they had more cordial relationships with their children because they spent more time with them. The children had more time to learn how to do activities such as cooking, household chores, and local crafts. As noted above, most of the participating parents were well-educated, on the whole, and mostly middle-class. They greatly valued education. However, parents were also able to see the positive side of a very trying and stressful period.

Based on these findings, we recommend that the Nigerian government and other relevant educational stakeholders invest more in remote learning platforms so that more children, especially low-income children, will have consistent access to educational programs on radio, internet, and television. The development of a user-friendly, simple literacy assessment that would enable parents to monitor their children's literacy development would be an asset to parents and schools alike, helping to

identify students who will need greater support upon school reopening. This would be a useful tool even after the end of the pandemic. In the short term, the Nigerian government should provide funding to parents to purchase textbooks and other instructional materials for home use.

The major limitation of this study is that most of the parents sampled were middle-class and educated. Azubuike et al. (in press) found that parents who have secondary education or less are more likely to say that they do not know how to support their children to learn remotely. Those that have secondary education or less are most likely to be low-income earners. If our sample included more low-socioeconomic status parents, parents' ways of supporting their children's literacy development and their challenges may be different. Further research should be conducted to investigate how low-income parents supported the literacy development of the children during COVID-19 school closures. Also, the parents in this study were interviewed after schools had been closed for two months. If the study were conducted after a longer period of school closure, parent efforts in supporting the literacy development of children may have differed.

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