



COVID-19 AND EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS OF NIGERIAN YOUTHS

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic has radically altered how we learn, work and live. This research paper aimed to study the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the educational and occupational aspiration of young Nigerians. A close examination among participants who took part in one-on-one, semi-structured interview conducted through zoom. Questions probed participants' hopes, dreams and perceived obstacles regarding school activities and work.

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic (the disease caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome - corona virus) has had a detrimental effect on global health care system with a ripple effect on every aspect of human life. This pandemic has radically altered how we learn, work and live. Work and schooling have been affected drastically around the world. Within the first few months of the outbreak of the pandemic in Nigeria, the nation witnessed high rate of unemployment and lay-off of workers increased and this affected several families in the country. Those fortunate enough to keep their jobs may have to start working from home, students of all ages were forced to adapt to virtual learning.

Students from privileged backgrounds, supported by their parents, found their way past closed school doors to alternative learning opportunities, while those from disadvantaged backgrounds remained shut out when schools were closed by the federal government. This crisis exposed the inadequacies and inequalities in the educational system; the lockdown of Nigerian schools has interrupted conventional schooling system. Some educational communities made some concerted efforts to maintain learning continuity during this period while teachers had to adapt to new pedagogical concepts and modes of delivery of teaching for which they may not have been trained. This shift has drastically changed the landscape of



Thematic content analysis was performed using both deductive and inductive approaches from the schools selected. Three major themes emerged which included: the benefits and drawbacks of working and learning from home, financial changes and concern, and hope, optimism despite the challenges posed by Covid-19 pandemic. Working and learning from home were discussed among participants. A consensus was reached that working and learning from home had many benefits, but some expressed their concern about the quality of online education. The Covid-19 pandemic also caused financial hardship as many people were laid off from their jobs, therefore forcing their children to delay in educational plans. However, majority of the participants expressed positivity and hope for the future inspite of the threat of death by Covid-19. Although educational or occupational plans may change, their aspiration largely remained the same of hopefulness of future life.

Key words: Covid-19, pandemic, educational aspiration and occupational.

education and work with many speculating that these changes will remain long after the pandemic is over.

Identification period in human life ranges between twenties to fifties as a period of time people are formative in their education and work career. Individuals in this age range may consider finishing a degree program, switching jobs or pursuing additional post higher education. The impact the pandemic had on academic and professional goals is important to consider, as educational and occupational aspirations and goals have been associated with academic achievement and post secondary school and higher school's enrolment (Agger et al; 2018, Ahuja, 2016).

For the purpose of this paper emphasis will be focused on educational aspirations at all levels and type of education one hopes to achieve, coupled with occupational aspiration as a career one hopes to achieve. These aspirations are influenced by numerous factors which include engagement in school, socio-economic status of the individual in Nigeria. Gutman and Schoon (2018) stated that adolescents who were more engaged in school reported higher aspirations and less uncertainty regarding their aspirations. In the opinion of Geckova et al (2010), Scandone (2018) Wang & Eccles (2012), studies have shown that students who value education and have a positive attitude towards school are more likely to have high educational aspiration. Although, socio-economic status seems to have some negative effects on educational aspirations, Okondwo (2014) viewed educational studies as a positive association between the two variables of educational and occupational aspirations. Clark (1986), Puzic et. al (2019), Stockfelt (2016), analysed that there appears



to be an association between educational aspiration and health, including mental health and health behaviour among human beings. In an analytical view of Rothon et. al (2011), he explored educational aspirations of adolescents in the United Kingdom and found that psychological distress is associated with lower educational aspirations, while self-esteem was associated with the desire to remain in post-compulsory education. In view of the analysis, the Nigerian government needs to reactivate the education system which needs to reinvent the learning environment so that digitalization expands to complement student - teachers and other forms of relationship for the adolescent.

Method

Samples of thirty (30) participants were selected among the invited examiners of the West African Examination Council to participate in the marking exercise of 2021. The current sample (N = 30) were drawn from a larger longitudinal study among the examiners. The examiners from various schools in Edo North Geo-political consented to be contacted for the research work. They were invited to take part in the lecture about educational aspirations at Our Lady of Fatima College Auchu Hall. The average age was 50 and consisted of 20 men and 10 women who were classroom teachers. The minimum academic qualification was Teachers' Grade II Certificate, with highest educational qualification as Masters in educations. The participants had been in teaching field for over a period of ten to twelve years of teaching; five were part-time teachers and two applicants seeking job opportunity or seeking financial assistance from the Federal Government and private individuals to open their own business enterprise.

Interview Guide

The study used a semi-structured interview guide with open and closed-ended questions (see Table A) which included specific questions that relate to both educational and occupational aspirations and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic; closed ended questions were followed up for further elaboration from questions 2-5 in the Table A. Knowing therefore that educational level of the individual varied, the questions about hopes and dreams were intentionally based on education and work of the average Nigerian. Based on verbal assent of participants, the interview opened with questions about hopes and dreams, people who influenced dreams, followed by the challenges experienced by facilitators which impacted these dreams over Four specific periods: (1) Aspirations during school period (2) At finishing school (both secondary/Higher education) (3) Since the pandemic was declared in Nigeria, (4) Most recently pre-pandemic.

Table A: Interview questions related to the Covid-19 pandemic.

1. In your own opinion, has the covid-19 pandemic declaration in Nigeria changed your educational hopes of life?



2. Before the virus, did you define yourself as hopeful or hopeless pursuing your dreams on education?
3. Did your hopes or dream change or remain the same since the declarations of the virus?
4. Before the pandemic was declared, were you actually interested in education?
5. Are you still interested in pursuing your dreams in the area of study or you have changed your focus?
6. With the current health challenges, do you consider switching to studying medicine, public health, nursing or other health care pursuit?
7. Health and education are not the only areas affected by the pandemic; will you shift your focus because of the pandemic?
8. What are your feelings about future employment opportunities in the country Nigeria?

Results

The participants provided in-depth comments on Covid-19 and its impact on the educational and occupational aspirations and plans for an average Nigerian. Three major themes emerged viz:

- (a) Benefits and drawbacks of working and learning from home – This is the most prominent theme throughout the interview conducted which centred on working and learning from home. This characterized the issues of access, preferred learning styles, balancing work and family with the participation in formal education. No demographic differences were observed.
- (b) Distance learning improves Access to Education – Participants interviewed spoke about virtual or distance learning as a result of the pandemic. Most participants discussed on how the increase in distance learning will promote greater access to education in Nigeria with inconsistent educational laws coupled with greater flexibility in their lives. The participants mentioned specifically that learning from home would allow them to have a balanced job with schooling, if the Nigerian government with federal and states ministry of education have a well planned and un-interrupted flow of academic calender.
 - i. **Respondents' View:** I would love to say, it would have been easier for me to if I wanted to go back to school because you know education online. If the facilities are available, I feel like even if I am at home, I can access, maybe I can manage like a part-time job and schooling at the same time.
 - ii. I think it would help me to go back to school if everything is online.
 - iii. I think if it was something that I was really interested in, and if it could have held my attention, I would definitely do it especially if I can do it online.



- (c) For many, in-person learning is preferred – Although many participants expressed appreciation for the accessibility provided by distance learning, however, some felt that in- person learning was superior, they also felt that the learning experiences they had were different and that in-person interactions were essential to learning.

Respondents' View: I don't like learning online, I prefer in-person teaching and learning, I like someone beside me, I like classroom environment with co-students receiving teachings from a classroom teacher.

- (d) Working from home allows for greater flexibility – Many of the participants highlighted some benefits of working from home which were made possible due to the pandemic, working from home allows greater flexibility and more conducive to be with one's family to learn from ones' family.

Respondents' View: I don't have to leave my home; I can do my counselling in my own house while my kids are taking their nap. I am lucky to work at home now; I have been wanting it since my salary will be paid in full by government. I don't have to commute all the way rushing down on a journey of 40 minutes to get to office.

It gives me the opportunity to think on starting a new business outside government work, I enjoy the present situation in the country: sit at home and work.

- (e) Financial Involvement – Majority of the participants have the fear of job in-security during the pandemic crises. The fear of losing jobs, lack of salary payment by governments and private business owners. The pandemic has actually affected their finances with the present economic hardship Nigerians are facing. Much money is spent on sit- at- home- and- work, the pocket is dry. There was expression of uncertainty of job security, many private enterprises will fold up, and thereby many Nigerian workers will be thrown into the labour market.

- (f) Financial changes brought by the pandemic impact on educational plans – Some of the respondents expressed their concern on what the pandemic has brought which has affected their educational plans. Returning back to school would have been the best option, but expressed absolute disappointment, his response:

Respondents' View: I do plan on going back to school (university) and sign for a new course different from what I have read before, but I just financially need to find the money as Covid-19 did affect the finances of the country because you know, there will be extra costs and things are difficult and federal government of Nigeria is not helping issues.

Another Respondent: One expects the Nigerian government to do all it can to reduce exchange value of Dollars, Euro and Pound, and at the same time increase



the wages of Nigerian workers to enable them meet up with the current hardship if one needs to further educational career.

(g) Hope for achieving educational and occupational plans – Participants were generally hopeful about achieving their educational and occupational aspirations in the future, although they speak with cautious optimism. They expressed their opinion that the pandemic has caused a lot of changes within the education, work and their personal lives but however did not affect or change their aspirations.

Respondents' View: I feel hopeful that it is definitely attainable, so I don't feel like the virus has had an impact in what I hope for myself personally and academically. I feel quite hopeful that my future is still going to be okay despite the threat of death by Covid-19. I think it has changed my plans, but not completely just my approach to, how to, how to pursue them.

One of the participants remained not only hopeful in her own ability to achieve her educational goals but also in school's ability to adapt, she respondent in this form:

"If Corona-virus doesn't get any better in the country, I think that the Federal government of Nigeria should make adequate arrangements for us to go into Universities, Polytechnics and Colleges of Education to pursue our education and finish what we need to finish in order to graduate".

Discussion

Findings indicate that, although the pandemic has changed the timeline of many participants' paths, many found that the pandemic actually has made future educational plans more accessible, expanding learning options will make it easier for people to attend school. Many of the participants seemed hopeful that if there is increase in remote learning opportunities and face-lift in the educational facilities being provided by the Nigerian government, with the pandemic creating havoc, there is still hope and education future of a Nigerian student will be bright.

Through this form of learning, they feel they will be better able to balance work and family responsibilities than if they are required to attend classes in person. They were of the view that the ability to work while taking classes will also help with saving for higher education. Most of the teachers consulted in the course of work expressed concern about the quality and effectiveness of distance learning compared with in-person learning. The view appeared to have been shared among the Auchi Polytechnic students. They expressed their view that online learning during the period of the pandemic has negatively impacted the quality education they dream of, if only the Nigerian government would make adequate arrangements and provide the facilities needed for in-learning. Similarly a study among the students of Auchi Polytechnic, Auchi, in Engineering department, reported



that they will feel better if learning takes place in a physical classroom than online as a result of various form of practical that needed to be carried out under the supervision of the lecturers.

Benson (2018) reported that remote learning may be beneficial to some students of higher institutions who experienced some social pressures or distractions in a classroom settings; he further assert that most students find distance learning to be lower quality due to increased distraction at home, difficulty in self-regulating learning and a lack of direct interaction with their instructors/teachers and peers group. Technical difficulties such as poor internet connection in Nigeria can also make it challenging for students to engage in class fully.

Considering the importance of students' engagement with a school to their aspiration, Gutman & Schoon, (2018) clarified that distance learning during Covid-19 may lead to lowered aspirations, especially if distance learning remains prevalent after the pandemic ends. This view was favoured by majority of the participants. Although the proportion of jobs which can be performed from home is higher, but the feasibility of working from home may vary from worker to worker, based on housing and family considerations. Nevertheless, some of the respondents were of the opinion that work from home is listed zero, to commute time and the ability to care for their children during work hours are major benefits to them.

From various news reports on Nigerian Television Authority, Channels Television, World News reports, the Covid-19 pandemic prompted some individuals to consider returning to school. This trend is seen as it affects economic downturns as several people believe that the benefits of returning to school during this period of recession or high rate of unemployment outweigh the costs. One of the participants mentioned that job insecurity may persuade some people to pursue an educational path that will lead to a more stable career and good job benefit than the threat of death by Covid-19 and job security. This desire for job security reflects in the increase in applications by students in professional courses that will meet the financial expectation of Nigerians.

However, in course of writing this paper, it was discovered that many interviewed persons chose not to further their educational career, for the pandemic had put a financial strain on them, this has affected their ability to pay school fees. This situation remains a major barrier for poor Nigerians in furthering their educational career; even including vocational education students in achieving their desired goal. Outside education, the economic hardship during the pandemic has caused many private businesses to fold up; even those on educational scholarship were faced with option to put to an end the aspiration to acquire a certificate or additional qualification. Although the educational aspiration still remains very high, it will remain to be seen if financial barriers brought on by the pandemic will remain low within the windows of educational expectations.



Discrepancies between educational aspirations – the level of education hoped to achieve by individuals and educational expectations – the level of education they think will be achieved has been associated with emotional behavioural problems as well as test anxiety.

Some of the respondents who shared their stories generally expressed optimistic view of the pandemic (Covid-19), focusing on the benefits to receive rather than the drawbacks of stay at home, work or learn. They were of the opinion that the pandemic seemed to give them a good time to reflect on priorities and their future plans to achieve their desired goals; for majority of the participants, the pandemic did not dampen their hopes, dreams and determination to continue pursuing and achieving their desired goals. Most explicitly stated that they felt hopeful about accomplishing their educational and occupational goals in life inspite of the threat of death by the pandemic (Covid -19). The future for every average Nigerian will be bright.

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic has created unprecedented changes in Nigeria in terms of how we work and learn. In spite of the impact of the pandemic on Nigerians, mostly young adults, educational plans and the type of work and learning in which we engage ourselves in, the constraints have not drastically affected the educational aspirations that there is still hope for the future. With this situation, many Nigerian youths still regard the future with the spirit of optimism and there will be great opportunities for the average Nigerian to continue learning, believing that the Covid-19 pandemic must surely come to an end. The shift to more virtual learning and working from home has benefited many in various capacities such as allowing access to educational opportunities with great flexibility in all their daily schedules. A lot of challenges face distance learning in Nigeria especially network break-down, coupled with inconsistent light supply. This is followed by financial difficulties as Nigerians hardly have the financial means of living; also, the feeling of job insecurity has disrupted the plans of some of the respondents to acquire further educational qualification. Nevertheless, for many youths and adults, the hope for the future remains bright despite all the threat of Covid-19 pandemic.

Recommendations

Here are some recommendations that could be of great assistance for educational aspirations of Nigerian youths:

- (a) The Federal government of Nigeria should have a good frame-work in providing balanced infrastructure in Nigerian schools.

- (b) Online training facilities followed with well trained facilitators to train the teachers and students should be provided for Nigerian schools.



- (c) Financial package should be made available to students to enable them aspire for higher education.
- (d) Nigerian government should ensure job security for Nigerian workers in sit at home to work both in government and private enterprise.
- (e) Television programmes on education should not be limited to specific subjects but should cover all the academic subjects to enable all students benefit.
- (f) Communication system should be improved upon to enable the average Nigerian receive a balanced information.
- (g) The Federal government should work on power epileptic to enable all Nigerians to benefit.
- (h) E-learning centres should be provided by the Nigerian government to meet the demand of an average student.

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