

LEARNING AT HOME DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN ABIM DISTRICT, UGANDA: LEARNERS' PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to explore learners' perspectives on the extent to which they were supported during COVID-19. The study also examined the challenges learners faced while learning at home during COVID-19 pandemic in Abim district, Uganda. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used. Data were collected from learners at primary and secondary levels. Participants were sampled randomly from the five parishes in the sub-county of Morulem, Abim district. Out of the total population of learners in Abim district, 375 learners were sampled to participate in the study. Questionnaires and focused group discussion guides were used to collect data. Research ethics were observed through seeking access to the field and seeking participants' consent. In addition, confidentiality and anonymity were also key ethical considerations. Quantitative data were analysed systematically. Data analysis was done using SPSS involving descriptive and frequency counts presented using tables, graphs and pie charts. Qualitative data were analysed using thematic content analysis. Data revealed that learners faced a challenge of poverty which resulted to malnutrition, lack of access to media such as radios, television and newspapers. This was coupled with lack of power and internet connectivity. Learners also faced a challenge of lack of study routine and too much domestic chores; lack of role models and guidance from their illiterate parents. As way forward, it is proposed in this study that government should provide adequate self-study materials and learners should be supported to access media such as radios, TVs and newspapers. Parents should be encouraged to provide adequate scholastic materials; give learners ample time for studies and parents should support learners through guidance and counselling. Finally, this study recommends that with the demands COVID-19 has exerted on education, nations worldwide should revise their policies on teacher preparation and development, curricular, parental involvement, funding and infrastructural development.

Keywords: Learning at home; Coronavirus disease, pandemic, lockdown

INTRODUCTION

The Family as the smallest unit in a society plays very vital roles in the social and academic life of a child. Families reinforce the importance of school, homework and activities that build student skills and feelings of success (Epstein et al., 2002). However, due to the outbreak of coronavirus disease (COVID) in 2019, many families now face new challenges of how to care for their children while working and schooling at home during this unprecedented outbreak (Cross, 2020). COVID 19 pandemic that has now infected over 5 million people with over 300 thousand deaths has resulted to socio-economic and political issues across the globe. Education sector has been greatly affected.

When COVID broke in Wuhan city, China in November, 2019 and later spread to other parts of the world, efforts have been made by many governments to combat the spread of the virus by closing many businesses including schools (Putra, Liriwati, & Tahrin, 2020). When schools are closed, learners experience isolation and lack of social contacts which are vital for learning and development (Bhamani, 2020). In order to address schooling challenges governments introduced online communication apps such as WhatsApp, radio, television, cell phones, computer and network hardware, satellite systems and other services. UNESCO also estimates that more than 1.3 billion students in schools, colleges and non-formal education institutions have been laid off to learn with on line facilities (Putra et al., 2020).

In Uganda, COVID has not only become a health issue but also economic and political. Before Uganda received her first victim of COVID-19 on 21st March 2020, the Ugandan government on 18th March 2020 announced measures to curb down the spread of COVID (UNICEF, 2020). These measures included but not limited to closing all educational institutions, suspension of communal prayers, ban all Ugandans from traveling to and through category one countries, close all weekly markets and shopping arcades and ban all public gatherings among others (Kasozi, et al., 2020). As per the Presidential directive dated 18th March 2020, all primary and secondary schools, universities and other institutions of learning closed starting Friday, March 20, 2020. Ministry of education and sports shortly announced alternative measures to help students learn from home. These included self-study materials which were distributed to all learners all over the country, online learning platforms were created and learners were encouraged to study via televisions and radios (MOES, 2020). As much as these initiatives are found to be suitable to address the need of the time, it has also given a tough routine to parents who are working from home and simultaneously taking the responsibility that their children's learning process continues seamlessly during the times of COVID-19 (Bhamani, 2020). On the other hand, this might have also caused inequalities between the urban and the rural learners. And yet nothing is known about learners' perception of the support rendered to them and challenges they faced while learning at home. Hence, the purpose of this study was to explore the learners' experiences of home learning in times of COVID-19 in Abim district, Uganda.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In Uganda, education is recognised as a powerful tool in achieving social, economic and political development of the country. However, with the outbreak of COVID-19 which resulted into the closure of all educational institutions, teaching and learning process right from kindergarten up to the university has been interrupted. Ministry of education and sports proposed on line

teaching and distribution of self-study materials but there are already complaints from stakeholders that this has instead resulted to learning inequalities between learners from urban and rural areas. If this situation is not checked, it may result into increased equity gaps, drop in numeracy and literacy levels, school dropout, high rate of teenage pregnancies and early marriages. Several studies have been conducted nationally and internationally but nothing is known about the situation of home learning during COVID-19 outbreak in Abim district. Consequently, this study was conducted to explore the learners' experiences of home learning in times of COVID-19 in Abim district, Uganda.

THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study was to examine learners' perception of learning at home during COVID-19 pandemic in Abim district, Uganda.

Specific Objectives

The specific objectives of the study were to:

1. Explore the extent to which learners' academic activities were supported at home during COVID-19 pandemic in Abim District, Uganda
2. Examine the challenges of learning at home during COVID-19 pandemic in Abim district, Uganda

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. To what extent were learners' academic activities supported during COVID-19 pandemic in Abim district, Uganda?
2. What challenges did learners experience while learning at home during COVID-19 pandemic in Abim District, Uganda?

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The study sought to examine learners' perception of learning at home during COVID-19 pandemic in Abim district, Uganda. The study was conducted with primary and secondary school learners from Morulem sub-county in Abim district. Abim district is one of the remote districts in Karamoja, North Eastern Uganda. The study was conducted between April and September 2020. This was a period of lockdown with high cases of COVID-19 in Uganda. The study sought to examine the academic support learners received while at home during COVID-19 pandemic and challenges learners faced during COVID-19 pandemic in Abim district, Uganda. The study focuses on learners' perception of learning at home and challenges they faced because in whatever situation, education must remain a priority necessary to transform the society.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The findings of this study might enhance stakeholders' insights into the various strategies to enhance learners' academic activities at home during COVID-19 pandemic. The findings might also inform policy development and both local and national levels to address challenges of home learning during COVID-19 pandemic. Other countries might adopt the various academic support to learners at home being rendered by the government of Uganda. The findings and conclusion from this study might inform future research on the impact of COVID-19 on education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

From the time of the outbreak of COVID 19, people have been impacted in different ways. Lockdown measures adopted by many countries have affected individuals socially and economically. The closure of all educational institutions have also affected the education system across the globe and has altered the lives of 1,576,021,818 learners in 188 countries (Bhamani, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). The lockdowns have put an extraordinary challenge on the governments to ensure that there should be continuity of learning (Bhamani, 2020). Thus, many countries implemented diverse measures to deal with the educational crisis. In this section, several literatures have been reviewed on the academic support during COVID-19 pandemic and the challenges of home learning during COVID-19 pandemic in Abim district, Uganda.

The importance of home environment for learning cannot be underestimated. Several research findings have found positive association between home environment and academic achievement of learners (Brossard et al., 2020). However, in the middle of COVID-19 pandemic, there are a myriad of challenges being faced by many learners and parents across the world. In attempt to mitigate the above challenges, the governments and parents world over, have come up with the variety of measures including online teaching and learning, distribution of self-study materials among others (Bryan, 2020; UNICEF, 2020). Several studies revealed that online teaching was the major strategy adopted to enhance home learning during COVID-19 pandemic (Bhamani, 2020; Cross, 2020; Engzell, Frey, & Verhagen, 2020; Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020). In addition, provision of guidance and counselling services are avenues where children are helped to study from home during COVID-19. This allows for the creation of a school-like family. A school-like family recognizes that each child is also a student by reinforcing the importance of school, homework, and activities that enhances student's knowledge, skills and feelings of success (Omara, 2020). This is in line with the assertion that if children are not provided with a routine of learning at home to replace school, they will face increased risks such as physical and sexual abuse, hazardous and exploitative child labour, child marriage and early pregnancy (Save the Children, 2020).

In the USA and Europe, most governments have advocated for access to online learning platforms. However, these do not favour children from low socioeconomic backgrounds. In a study conducted by Van Lancker and Parolin, (2020), it was revealed that students from high socio-economic status backgrounds had access to online learning while a considerable number of learners from low socioeconomic backgrounds were grappling with online learning challenges such as lack of computers, lack of access to internet and unconducive study environments. A study conducted by Putra et al., (2020) also found that students reported that support given by their school was very low. This affected their home learning activities to a greater extent.

Besides the educational challenges, children from low socio-economic backgrounds also face a challenge of food insecurity. Masonbrink and Hurley, (2020) adds that parents in poverty are facing their own pandemic-related stressors such as unemployment, at-risk jobs and may lack the time or resources to support remote learning. The authors recommend that nutrition and learning needs of poor students must continue to be addressed. Secondly, teachers should also consider how to adapt their learning materials for students without access to wireless internet, a computer, or a place to study.

The education level of parents affected home learning during COVID-19 pandemic. A study by Engzell, Frey and Verhagen, (2020) revealed that parental education had both positive and negative effects on the child’s level of commitment while learning at home. Parents who have attained high level of education were able to provide support inform of guidance and counselling, provision of scholastic materials and conducive learning environment as compared to parents with low level of education. From the two studies above, it is clear the level of inequalities created. Bayrakdar and Guveli, (2020) noted that since schools have a key role in creating equal opportunities, transferring schooling to families is likely to increase learning inequalities generated by family backgrounds. This scenario was observed from their study that children receiving free school meals, from single-parent households, with less-educated parents, and with Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage spend significantly less time on schoolwork at home than their peers during the COVID-19 school closure. Secondly, children with Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds spend the least amount of time on home learning and are overrepresented in not receiving distance teaching provisions. The authors conclude that schools’ provisions of offline and online distance teaching and homework checking, significantly increase the time children spend on home learning and mitigate most of the disadvantages.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A concurrent mixed method design was adopted for this study. Mixed methods design enables the researcher to view a problem from numerous perspectives; enables merging of quantitative and qualitative data in order to develop a complementary picture and to examine experiences along with the outcomes (Creswell, 2009). Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. Quantitative methods are vital for measuring generally phenomena that are known and essential patterns of association such as inferences of causality (Ingleby, Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2012). Qualitative data aid researchers to understand processes that emerge over time, provide detailed information about the context, and underscore the voices of participants through verbatim quotes (Maxwell, 2012).

The study population comprised all the learners in Abim district, Uganda. However, 375 learners from Morulem sub-county were randomly sampled to take part in the study. Out of these participants, 300 responded to a questionnaire while 75 participated in focused group discussions. Most previous studies rely on getting information about learners from adults such as parents, teachers or neighbours but involving learners in this current study helped the researcher to gain greater insights from learners themselves on their perception of learning at home during COVID-19 pandemic. Data were collected using questionnaires and focused group discussions. Questionnaires comprised three sections. Section A was on bio data, section B had questions on academic support by government, parents and others stakeholders. Section C had open ended questions on challenges that influence home learning during COVID-19 lockdown. Questionnaires were administered to 300 learners in Morulem sub-county, Abim district, Uganda. However, only 200 questionnaires were returned as shown in the table below.

Table. 1 Number of respondents by educational level and gender

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Primary	79	39.5	39.5	39.5
	Secondary	121	60.5	60.5	100.0
	Total	200	100.0	100.0	
Valid	Male	93	46.5	46.5	46.5
	Female	107	53.5	53.5	100.0
	Total	200	100.0	100.0	

Focus group discussion was sought as the suitable method to explore children’s perspectives within a peer group setting. Additionally, the use of focus groups with learners recognises learners as authorities and important informants on their perceptions on home learning during COVID-19 pandemic (Nixon & Halpenny, 2010). Five focused group discussions were conducted with 60 learners from parishes of Katabok West, Katabok East, Aremo, Adea and Angolebwal in Morulem sub-county. Each focus group had 15 participants, comprising of both male and female participants. Focused group protocol had questions on key topics

such as academic support by government, parents, other stakeholders and challenges they faced while learning at home COVID-19 pandemic.

Ethical considerations were met through getting introductory letter from the university to the Residence District Commissioner (RDC), Abim to allow gathering of data from participants during COVID-19 lock down. Permission for children to participate in the study was sought from their parents or relatives and consent was sought from participants (learners) who were above 18 years of age, employing principles of anonymity. By keeping identity of participants confidential offered privacy to the participants (Magwa & Mugari, 2017).

Quantitative data were analysed systematically. Data analysis was done using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) involving descriptive and frequency counts presented on tables, graphs and pie charts. On the other hand, qualitative data was analysed using thematic content analysis (Magwa & Mugari, 2017). This was to allow generalisation of related themes, codes and sub-codes to enable presentation, synthesis and discussion of results. Finally, both quantitative and qualitative data were merged during discussions of findings and conclusion.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study sought to examine learners' perception of Learning at Home during COVID-19 pandemic in Abim district, Uganda. This section presents findings and discussions on the academic support rendered to learners during COVID-19 pandemic to enhance home learning and the challenges that affected home learning during COVID-19 pandemic in Abim district, Uganda. It also presents conclusion and recommendations to challenges learners faced while learning at home during COVID-19 lockdown.

ACADEMIC SUPPORT TO LEARNERS DURING COVID-18 PANDEMIC

The study established that there were several strategies employed by different stakeholders to support home learning during COVID-19 lock down in Abim district, Uganda. These strategies included distribution of self-study materials, teaching online by government and provision of scholastic materials, Guidance and Counselling and provision of ample time for studies by parents and other stakeholders.

One of the key stakeholders was the government of Uganda. Data from the survey responses of 200 learners revealed that the government of Uganda supported home learning activities through supply of self-study materials and teaching over media such as radios and televisions (TVs) as presented in the table below

Table 2. Government support during COVID-19 Lockdown

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Self-study materials	48	24.0	24.0	24.0
Teaching over media	7	3.5	3.5	27.5
None	145	72.5	72.5	100.0
Total	200	100.0	100.0	

Responses from participants as presented in table 2 above shows that government supported home learning through supply of self-study materials and teaching over radios and televisions.

Out of the 200 learners who responded to the survey, 24% acknowledged receipt of self-study materials through their Local Council one (LC1), 3.5% attended lessons over radios or television. However, 72.5% of the learners did not receive any support from the government of Uganda. Data from all the focused group discussions confirmed that while some learners received academic support from the government, a majority of the learners did not receive any support to help them continue learning during school closure.

When the noble coronavirus hit the globe, many countries developed measures to reduce the spread. Uganda was one of those countries that closed all educational institutions in March 2020. The Ugandan ministry of education and sports in its circular dated 20th April 2020 directed all educational institutions to use media learning and self-study materials (MOES, 2020). In one of the focused group discussions, participants confirmed receiving self-study materials from their Local Council One (LC1) chairperson. "For us we were given reading materials sent from ministry of education through our LC1 chairperson. The material has summary of notes for all the subjects" said one of the participants (FGD 17th July 2020). However, the excerpt below from one of the participants during a focused group interview is a clear indication that lack of government support to rural areas affected continued learning during school closure in Abim district.

"We are not learning at home. Some of us left our books at school because it was abrupt closure of schools. Some of us haven't received any support from the government. Is it because we are in rural areas?" (FGD 13th July 2020). This was reiterated by another learner "... this is unfair, we are hearing that some sub-counties got reading materials but we have not seen any" (FGD 14th July 2020). The finding is in line with the study conducted by Putra et al., (2020) on the Students Learning from Home Experience during Covid-19 School Closures Policy in Indonesia. The study found out that much as governments of different countries support students home learning, a number of students especially from remote places lagged behind due to the difficulty of internet access and expertise in using technology by many students affected home learning.

The second category of stakeholders who supported learners with home learning were their parents. According to the learners, parents supported their home learning through provision of scholastic materials, support to access lessons over radios and TVs, data for online learning, guidance and counselling and provision of ample time for studies, as shown in the pie chart below

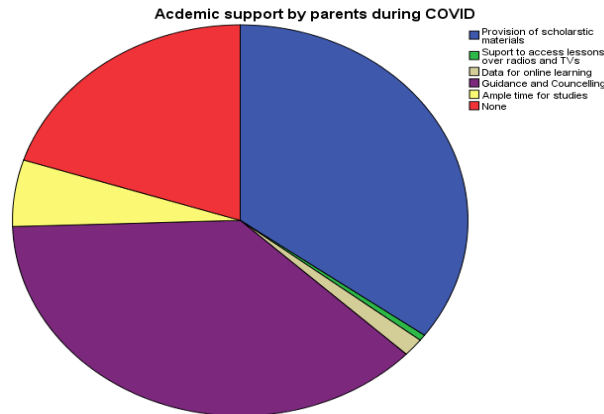


Fig 1: Academic support by parents during COVID-19 Lockdown

From the figure above, 35% of the learners confirmed receipt of scholastic materials from their parents, 0.5% of the respondents were supported in accessing lessons over radios and television, 1.5% of the learners received data for online learning from their parents. In addition, 37.5% of the learners were provided guidance and services while 5.5% of the learners were given ample time to study while at home. On the other hand, 20% of the learners did not receive any academic support from their parents.

Suspension of face-to-face learning has left parents with a lot of tasks to play as key stakeholders in children’s learning at home. These include provision of scholastic materials, conducive learning environments, meals for children and provision of guidance and counselling among others. However, this has further accelerated learning inequalities between disadvantaged learners and their well-off counterparts. These excerpts from the various focused group discussions confirm the inequalities. *“my parents gave me reading materials like notes, newspaper pull outs with revision questions. He also gave me reading table and light”* (FGD 15th July 2020). Another learner had this to say: *my father who is a teacher was concern about my studies. He was talking with me regularly about academic issues. He told me to read hard. He also helped me with my holiday packages”* (FGD 17th July 2020). However, some of the students from low socio-economic backgrounds had this to say: *“for me my parent could not do anything. She cannot buy books, pamphlets and provide data for internet. I rely only on notes from school* (FGD 16th July 2020). *My father was reluctant. He could not help us with learning materials. He could spend most of the time just drinking. No advise. No time for us* (FGD 17th July 2020). Research findings by Human Rights Watch, (2020) shows that school closures caused by the pandemic exacerbated previously existing inequalities, and that children who were already most at risk of being excluded from a quality education have been most affected. It is apparent that much as some parents took the initiative of helping children with home learning activities, some parents from low socio-economic status backgrounds did not provide academic support to learners as expected.

Thirdly, learners also revealed receiving support from other stakeholders apart from the government of Uganda and their parents. They received academic support from close relatives, older siblings, friend/peers, religious leaders and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO) in their community as presented in the figure below.

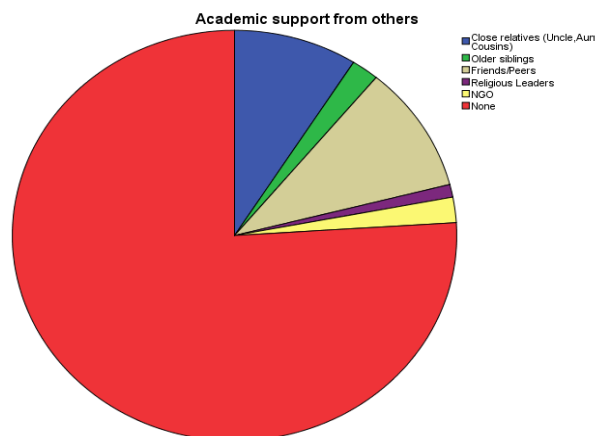


Fig. 2. Academic support from other stakeholders during COVID-19 Lockdown

Several key players are vital in supporting children's home learning during COVID-19 pandemic. From the pie chart above, 9% of the learners acknowledged receiving support from close relatives such as uncles, aunts and cousins, 2% confirmed receiving support from older siblings, 10% from friends, 10% received academic support from religious leaders while 2% received from NGOs.

During focused group discussions learners confirm receiving this assistance. *"we had not completed some topics in mathematics so my brother helped me with doing some numbers in mathematics which were difficult"* (FGD 13th July 2020). *"I live with my uncle who is good at chemistry. He taught me senior three work on mole concepts and some other chemical equations which I feared most. But now am enjoying chemistry"* (FGD 14th July 2020). However, 76% of the learners reported that they did not receive support from any other stakeholder as illustrated in the following quotes: *"No I have not received any academic support. My parents are not educated so they were not bothered. They don't even have that time to advise me. It is even very hard this time of lock down to go to friends or relatives. I just stay home like that"* (FGD 17th July 2020). Given the above state of affairs, it is of paramount importance for education partners to support home learning during COVID-19 pandemic. In response to the critical need to support home learning, Save the Children together with other development partners in Uganda proposed the following strategies in supporting children's home learning activities. They include: Ensure that education is a core part of the COVID-19 response and is adequately funded from the start; Align funding and activities to support government response plans; Support alternative and informal learning to continue while schools are closed; Support planning to prepare for schools to reopen safely; Ensure that children are protected from harm; and ensure that the most vulnerable children, such as refugees and children with disabilities, have access to learning (Save the Children, 2020)

CHALLENGES THAT INFLUENCED LEARNING AT HOME DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Findings revealed that there were several challenges learners faced while learning at home during COVID-19 pandemic. Data from open ended questionnaires revealed that learners faced a challenge of lack of access to media such as radios, television and newspapers due to poverty. This was coupled with lack of power and internet connectivity. Learners also faced a challenge related to lack of study routine and too much domestic chores; lack of consultation with teachers and peers; lack of role models and guidance from their illiterate parents.

Poverty deprived many learners from accessing nutritious foods for their good health. Most learners reported eating one meal a day because their parents could not afford adequate and balanced diet. *"...from school we use to eat three meals but now we eat only supper. No breakfast. No lunch because my parents are poor. They cannot afford expensive foods. This has affected our health..."* (FGD 13th July 2020). It is now clear that the lives of millions of children and parents have not only been affected by school closure but also by the economic and health implications of coronavirus pandemic (Bayrakdar & Guveli, 2020; Bryan, 2020). Report from learners in Abim district indicated that besides feeding and access to basic necessities, lack of access to media inhibited their home learning during COVID-19 lockdown.

Data collected through open ended questionnaires and focused group discussions revealed that learners in Abim district faced a challenge of lack of access to media such as radios, television and newspapers. They reported that lack of power and internet connectivity even made the situation worse as reflected in the following quote. *"... the problem was inability to access teachings over radios or TVs. Most radio stations are not heard from our place. No TV in our home. So, it was difficult to learn online. Our place doesn't have internet. There is no electricity connected here"* (FGD 14th July 2020). In the circular released by the government of Ministry of Education and sports (MOES), schools were encouraged to use online media such as radios and televisions to embark on online teaching (MOES, 2020). Nevertheless, from the above expressions, it is a clear testimony that most students from rural areas did not access lessons and assessments using those media. There is fear across the globe that COVID-19 pandemic will increase inequalities between the poor and the rich (Bayrakdar & Guveli, 2020; Bhamani, 2020; Engzell et al., 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2020). In the same vein, Drane, Vernon, and Shea, (2020) note that a vicious cycle of intergenerational disadvantage can be seen in the lives of many young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds. This is as a result of digital divide between learners from low and high socio-economic status backgrounds, with students from low socio-economic status backgrounds hindered by inadequate exposure to modern technologies.

Schools provide a conducive environment where students interact with their teachers and peers in various indoor and outdoor academic activities. However, during mandatory school closure by the government of Uganda, all students were sent home. This brought about academic loneliness where students did not have direct contacts with their peers and teachers in case of academic challenges. Data from survey and focused group discussions revealed that learners in Abim district faced a challenge of limited contacts and consultation with peers and teachers as seen from their verbatim quotes: *"I feel lonely because I can't meet my friends to discuss academic issues. I can't even call them on phone to discuss assignment sent from school because I don't have a mobile phone"* (FGD 16th July 2020). Another participant had this to say: *"my group members are far apart. We don't communicate. My teachers just send work without guidance. I don't know what to do"* (FGD 15th July 2020). When children continue to be confined at home in order not to contact the disease, the effect may not only be on syllabus coverage but adversely on the future of these children because schools play a vital role in developing children's talents and abilities and in equalising opportunities in society (Bayrakdar & Guveli, 2020). A study by Putra et al., (2020) indicated that during school closure, a number of students could not access support from their teachers and peers and thus parents with their questionable qualifications became teachers' substitutes. Most learners expressed that their parents' low level of education affected home learning activities. Parents with low level of education could not provide adequate support services in form of drawing academic routines, guidance and counselling and checking learners exercise books. These were some of the expressions: *".....my father stopped in primary three and cannot help with primary seven work. Whenever my teacher sends work, he doesn't bother seeing whether I have done or not..."* (FGD 13th July 2020). *"my mother can't see any value in education. She doesn't care about my studies. When I ask for books and pens, she*

can't give. Her attitude is low on education" (FGD 14th July 2020). Parents cannot be the teachers' substitutes because of the lack of professional training that teachers go through otherwise this will be the potential to students' stress because of the average inability of parents to replace the role of school teachers (Putra et al., 2020).

Most participants during group interviews confirmed that there were too much domestic chores levied on them and that they did not have study routines while at home. "we faced a lot of challenge doing garden work and other house chores (FGD 15th July 2020). "you wake up in the morning and go to the garden. You come back late when you are very tired. There is no time to even read because other house chores need to be done after garden work. I even pray they open schools (FGD 16th July 2020). "some of us do not have study time table. So, every morning you wake up and do what you want. Even those who have do not follow because there is too much work to do" (FGD 14th July 2020). Save the Children, (2020) in the report on Keeping Children Learning and Safe During COVID-19 posits that if children are not provided with a routine of learning at home to replace school, they will face increased risks such as physical and sexual abuse, hazardous and exploitative child labour, child marriage and early pregnancy. Heavy burdens will also rest on girls who often absorb additional domestic chores while at home and thus risk being exposed to domestic violence. Keeping daily routines is helpful to talk with learners about why they are staying home and what your daily structure will be during this time (Cross, 2020).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

The novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has resulted into millions of deaths and other issues that need to be addressed such the closure of schools and the support learners received during home learning. The study focused on understanding the various support and challenges learners faced during home learning in Abim district. On support rendered to learners, data from survey and focused group discussions revealed that they received support from the government of Uganda through supply of self-study materials and teaching over media such as radios and televisions (TVs). The second category of stakeholders who supported learners with home learning were the parents of the learners. According to the learners, parents supported their home learning through provision of scholastic materials, support to access lessons over radios and TVs, data for online learning, guidance and counselling and provision of ample time for studies. Thirdly, learners also received support from other stakeholders apart from the government of Uganda and their parents. They received academic support from close relatives, older siblings, friend/peers, religious leaders and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO) in their community.

On challenges that affected learning at home, findings revealed that there were several challenges learners faced while learning at home during COVID-19 pandemic. Data from open ended questionnaires and focused group discussion revealed that learners faced a challenge of poverty which resulted to malnutrition, lack of access to media such as radios, television and newspapers due to poverty. This was coupled with lack of power and internet connectivity. Learners also faced a challenge related to lack of study routine and too much domestic chores; lack of consultation with teachers and peers; lack of role models and guidance from their illiterate parents.

Recommendations

The findings of this study are useful to individuals, institutions and governments in several ways. First, the findings on government support to learners during COVID-19 through supply of self-study materials and teaching over radios and televisions are in congruent with the findings of other previous studies. In this era of COVID-19, engaging learners through distance learning is gaining momentum. However, it has also been noted that most learners cannot access learning through the various media. This might disadvantage learners from low social economic status backgrounds. As way forward, it is proposed in this study that government should provide adequate self-study materials and students should be supported to access to media such as radios, TVs and newspapers. In addition, teachers' role in facilitating distance learning and providing individualised feedback to learners cannot be underestimated, thus government of Uganda and other countries should embark on post-pandemic efforts in training teachers to integrate technology in their teaching and learning practices to bridge the current gaps in teacher preparation, usage and access to digital devices. Secondly, parents play very key roles in supporting home learning activities such as provision of scholastic materials, conducive learning environments, meals for children and provision of guidance and counselling. The findings of the current research are in agreement with other previous studies that revealed that most parents especially in rural areas could not fully support children's learning at home, given their low social economic statuses and low level of education. Parents should be encouraged to provide adequate scholastic materials; give learners ample time for studies and parents should support learners through guidance and counselling. Finally, this study recommends that with the demands COVID-19 has exerted on education, nations worldwide should revise their policies on teacher preparation and development, curricular, parental involvement, funding and infrastructural development.

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