

Exploring Policies and Implementation of Almajiri Schools during COVID-19 Pandemic. A Literature Review

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Abstract

Purpose: *The primary purpose of the paper is to contribute to the gap in literature on the impact of COVID-19 and the schooling of marginalized poor children in developing countries as Nigeria, and Africa in general. The secondary purpose presented an educational collaborative and community based policy options for the learning continuity of the target marginalized student learners of the paper, which can be applied to similar population across developing countries.*

Design/methodology/approach: *It is based on qualitative educational orientation, using an Exploratory Literature Review (ELR) that focused on integrative literature review design of documents, publications and media blogs. Selected literature were reviewed through keyword searches of electronic data base as Advance Google Search, Google Scholar, Academic and Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC). Qualitative content analysis (QCA) was adopted to generate major themes from the literature and presented in a table. The paper discussions are supported with citations of excerpts from the reviewed literatures.*

Findings: *Major findings revealed that state policy initiative of closing down schools during COVID-19 and repatriating all Almajiri students back to their rural families were in effective as it lead to the discontinuation of their schooling and learning. In addition, their return home facilitated the students return to street begging and farm labor for family sustainability. Findings revealed that the public school broadcasting as radio and television during COVID-19 lock down were not reachable nor utilized by Almajiris due to their rural geographic locations and none affordability of those technologies by their families. Almajiri parent's low socio-economic status contributed to low or no support of the students learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Almajiri students as rural dwellers experience more schooling discontinuities' during COVID-19, thereby creating further educational inequalities and gap between them and urban learners in the country.*

Research limitations/implications: *The paper will incite further research on the impact of COVID-19 and schooling, especially in the developing countries of Africa.*

Originality/value: *The paper will be of value in the area of COVID-19 and schooling in the developing countries, particularly Africa. It will also add to the gap in literature in the area of schooling during pandemic in developing countries. Additionally, the paper will challenge educational policy makers and stakeholders to a more responsive inclusive learner initiatives on schooling during pandemics in south nations.*

Article Classification: *Literature Review; Case Study*

Keywords: Almajiri Students, COVID-19, School Closures, Educational Policies, Poverty and Education, Africa

Introduction

Education in emergencies (EiE) generally refers to providing safe, relevant and quality education to people affected by conflict, health-related crises or natural disasters. It focuses on the cycle of prevention of, preparedness for, response to, and recovery from emergencies (Winthrop, 2020; Federal Ministry of Education, 2020). In West Africa, the Ebola virus epidemic which killed over 11,000 people, kept at least 5 million children out of school was tagged (EiE) (World Bank, 2015a). Specific to Nigeria, the quick educational policy response to COVID-19 is in sequence to the nations' past experience with the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) pandemic (BBC, 2014; Olalekan & Adeola, 2015). The EVD pandemic impacted the closure of schools in Nigeria and other countries of West Africa.

Despite school closures, countries around the world emphasized that 'education must continue' by pursuing innovative educational policies and curriculum delivery (World Bank, 2020). Additionally, Wintrop (2020 cited by Federal Ministry of Education, 2020, p.11) stated that EiE is a critical response in emergency contexts as it offers numerous benefits. First, it helps to meet the psychosocial needs of children and youth affected by trauma. Second, it provides physical and social protection for children and youth who face higher risks such as unwanted pregnancies, violence, sexual assault, substance abuse, among others. Third, EiE helps young people keep familiar routines by maintaining study skills to mitigate the number of school dropouts and easily reintroduce schooling. Finally, EiE is important in conveying survival and peace building messages and skills (UNHCR, n.d, cited by Federal Ministry of Education, 202, p.11).

Despite the national and state response to COVID-19 learning continuity, there are great disparity between public and private schools across Nigeria (Adeyeye, 2020; Akintunde, Chen & Di, 2020), with public primary and secondary school students unable to access quality curricula delivery and resources as compared to tuition paying independent (private) K-12 schools (Al-Amin, 2020; BBC Africa, 2020). Greater disparity are noted between the public urban and rural schools across the country. Indeed, the disparity of sustainable learning enforced by curriculum delivery is most challenged with the Almajiri Model Schools (AMSs) and Koranic Traditional schools (Tsangaya) for the poor and marginalized street beggar children of northern Nigeria (BBC Africa, 2020; Gansler, 2020).

The paper explores the situational educational response of the northern state governments' management of Almajiri Model Schools (AMSs) and the Koranic traditional school students' learning, parents and religious communities' response during COVID-19 lock down of schools. The context of the paper are organized under the following themes as the preambles of the research orientation, the historical foundation and objectives of the Almajiri Model Schools (AMSs), synopsis of the north western state governments' response to the students' learning continuity during the COVID-19 pandemic, and parental and religious community perceptions response to the students home learning initiatives during the pandemic period. The paper concludes with suggested educational policy options that might be considered by the north western state governments running Almajiri Model Schools (AMSs) and community parents as stakeholders. The aim of the policy options is to ensure sustainable learning and effective curricula delivery for the Almajiri students during the COVID-19 pandemic, and in future schooling emergencies/pandemics.

Research Procedures. The paper is a report of a qualitative educational research orientation, with a focus on documentary design that reviewed various literature related to the topic (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Open research question include the following: What happened to the Almajiri students in both the Koranic and model schools during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown of schools? Specific research questions include: what curriculum delivery methods were used or should have been used to ensure learning continuity of the Almajiri students during the COVID-19 lockdown of schools and in future pandemics? What learning support initiatives did parents and community stakeholders provided to Almajiri students during the COVID-19 lockdown of schools? and what learning support initiatives as policy implementation can states and parents can provide to the Almajiri students in future schooling pandemic closures?

Responding to the research questions requires a more creative collection of data by adopting "an integrative literature review approach that can be useful when the purpose of the review is not to cover all articles ever published on the topic" (Synder, 2019, p.1). As noted by Synder (2019) that the qualitative "purpose of an integrative literature review as critiquing and synthesizing, narrow the research questions, through sample

characteristics as research articles, books, and other published texts, [which] contributes to taxonomy or classification of [texts]” (p.334), this justified the choice of an integrative literature review for the paper.

A total number of forty three (43) selected literature were reviewed through keyword searches of electronic data bases as Advance Google Search and Google Scholar, Academic and Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) (Creswell & Gutterman, 2019; Naidoo, Naidoo & Muthikrishna, 2016). As common with the practice of integrative literature review, research papers, books, journals and allied documents related to the topic were analyzed for themes (Snyder, 2019; Torrance, 2005). Other text reviewed for themes in this paper included social media blogs, and print media commentaries related to the topic.

The method of generating the themes engaged the qualitative phenomenological research procedures of reading the papers several times to capture the main ideas of the context (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 2018). This process led to the classification of themes as per each literature reviewed below.

Table 1:1. A Taxonomy of Literature Reviewed and Themes Generated

Type of Literature	Electronic Data Base Search	Author(s)	Themes
Online Public Document	Google Search	Federal Government of Nigeria (2020). COVID-19 school closure.	Situational Analysis on COVID-19 Educational Policy in Nigeria
Online Public Document	Google Search	Nigeria Education Sector (2020). COVID19 Response Strategy in North East	
Online Public Document	Google Search	Nigeria (2020). Education in emergencies. Working group	
Online Public Document	Google Search	Nigeria Center for Diseases Control (2020). COVID-19 Nigeria	
Online Public Document (Media Print)	Google Search	Salau, S. J. (2020). Post Covid-19: Experts urge Nigeria to adapt education policies to cope with technology integration	
Online Public Document	Google Search	United Nations Children’s Fund (March, 2020), UNICEF key messages and actions for COVID-19 prevention and control in schools	
Online Public Document	Google Search	UNESCO, Nigeria. (2020). School meets the learner approach under COVID-19. Abuja Nigeria	
Online Public Document(Media Print)	Google Search	Vanguard Nigeria (May 27, 2020). How COVID-19 can help Nigeria rethink education policy — AACS	
Online Public Document	Google Search	World Bank. (2020). The COVID-19 pandemic: Shocks to education and policy responses.	
Online Public Document	Google Scholar	Reimers, F., Schleicher, A. (2020). Schooling disrupted, schooling rethought. How the Covid-19 pandemic is changing education. OECD	
Online Journal	Google Scholar	Harris, A. & Jones, M. (2020). COVID-19. School leadership in disruptive times. <i>School Leadership & Management</i>	
Online Public	Google Search	Amoo, A. (2018). List of Tsangaya	Foundations and

Document (Media Print)		(Almajiri) model schools built during Jonathan across Nigeria	Nature of Almajiri Model and Traditional Schools
Online Public Document (Media Print)	Google Search	Agbo-Paul, A. (2016). Almajiri schools: The rot and the blame game (1). International Center for Investigative Reporting	
Online Public Document (Media Print)	Google Search	Ayando, S. (2020). Senate seeks the revival of Almajiri schools built by former president Jonathan	
Online Journal	Google Scholar	Usman, M. L. (2008). Assessing the universal basic education primary and Koranic schools' synergy for Almajiri street boys in Nigeria.	
Online Blog (World Bank)	Google Search	De Simone, E. M. et al (June 16, 2020). World Bank Blogs. Learning despite the crisis: the case of Edo state, Nigeria	Curriculum Delivery in COVID-19 in Nigerian Schools
Online Public Document (Media Print)	Google Search	BBC Africa (May 15, 2020). Coronavirus in Nigeria: The child beggars at the heart of the outbreak. Nigeria.	
Online Public Document	Google Search	Department for Education, UK (2020), Guidance: Supporting vulnerable children and young people during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak - actions for educational providers and other partners	
Online Public Document	Google Search	Federal Ministry of Education of Nigeria (2020). Education coordinated under COVID-19 response strategy	
Online Public Document	Google Search	Fugate, J. (May 27, 2020). Education prevails: Nigerian teachers discuss challenges in COVID-19.	
Online Public Document	Google Search	Kazeem, Y. (July 21, 2020). Nigerian schools are being forced to rethink their digital limits and education models in a pandemic	
Online Blog Document	Google Scholar	Global Education Monitoring Report. (2020). Covid-19: Where's the discussion on distance learning training for teachers? World Education Blog	
Online Research Document	Google Scholar	Green, F. (2020). Schoolwork in lockdown: new evidence on the epidemic of educational poverty. LLAKES Research Paper 67.	
Online Blog Document	Google Scholar	Hussain, T. (April 28, 2020). Education and COVID-19 in Nigeria. Tackling the digital divide. SOAS Blogs	
		Nigeria Education Sector (2020). COVID19	

Online Public Document	Google Search	Response Strategy in North East	
Online Research Document	Google Search	Müller, L. & Goldenburg, G. (May 7, 2020). Education in times of crisis: the potential implications of school closures for teachers and students. A review of research evidence on school closures and international approaches to education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Chartered College of Teaching	
Online Public Document	Google Search	UNESCO, Nigeria. (2020). School meets the learner approach under COVID-19. Abuja Nigeria	
Online Public Document (News Print)	Google Search	Nigerian Mothers (2020). Almajiri crisis in northern Nigeria. A cry for our children.	Parents and Community Perception/Support during COVID-19 school lockdown
Online Public Document (News Print)	Google Search	Iyora, F. (Sep. 14, 2020). Contracting Covid-19 helped reunite Nigerian children with their families	
Online Public Document (news media)	Google Search	Wuilbercq, E. (Jan 27, 2021). Pandemic feared fuelling child abuse at Nigeria's Islamic schools	
Online Public Document	Google Search	Geoffrey, N. (2020). Children adjust to life outside Nigeria's Almajiri system. UNICEF Nigeria	
Online Public Document (news media)	Google Search	Orizu, U. (May 18, 2020). Nigeria: More Pain for Nigeria's Children Living Under Difficult Circumstances	
Online Public Document	Google Search	Kaalu, S. (2020). Kano parents taking responsibility for safe schools reopening. UNICEF (Nigeria).	
Online Public Document	Google Search	Azubuikwe, B O. & Aina, B. (August 17, 2020). How parents are supporting their children's learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria.	Suggested Educational Policy Options for Learning Continuity in COVID-19 schooling
Online Public Document	Google Search	Edge Foundation (2020). The impact of Covid-19 on education: evidence on the early impacts of lockdown	
Online Published Research Paper	Google Search	Cullinane, C., Montacute, R. (2020). COVID-19 and social mobility impact brief #1: school shutdown. Research Brief	

Online Public Document	Google Scholar	Green, F. (2020). Schoolwork in lockdown: new evidence on the epidemic of educational poverty. LLAKES Research Paper 67.	
Online Published Research Paper	Google Search	Lucas, M., Nelson, J., & Sims, D. (June 16, 2020). Schools' responses to Covid-19: pupil engagement in remote learning. National Foundation for Educational Research.	
Online Public Document	Google Search	Social impact of Health and Education, SHE (July 3, 2020). Reining back Nigeria's Post-COVID-19 education indicators of multidimensional poverty	
Online Published Research Paper	Google Search	University College London. (May 18, 2020). Briefing Note: Inequalities in resources in the home learning environment	
Online Published Research Paper	Google Search	The Education Partnership Centre (TEP Centre) (2020). Learning in a pandemic. Nigeria's response to teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic	
Online Journal	Google Scholar	Usman, M. L. (2008). Assessing the universal basic education primary and Koranic schools' synergy for Almajiri street boys in Nigeria.	
Online Public Document (Media Report)	Google Search	Wuilbercq, E. (Jan 27, 2021). Pandemic feared fuelling child abuse at Nigeria's Islamic schools. Thomson Reuters	

Foundation and Nature of the Almajiri Model and Koranic Schools

1.1. The Koranic Schools.

In Northern Nigeria, street beggar children are identified as Almajirai (singular Almajiri) who for the most are boys from ages 4-20 (Gansler, 2020; Ezegwu, 2020; Usman, 2008). In some literature, they are described as street urchins due to the nature of their survival activities as a deprived and marginalized vulnerable population (Abubakar-Abdullateef, Adedokun, & Omigbodun, 2017; Gasner, 2020). In 2014, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimated the number of these children at around 9.5 million in Nigeria (Gasner, 2020). Most of these boys migrate (with the consent of their parents) from rural areas to urban and semi urban cities' within West African Muslim countries to attend traditional Koranic schools under the tutelage of Mallams or Mullahs (Arabic word for teachers) (Eastern, 2000; Jaafar, 2008 cited by Usman, 2008).

Koranic schools have gained recognition as sources of basic religious literacy in most Muslim nations of the world (UNESCO, 1993 cited by Usman, 2008). In northern Nigeria, they are also referred as Makarantar Alo/Tsangayya (in Hausa language) and they are considered the oldest Islamic school types in the region (BBC Africa, 2020; 2014; Umar, 2003a cited by Usman, 2008). As Muslims, the boys are required by tradition to obtain basic religious literacy in these schools (Maqsd, 1978; Quasim, 1991 cited by Usman, 2008), with the possibility of acquiring advance Islamic education in marital law, taxation (for economics) (Gasner, 2020) and Islamic family law and jurisprudence (Usman, 2003; 2008).

All curriculum process and policies are implemented by the male pedagogue [Malam] (UNICEF, 1998/99:1, UNESCO, 1993 cited by Usman, 2008), who also serves as role model and locoparentis for the boys. The teachers at tsangaya are morally responsible for the care and nurture of the boys in their capacity as the locoparentis. The schooling organization allows each student to pursue an individual course of study (Abdurrahman & Canham 1978 cited by Usman, 2008), while the medium of instruction and learning is in Arabic and Hausa languages. The Quran and the Hadith are the central text resource in the general acquisition of knowledge, reading, language skills and expressive writing, while oral recitations are learnt through teacher scaffolding, in a sing song manner

for the boys to model (Fafunwa, 1974 cited by Usman, 2003; 2008). Specific songs as ‘yar bakara’ (Jaafar, 2006 cited by Usman, 2008) are learnt and used after school hours by the boys (who form groups of 2-4) to beg for alms from members of the public on the streets. Writing skills are practiced using the Arabic inscriptions, often modeled for the boys who imitate by writing on their slates or Alo (Usman, 2003; 2008). The repeated writing practice facilitates mastery and the development of fine gross motor skills.

Boys’ learning styles involves memorization, observation and imitation of peers for mastery learning. Despite the benefits of basic religious literacy and moral education obtained by the Almajiris, (Maqsd, 1978; UNICEF, 1993; 1998 cited by Usman, 2003; 2008) the limitations of the system are noteworthy. Recent deviation of the schooling objectives by some Koranic schools have been criticized on the teachers’ inability to deal with students’ enrollment increase and sustaining them economically as resident students (since the schools depend on charity), but rather encourage the boys to go to the streets and beg for alms, or serve daily during the day as child laborers at the expense of more time spent in school. Okoye & Yau 1999 cited by Usman, (2008) noted: “instead of educating their pupils and giving them skills and knowledge necessary for functioning effectively in society as they used to, Koranic schools have deteriorated to the extent that many people regard them as no more than a breeding ground for street beggars (p. 14).

These shortcomings of the traditional Koranic schools are leaving the boys behind in accessing formal education that will harness their knowledge, talent and skills in the economy and social mobility in the Nigerian society. These reflections were made by Nigeria’s educational policy makers at the federal level, thereby resulting to the foundation of the Almajiri Model Schools (AMs) in 2012 (Amoo, 2020)

1:2.The Almajiri Model Schools.

The foundation of AMS educational policy terms of reference are based on the federal National Policy on Education, Section 3, sub-section 15:3-10 C which states that “ as a means of accelerating development in primary education in certain areas, state governments are already considering measures by which suitable Koranic schools and Islamiyya [Tsangayya]schools, with necessary adjustment of curricula, could be absorbed into the primary [and secondary] school system (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2008; 2013,p.14).

In 2012 the federal government formally incorporated the Almajiri Education Program under the Universal Basic Education Commission and Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) (Lawal, 2019). Furthermore, in 2013, the federal government formally launched by opening one hundred and sixty five (165) Almajiri Model Schools, with majority in northern Nigeria (Amoo, 2018; Agbo-Paul, 2020). The aim of the AMS schools is to reduce the growing figure of out-of-school children (especially the Almajiris) in the country (Amoo, 2019; Lawal, 2019; Social Impact of Health and Education, 2020). AMSs schools were federally funded but managed by the northern states and local governments and Islamic scholars in these jurisdictions (Amoo, 2018; Lawal, 2019).

Despite the educational progress made, recent literature from the local print media, and documented minutes of Nigeria’s senate assembly reported that most or some of the AMS schools were abandoned (MacLeva, Umar, Adebayo & Auwal, 2017), with some of the pupils back on the streets as child beggars (Ayando, 2020; BBC, Africa, 2020; Geoffrey, 2020; Orjinmo & Abubakar, 2020). The educational setback of the Almajiris are influenced by negative cultural behavioral response of the students and their parents, which have not only reversed the small progress made on formal access to educational opportunities, but derailed the Almajiris fundamental human right to education. Local public observers of the educational policy implementation question whether Almajiri parents and community stakeholders were consulted prior to the establishment of the model schools or not. As noted by World Bank that for any educational policy to be functional and embracing by stake holders in Africa, the Social Demand Approach (SDA) involving grassroot in the planning and implementation of the policy are crucial (Psacharopoulos, 1990). The preceding context of the paper explores the current situation of the students of the model schools within the COVID-19 pandemic.

2:1. Social Situation Analysis of Almajiri Schools in COVID-19 Pandemic

Almajiris as Muslim students observe Islamic teachings of hygiene, which are guided by the ethos of cleanliness as half of faith (Qarawi & Yacub, 1997), through washing of hands before and after eating, washing hands after going to the toilet, washing hands, face and feet before each of the five daily prayers, bathing before main weekly prayer on Fridays [and other days], and washing a person after death (BBC Africa, 2020; Qaraḍāwī & Yacub, 1997). However, these health religious practices are challenged with the advent of Ebola Virus Disease (EVD)

and the current COVID-19 pandemic, which both requires frequent use of soap and water in all forms of washing of the body (UNICEF, 2020; WHO, 2020;2019). The soap washing engagements are not constant practices engaged by the Almajiri students due to the poor constant water supply, and cost of soap within their reach in the residential schools, thereby affecting their state of hygiene and making them more vulnerable to contacting COVID-19 (Akinrinola,2020; Akintunde, Chen & Di, 2020). Hence, the coronavirus pandemic is particularly dangerous for the Almajiri students, considering their poor living conditions in overcrowded hostels and classrooms [especially those in the Koranic elementary settings], which increase their chances of infection (BBC Africa, 2020; Federal Ministry of Health of Nigeria, 2020; Hoehner & Salisu, 2020; Nigeria Center for Disease Control, 2020). Many people, particularly the state governors of northern states of the country (Akinrinola, 2020; Al-Amin, 2020; BBC Africa, 2020) believe that the Almajiris are helping to spread the corona virus, despite lack of evidence of this whatsoever (Gansler, 2020).

As part of the northern states' measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 northern state government with population of Almajiri model school students, and the traditional Koranic (Tsangaya) schools decided to shut down the schools and returned the students to their homes and states of origin. As reported by BBC Africa, that tens of thousands of Koranic school children were crammed into open vans and sent back home from cities and towns across northern Nigeria in a controversial move by state governments to prevent the spread of coronavirus within their territories (Orjinmo and Abubakar, 2020). The authors added that "There was a ban on travel, but the vans, with children sitting shoulder-to-shoulder, were allowed to crisscross the country's highways to get the boys to their homes in villages, often thousands of miles away" (Orinjomo & Abubakar, 2020, p.1). Nevertheless, some governors in northern Nigeria sent the boys home, often against their will, in the middle of the night and sometimes by violent means (Gansler, 2020).

As the children [Almajiris] arrived in their homes across northern states, some of them were quarantined and tested for COVID-19 in state public hospitals across northern Nigeria. The results caused widespread consternation - of the 169 tested in Kaduna, 65 were positive, as were 91 of the 168 tested in Jigawa. In Gombe, eight of the 48 children tested had Covid-19 (Akinrinola, 2020). In Bauchi, the number was seven out of 38 (Orjinmo and Abubakar, 2020). UNICEF (Nigeria) supported the family reunification of 310 Almajiri children, following 213 in Kaduna who underwent 14-day quarantine at temporary shelters in Kaduna. Other states as Gombe about 40 and Yobe 57 students were returned from Kano state (UNICEF Nigeria, 2020, p.4). With the support of UNICEF the governor of Kaduna State visited the Almajiri children and committed to providing education and other reintegration support through a signed MoU (UNICEF Nigeria, 2020).

Northern governors saw the pandemic as an opportunity to scrap the Almajiri Koranic schools that have long been part of the Islamic education system in mainly Muslim north of Nigeria. Kaduna state governor stated thus "We've been looking for ways and means to end this system because it has not worked for the children. It has not worked for northern Nigeria and it has not worked for Nigeria. So, it has to end and this is the time" (Orjinmo and Abubakar, 2020, p.1). The governor has gone one step further by submitting a law to the state parliament banning the practice of Almajirai "We want to dismantle the system so that children can remain with their parents. They should receive a modern education in the morning and Koran lessons in the afternoon." (Gansler, 2020, p.1).

The outbreak of COVID-19 has initiated interim educational laws that will formally prohibit Almajiri traditional [Koranic] educational system in states as Kaduna. In addition, the author quoted the governor, We are not just abolishing the system, we're not just telling the parents of the children, but we've let them know that the children must go to school once school is open and we've tracked each and every one of their parents and we're going to counsel them on parental responsibilities. It is a long process, but the children must go to school. (Orizu, 2020, p.1)

The ferocity of COVID-19 did not only disrupt the schooling of these poor vulnerable population of learners, but has facilitated educational inequities and opportunities between the Almajiris and other children and youth of northern Nigeria. To this effect, this has not only increased educational poverty of the Almajiris, but created a gap towards a positive upward mobility in future economic participation as skilled/trained workers, as well as opportunities of improving their quality of life through white collar jobs.

3: Parents and Community Perception of Almajiris School Closure during COVID-19 Pandemic

To stop the spread of the virus among the Koranic schools, the boys who live in crowded, dirty makeshift shelters without running water, and basic sanitation facilities which made them vulnerable to the virus, northern Nigeria governors started a fresh conversation about scrapping the age-long school system and mass return of the students to their parents and communities (Iyora, 2020, p.1). As reported in some news print media across the country, the consent and opinion of the parents of the Almajiri were never sought by the northern state governors, as they forcefully removed and repatriated home their children, a way of saving the students from the COVID-19 pandemic (Azubuike & Aina, 2020).

Parents of Almajiri students attending the model and traditional Koranic schools were divided in their opinions when their children were returned to them at the COVID-19 pandemic due to school closure (Azubuike & Aina, 2020). While some parents welcome the return of their boys' home, some of the students added "I am happy to at least see my parents again. When I heard about the lockdown, I was not happy because it meant I would not have the freedom I used to enjoy anymore says Babuga" (Iyora, 2020, p.1).

On the other hand, an elite group of women called Nigerian mothers published an article in reaction on the current treatment of Almajiri boys by the northern state governors during the COVID-19 pandemic (Nigerian Mothers, 2020). The all-female group expressed disgust and lack of proper treatment of the Almajiri boys with the following statement

Almajiranci – the act of being an Almajiri has become a perpetual situation for the children; evidence of pervasive societal neglect. They signify an abdication of our collective responsibility amidst waste and abuse of resources derived from our commonwealth, which allows the perpetuation of a system that no longer has basis in religion or culture (Nigerian Mothers, 2020, p.1).

They reiterated the reason for crying out in defense of Almajiri's schooling travails and treatment during the COVID-19 school lockdown

As Nigerian mothers in protest – The psychological trauma of having our [Almajiri] children's innocence and dignity snatched away at such a young age is unacceptable. We protest the creation of a two-tier system in which certain children are privileged with access to succor, accommodation, education, possibilities of employment, undergirded by their parent's wealth or position within society (Nigerian Mothers, 2020, p.1).

While parents of some Almajiri students are grieving the actions of the northern state governors' repatriation of the boys back to their homes, and enacting a policy of banning the Almajiri schooling, especially the traditional Koranic types in the following statement "We're thinking the Almajiri system is bad, says Sabo, but the parents don't think it's bad. They think their children are learning the Quran, which is a religious obligation." (Iyora, 2020, p.1). In the same interview section, a mother of an Almajiri added:

I am not happy about the ban because that means my child would have to come back home and sit down without going out to seek knowledge, says Aljuma. If my child would have to go to school to gain formal education, that means the government would have to step in and make provisions for his fees and everything they will need because I cannot afford the money to train him myself. Except that happens, I am afraid he will have to stay at home (Iyora, 2020, p.1).

While opinions of Almajiri school attending parents may differ, it seems most of their opinion regarding the need to educate their children are positively expressed, which in my opinion are united with the standpoint of the elitist Nigerian Mothers (2020). Disbanding the Almajiri schooling system due to COVID-19 by the northern state governors will result to educational policy waste and redundancy, especially with the progress made in the past years through the foundation of the Almajiri Model Schools across the northern states.

In addition, returning the Almajiri boys home to their states of origin and with no contingency efforts of ensuring their learning continuity as organized and implemented with students in public and private schools by the government (TEC, 2020) and the support of UNICEF Nigeria (2020), is not only unjust, but creating a two tier educational system that marginalize the Almajiri students to educational poverty; as well as shutting them from obtaining the basic free education as a human right, but also shutting them out from acquiring functional skills and knowledge for socio-economic upward mobility in the society (Advocates Of Dan Almajiri, n.d.; De Simone, 2020; Nigerian Mothers, 2020). The question needing answer is that- what educational policies can the northern

Nigerian state governors implement so as to retain the learning continuity of the Almajiri students even as they remain with their parents during the current COVID-19 pandemic lockdown of schools? Orizu (2020) reported that northern state governors stated that “Parents of Almajiri students of both AMs and traditional Koranic schools have been tracked and would be properly trained on parental responsibilities, in order to efficiently and effectively enforce the proposed model for the children” (p.1). The state-parental partnership initiative of collaboration is promising, but is it sustainable? This is an area of concern by local public and educational policy observers, considering the facts that changes in government political parties at the state levels tend to abandoned their predecessors’ educational road maps; an educational political culture that not only derail educational program sustainability, but leading to chaos and financial waste across Africa as reported by world bank (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018; Psacharopoulos, 1991). The preceding discussion attempts to address the research question on- what learning support initiatives did parents and community stakeholders provided to Almajiri students during the COVID-19 lockdown of schools/ what learning support initiatives can states and parents provide to Almajiri students in future schooling pandemic closure. The respond to the question are made through various literature on policy initiatives of sustaining learners during the COVID-19 in the developing countries of Africa in particular.

4. Suggested Educational Policy Options for Learning Continuity of Almajiri Students

With the outbreak of COVID-19, the federal government of Nigeria developed an emergency educational policy and implementation processes that provided framework for decentralization of administration by states, and local government ministries, and departments of education. The federated policies were framed by Nigeria’s Federal Ministry of Education and the Universal Basic Education Commission set up the Nigeria Education Sector COVID-19 Response Strategy (Federal Ministry of Education, 2020). The Education Partnership (TEP) center, the Nigerian Economic Summit Group (NESG) with the support of Hewlett Foundation (Federal Ministry of Education, 2020; TEP, 2020) contributed to the COVID-19 educational intervention policies and implementations, which were adopted by the various states and local government controlled public and private schools (TEC, 2020). The bodies drew on their competencies in education and economic research that carried extensive survey across Nigeria during the COVID-19 pandemic (TEC, 2020). The aims were to analyze the responses of key education stakeholders in Nigeria (supply-side) and understand the adoption of learning alternatives by students and parents (demand side) in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent restriction of movement across Nigeria. (Federal Ministry of Education, 2020, p.1).

The report by TEC (2020) highlighted the federal policy of Learning at Home Programme (LHP) during COVID-19 lockdown. LHP aimed at minimizing the learning slide during the pandemic (TEP, 2020, p.19). As reported in the survey findings by TEC (2020) that

Through the LHP -in partnership with educational technology companies FMoE launched virtual learning platform. These virtual learning platforms include SchoolGate, Mobile Classroom, WAEC E-learning toolkit and Unity Schools virtual learning platforms. Other e-learning resources whose links are provided on the FMoE websites are Khan Academy, Seesaw, National Open University, UNESCO School Meets Learner Approach, Teacher Development Programme, British Council, state government owned e-resources, Oracle Academy, IBM University Relations and Development Learning Partners Educational Resources. The SchoolGate virtual platform gives primary school children free access to instructional materials for subjects ranging from Mathematics to Civil Education resources and provided links to e-learning resources (p.19).

From the above, the Learning at Home Programme (LHP) and the SchoolGate virtual are applicable to Almajiri Model schools. However due to the nature of home environment and rural location of the Almajiris and their families, the application of the two strategies during COVID-19 lock down of schools were not feasible nor inaccessible to the students. The family poverty levels of the Almajiri students were major hindrances to their involvement of the LHP and SchoolGate virtual schooling.

The preceding discussion explores doable policy options or delivery strategies that may be considered by all stake holders in implementing the two delivery strategies in COVID-19 and in future pandemics so as to sustain learning and promoting for the Almajiri students in Nigeria.

4:1 Facilitate and Sustain Radio and Television Curriculum Delivery Strategies.

In a research report by TEC Nigeria (2020), a major recommendation to the Nigerian federal government is the use of soft technology as radio and television school broadcast during the COVID-19 (TEC, 2020, p.26). This media curriculum delivery during COVID-19 lock down was in reference to the nations' National Policy on Education (NPE) on educational services, which stated in Section 83 sub- section 10 that :

Where the facilities exist radio and television broadcasting will form a permanent feature of the education system, and in this regard, the Broadcasting services, Ministries of Education and other agencies will work closely together. Government has already approved School Broadcasting Unit of the Federal Ministry of Education into an Education Technology Center (FGN, 2008, p.43)

In support of this curricula delivery strategy, states ministries of education engaged in a wide school broadcast in the different curriculum with radio and television teachers delivering curriculum modules in different subjects for students listening during COVID-19 school lockdown (TEC, 2020). While much was achieved through this curricula delivery method in the urban areas, it was noted that learners in rural areas were unable to access much of the delivery strategy due to lack of constant power supply leading to low student engagement (Salau, 2020; TEC, 2020). Other lapses caused by radio school broadcast affecting students listenership included fluctuating radio short waves impacted by weather challenges as rain storms, strong winds amongst others.

Specific to the Almajiris, most of them were not able to engage in radio and television classes due to the fact that their parents could not afford radio and television sets. When television was introduced in Nigeria in 1959, northern Nigerian local governments introduced television viewing centers for public awareness, particularly in the 1970s-1990s. These centers should be returned and become active so as to serve as community learning centers for rural primary and secondary school students as the Almajiris. To ensure sustainable listenership and viewing of the school broadcast in the rural television centers, solar energy should be installed so as to supply steady electricity to the television sets, while radio sets and small solar rechargeable batteries should be distributed to families of Almajiris, this will enable them access school broadcast from home as well.

The centers will provide Almajiri students the opportunity to access the educational broadcast so as to sustain their learning continuity. As noted in a study in Senegal, a conducted survey revealed that approximately 11 percent of survey respondents said students accessed educational material using either radio, television, or web-based resources (Vegas & Winthrop, 2020). Indeed, the use of television viewing centers for school broadcast in the rural areas for the Almajiris will encourage student concentration, and the need for physical connection with their peers, a learning strategy that encourages socialization and interpersonal communication familiar to them in the face-to-face delivery model (Usman, 2008).

The above suggestions are not only technological support for the students learning continuity, but a major pedagogical support for sustainable learning and commitment by the students.

4:2. Engage Community Leaders in the Supervision of Almajiri Students' Learning.

To prevent Almajiri students from learning disengagement during COVID-19 school closure, the community heads and traditional leaders should monitor closely student engagement by monitoring their attendance, behavior, and learning progress, as done in OECD countries (Gouédard, Pont and Viennet, 2020/1). A community representative should be appointed to assume the role of "teacher-in-charge" in addition to two trained teachers in rural television viewing centers for the Almajiris session of the school broadcasts. The presence of the adults will not only ensure the Almajiris are on course with their learning, but are able to monitor their learning behavior as well as staying on task. In these centers, learning resources as books can be provided for the Almajiris by the stat and multilateral organizations as UNESCO Nigeria who operated "school meets the learner approach during COID-19, by supplying learning resources to students" (UNESCO Nigeria, 2020, p.1).

4:3. Build and Sustain School and Almajiri Parents' Community Collaboration. As noted in the Nigerian survey findings,

For parents, the shutting down of schools has necessitated deeper and more technical levels of involvement in their children's education. This has been challenging for most parents, as school teachers were mostly directly responsible for driving the learning outcomes of school children. A number of parents have had to balance

working or managing their families with actively facilitating or monitoring the home-schooling of children (Babatunde, 2020 cited by TEC, 2020, p.13).

In addition, children whose parents cannot afford remote learning facilities may have to wait for schools to re-open to continue learning, as such, it is uncertain the number of children that will return to school when the pandemic is over (Obiakor & Adeniran, 2020, cited by TEC, 2020, p.13).

Collaborating with parents is a more local grassroots state based intervention during COVID-19. Community leaders must collaborate with families of Almajiris through meetings in community design spaces. As noted in other parts of the world during the COVID-19 school closures Reimer & Schleicher (2020) noted that many parents have suffered in maintaining their children's learning and are in need of support and guidance. Experience has shown how important it is to clearly and consistently communicate what is to be accomplished. Kaalu (2020) reported on Mothers Association, Schools Based Management Committee of Ja'en Special Primary School in Kano state of Nigeria that mothers are purchasing supplies to make sure the school is safe for students. The women leader in an interview added

We have made up our minds as mothers to do all we can without necessarily waiting or relying on government out rightly in the education of our children. We have bought 200 buckets, as well as hand sanitizers, washing soaps, 2300 face masks, first aid drugs and writing materials, all waiting to be distributed among schools in Ja'en and its neighborhood, said Hauwa. During the lockdown, we also made sure the students participated in all the e-learning on both radio and television. So for us, we are ready and the safety of our children is guaranteed. (Kaalu, 2020, p.1) From the above, it is remarkable to learn how mothers are stepping up to support their children's education during COVID-19 in northern state of Nigeria. The parent initiatives should be supported by parents of Almajiri Model Schools across the local communities in the northern region of Nigeria. Furthermore, TEC (2020) COVID-19 learning situation research report recommended training and support for parents "Parents need active and contextual support (such as learning groups)..." (p.39). In addition, Abay, Amare, Tiberti & Andam (2021) reported that "Households residing in states experiencing strict lockdown measures reported further deterioration in food insecurity. Single mothers and poorer households experienced relatively larger deteriorations in food security due to disruption of school feeding services" (p.1). The authors' reiterated that "COVID-19-induced disruptions in educational and nutritional services have exacerbated households' food insecurity in Nigeria. These findings can inform the designs of immediate and medium-term policy responses, including the designs of social protection policies and alternative programs to substitute nutritional services affected by the pandemic" (Abay et.al. 2021, p.1). The authors recommended the extension of school feeding initiatives to students in their communities during the COVID-19 lock down of schools and indeed any future pandemic. The authors claim that feeding continuity for the students will induce household food security of the student's households who for the most are very poor. Indeed, the distribution and management of food by the National School Feeding Program of Nigeria during the pandemic impacted Almajiri students, as most of them reside in rural areas, hence, the distributions of food palliatives to households were concentrated in the urban and suburban households with primary and secondary attending students, not the rural households of which most Almajiri students reside.

As a result of their poverty level, and poor household feeding, it was reported that the returned Almajiri students resorted to street begging and scavenging for food from dumpsters in sub-urban areas closer to their villages during COVID-19 lockdown (Abay et al, 2021; Eranga, 2020). The lack of sustainable feeding experienced by the Almajiri students, is a distraction from their learning engagements, which creates learning discontinuities which are partly responsible by the state coordinators in charge of school feeding programs. Such a dearth in food policy distribution at the local community level must be corrected and consistent for the survivals of the Almajiri students and the schooling system survival.

4:4. Engage the Services of Local Health Inspectors to Monitor Almajiris' Street Begging.

As noted by the Nigerian Mothers (2020), Almajiri street begging is not only child abuse, but expose them to contracting COVID-19 on the streets, especially when scavenging for unhealthy left over food from the garbage bins of restaurants, and public dumpsters in sub-urban and urban areas in proximity to their villages. To arrest the situation, local sanitary and health inspectors should monitor and prevent the Almajiris from patronizing these garbage bins, and refer them to the nearest National School Feeding Centers for food supplies. The inspectors will not only ban the boys from returning to the street begging, but a small fine should be implemented on their parents as done in the nation's Universal Education laws to attract school attendance and participation (Usman,

2008). . In so doing, the parents will take more responsibilities and prevent their boys from street begging but rather focus and encourage them with visiting the television centers to actively participate in their learning grade level models.

4.5. Implement the Federal Policy of Safe to School Program on Almajiri Schools.

On May 27, the Federal Ministry of Education inaugurated a “Safe to School, Be Seen, Be Safe” initiative to ensure the children’s safety in and out of school. The Safe School Programme by the Federal Ministry of Education is in collaboration with the Children Accident Prevention Initiative (CAPI). At the unveiling of customized reflective children safety jackets and uniforms for cadet and school crossing guards in Abuja the customized not for sale reflective jackets for school children and other accident prevention infrastructures will provide immediate care and support for the children.

“This initiative, especially, is to prevent children from sustaining injuries while trekking to and from neighboring schools. It is in pursuant of the good health and well-being of school children and realization of quality education. The initiative is designed to primarily aid the protection of school children from road accidents associated with motor vehicles, motorcycles, tricycles while crossing our busy network of roads to and from their respective schools” (News Agency of Nigeria, 2021, p.1).

Conclusion

The Almajiri phenomenon is not only peculiar to Nigeria, but common across Muslim Sub Sahara African countries practicing Quranic (Koranic) educational system. Public concerns continue to be expressed on the health and learning experiences of the Almajiris, which often are described as unhealthy, thereby exposing them to common diseases as malaria, typhoid fever, and of recent Ebola and coronavirus pandemics. Indeed, many literature reported the current situation of the Almajiris in relation to COVID-19 pandemic, as dyer and needing emergency solution by government and allied stakeholder in Nigeria.

The context and organization of the paper include the research procedures, which was based on educational qualitative orientation, using documentary analysis and exploratory literature review. A general qualitative research question as -what happened to Almajiri students in both the traditional and model schools during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown of schools? In respond to the research question, an explorative review of forty three (43) multilateral organization papers, gazettes, journals, reports, media prints and social media blogs were made using computer based search engines as Google, academic Google Scholar, and ERIC. Major themes from the literature were generated using the qualitative phenomenology approach of reading the literature several times and identifying the themes (van Manen, 2018). The major themes include the foundation and nature of Almajiri schools, situational analysis of Almajiri schools in COVID-19 pandemic, parents and community perception/support of closure of Almajiri schools during the pandemic, and suggested educational policy options for the learning continuity of Almajiri students’ pre and post COVID-19. The themes are presented in a table, and further contextualized as part of the discussion of the paper.

In sum, the paper’s strength in my opinion will add to the current gap in literature on learning during COVID-19, as well as academic discourse on students learning, especially students from poor family with low socio economic back ground in developing countries in Sub-Sahara Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, like any research paper, one major limitation is the lack of many empirical research journal papers on COVID-19 and schooling in Africa. Despite the limitations, I hope to extend the paper by engaging in a field research data gathering through a SEED grant in the nearest future of post COVID-19 pandemic. I hope to focus on the return of the Almajiri students into the Almajiri Model Schools, assessing their learning loss experiences during pandemic school closure and how it has impacted their goals and aspirations, as well as how their parents are involved in their learning.

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