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Navigating Educational Disruptions: Resilience in Ugandan Vocational Education during COVID-19

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Abstract

This research article investigates the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on secondary schools in Uganda, focusing on the strategies adopted to cope with disruptions in educational processes. It utilises a mixed-methods approach, gathering data from 16 schools in Uganda's Western, Northern, and Eastern regions, and focusing on vocational subjects. Its findings reveal that schools observed Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), including social distancing, mask-wearing, and handwashing, despite resource constraints and spatial limitations. Remote learning for candidate classes reduced exposure but highlighted rural disparities due to inadequate internet infrastructure. Despite significant challenges, school administrators exhibited resilience by implementing innovative measures, including staggered attendance and restricted student movement to minimize contact. However, vocational education encountered notable setbacks, such as inadequate practical facilities, especially within private institutions. It highlights the critical need for enhanced government support, particularly for vocational teachers, to sustain education post-pandemic. While Uganda's education sector has shown resilience during the pandemic, sustained investment in infrastructure, teacher support, and vocational education is vital for long-term stability and growth.

Keywords: Adaptability, Coping Strategies, Disparities, Resilience, Vocational Education

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly disrupted socio-economic structures worldwide, with education being among the hardest-hit sectors. In developing economies, the pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities, leading to increased dropout rates among students. As Schleicher (2020) notes, "students from privileged backgrounds, supported by their parents and eager and able to learn, could find their way past closed school doors to alternative learning opportunities. Those from disadvantaged backgrounds often remained shut out when their schools shut down" (p.4). Despite these challenges, some Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) attempted to maintain instructional continuity. Schleicher (2020) further highlights that HEIs leveraged technology to provide online learning experiences, yet many institutions lacked the expertise and resources necessary for effective implementation. This disruption extended to examinations and student progression, underscoring the broader impact of the pandemic on educational systems.

Uganda, like many developing nations, places significant emphasis on education as a catalyst for socio-economic transformation and national development (Tumwesigye, 2020; Higgins & Rwanyange, 2005). When COVID-19 emerged, Uganda responded promptly, implementing strict measures to mitigate the pandemic's impact. The first case was reported on March 21, 2020, and by March 18, 2021, the country had documented 40,607 cases, with 334 deaths and 15,099 recoveries (Kawuki et al., 2021, Gathogo, 2024). Uganda's relatively low death rate was attributed to swift interventions, including border closures, suspension of transport, and a nationwide lockdown. President Museveni's measures were comprehensive, reflecting the significant risk posed by mass gatherings in educational institutions, which collectively host nearly 15 million students across primary, secondary, and tertiary levels (Museveni, 2020).

However, Uganda's lockdown, which extended for nearly two years (Mbonye, 2022), was one of the longest globally. While the government's actions were aimed at safeguarding public health, the prolonged closure of schools had profound socio-economic repercussions. Parents faced increased financial and caregiving burdens, and reports of sexual abuse among out-of-school children surged, with young girls being disproportionately affected (Sserwanja, Kawuki & Kim, 2021). The closure of schools widened the digital divide, as students with internet access continued learning, while the majority without such resources fell behind. This situation highlights the urgent need for equitable educational strategies to bridge the gap and ensure universal learning opportunities.

In light of these challenges, the present study focuses on the impact of COVID-19 on secondary schools offering vocational subjects in three regions of Uganda. The study seeks to (1) document reflections from these schools, (2) evaluate the pandemic's effects on vocational education, and (3) recommend strategies for mitigating the long-term impacts of the pandemic on secondary education. The findings aim to contribute to ongoing efforts to enhance resilience and equity in Uganda's education system.

Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light the fragility of educational systems globally, particularly in developing economies. Existing literature underscores the varying capacities of schools to adapt to systemic closures and unplanned operational shifts. While much attention has been given to the socio-economic and medical dimensions of the pandemic, fewer studies have explored its educational implications, especially in vocational and secondary education contexts (Kok, 2015; Braveman, 2014; Paige, 2000). Paige (2000) aptly describes the historical challenges facing African education systems, which have long been beset by poverty, malnutrition, and fragile infrastructures. He argues that poverty remains a fundamental barrier, limiting access to quality education and exacerbating inequalities. Widespread malnutrition, prevalent in many African regions, undermines students' cognitive development and learning capacity, thereby reducing the overall efficacy of education. Fragile infrastructures, including inadequate school facilities, limited instructional materials, and poorly maintained buildings, further hinder educational delivery. These systemic issues, Paige contends, are deeply entrenched and perpetuated by broader socio-economic and political instability. During the lockdown in Uganda which was one of the longest globally, all issues Paige raises such as malnutrition, inequalities between the poor and the rich, failure to access educational materials characterized most Ugandan communities.

Disruptions to education have always resulted into numerous challenges such as poor attendance, and low performance. In this regard, Paige highlights how external crises, such as civil conflicts, economic downturns, and political turbulence, magnify these challenges, further destabilizing education systems. For example, Paige looks at periods of political chaos, such as Uganda's tumultuous era from 1971 to 1979 during the time President Idi Amin and 1980 to 1986 during the time of President Obote, when schools struggled to operate amidst resource scarcity, insecurity, and disruption of societal order. Despite these obstacles, Paige acknowledges the resilience of educational institutions, emphasizing their ability to adapt and survive against the odds. This resilience, he notes, underscores the critical role of education as a stabilizing force within societies, even amid profound adversity. During the COVID 19, the closure of schools in Uganda was a necessary disruption that contained the pandemic. On March 18, 2020, Yoweri Museveni the President of Uganda announced the closure of all educational institutions as a preventive measure against the spread of COVID-19. The President observed that;

today, there are 10.7million children in the Primary Schools; 2m children in the Pre-Primary Schools; 2million students in the Secondary Schools; 314,548 students in the Universities and Tertiary Institutions. This is a total of almost 15million young Ugandans, distributed in 36,285 Primary Schools (Government and Private), 7,308 Pre-Primary Schools (Government and Private); 5,553 Secondary Schools (Government and Private) and 49 Universities and 1,543 Tertiary Institution (Technical Schools, Teacher Training Colleges, Vocational Schools), etc., etc. This is a total of 50,688 points with concentrations of 1,000 or more persons each. When I visited Masaka S S in Masaka Town, it had 4,000 pupils without counting the other non-student people staying in that compound. It is wise that we temporarily remove these concentration points by closing the Primary and

Secondary schools as well as all the Universities and Tertiary Institutions for one month, starting with Friday, the 20th of March, 2020, starting at mid-day. All these institutions, without exception, should close so that we deny this virus those concentrations.

The closure of schools in Uganda was echoed elsewhere as the Global Campaign for Education (GCE, 2020) acknowledges the necessity of school closures as a public health measure but emphasizes the importance of contingency plans to uphold the right to education during crises. The pandemic has underscored disparities in access to learning resources, with many students in low-income settings unable to participate in online education due to a lack of internet infrastructure (Grahl, 2021). This has raised concerns about long-term educational inequities, as noted by Johnson (2021), who warns that setbacks in school enrolment and retention could reverse years of progress in educational access.

Studies on coping strategies in educational institutions emphasize the pivotal role of collective action, leadership, and community engagement in managing crises. Effective leadership, particularly at the institutional level, is essential for fostering resilience and ensuring continuity in education. According to Harris and Jones (2020), school leaders play a critical role in creating adaptive strategies, such as reorganizing resources and maintaining morale among staff and students during disruptions. Similarly, Leithwood et al. (2020) argue that collective action involving teachers, parents, and local authorities is crucial for addressing logistical and emotional challenges in times of crisis. Community engagement further amplifies these efforts by fostering a sense of shared responsibility and leveraging local resources to sustain educational activities (Saito & Van Thuy, 2020).

In Uganda, school head teachers and local leaders have been instrumental in navigating educational disruptions, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, they adopted innovative measures such as staggered attendance, remote learning programs, and community-based teaching hubs to mitigate the impact of school closures (Musoke et al., 2021). Additionally, head teachers collaborated with local governments to provide resources such as learning materials and ensure compliance with Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). Despite these efforts, significant challenges, such as limited infrastructure and funding, persisted, underscoring the need for robust support systems (Nampala & Batungi, 2020). These findings highlight the importance of empowering institutional and community leaders to create sustainable and inclusive educational systems capable of withstanding future crises. The study findings are not isolated and unique to Uganda but similar echo the importance of empowering institutional and community leaders in such crisis circumstances. Research from South Africa highlights similar patterns, where the socio-economic context of schools influences their resilience and coping mechanisms (Zulu, Bhengu & Mkhize, 2019). For instance, township schools face unique challenges, including heightened parental awareness of educational rights, which differs from rural settings.

Students' perspectives revealed significant insights into how the closure of schools was managed and their subsequent compliance with directives. Many students adhered to these measures primarily due to their fear of contracting the disease, indicating a general acknowledgment of the severity of the pandemic. Baloran (2020) observes that students widely perceived non-medical interventions, such as school closures and social distancing, as effective strategies in mitigating the spread of COVID-19. This perception underscores the role of public awareness in fostering compliance with health directives. While many students expressed satisfaction with government efforts to contain the pandemic, disparities in access to resources and learning opportunities became glaring. These disparities were particularly evident in rural and underprivileged areas where access to remote learning tools, such as internet connectivity and digital devices, was limited. According to UNESCO (2021), the digital divide exacerbated existing inequities, leaving marginalized students disproportionately affected by school closures.

Furthermore, students from vocational education streams faced unique challenges, as the hands-on nature of their curricula could not be adequately replicated in remote learning environments. Many households in Uganda do not have access to internet. Furthermore, students either do not have smart phones or data to communicate with their teachers. As highlighted by Moro et al. (2020), practical skills acquisition demands physical interaction with tools and resources, which was significantly disrupted during the pandemic. Some respondents reported that even if they had smartphones and data, they did not have means of charging their phones. Most of the households are not connected on the national grid or did not have solar power. The issue of bridging these gaps remains critical to ensuring equitable learning opportunities in post-pandemic recovery. Policymakers must prioritize strategies to address these inequities by investing in digital infrastructure, expanding vocational training facilities, and implementing inclusive educational policies that cater to the needs of all students, regardless of their socioeconomic background. These measures are essential for fostering resilience and inclusivity in education systems moving forward.

This article builds on these insights to examine the specific challenges faced by secondary schools offering vocational subjects in Uganda. By focusing on these schools, the research aims to provide actionable recommendations for strengthening resilience and fostering equity in education.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative methods to ensure a comprehensive analysis. Physical verification was conducted at all selected schools to validate findings and collect first-hand data. Quantitative data were primarily obtained from school records and documentation provided by head teachers, while qualitative insights were gathered through interviews and observations.

A total of 16 schools were included in the study, with six from Western Uganda, five from Northern Uganda, and five from Eastern Uganda. The sample comprised both public and private institutions, with a mix of single-gender and co-educational schools. To facilitate data collection, three research teams were formed, each assigned to one of the three regions under study. Schools in Central Uganda were excluded based on the assumption that their proximity to the capital city and better access to resources enabled them to cope more effectively with the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

It examined the availability and uptake of vocational subjects in the sampled schools. In Eastern Uganda, Agriculture and Fine Art were universally offered across schools, while Home Economics was available in only two government institutions. For instance, at Mbale Secondary School, over 500 students sat for the Agriculture examination in the most recent Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB) cycle. In Northern Uganda, the inclusion of vocational subjects varied based on gender, historical factors, and local economic conditions, a pattern that was similarly observed in Western Uganda. Notably, boys-only schools in these regions were less likely to include Home Economics in their curricula. This methodology ensured a balanced representation of schools across diverse regions and socio-economic contexts, providing a nuanced understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on the inclusion and delivery of vocational education in Uganda.

Results

The findings underscored the urgent need for implementing coping strategies to mitigate the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on educational institutions. The lockdown presented significant challenges, including restricted public transportation and widespread food shortages, which placed immense pressure on both teachers and students. Despite these difficulties, many schools managed to remain operational due to the unwavering dedication of their staff and learners. Teachers and students displayed remarkable resilience, enduring hardships to sustain learning activities under constrained circumstances. This perseverance was further strengthened by head teachers and school proprietors, who made notable sacrifices, including reducing operational scales and reallocating resources, to keep their institutions functional. Such collective efforts highlighted the adaptability and resourcefulness of the education sector in navigating unprecedented disruptions (UNESCO, 2021).

However, the crisis also revealed the fragility of some educational systems and the need for more robust support mechanisms. While many school administrators and owners demonstrated resilience and optimism, hoping for a return to normalcy, the prolonged uncertainty pushed some individuals to abandon their educational roles. Teachers and school staff, particularly in private institutions with limited financial support, often sought alternative livelihoods, with some entering informal sectors like the motorcycle (*bodaboda*) business (World Bank, 2021). This exodus of educational professionals increased on the existing challenges, particularly in rural and low-income areas, where retaining qualified educators was already a struggle. Studies by Arndt et al. (2020) emphasize the critical need for targeted interventions, such as financial incentives and policy support, to sustain the education workforce and strengthen the resilience of schools during crises. These findings highlight the importance of proactive strategies to safeguard education systems against future disruptions. The results indicate that many schools made concerted efforts to adhere to the recommended Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools that successfully implemented practices such as social distancing, regular handwashing, and mandatory mask-wearing showed significantly better coping mechanisms compared to those that struggled with these measures. Social distancing, in particular, was most effectively practiced in schools with larger campuses and sufficient infrastructure, such as traditional institutions, which utilized their expansive spaces to reorganize classrooms and dormitories (UNESCO, 2021). These adaptations enabled some schools to mitigate the spread of the virus and sustain academic operations under challenging circumstances.

However, numerous challenges hindered the full implementation of SOPs, particularly in rural and underfunded schools. Limited classroom space in overcrowded schools made enforcing social distancing nearly impossible, while economic constraints left many students without access to multiple masks or proper hygiene supplies. For many learners, access to masks was hampered by financial challenges, with some students owning only one mask or none at all (World Bank, 2021). Furthermore, discomfort and stigma associated with mask-wearing, as reported in other studies, reduced adherence to mask policies (Moro et al., 2020). This discrepancy in adherence highlights the inequities in the education system, with resource-rich schools better positioned to implement SOPs compared to their under-resourced counterparts.

Despite these obstacles, schools employed creative strategies, such as staggered attendance, to reduce congestion. Informative charts and posters about COVID-19 were also displayed to raise awareness among students and staff. Nevertheless, the 40% national compliance rate underscores the need for increased governmental and community support to ensure equitable adherence to health protocols in schools across Uganda (UNESCO, 2021; World Bank, 2021). Social distancing emerged as a crucial strategy in many schools, regardless of gender, to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Another key strategy was the use of face masks, which were considered vital for reducing transmission. Some participants in the study highlighted that the government initially provided masks—two per candidate for senior students—though this was supplemented by a request for students to bring their own. Over time, the requirement increased, with students now expected to bring five masks each. However, a significant concern remained regarding the maintenance of mask hygiene, as research revealed that many Ugandans struggle with basic hygiene practices. The debate surrounding mask usage varies across countries; some have made masks mandatory at all times for both staff and students, while others require them only when individuals are symptomatic. Simon et al. (2020) and Moro et al. (2020) emphasize that masks are particularly necessary for students above the age of 10 when SOPs are not strictly observed.

Handwashing facilities were another essential element in enabling schools to cope with the pandemic. Most schools invested in handwashing stations, strategically placed throughout the premises, equipped with detergents for washing and sanitizing. Additionally, school administrations implemented measures such as spraying dormitories and rearranging beds to increase space between them. Informational posters about COVID-19, its transmission, and preventive measures were prominently displayed across school grounds to raise awareness. To manage the flow of students, school reporting was staggered, with candidates given priority to reduce overcrowding.

Remote distance education has been widely recognized as a viable strategy to mitigate the potential exposure and transmission of COVID-19 in educational settings. In areas with high infection rates, online teaching can reduce physical contact, thereby minimizing the risk of infection. However, while staggered class attendance has emerged as a practical solution for managing student numbers, it creates challenges for those left behind, particularly new students in Senior One and Senior Five. The delay in their integration could disrupt the overall school calendar, both locally and globally. Government directives that restrict new entrants may lead to long-term delays in academic progress. As some governments have argued, "death is far worse than missing a school calendar," underscoring the priority given to public health over educational schedules. While all participants and school administrators agreed on the importance of observing SOPs, key obstacles remained, including insufficient space, an inadequate supply of masks, and a shortage of furniture. Although the idea of staggering classes was supported, school administrators expressed concern about how to compensate teachers for handling double classes.

A common strategy recommended by schools to enhance compliance with SOPs was minimizing student movement within the school. Rather than students changing classrooms for different subjects, teachers were to move between classes. This approach was deemed more effective, as it allowed for better monitoring of SOP adherence by the teachers, who could manage the environment more effectively than students. Schools also printed and displayed posters to guide students on the importance of SOPs. Despite the government's recommendation to provide handwashing facilities in all public spaces, including schools, findings revealed that many schools, especially those in rural areas, lacked handwashing facilities altogether. Even those that did have facilities often lacked soap or water. In line with guidelines from health experts such as Moro et al. (2020), schools were found to prioritize cleanliness and disinfection. Regular cleaning, the use of hand sanitizers, and the maintenance of open windows and doors for ventilation were common practices. Additionally, schools implemented systems to monitor students for signs of COVID-19, such as high body temperatures, with trained personnel designated to handle suspected cases. These measures helped schools in Uganda manage the pandemic with minimal disruption.

Vocational education in Uganda, however, remains a challenge, with only 10% of students participating in vocational studies. While 70% of students had returned to school by the time of the study, mainly those in candidate classes and Senior One and Senior Three, there remained a low likelihood of increasing the uptake of vocational subjects. Many schools reported that additional government support was necessary to continue controlling and preventing the spread of the virus. Schools, particularly those offering vocational studies, needed more resources to address the ongoing challenges. This support was crucial for ensuring the survival of vocational education and for incentivizing private teachers, many of whom had transitioned to other occupations during the pandemic. Potential strategies to attract these teachers back to vocational education include offering financial incentives, salary increases, and loans.

In the schools visited, only three schools offered vocational subjects, and none offered all three key vocational subjects. Art and Agriculture were the most commonly offered subjects across the regions, with Agriculture sometimes being taught in a theoretical manner due to a lack of space for practical experiments, especially in private schools. Fortunately, governments across Africa are actively addressing the educational disruptions caused by COVID-19. Policymakers are

adjusting their strategies to facilitate a safe return to school while learning to live with the virus. Many African countries are urgently seeking solutions to ensure the safe reopening of schools, and the technical community is also developing innovative ways to support these efforts (Nyoh, 2020).

Conclusion

This research article set out to investigate the strategies and coping mechanisms employed by schools in Uganda during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a particular focus on adherence to Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), the role of vocational education, and the challenges faced in ensuring equitable learning opportunities. The research was motivated by the unprecedented disruption caused by the pandemic, which tested the resilience of educational institutions and their ability to adapt to new norms while ensuring the safety and continuity of learning.

To achieve these objectives, the study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data from 16 schools across Uganda's western, northern, and eastern regions. The research involved site visits, interviews, and reviews of administrative documentation to provide a comprehensive understanding of the pandemic's impact on education. The findings revealed that while many schools implemented measures to comply with SOPs, significant disparities in resources and infrastructure hindered full compliance, particularly in rural and underfunded schools. Vocational education, already underrepresented in Uganda, suffered further setbacks as most schools prioritized theoretical subjects over practical ones.

Key findings highlighted the resilience of teachers, students, and administrators in keeping schools operational despite limited resources. Schools with larger facilities or better funding were able to implement SOPs more effectively, while under-resourced schools struggled with overcrowding, lack of masks, and insufficient hygiene facilities. The pandemic also exposed the systemic inequities in education, with rural and private schools disproportionately affected. Vocational education received minimal attention, with only three schools offering vocational subjects and limited opportunities for practical learning.

While remote learning and staggered attendance have proven to be effective in minimizing exposure, they also present significant challenges in terms of integration into the academic calendar, especially for new students. The study underscores the importance of observing standard operating procedures (SOPs) such as social distancing and mask-wearing, although implementation has been hindered by limited space, inadequate resources, and logistical constraints. Despite these challenges, schools have demonstrated resilience by adopting strategies such as minimizing student movement and enhancing hygiene practices to curb the spread of the virus.

Moving forward, the study underscores the need for targeted interventions to bridge the resource gap and ensure equitable access to quality education. Governments and stakeholders should prioritize funding for infrastructure development, particularly in rural areas, and provide subsidies for essential resources such as masks and hygiene facilities. Further research could explore the long-term impacts of the pandemic on educational outcomes, particularly in relation to vocational education and its role in equipping students with practical skills for economic recovery. Additionally, studies should investigate the effectiveness of remote learning technologies in enhancing equitable access to education during future crises. These efforts will be critical in building a more resilient and inclusive education system in Uganda and beyond.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, this study underscores the critical need for targeted interventions to enhance the resilience of Ugandan secondary schools, particularly in vocational education, to withstand future disruptions. To address the digital divide revealed by the pandemic, it is essential to prioritize investment in digital infrastructure, particularly in rural and underfunded schools. This includes providing access to affordable internet, digital devices, and teacher training on the use of remote learning platforms. Such measures will ensure equitable access to education for all students, regardless of their geographical or socioeconomic status. Furthermore, schools must be equipped with adequate health resources, including masks, hand sanitizers, and improved sanitation facilities, to enhance compliance with health protocols during emergencies. Ensuring the availability of such resources, especially in rural and private schools, will mitigate disparities in preparedness and foster a safer learning environment for both students and staff.

In alignment with the findings on the undervaluation of vocational education, the government and educational stakeholders should strengthen support for vocational subjects through financial incentives, teacher training programs, and the provision of practical learning spaces. Continuous professional development for teachers, particularly in vocational education, should be prioritized to enable them to effectively deliver both theoretical and practical content, whether in person or online. Additionally, nationwide awareness campaigns are necessary to promote vocational education as a viable career path, thereby addressing societal stigmas and encouraging student enrolment in these programs. To ensure the

continuity of education during future disruptions, policymakers should develop flexible academic calendars, adopt contingency plans, and explore hybrid learning models that combine online and in-person teaching. These measures, alongside collaborative efforts between the government and private sector, will contribute to a more equitable, inclusive, and resilient education system capable of weathering future crises.

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The researchers are the sole authors of this article.

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