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PERCEIVED IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN ABAKALIKI EDUCATION ZONE OF EBONYI STATE

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the perceived impact of COVID-19 pandemic on students' academic performance in public secondary schools in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State. The study was guided by two research questions and two null hypothesis. The study adopted descriptive survey design. The population of the study comprised 7,612 SSII students from the public Secondary Schools in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State. The sample for this study comprised 569 SSII female students and 525 SSII male students; making a total of 1,094 respondents, which were drawn using proportionate stratified random sampling technique. The instrument for data collection was a 12 item self structured questionnaire, validated by three experts. The reliability of the instrument was done using Crombach Alpha which yielded a coefficient index of 0.864. Data collected were analyzed using mean ($\bar{x}$) and standard deviation (SD). The analysis of the data collected specifically indicated among others that COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on students' attendance to school and study habits in secondary school in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State. This is because the pandemic prevented students from attending classes and having face to face interaction with teachers and fellow students for better academic performance. Based on the findings of this study, it was recommended among other things that the government and all concerned stakeholders should ensure that attainable futuristic plans are put in place to regulate students' attendance to school and improve study habits in case of another similar experience as COVID-19. Action oriented plans should be taken to secure the present and future educational system from other possible disruptions and emergencies. The educational implication of the findings is that the sudden interruption of the education system in Nigeria as a result of COVID-19 pandemic was a wakeup call to the government, parents, individuals, ministries of education and other concerned stakeholders to be proactive in emergency response strategies to minimize attendance dilemma of students and guarantee uninterrupted school calendar.

Keywords: *Corona, Virus, Pandemic, Students' attendance, Study habits and Academic performance*

Introduction

The corona virus (COVID-19) pandemic is a health related emergency that did not spare any country of the world and has caused an unprecedented crisis in all the affected areas. In the field of education, this emergency led to the massive closure of face-to-face activities of educational institutions in more than 190 countries in order to prevent the spread of the virus and mitigate its impact. According to data from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), by mid-May 2020, more than 1.2 billion students at all levels of education worldwide had stopped having face-to-face classroom instructions.

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic emerged suddenly and affected educational programmes at all levels, kept students at home for close to three academic terms and disrupted academic calendar. Hence, the easily observable poor performance of secondary school students since 2020 has been blamed on school closure caused by the pandemic. Academic activities were interrupted, affecting not just students' attendance to school, but student study habit, class participation and their involvement in co-curricular activities The impact of the pandemic has been multifaceted, affecting all sector of human society globally (Simon & Hans, 2020).

In the education system of nearly all nations, it has created a large dysfunction affecting unimaginable number of students globally (United Nations, 2020). Ogunode (2020b) stated that the pandemic affected 94 per cent of global school students from pre-primary school to secondary schools, technical and vocational training establishments to adult education as well as tertiary education systems in over 200 countries worldwide as at April, 2020.

In Nigeria, the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed on the 27th February 2020. The virus was officially named Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, Coronavirus 2 (SARS-COV-2) by the International Committee on Taxonomy of viruses based on phylogenetic analysis in year 2020. The virus according to Ajazeera (2020) was first reported in Wuhan China on 31 December 2019 and subsequently spread worldwide. As SARS – COV-2 spread both inside and outside China and infected even people who have had no direct contact with animals that means the virus is transmitted from one human to another. However, it was on the 20th March 2020 that the Nigerian government through the ministry of education directed the closure of all schools as a precautionary measure aimed at checking the spread of the COVID-19 across the nation. (Ogunode, 2020b). As of June 2020, all schools have been closed, keeping the children at home and affecting the educational development of 46 billion students throughout the country (Wang & Cheng, 2020). The ripple effect of the pandemic has affected students both at the primary, secondary, and tertiary level, including the educators themselves as academic sessions were badly disrupted.

This virus spreads in the U.S.A and around the globe, meaning that people unwittingly catch and pass the coronavirus. The infectious disease of the COVID19 pandemic affected all aspects of human life including business, research, education, health, economy, sport, transportation,

worship, social interactions, politics, governance and entertainment. COVID-19 is believed to be a split over of an animal coronavirus and later adopted the ability of human-to human transmission. The virus appears contagious, spreads rapidly and continuously evolves in the human population. Most people who fell sick with COVID-19 experience mild to moderate symptoms and recover without special treatment; however, some become seriously ill and require medical attention. Additionally, the crises caused by the COVID19 virus have far reaching effect in nearly all social areas, education inclusive. Indeed schools were closed down in March 2020 in nearly all countries in the world (Huber & Helm, 2020).

The pandemic led to the total lockdown of major cities globally, Nigeria inclusive. Ebonyi state was not free from the covid19 crises as there was total lock down in the state including schools. The lockdown affected almost every sector, with devastating impact on education. For instance, before the pandemic, the Nigerian education system had adopted purely, face to-face approach to teaching and learning in the primary and secondary schools. Primary and secondary school learners were not allowed to own any digital gadget such as phone or computer, neither were they allowed to be seen with such in schools. But with the emergence of the lockdown condition, and school closure following the pandemic, both teachers and learners became helpless about how to continue learning in the face of the pandemic. (Nuhu, 2020).

In the view of Victor(2020), educational institutions provide essential learning activities to the learners and when school activities are disrupted as a result of school closure, students are deprived the opportunities of social, cognitive and psychomotor growth and development within the period affecting them even beyond the period of closure. Victor also states that the closure of schools disrupted the well-planned and articulated school programme, academic calendar and activities which were supposed to have been covered within the specified period. Thus, the disruption resulted in delay in the graduation of students at all levels. He further states that there could be a decline in the learning ability of students from poor homes; as their parents may not afford to provide them with lesson teachers or engage them in e-learning platforms. Ajazeera (2020) also states that shut down of schools might encourage students to take to gangsterism, crime and drugs abuse.

In this context, students at home within the period of lockdown could also keep bad companies as their parents may not have good monitoring approach on them. The accumulation of financial cost for parents may affect students from poor economic background because their parents may be unable to pay the accumulated school fees and other levies thereby resulting to high rate of school dropout. This is why over the years educational sector have remain a sensitive part of the sustainable development of any country; because the tune in the development of any country is majorly dictated by the educational sector.

Victor (2020) maintains that the human brain functions more effectively when constantly engaged with activities. Hence, the closure of schools due to COVID-19 has the tendency to reduce the learning ability of students. In Victor's opinion, some students may not likely read their books as long as the school is not in section. Some may be engaged by their parents in domestic/house chores, street hawking and other activities that may distract them from studying. In some cases, the children while constantly at home may engage in certain social vices such as stealing, keeping bad friends and indulging in drugs abuse activities. Researcher's opinion affirms that when schools are closed down, parents are charged with additional responsibility of facilitating the learning of their children at home. Some parents' especially poor and uneducated ones may not engage them successfully because of limited resources. This could reduce the academic performance of students.

The issue of student attendance may have been more problematic with the emergence of covid19 pandemic and its associated crises. During the pandemic, students may not have been opportune to be in school, and even after the heat of the pandemic, many students may not have attended school for fear of catching the virus. Therefore, it is against this backdrop that Fabgenle & Elegbeleye (2014) stated that attendance to school is important for students' behavioral, social, economic and educational learning.

Additionally, the emergence of COVID19 pandemic may have also dealt seriously with the already perceived fast eroding study habit of students. Carey (2015) stated that a student's study habit is corollary to his perception of learning. In order words, a students' attitude to learning is defined by how he sees learning since studying is different from reading. According to Jeffrey (2006), every student who studies reads but not every student who reads studies.

It is imperative to note also that the emergence of COVID19 pandemic may have seriously influenced the participation of students in classroom activities. Classroom participation involves a variety of activities and has different forms. Classroom participation incorporate an aspect of engagement as it is frequently used to describe students' inclination to participate in daily classroom activities such as regularity, timely submission of take home assignment and teachers' instructions in classroom.

The pandemic may have impact not only on students, teachers and families but has far-reaching economic and societal consequences (Baker, 2020). Burgess & Quentin (2020) observed that going to school is the best public policy tool available to raise skills or citizen for positive contribution to the growth of the society which they are members and noted that the primary point of going to school is to increase a child's abilities and competences. Thus, a relatively short time in school or a relatively short period of time one misses school would have consequences for skill growth. The global lockdown of educational institutions may have caused major interruption in students' attendance, disruptions in class participation, co-curricular activities and even the cancellation of public assessments for

qualifications or their replacement by an inferior alternative. It is on this premise that this study becomes imperative to verify the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on academic performance of secondary school students in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State.

Research Questions

The following research questions were posed to guide the study;

1. What is the perceived impact of COVID-19 pandemic on students' attendance in secondary school in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State?
2. What is the perceived impact of COVID-19 pandemic on students' study habits in secondary school in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State?

Test of Hypotheses

$H0_1$: There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female respondents on the perceived impact of COVID-19 pandemic on students' attendance in secondary school in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State

$H0_2$: There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female respondents on perceived impact of COVID-19 pandemic on students' study habits in secondary school in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State

Research Method

The design for this study is a descriptive survey research design. The study was conducted in Abakaliki Education zone. Abakaliki Education Zone is made up of four (4) Local Government Areas, namely: Abakaliki, Izzi, Ohaukwu and Ebonyi LGAs Abakaliki Education Zone was chosen for this study based of the researchers' observation of the poor attitude of students towards academic activities especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. The population of the study comprised 7,612 SSII students from public secondary schools in the four local government areas that made up Abakaliki Education Zone. The sample for this study comprised 569 SSII female students and 525 SSII male students; making a total of 1,094 respondents, drawn from the four local government areas that made up Abakaliki Educational Zone. This sample size of 1,094 was arrived at using a proportionate stratified random sampling technique for the study.

The instrument that was used for data collection in this study was a structured questionnaire developed by the researchers. The instrument was validated by three experts; while the reliability of the instrument was established using a trial test method; involving thirty (30) SSII students in Onueke Education Zone of Ebonyi State which was not part of study. The internal consistency of the instrument yielded 0.864 using Cronbach Alpha Reliability procedure. Direct delivery method was applied in the administration of the questionnaire to the respondents with the help of four research assistants, who were briefed on how to administer and retrieve the copies of the

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questionnaire from the respondents. The generated data was analyzed using mean and standard deviation.

Presentation of Results

Table1: Mean and Standard Deviation of the Respondents on the Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Students' Attendance in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State

S/N	Item Statement	N	$\bar{x}$	S.D	Decision
1	Students were not opportune to attend classes at the heat of COVID-19 pandemic	1059	2.97	0.93	Agreed
2	There was loss of face to face interaction between teachers and students during COVID-19 pandemic	1059	3.32	0.75	Agreed
3	The persistent challenge of attendance of students in secondary schools may have been worse by COVID-19 pandemic	1059	2.77	0.91	Agreed
4	During the COVID-19, schools were closed forced children of school age to hang around in the streets instead of being in the classroom.	1059	2.72	0.92	Agreed
5	The fear of contracting the COVID-19 virus may have reduced attendance in secondary school.	1059	3.15	0.94	Agreed
6	The principle of social distancing that characterized COVID-19 pandemic generated fear to many students that increased absenteeism	1059	2.57	0.92	Agreed
	Grand Mean		**2.92**	**0.90**	**Agreed**

Table1 shows the Mean and Standard Deviation of the responses of SSII students in respect to the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on students' attendance in secondary school in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State. The analysis revealed that in all the 6 items in cluster A, students agreed that COVID-19 pandemic prevented them from attending classes and having face to face interaction with teachers and fellow students. The results also showed that the principle of social distancing that characterized COVID-19 pandemic generated fear to many students which increased absenteeism; just as the pandemic eventually led to school closure that forced children of school age to hang around in the streets of Abakaliki instead of being in the classroom.

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Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation of the Respondents on the Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Students' Study Habit in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State

S/N	Item Statement	N	$\bar{x}$	S.D	Decision
7	Students lost interest in studying their books during COVID-19 pandemic	1059	3.33	0.78	Agreed
8	Students had no opportunity of studying in the libraries during COVID-19 pandemic	1059	2.74	0.97	Agreed
9	Studying at home with associated distractions may have affected students study habit	1059	2.65	0.95	Agreed
10	Group learning which enhances students' curiosity was not possible as a result of the pandemic	1059	3.32	0.79	Agreed
11	Lack of teachers words of encouragement and admonition to students during COVID-19 pandemic may have affected their study habit	1059	3.28	0.79	Agreed
12	Inability of students to access laboratory at the heat of the pandemic may have affected their academic performance	1059	3.32	0.75	Agreed
	Grand Mean		**3.11**	**0.84**	**Agreed**

Table 2 revealed that items 7-12 were formulated to establish the perceived impact of COVID-19 pandemic on students' study habits in secondary school in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State. The results on the table showed that the mean score for all the items are greater than the benchmark value of 2.50 as established in this study. This implies that more of the respondents agreed to the tune of the items. The grand mean of 3.11 as seen on the table further points to the claim that COVID-19 pandemic had negative impact on students' study habits in secondary school in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State.

Table 3: t-test of Difference of the Mean Responses of Male and Female Students on the perceived impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Students' Attendance in Secondary School in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State

Items	Gender of Students	N	Mean	SD	Cal. Signif	Alpha Level	Decision
1	Female Students	461	2.90	0.98	0.00	0.05	Not Significant
	Male Students	498	3.05	0.85			
2	Female Students	461	3.36	0.74	0.02	0.05	Not Significant
	Male Students	498	2.92	0.89			
3	Female Students	461	2.62	0.90	0.04	0.05	Not Significant
	Male Students	498	2.88	0.79			
4	Female Students	461	2.56	0.92	0.02	0.05	Not Significant
	Male Students	498	2.90	0.89			
5	Female Students	461	2.97	1.03	0.00	0.05	Not Significant
	Male Students	498	3.35	0.78			
6	Female Students	461	2.15	0.70	0.11	0.05	Significant
	Male Students	498	3.03	0.91			
	Average				**0.03**	0.05	**Not Significant**

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Summary of result presented in Table 3 indicates that there is no significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female respondents (students) on the perceived impact of COVID-19 pandemic on students' attendance in secondary school in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State. This is because the calculated significant value of 0.03 as seen therein is less than the significant (alpha) level of 0.05 that the analysis was based. Therefore, the null hypothesis was upheld as stated.

Table 4: t-test of Difference of the Mean Responses of Male and Female Students on the perceived impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Students' Study Habits in Secondary School in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State

Items	Gender of Students	N	Mean	SD	Cal. Signif	Alpha Level	Decision
7	Female Students	461	3.29	0.75	0.01	0.05	Not Significant
	Male Students	498	3.39	0.82			
8	Female Students	461	2.53	0.91	0.04	0.05	Not Significant
	Male Students	498	2.97	0.98			
9	Female Students	461	2.47	0.92	0.05	0.05	Significant
	Male Students	498	2.86	0.94			
10	Female Students	461	3.28	0.78	0.03	0.05	Not Significant
	Male Students	498	3.16	0.80			
11	Female Students	461	3.35	0.75	0.05	0.05	Significant
	Male Students	498	3.20	0.82			
12	Female Students	461	3.37	0.73	0.03	0.05	Not Significant
	Male Students	498	3.28	0.77			
	Average				**0.04**	0.05	**Not Significant**

The summary of result presented in Table 4 indicates that there is no significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female respondents (students) on the perceived impact of COVID-19 pandemic on students' study habits in secondary school in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State. This is because the calculated significant value of 0.04 as seen on the table is less than the significant (alpha) level of 0.05 that the analysis was based. Therefore, the null hypothesis was upheld as stated.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study showed that the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on students' attendance in secondary school in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State. This is because the pandemic prevented students from attending classes and having face to face interaction with teachers and fellow students for better academic performance. The findings of this study further showed that schools were closed while children of school age were forced to hang around in the streets instead of being in the classroom due to COVID-19 pandemic. The $H0_1$ was upheld as stated; hence, there was no

significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female respondents (students) on the perceived impact of COVID-19 pandemic on students' attendance in secondary school in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State.

The findings were in agreement with the view of Victor (2020) who observed that educational institutions provide essential learning activities to the learners and when school activities are disrupted as a result of school closure, students are deprived the opportunities of social, cognitive and psychomotor growth and development within the period; which is capable of affecting their academic performance even beyond the period of closure. Victor also states that the closure of schools due to COVID-19 disrupted students' attendance to school as the well-planned and articulated school programme, academic calendar and activities which were supposed to have been covered within the specified period were all shattered and thereby delayed the graduation of students at all levels. This scholar further states that there could be a decline in the learning ability of students from poor homes; as their parents may not have provided them with lesson teachers or engage them in e-learning platforms to make up for the lost periods.

The finding of this study also holds true of Ajazeera (2020) stated that the shutdown of schools as a result of COVID-19 which kept students away from school for a very long time may have had negative impacts on the life of students at all levels; as many may have being indirectly lured into gangsterism, drugs abuse, rape and other social vices in the society. It is therefore worthy of note that attendance to school is important for students' behavioral, social, economic and educational learning. But with the emergence of the pandemic and its associated crises, students' attendance to school were very poor as many students could not return to school due to many variables such as fear of contracting the virus, economic hardship associated with the lockdown and other related issues which could may have resulted to poor school attendance, loss of friends and partners, disruption in class when absentees return to school, difficulty in keeping accurate records, reduced ability to meet instructional targets, poor academic performance and damage to school reputations among other havocs.

The findings of this study clearly revealed that COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on students' study habits in secondary school in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State. This is because group learning which enhances students' curiosity was not possible as a result of the pandemic. It was also specifically noted from the findings of the study that many students lost interest in studying their books during COVID-19 pandemic since they had no opportunity of studying in libraries during COVID-19 pandemic. Again, it was found out that students' attempts at studying at home, with the associated distractions may have affected students study habit, while lack of teachers' words of encouragement and admonition to students during COVID-19 pandemic may have also affected their study habit negatively. The $H0_2$ was upheld as stated since the mean ratings of both male

and female students on the item statements did not differ significantly.

These findings are completely in line with the view of Victor (2020), who maintains that the human brain functions more effectively when constantly engaged with activities and states that the closure of schools due to COVID-19 has the tendency of reducing the learning ability of students. In Victor's opinion, some students may not likely read their books as long as the school is not in operation. Some may be engaged by their parents in domestic/house chores, street hawking and other activities that may distract them from studying. In some cases, the children while constantly at home may engage in certain social vices such as stealing, keeping bad friends and indulging in drugs abuse activities. These assertions are perhaps very true since some parents' especially poor and uneducated ones may not engage their children successfully because of limited resources thereby reducing the academic performance of students at all levels.

Similarly, the findings of the study with particular reference to research question two agreed to Burgess and Quentin (2020) who noted that a very good and conducive learning environment encourages students study habit and has positive impact on their academic performances; while students reading in an unfavorable environment might find it difficult to study which may affect their academic achievements negatively. This implies that the emergence of COVID19 pandemic may have also dealt seriously with the already perceived fast eroding study habit of students. On the contrary, Carey (2015) stated that a student's study habit is corollary to his/her perception of learning. In order words, a students' attitude to learning is defined by how he/she sees learning. To this scholar, studying is different from reading. Cary emphasized that every student who studies reads but not every student who reads studies. Stressing on this, the scholar contends that studying has to do with reading in between the lines of a book in order to internalize the contents while reading involves going through the contents of a book in order to get an idea of the content. The later accordingly, provides a peripheral knowledge of any literature to the student.

However, it is argued that study habit is not natural with students but that a lot of factors can make or mar good study habits of a student. One of such factors is environment which connotes all the social circumstances that surround the place a student engages in study. It could be the location of the study venue that is within an industrial estate, market or sports arena. It could as well be a quiet place void of any form of distraction. This therefore implies that the circumstances of COVID19 and the associated risk factors may have negatively influenced the school climate and by implication, impacted the students' study habits negatively.

The sudden interruption of the education system in Nigeria as a result of COVID-19 pandemic is a wakeup call to the government, parents, individuals, ministries of education at various levels and other concerned stakeholders to be proactive in emergency response strategies to minimize attendance dilemma of students and guarantee uninterrupted school calendar. There is no doubt that students in terminal

classes in lower and higher levels of education system in Abakaliki Education Zone and beyond was held to a standstill as they were unable to graduate or even move to the next level in their academic pursuit thereby truncating the smooth running of educational sector in Nigeria and the world at large.

Conclusion

This study has shown that the COVID-19 pandemic has had an obvious effect on the educational system and the educational development of school students. The pandemic has not only affected but has brought to the fore the problems that are inherent in our education system in Nigeria. Based on the findings of this study, it was concluded that the educational institutions provide essential learning activities to the learners and when school activities are disrupted as a result of school closure as was the case in this study, students are deprived the opportunities of social, cognitive and psychomotor growth and development within the period, affecting them even beyond the period of closure. Thus, COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the well-planned and articulated school programme, academic calendar and activities which were supposed to have been covered within the specified period. Thus, the disruption had negative impact on students' attendance, study habits, participation in classroom activities and co-curricular activities in secondary school in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State.

Recommendations

1. The government and all concerned stakeholders should ensure that attainable futuristic plans are put in place to regulate students' attendance to school in case of another similar experience as COVID-19. Action oriented plans should be taken to secure the present and future educational system from other possible disruptions and emergencies.
2. The Ebonyi State Ministry of Education in particular should employ experts in the area of ICT to further introduce programs that would enhance students' study habits in order to compete with the outside world even in the period of global pandemic lockdown. Government should be more committed in equipping public secondary schools with modern facilities to promote co-curricular activities. Efforts should be made to upgrade the knowledge base of teachers to effectively teach and reach out to learners even outside the conventional classroom in event of any disease outbreak or emergencies.

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