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REPOSITIONING EARLY CHILDHOOD AND PRIMARY EDUCATION: LESSONS FROM COVID 19 PANDEMIC EXPERIENCE

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Preamble

In the year 2020 the world woke up one day and the pandemic was on us, and before we could say anything the destruction was huge and spreading. You will agree with me that the education sector was among the worst hit with schools closing for months and years in some countries and more than 1 billion children were at risk of falling behind in their learning outcomes (UNICEF, 2020). Prior to the pandemic, the Nigerian government has been on a struggle to ensure young children stay in school and gain accessibility to proper education as statistics revealed that Nigeria contributed approximately 20% of the total global out-of-school population (Amorighoye, 2020).

These numbers escalated during the pandemic which further deepened the crisis. As we all look for a lasting solution the place to begin is early childhood and primary education levels as both form the foundation of all learning. We may not be able to completely replace the lost two years as it is on record that school children around the world lost an estimated **1.8 trillion hours** – and counting – of in-person learning (UNICEF, 2020) we should be able to critically look at issues that arose at these levels of education and based on that plan and reposition not only for the next emergency but for the future of the children. Therefore, this conference with this theme '**Repositioning Early childhood and primary Education cannot have come at a better time.** Let me at this juncture congratulate the organizers and all participants that we all are opportune to be part of a solution at least at this crucial time. I am grateful for the opportunity to share my thoughts with you and hopefully it will indeed be the beginning of the repositioning of our sector.

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I briefly define ECE because this would enable us to identify the critical stakeholders to address the recommendations to. In addition, I looked at the state of ECE before the pandemic and issues that arose during the lockdown, after which I presented the cogent experiences and drawing out our lessons to work with, which eventually led to my recommendations.

Let me start the discussion by critically looking at the word '**repositioning' so as to bring everything into perspective.** The dictionary says place in a different position, adjust, alter, change the image of a product, or try to target a new market in case of a product. It further says to revise the marketing strategy of a product or company. Therefore, we may want to start by asking ourselves this question is Early Childhood Care Education (ECCE) a product or a company? If the answer is yes, then how can we alter or change or revise the marketing strategy of ECCE as a sector to make sure that ALL children have access to schools and are learning?

Another meaning of the word reposition means changing everything required to alter the existing perception of the brand in the minds of customers … and really, I think this last phrase is more relevant to us as early years educators; i.e changing the perception of Early Childhood Education especially as the brand for the now as far as education is concerned in the minds of the customers! If I may ask who are this customer? They are the parents, society, colleagues, educators, media, policy makers, government officials, development partners and maybe we ourselves in the field of early childhood and primary education.) To better reposition Early Childhood and Primary Education then we may need to review the journey so far to evaluate where we are coming from and where we are going.

What do we mean by Early Childhood and Primary Education?

Looking at the term globally, UNESCO for example, refers to early education as 'early childhood care and education' (ECCE) emphasizing the care and nurturing aspect. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2006) uses the term 'early childhood education and care' (ECEC), while United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) tend to use the term 'Early Childhood Development' (ECD) (UNICEF, 2009) or 'Early Childhood', respectively. These divers' definitions just show to us the multifaceted nature of early childhood and may even be a source of confusion if not well understood. However, Primary education, also called elementary education, is for children who have successfully scaled through the early childhood education stage. Though, both stages are germane and critical to the total development of the child each has its own goals and objectives. Primary education provides children with a basic understanding of various subjects as well as a build-up of what has been deposited into the child at the early years. Literacy and numeracy skills are learnt at this level as well as scientific and critical thinking skills for long learning all through their lives. **Elementary education**, also called **primary education** is the first stage traditionally found in formal education, beginning at about age 5 to 7 and ending at about age 11 to 13. In this paper kindly permit me to use the term ECE to cover both the early childhood education (or pre-primary education)and primary education because I strongly believe that the first eight years of a child's life are the most critical as we have seen with 90% of brain development taking place at this time (Oduolowu, 2011).I do appreciate though that some institutions have two different departments (ECDE and PES as we have in the Colleges of Education) while in some universities it is just one department. Let's us briefly consider what was the position of ECE before the pandemic

Position of ECE in Nigeria before COVID 19 .

As we all are aware this sector was left in the hands of the private sector for a long time (Sooter, 2013). Until 2000, when Nigeria along with other 163 countries made commitment at the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal and the government began to seriously to focus on this sector and a lot of policy changes were made such as establishing pre-primary section in existing public schools, developing curriculum, establishing desk offices for ECD and encouraging higher institutions to offer specialization in early childhood and primary education as an undergraduate course. This renewed interest led to the creation of ECCDE departments in all Colleges of Education and some universities which has hitherto offered the program under another department like Educational Foundations, Guidance and Counselling, Teacher education.

Although this may be seen as a form of progress, it is worthy of note to state that only 15 universities are offering the Early Childhood Education as a an undergraduate program out of over 200 universities. This just further confirms that the priority that is supposed to be place on the sector is not yet there and really, we need to start rethinking and rebranding ECE for a better repositioning.

Globally, the spotlight is on the early years and even now more emphasis is on the first 1000 days as investing in the early years is one of the smartest things a country can do to eliminate poverty.Furthermore, it is said that 90 % of our brain development happens before the age of five…… who are the experts that will ensure that the brain of the child is stimulated at this level as inadequate manpower has been a major setback for the sector

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(Akinrotimi&Olowe2016). So before I dwell into the core of my paper on lessons learnt from the COVID pandemic our repositioning should start from the value place on the course of study (early childhood and primary education) . We should start by raising the bar of admission into colleges of Education and universities for the course knowing fully well that the teacher holds the key to successful implementation of any educational enterprise. If the foundation be faulty what then can the righteous do. We need to reposition the foundation for our children and set the structures in place for a robust early childhood and primary education program by making the course attractive to the best brains. Having laid this foundation let us now go to the core of today's paper.

Prior to COVID-19, Nigeria accounts for one in every five of the world's out-of-school children as records had it that 10.5 million children aged 5-14 years were out of school, and only about 61 % of 6 to 11-year-old children received primary school education (UNICEF 2018). While an average 36 percent of children in Nigeria attended early childhood education program (3-5 years old). The share of females was 35 percent, whereas males reached 36 percent. Apart from the issue of access there were myriad of other problems such as inadequate manpower (Akinrotimi&Olowe, 2016), access to quality learning, attacks on learning institutions and abduction of children(ref). Adding to this challenge is the demographic pressure with about 11,00 newborns every day that overburdens the system according to (Global Partnership for Education, 2022). These already existing challenges made the effects of COVID -19 more critical as most of the alternatives provided for children learning did not cover the early years (UNICEF,2021) or the primary schools except for some few private institutions that were able to continue learning. This will take me to the experiences as I mention them one after the other though the list is not exhaustible, but we can consider the main issues that came up because of the crisis.

Experiences in ECE during the COVID -19

1) **Access:** While Nigeriawas battling with underlying educational challenges that have kept the country behind in children accessing quality education (Eze 2021), the pandemic further escalated the crisis with schools in Nigeria closed from March 27, 2020, for six months. Though schools were reopened in October 2020 but not all children returned to school as parents were either afraid of the effect of the deadly virus on their children or the school did not have enough facilities to observe the COVID protocol (GPE,2022).

   Apart from the pandemic insecurity, abduction and kidnapping added to the risk of going to school in some parts of Nigeria and in September of 2021, about a million children could not return to school.(UNICEF 2021). In the words of Peter Hawkins, UNICEF Representative in Nigeria

   "*A child's first day of school should be an exciting event for parents and children. This moment is being stolen from around a million Nigerian children this year, as insecurity threatens their safety and education*."

   As at the time he spoke in 2021, there had been 20 attacks on schools in Nigeria, with 1,436 children abducted and 16 children dead. More than 200 children are still missing.

   In addition just last week I was a panelist on a webinar that had top government officials and education stakeholders discussing school safety and digital alternatives especially as some parts of the nation still has schools closed due to abduction especially in Zamfara and Borno States(https://www.africanews.com/2022/01/18/northern-nigerian-state-reopens-schools-closed-after-abductions//).

   The lesson :This is gradually calling for a repositioning of how we do education as some are already looking at the option of digital alternatives by providing learning materials via radio and television for children in the safety of their homes. But the question is are we ready? Is there a provision for this level of education to be adequately covered by this digital alternatives. Will this not further escalate the inequality in accessing education? Will the poor ever be able to have access to a digital mobile? What are the other effects of children inability to learn within the social context of meeting with their teachers and peers? What become of their social skills and they are separated from the micro-system according to Urie Bronfenbrenner These are reasons for concern!

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As educator we need to consider must children come to school, before they can learn ? Are we prepared for education in emergencies and are there best practices that we can copy from our neighbours? These are food for thought.

(2) **Technology and Children's learning**

With school closures across 188 countries (as of April 2020), many governments were exploring alternative ways to provide continuous education using technologies such as Internet, TV, and radio. However, access to these technologies was and is still limited in many low- and middle-income countries, especially among poor households; UNICEF2020), with the largest disparities appearing in sub-Saharan Africa, Nigeria inclusive (Dreeseni, *et al.,* 2020).While more than 90 per cent of the countries adopted digital and/or broadcast remote learning policies, only 60 per cent did so for pre-primary education (unicef. 2021). Thus the children below the formal school age were not top on the priority and do not access learning for close to two years. In Nigeria , states like Ogun, Lagos and Oyo employed digital alternatives like 'school on air', and 'Ogun digiclass' the programs focused only on the secondary school learners despite the fact that television had the potential to reach the most students (62%) globally only 16% of schoolchildren could be reached by radio-based learning worldwide.(.unicef. 2021).

Lesson learnt: The use of technology further enhanced inequality in education as learners from poor homes could not access this . In addition focus was only exam classes (JSS3/SS3) as recorded by Faseyitan , (2021) and higher education (Ebohon et al, 2021). A comprehensive approach is needed to reach a wider population such as using radio, television, mobile devises and various online platforms

(3) Increase in the digital divide

Inequalities between schools that pre-dated the pandemic were exacerbated during lockdown

In another report by UNICEF in 2020 based on availability of internet facilities in countries of study , focusing on 71 countries (out of 183 with data), less than half the population has access to the internet before the pandemic.

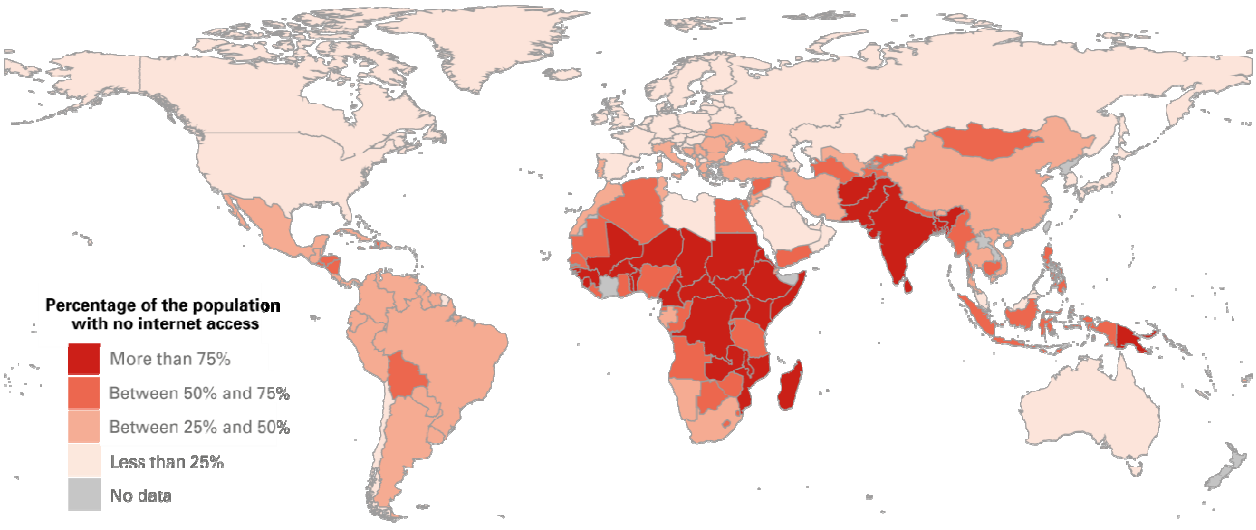


Figure 1: The Digital Divide: Percentage of population with no internet access.

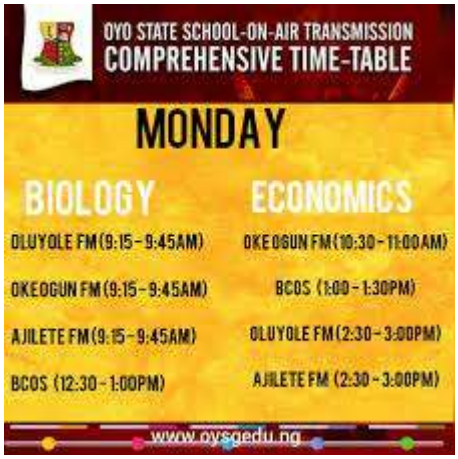
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Source: ITU, datareportal.com (latest data from 183 countries, 2015–2019)

Although Nigeria falls between the 50%to 75% in this category. The data only affirm the reasons why some countries could easily switch over to online classrooms during the crisis while majority of the developing nations could not do so due to lack of internet access . For the few who could in Nigeria, gadgets are with their parents and this had to be shared according to age, gender and need . Globally, 31 per cent of schoolchildren worldwide (463 million) cannot be reached by the broadcast. Out of 94 per cent of ministries of education analysed by UNICEF on developed policies regarding the provision of at least one form of remote learning that involved digital and/or broadcast instruction, only 60 per cent provided this type of policy for the pre-primary education level (.unicef.factsheet/; 2020).

Across countries, only 42% had content for pre-primary and 74% for primary classes while 77% was for upper secondary education. Many countries have also developed broadcast curricula (television- and radio-based), especially for primary and lower secondary students ,some states in Nigeria inclusive. OYO State Government commenced airing lessons in English Language and Mathematics for Primary School Pupils on the radio, April 2020. This was done via interactive radio instruction initiative tagged 'Oyo SUBEB Learning-on-air' on Oluyole 98.5 FM, while a simulcast was aired on Oke-Ogun 96.3 FM and Ajilete 92.1 FM. The program aired daily and twice (morning and afternoon). How effective was it as it covered only two subjects .





Lesson learnt : Well the 'school on air' provided an alternative that could be improved upon to cover more subjects, Currently the organization that did this is working on the early years curriculum for UNICEF . In addition, Children from low income homes and those living in rural communities should be the priority of the government and all development partners so all can have equal access to qualitative education. Also the gender divide should be taken into consideration so both boys and girls can have access to technology .Also, Nigeria should have policies that cater for the digital learning of children in the ECE.

(4) Inadequacy of parents to support their children : In many situations, despite some government intervention of providing remote learning policies and the presence of the necessary technology at home, some children could not learn due to lack of parental support (UNICEF, 2020). Providing access to content is only the first step in remote learning. In Nigeria with examples of states like Lagos, Oyo and Ogun who provided content through the radio and television , illiterate parents could not assist their children . In some countries in the developed world efforts were made to ensure that caregivers are not only support learning at home, but also they were providing children with psychosocial support and encourage their safe use of technology (Dreeseni, et al., 2020).

Apart from these problems many parents were burdened by costs associated with trying to to provide data and internet services on a daily basis moreso they were experiencing the lockdown too and could not go out to work or access funds. So, it was like a double jeopardy. (Human Right Watch, 2020).

A Nigerian father said, "[My three children] join in the school's online classes on my phone because the family has no computer... Although the lessons are on video, the kids only listen to the audio. Sometimes they cannot connect because I do not always have enough data."(Human Rights Watch interview with Timothy B., 2020).

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Another person this time a mother said, "I had to upgrade [my daughter] to a smartphone so she can access online materials, but I am sometimes unable to pay for data from [my] civil servant salary."(Human Rights Watch interview with Olayinka O., 2020).

Lesson learnt *:* Parental support and their economic status is vital for a successful transition to digital alternatives. The literacy level of parents and the significant others around the child is equally important

(5) Social development of children is key to their holistic development . The pandemic affected this aspect of the children's development with the social distancing, no handshake and total withdrawal of outdoor play for school children. The long-term effect of this isolation can only be imagined as many childrenexperienced feelings of stress, anxiety, isolation, and depression, which could be linked to the lack of contact with their school community and loss of loved ones due to the virus. . Cases of depression and mental breakdown was on the increase and children were constantly exposed to abuse and violence at home and in the community due to economic pressures experienced by their parents or the adults they live with. They constantly wondered why they could not socialize and go out to play again as before.

"No emotional and social support is provided by the school," said a caregiver. "This aspect was neglected." (Human Rights Watch ,2020). The fear of catching the virus did not give room for home visit or any social interaction with their teachers.

Between April and August 2020, Human Rights Watch conducted 57 remote interviews with students, parents, teachers, and education officials across Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Madagascar, Morocco, Nigeria, South Africa, and Zambia to learn about the effects of the pandemic on children's education. The result showed that the pandemic highlighted more of the existing inequalities.

Lesson learnt: As we look at repositioning early childhood and primary education, how can we encourage social and emotional development in such situations? Could community centres be created at each local government area that will be available for the children at least to replace the larger school or the structured school environment? At least the risk of infection may be milder, and the children will still be able to access early stimulation as well as interact with peers? As a nation we do not have a plan for education in emergencies.

(6) Interventions from Donor agencies

UNICEF: During the COVID-19 breakdown, UNICEF office in Nigeria received a Global Partnership Education grant of US$140,000 to support the Federal Ministry of Education with preparing a COVID 19 education strategic framework on learning continuity in Nigeria. The support covered: (a). Sixteen (16) states, representing 63% of schools and nearly 70% of children enrolled in school; (b). Access to diverse remote learning programmes that is appropriate for each context through state-level radio and television-based education programmes; (c). Safe school operations with psychosocial support, access to children with special needs, provisioning WASH and hygiene supply to school, back-to-school campaigns; (d). Enhancement of systemic capacity and preparedness and resilience to future shocks through capacity building at state level; (e). Prioritisation of children from the most marginalized groups and (f). Strong emphasis on social behavioural mobilization including sensitization on gender-based violence for girls. (https://www.globalpartnership.org/where-we-work/nigeria). The lesson here is that the government alone can not provide quality education especially during emergencies. However, the intervention of UNICEF was all encompassing and this should serve as a template for any type of intervention to be carried out for the benefit of the children. Parents, teachers and the immediate family of the child must be involved in providing the solution to education needs. It indeed takes a village to raise a child.

Recommendations:

Prior to the pandemic primary and secondary school learners were not allowed to own any digital gadget such as phone or computer, and even if they owned one they were not allowed to be seen with such in the schools especially at the preschool/primary grades.With the emergence of the lockdown condition and school closure, following the COVID-19 pandemic, both teachers and learners were helpless about how to continue learning in the face of the pandemic using technology since the children could not have direct access to a mobile phone. Accessibility was key as majority of children cannot access technology at home or the mobile devices are not enough to go round even within the families. Based on the happenings and limitations experience by all and sundry during the pandemic my recommendations would therefore be as follows:

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- Investment in Technology is key The issue of technology use in ECDE/ Primary education deserve an urgent attention to bridge the digital divide and to maximize the potentials embedded in the use of the mobile devices for teaching and learning. There is the need for our political leaders at the local government levels to invest in creating education hubs so majority of children can access education digitally .
- There should be a policy to drive the edtech start-ups or hubs in the 774 LGAs in Nigeria.
- Teachers should be trained and retrained on the use of technology, and they should have access to the tools needed. Investing in the professional development of teachers technologically is critical because they are key to the teaching and learning of children at this level to develop content and be able to deploy same. This is needful since the children at this level still need the support of their teachers to learn effectively. Adults can learn by themselves but for early childhood/primary classes they need their teachers so without the teacher's capacity increased digitally the use of technology will still be a mirage in ECCD settings.
- Curricula have not been adequately designed and customised for remote teaching or for broadcast media, there is therefore the need to either rethink the curriculum or design an alternative model that can be activated when remote teaching is needed
- Inequality in access to basic education was on the increase due to the pandemic and this affected the number of school aged children that are in school. Some families couldnot afford television sets while for others internet connectivity was a major hurdle despite government efforts to provide digital learning for the children. Therefore, government should ensure equity prevails in terms of access to educational services and digital technology
- Government should device policies on how to include parents more in the education of their children, including appropriate financial support, especially for those in underserved areas and in case of emergencies.
- There should be strategic plans to provide socio-emotional and psychological well-being for both learners and teachers to ensure continuous learning especially the vulnerable so as to leave no one behind.
- Government and development agencies could assist communities to provide low-cost and low-tech solutions for all children to encourage easy access for both boys and girls
- Finally, there should be a strong collaboration between all non-state actors like the civil society and the private sector to support and partner to education needs.

Conclusion: As I conclude this paper, nobody plans for emergencies or should I say we as a nation do not plan for emergencies, but the COVID experience should spur us to begin to plan for education in emergencies. Furthermore, I would like to quote Rebeca Winthrop of the Centre for Universal Education who said 'ensuring Africa's children …… have high-quality education opportunities that prepare them for the 21st century world we live in is not only the right thing to do …..but is also the smart thing to do' . WE need to reposition the early childhood and primary education sector so as to provide uninterrupted education for the young minds as ' education cannot wait'

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