Equity issues in the provision of online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic in Kenya

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to critically review the well-intended plan by the government through the Ministry of Education to continue providing quality learning through online learning and in an equitable and inclusive manner during school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is based on a review of the available literature including assessment reports, academic studies and media reports.

Findings – The paper revealed that despite the visionary plan by the government that the development and implementation of an emergency response plan would ensure equitable and inclusive continued learning for all students, those learners who were disadvantaged, including those living in remote areas and urban informal settlements, girls and learners from low–socio-economic households, found it even harder to access lessons. In fact, the existing digital divide on the part of the learners and schools served to reproduce or even widen inequities in learning. The COVID-19 pandemic evidently made these inequities more visible or even worse. What had been conceived as and intended to be an equitable and inclusive learning exercise ended up marginalising learners in already marginalised spaces.

Research limitations/implications – While the researchers made an attempt to search for as many documents as possible, the documents selected for the paper are limited to those that explored the online learning during COVID-19 in Kenya. These reports were critically examined with a view to providing a clear picture of what online teaching and learning was like and how this picture embraced notions of fairness and inclusivity hence equity. Despite all these, there was the possibility of having some biases in the used reports. However, the researchers carefully read them triangulating them with others with similar information in an attempt to filter biases.

Practical implications – The paper has demonstrated how the learning process can be influenced by the provision of the relevant teaching and learning materials, tools and infrastructure.

Social implications – This paper has clearly demonstrated the position that learning is a social process and which is affected by the social factors such as gender roles, socio-economic status and the social environment in which it occurs.

Originality/value – The paper contributes to ongoing discussion about the potentials and challenges of online learning particularly in a country like Kenya where equity in learning still remains a considerable challenge mainly as a result of the existing socio-economic, regional and gender disparities in learning. The paper makes a contribution in terms of an authentic mode of thinking that should guide the process of provision of "learning for all".

Keywords Online learning, Remote learning, COVID-19, Equity, Basic education

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The outbreak of the novel corona virus disease (COVID-19) affected various institutions in profound ways. One of the common tools used in the education sector to contain the spread of this pandemic was school closures. In Kenya, for instance, school closure affected more than 90,000 learning institutions with over 18 million learners and 300,000 teachers being forced to stay at home (APHRC, 2020; Kathula, 2020). The closure took place between March and September 2020 for Grades 4 and 8 of primary school and Form 4 of secondary school, and up to December for all other classes for a period of 9 months (MoE, 2020; Population Council, 2021). While schools reopened in January 2021, not all learners were able to return to school. A mobile-phone survey targeting 3,921 adolescents age 10 to 19 years in Nairobi, Kisumu, Kilifi and Wajir revealed that 16% of girls and 8% of boys did not return when schools reopened (Population Council, 2021). Based on the projection from the 2019 census, the same study estimated that 270,350 girls and 137,113 boys who were in school in March 2020 had not returned by February 2021 (Population Council, 2021, p. 66).

In response to school closures, the Ministry of Education developed an emergency response plan which outlined the ministry's plan to continue providing quality learning with an equitable and inclusive online approach at home (MoE, 2020). This is in line with the government's commitment to Goal 4 of the United Nations sustainable development goals (SDGs), which clearly states the provision of inclusive and equitable quality education for all. Common to these two guiding documents is the concept of "equity" in the provision of education. Accordingly, the emergency plan was to ensure quality learning, particularly for vulnerable learners such as low socio-economic backgrounds, those with disabilities, those in urban informal settlements, girls, remote locations, the internally displaced, asylum seekers and refugees as well as those whose family may have lost livelihoods as a result of job cuts or business closure (MoE, 2020, p. 2). It is therefore evident that the outbreak of COVID-19 made it mandatory for education systems to explore other possibilities for learning to be carried on outside the conventional school space. Accordingly, learning shifted from the usual face-to-face encounters in the school classroom to online learning. Despite such commitment and effort by the government, however, earlier studies point out some challenges to online learning, especially amongst the most vulnerable children (Kathula, 2020; Mwebi, 2021).

The purpose of this paper is to critically review the nature of provision of online learning in view of the government commitment. The paper is based on a review of the available literature including assessment reports, academic studies and media reports. While the paper is limited to the capacity of a desk review, it nonetheless reveals challenges faced by vulnerable children and adolescents, especially those located in marginalised areas and pockets of poverty. The paper also identifies widening learning disparities in socio-economic status, gender, region, type of school and the existing digital divide on the part of the learners. The paper will conclude with critical reflections.

The paper is organised as follows. The following section sets out the government response to school closure followed by Section 3 on methods of a desk review. Section 4 presents various challenges learners faced in remote learning while at home. This is followed by Section 5 for discussion and the final section for conclusions.

2. Provision of online learning

2.1 Definition of equity in the study

Given the centrality of the concept of equity in relation to the nature of provision of education during this COVID-19 period, it is important to first review the notion of equity in education. The concept of equity has been defined in different ways by different scholars at different times and places. Arguably, most of these conceptions do not offer a full and exhaustive analysis that breaks the concept down into specific indicators in terms of which the concept of

equity can be measured (Castelli, Ragazzi, & Crescentini, 2012). However, at the core of all these definitions are the notions of fairness, impartiality, justice and inclusivity relating to equal opportunity (Sen, 2009). It therefore has to do with giving each learner what he or she needs to enable them to perform at an acceptable level.

According to Field, Kuczera & Pont (2007), equity in education has two closely intertwined dimensions; first, fairness and second, inclusion. To begin with, the notion of fairness involves ensuring that personal and social circumstances including gender, ethnic origin, socio-economic status, disability etc. are not obstacles to achieving educational potential. Inclusion, on the other hand, is about ensuring basic minimum standards of education for all such that if some learners need more to achieve their potential, they should receive it. It is about all learners being able to access and gain equal opportunities in the process of learning and the benefits therefrom.

Achieving equity in learning requires an understanding of each learner's individual needs so as to design learning experiences that will help all learners to benefit maximally from the process of learning. Understood in this way, equity takes the form of provision of personalised resources needed for all individuals to reach common goals. And while the goals and expectations are a common phenomenon for all learners, the support needed to achieve those goals depends on the learners' needs (Alegre & Ferrer, 2010). Therefore, by committing to providing equitable and inclusive quality learning during the COVID-19 era, this paper is based on the understanding that the Ministry of Education was promising to ensure that every learner, including those in marginalised areas of the country, had the support they needed to participate in online learning.

2.2 The government's response to the provision of online learning

The education system is currently undergoing some transition. For approximately four decades the Kenyan system of education has been identified as the 8-4-4 system. This means that a child begins school at age 6 and spends 8 years in primary school, 4 years in secondary or technical/vocational school and an average of 4 years in higher education (of course, other more technical courses may last five or six years). The eight years of primary and 4 years of secondary are collectively referred to as basic education and are free and compulsory. However, from 2017, the government introduced the competency based curriculum (CBC) commonly represented as the 2-6-3-3 system, which is gradually and systematically replacing the 8-4-4 system. This change was a response to weaknesses identified in the 8-4-4 system, which was highly criticised for being too examination-oriented (MoE, 2012).

Upon the outbreak of COVID-19, the education sector immediately put measures in place not only to prevent the spread of the virus but also to ensure continued provision of equitable and inclusive quality online learning while at home. Accordingly, the Ministry of Education developed an emergency response plan that aimed at providing learners with access to equitable and inclusive quality education during and after the crisis, ensure continued learning, facilitate the production of online teaching and learning materials, and expand distance learning programmes, among other objectives (MoE, 2020). The ministry particularly sought to target learners such as those from low socio-economic backgrounds, those with disabilities, those in urban informal settlements, girls, those in remote locations, the internally displaced, asylum seekers, refugees and those whose family may have lost livelihoods as a result of job cuts or business closure (MoE, 2020).

In order to ensure continued quality learning, the Ministry of Education in collaboration with the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) began offering online lessons to primary and secondary school learners through radio programmes (Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) English Service and Radio Taifa), television (TV) channels (Education and YouTube) as a live streaming of on-demand content, and the Kenya Education Cloud for

interactive lessons on the Internet (Ressa, 2021, p. 31). There were also some ed-tech apps which were put to use for online learning. The classes covered grades from early childhood education through primary all the way to secondary education (Ressa, 2021).

In addition, many actors came to partner the ministry in providing online learning platforms, including Star-Times TV, *Safaricom* (a mobile phone service provider), V*iusasa* (a subscription video-on-demand service accessible through a specifically developed app) and many other mobile apps (Mwebi, 2021, p. 133). The KICD also partnered with the Kenya Publishers Association to provide learners with free electronic copies of textbooks on the Kenya Education Cloud (Ressa, 2021, p. 31). The Kenya Civil Aviation Authority collaborated with Telkom Kenya and Alphabet Inc. to float Google's Loon Balloons, carrying 4G base stations, over Kenya airspace (Ressa, 2021, p. 32). For its part, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) made efforts to support the most vulnerable children in informal settlements, refugees and children with disabilities by distributing 27,500 solar powered radios for learners without access to lessons. The agency also distributed textbooks to 18,350 students in refugee camps (Otieno & Brown, 2020).

While some stakeholders approved of this approach, many more had reservations as they perceived the environment of implementation as ill-prepared for this purpose. To many of them, the environment was generally unprepared in ways that would make it difficult for the ministry to achieve its objective of providing learning equitably and in an inclusive manner. In any case, an earlier study had established that learning opportunities were reportedly unequally distributed, with devastating consequences for marginalised learners (APHRC, 2020).

While all these efforts provided a mixture of platforms to enable online learning to take off, during the actual online teaching and learning, schools were free to make choices of particular platforms and apps suitable for their respective learning environments. Having made respective choices, schools drew up timetables which they utilised to coordinate their online teaching and learning activities. With these different levels of endowment and access to such amenities, it is the core concern of this paper to examine whether and how the Ministry of Education was able to provide this support, in order to ensure that all the learners meaningfully participate and benefit from online lessons conducted during school closure. In particular, the paper focuses on the experiences of learners from low socioeconomic backgrounds, those with disabilities, girls, those in urban informal settlements and those from remote locations in accessing online learning.

2.3 Internet accessibility in the Kenyan context
Before exploring actual practices of online learning, it is important to understand the situation surrounding Internet accessibility in Kenya prior to COVID-19. The 2019 Census data by the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) indicates that only 17.9% of Kenyan households have Internet access, 56.9% have stand-alone radios while 40.7% have functioning televisions (Republic of Kenya, 2022). Data from other sources including Muyaka (2019) indicate that about 70% of these learners reside in rural areas. In these rural areas, the KNBS 2019 report indicates that only 26% of households have access to electricity. Besides data from the KNBS, data obtained from the communications authority of Kenya indicates that as of September 2019, out of the approximately 52 million people with mobile phones, only 25 million people had mobile broadband (Communications Authority of Kenya, 2019).

From these statistics, one can deduce a number of issues. These include the fact that, firstly; electricity is poorly distributed across the country with the rural areas suffering the most. Secondly, that Internet access is not evenly distributed. Thirdly, that more than half the population do not have functional televisions and finally, that while some lessons were streamed live through the radio, nearly 43% of the population does not own stand-alone radio sets but have it as part of other gadgets such as mobile phones.

3. Methods of reviewing literature

The cardinal question that this paper seeks to address is: since the shift to online learning was intended to have all students continue learning while at home, did the approach adopted by the Ministry of Education adequately cater for the different needs of all learners to ensure that they all access and meaningfully participate in online learning? Put differently, to what extent were the resources for online learning, as provided by the Ministry of Education, personalised to the needs of all learners?

The paper mainly used document analysis as a qualitative research approach. In responding to the above question, the researchers have made reference to a number of documents including the Government of Kenya Emergency Response Plan, rapid assessment reports (small-scale), reports by the KNBS, collaborative media reports and academic studies. These documents were selected as data sources for this paper after reviewing them for their suitability and relevance. Accordingly, the researchers carefully read them triangulating them with others with similar information in an attempt to filter biases. As for collaborative media reports, priority was given to mainstream and authoritative sources to ensure authenticity. While the researchers made an attempt to search for as many documents as possible, the documents selected for the paper are limited to those that explored the online learning during COVID-19 in Kenya. These reports have been critically examined with a view to providing a clear picture of what online teaching and learning was like and how this picture, whatever its nature, embraced the concept of equity, and more particularly, notions of fairness and inclusivity. While such a picture may not constitute a model in a strictly formal sense (Eikeland & Skjærseth, 2016), it is a tool that provides a simplified image of the nature of online learning and its consistency (or lack of it) with the underlying informing policy that guided its provision.

4. Implementing online learning

4.1 Manifestations of inequity in online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic

4.1.1 Overall challenges and unequally distributed learning opportunities. This section examines the extent to which the provision of online learning during school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic ensured (or failed to ensure) that the personal and social circumstances of learners including socioeconomic status, disability, informal settlements, gender, remote areas, among others, did not hinder them from accessing and participating in online learning. Learning was rooted in the fact that it was in the spirit of the emergency response plan to provide continued learning equitably. As indicated earlier, the continuation of learning proceeded through alternative learning pathways including online classes, radio lessons and educational television channels following the enhancement of the Kenya Education Cloud. However, upon declaration of the shift from face-to-face to online learning while at home, media reports increasingly indicated that the decision was received by the various stakeholders with mixed feelings (Owiti, 2020). As mentioned previously, schools were free to make choices of particular platforms and apps suitable for their respective learning environments. According to a report by Uwezo Kenya (2020), the main platforms that were in common use included WhatsApp, Zoom and Google-Meet.

4.1.2 Household socioeconomic status. The few available studies on the extent of access to virtual learning through educational technology that exist together with collaborative media reports identify the lack of electricity and poor Internet connectivity as the main factors that largely excluded many learners from online learning (Uwezo Kenya, 2020; Parsitau & Jepkemei, 2020; Population Council, 2021; Ressa, 2022). In a way, these studies depict a trend where such disparities coincide with the financial stability (or lack of it) of families from which learners come. In some cases, loss of livelihoods meant that children from low-income and poor households could not meet online learning requirements. These included online

learning infrastructure such as computer equipment for virtual learning on the one hand and resources such as Internet bundles and Wi-Fi connections on the other hand (GIRL Center, 2022). In effect, learners from low-income households had difficulty in accessing online learning compared to those from well-to-do households and those residing in places with comparatively better amenities such as electricity connection and Internet connectivity.

Furthermore, studies on online learning in the COVID-19 era indicate that both access and knowledge of how to use online digital tools and equipment for learning is significantly influenced by children's socio-economic background. According to a survey on remote learning by Uwezo Kenya (2020), access to learning was low and inequitable, parental awareness varied, the most utilised platform for remote learning was not the most accessible, and public schools were the least prepared to support the digital learning approach. Therefore, besides infrastructure, the Ministry of Education needed to give a little more support to learners from poor backgrounds if they were to realise equitable and inclusive provision of continued learning as intended.

4.1.3 Learners with disabilities. While online learning could become a flexible and efficient learning tool for some leaners with disabilities who may have some challenges in accessing schools, it can also become a tool for widening some existing disparities in learning. Despite efforts by the Kenyan government, international organisations, local and international companies among others to boost online learning, people with disabilities were the most disadvantaged in online learning as most were poverty-stricken thus had limited resources to purchase or prepare for learning equipments (Ressa, 2020, p. 48). While many learners with disabilities relied on the radios and mobile phones, these tools required a lot of concentration, thereby making it more difficult to learn (Ressa, 2022). While learners with disabilities are used to the routine of trying to maintain their health and functionality, the environment within their homes became stressful because of this change in the routine (Ressa, 2022, p. 133). Such learners also require appropriate and psychological support or counselling for their mental health. However, such support was inadequate and this further made their online learning difficult (Ressa, 2022, p. 134).

4.1.4 Gender disparities. The discourse on online learning during school closure due to COVID-19 has not completely ignored the gender aspect. Rather, it has partly sought knowledge of gender dynamics that played out during the shift from face-to-face to online learning and how this affected learners and the learning process.

Initial analysis of media reports as well as other rapid assessment reports indicates that the closure of schools pushed many children, particularly girls, out of their protective environment (Parsitau & Jepkemei, 2020; WUSC, 2020; GIRL Center, 2022). As a result, media has reported increasing cases of sexual assault on women and girls during their stay at home following school closure. For instance, such reports indicated that in the first three months of closure, one county recorded up to 4,000 cases of early pregnancy (AfricaNews Online, 2020; Ajayi, 2020). Again, staying at home meant an increase in competing household chores especially on the part of girls (Population Council, 2021). For example, while at home, girls had to cook for the family, carry out cleaning, fetch firewood and care for the sick, particularly in rural households (WUSC, 2020), all which significantly reduced their online study time, particularly, time for attending to class assignments, compared to their male counterparts (Population Council, 2021).

Other studies also found out that limited access to learning resources was greater in rural and mobile communities, especially for girls. In these communities, the most common method of remote learning was books yet these were not supplied by schools, and less than 5% of students learnt on computers in such areas (GIRL Center, 2022, p. 2). Girls are particularly vulnerable at home as most of them are required to prioritise household chores over remote learning (GIRL Center, 2022). Some girls were unable to return to school when schools re-opened due to pregnancies and early marriages that reportedly took place during school

closure (Population Council, 2021; GIRL Center, 2022). According to a study conducted by Population Council (2021), while almost one out of every five girls age 15 to19 years was reported to be pregnant or having had a baby in the pre-COVID-19 period, school closures increased this risk. For example, as high as 13% of adolescent girls in Kisumu reported being pregnant or having had a baby during school closures (Population Council, 2021, p. 45). Interviews held with these adolescents reportedly revealed that the pregnancies were unintended and factors that fostered sexual activities during school closure were idleness, lack of household income, peer pressure, exposure to violence and difficulty in accessing health support services due to quarantine and curfews (Population Council, 2021).

While girls often receive more attention as victims of school closures, boys too carry a substantial burden. In fact, more boys than girls were involved in income-earning activities during school closures (GIRL Center, 2022). While almost half of adolescents experienced the symptoms of depression – and this was higher in urban areas (47% in Kisumu and 46% in Nairobi) than in rural areas (34% in Kilifi) (Population Council, 2021) – the signs of depression were more prominent among boys than girls (GIRL Center, 2022). Accordingly, regardless of gender, both boys and girls shouldered some burden during school closures and therefore both boys and girls required physical, psychological or emotional care when school re-opened.

Quarantine and curfews that were used to minimise people's interaction by restricting their movement tended to reduce and restrict the mobility of women and girls more than it did for men and boys. This significantly served to diminish their (women and girls) autonomy. But more importantly, these quarantines and curfews essentially limited girls' access to essential services such as clinics and health support services as well as support networks including the use of cyber cafes to access the Internet. The well-intended plan to support equitable and inclusive learning notwithstanding, the Ministry of Education apparently did less to address such unique needs and circumstances thereby putting some groups of learners at a disadvantage.

4.1.5 Learners in urban informal settlements. Urban informal settlements are often characterised by poverty, lack of basic infrastructure such as roads, electricity and water as well as social amenities including poor housing and lack of adequate schools for the young population. Education provision in these areas is commonly associated lack of adequate public schools hence more low-cost privately owned schools, most of which charge fees that even fall below the cost of the typical public school (Tooley, Dixon, & Stanfield, 2008). Following the hard economic times brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and coupled with declining livelihoods learners in the disadvantaged urban informal settlements, many of their private schools were forced to close down. In this regard, media reports indicate that a total of 339 private schools ceased operation thereby affecting the learning of about 56,000 students as well as 1,247 teachers who lost their jobs following this permanent closure (VoA News Online, 2021).

The few schools that survived reportedly made a deliberate decision to avoid investing in new Information and Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructure and online learning materials since they were not sure whether parents would pay for the cost. And for those that mounted online learning, they had some of their teachers, especially those who were not part of creating remote learning materials, laid off while others had salaries reduced (Ehwi & Ehwi, 2021, p. 12). According to Bridge International Academies, which are spread throughout at least 40 out of 47 counties in Kenya, the school forced their staff on compulsory leave in order to reduce their financial burden (Wafula, 2020). Apparently, this problem of online learning not only affected learners but teachers too.

In effect, many private schools, particularly those located in urban informal settlements, could not sustain themselves, let alone support online classes and learners in these schools therefore never quite accessed online lessons during school closure. However, the Ministry of Education did not make adequate specific provisions, in its plan, to provide more targeted support to learners in schools in such catchment areas hence compromising the supposed benefits of online learning for all learners.

4.1.6 Learners in remote locations. Literature on the learning environment (including Fraser, 2018) tends to focus on aspects of the psycho-social learning environment in formal learning spaces. However, more recent literature appears to provide a wider view of the learning environment to include physical and technological aspects as well as informal learning spaces outside the classroom (Valtonen *et al.*, 2021).

Many children from such households in rural areas, arid and semi-arid lands (ASAL) and those in urban informal settlements were found to be equally disadvantaged in terms of online learning due to lack of electricity, which is unevenly distributed (WUSC, 2020). For instance, households in remote parts of Kajiado, Narok, Samburu, Turkana and Kilifi counties do not have electricity, and therefore, learners residing in these areas largely remain excluded from online learning as they cannot afford alternatives to electricity connection (Parsitau & Jepkemei, 2020).

Conceptually, there appears to be a variation of what remote learning means to learners in different geographical areas and individuals. For instance, a study by Population Council (2021) indicated that while on average 85% of those enrolled when schools were closed had some form of remote learning the most commonly used method of remote learning was reading other books (68%). In fact, according to the study, it was only 32% in Nairobi, 25% in Kisumu, 12% in Kilifi and 2% in Wajir who used mobile phones to access online learning materials provided by the Ministry of Education (Population Council, 2021, p. 32). In this way, while children in these areas may talk of having accessed online learning, what they went through is not the online experience as envisaged by the Ministry of Education. For the few who used digital gadgets, some of them reportedly shared these gadgets such as mobile phone with their parents, or guardians, some of whom, in turn, limited their children's use of the gadgets as they feared they (children) would use them to communicate with their friends of the opposite gender (Population Council, 2021).

As for the rural areas and ASAL regions, many children come from households that lack electricity and internet connectivity (WUSC, 2020; Engzell *et al.*, 2020). In addition, such households were found to be less likely to own smartphones, radio and television sets, which were the basic gadgets needed for accessing online content for learning. And while children from well-to-do households would get support from their parents in handling online learning experiences and challenges including hiring tutors to help their children in their studies, those from such disadvantaged households as those in the marginalised areas could not afford any of these forms of support. Instead, they looked to the government for such support, which was, often, not forthcoming (APHRC, 2020; Population Council, 2021). In the end, it is apparent that the manner, in which online learning was implemented, particularly in marginalised areas in Kenya, speaks much about the danger of a programme that does not adequately address the circumstances in which learning is takes place.

4.1.7 The digital divide in online learning. The statistics of the learning environment shared in the preliminary sections of this paper indicate a generally low percentage of learners with access to digital learning materials such as computers, iPads and laptops, as well as that of those with access to learning through the Internet. The discourse on the digital divide cannot avoid the question of access to the Internet. Accordingly, it is important to bear in mind that the proportion of the population with Internet access in Kenya may not be as high as generally assumed. According to the 2019 Kenya Population and Housing Census, 4.0% of primary and 23.9% of secondary school learners use the Internet. However, there is a substantial regional difference as 2.0% of primary school learners in rural areas use the Internet compared with 10.3% of their counterparts in urban areas. The same proportion in secondary school shows 16.8% in rural and 41.0% in urban areas use the Internet. Furthermore, when it comes to individual use of a computer, 4.0% of primary and 12.0% of secondary school learners responded that they use computers (Republic of Kenya, 2022). Thus, access to the Internet does not necessarily guarantee the use of computers at home.

Considering the fact that those who use the Internet represented a relatively small population, it is no surprise that online lessons via the Internet did not reach the intended range of learners during school closure.

At the same time, the percentage of those with access to electricity, particularly in rural areas, was equally wanting in terms of enabling home learning for all. These disparities therefore represent a glaring gap between demographics and regions that have access to modern information and computer technology and those that do not or have restricted access. This is the case with the findings of a study by Uwezo Kenya (2020) which reports low and inequitable access to learning due to disparate parental awareness (low in low socio-economic households in areas such as rural, marginalised, urban informal settlements). According to this study, the most utilised platforms for remote learning (TV and mobile phone) are apparently not the most accessible. At the same time, the report found that public schools were the least prepared to support a digital learning approach. In the end, the general picture painted in terms of the digital divide shows that while home schooling is a viable option in times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, there is much about this option that deserves in-depth, long term and rigorous research, if it is to enhance the achievement of a positive effect for most learners if not all.

5. Reflecting on online learning in Kenya: mitigating online learning challenges or widening existing gaps?

In the circles of opinion on the provision of continued learning, there were voices of dissatisfaction with the model adopted in schools in Kenya and, in particular, how it was eventually designed and subsequently offered by the Ministry of Education as online learning for school learners in Kenya during the COVID-19 crisis (Obura, 2020; Kathula, 2020). The arguments presented in this paper also clearly point to substantial challenges in the provision of equitable and inclusive quality online learning. Despite the rapid response of the Ministry of Education in terms of providing continued learning through online classes, the extent to which it addressed the issue of equitable access by the most vulnerable learners remains dissatisfactory. In particular, the notion of "equity" understood from the perspectives of fairness and inclusion reveals a number of unmet promises. Some stakeholders and educational scholars have even expressed the view that in addition to conventional learning constraints such as direct costs of uniforms and school meals, and indirect costs of poverty, insecurity, long distances, and lack of food and water at home, online learning became a new constraint on this list. Apparently, children from low–socio-economic backgrounds, urban informal settlements and those from ASAL regions, including those in refugee camps, benefitted the least from such a learning approach (Mwebi, 2021).

This paper also demonstrates the ways in which online learning increased gaps in educational opportunities. Whereas students in well-off households with Internet connectivity and TV sets were able to continue learning, the majority of learners, mostly from remote areas, low–socio-economic backgrounds, girls and other vulnerable children, were unable to access learning materials. Despite the Ministry of Education having proposed a number of measures including enhancing connectivity to make continued learning for all possible, measures related to the prevailing digital gap were neither clearly identified and outlined, nor were they prioritised during the implementation of online learning. What was missing, however, was a strategy that would directly address the needs of vulnerable learners who had already been experiencing learning gaps even in the period prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although there was an existing disparity in learning in general, remote learning, as implemented in schools in Kenya, added to the disparity since it was mainly those learners from middle to upper income earning households in urban areas that had access to the Internet and learning devices such as mobile phones and/or computers. Even devices such as

TVs and radios were not easily and readily accessible to some learners. Accordingly, while some students continued learning through the virtual mode, the majority of learners, especially those from the marginalised areas, were unable to access quality learning for the nine months that school closure lasted.

As a result of quarantine and curfews, the government had no choice but to close all schools. This pushed girls out of the "protective space" of the school environment, exposing them to the gender-based violence that partly resulted in increased incidences of early pregnancy adding to anxiety about continued learning (Population Council, 2021). Additionally, girls had to take up more household chores and which they had to prioritise over their online studies (GIRL Center, 2022). However, the Ministry of Education failed to provide accompanying guidelines for gender-specific protection and its subsequent enforcement in order to make homes equally "safe spaces" for learning as that of school.

6. Conclusion

In its emergency response plan, the Government of Kenya, through the Ministry of Education, declared its well-intentioned plan to continue providing quality equitable and inclusive learning during the COVID-19 era through online learning when schools were closed. This shift to online learning elicited sharp reactions, particularly from those stakeholders who feared that the approach would be insensitive to the circumstances of many learners. In other words, quite a number of stakeholders feared that the provision of education virtually was going to happen but its implementation would be devoid of the principle of equity.

From the foregoing discussion it is evident that there is a dire need to rethink the often-taken-for-granted view that providing equal opportunities is actually tantamount or even a means to the provision of learning for all learners as envisaged in SDG 4, especially when socioeconomic disparities still exist among learners. Devices such as TVs, computers and mobile phones are expensive thus out of reach for many households. Given such circumstances, online learning using such devices can add to, if not widen, an already existing disparity in learning. While it was such a step forward for the government to immediately respond to the fast spreading pandemic by way of closing all schools and subsequently putting in place a plan to ensure continued learning, it amounted to two steps back for it not to ensure the promise of learning for all. Certainly, an approach that targeted specific populations with a view to addressing their unique challenges that would otherwise compromise their meaningful participation in online learning would have been preferable if the subsequent learning process was to be fair and inclusive.

Consequently, while the various disparities discussed were already in existence, the COVID-19 pandemic (and more specifically, the approach adopted for learning) evidently made these inequities more visible and worse. What was conceived as a strategy for an equitable and inclusive learning exercise ended up marginalising learners in already marginalised spaces? This therefore not only jeopardised the promise of the emergency response plan but also that of SDG 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education for all.

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