**The New Normal in Education: a case of Covid-19**

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Abstract

The outbreak of the Corona Virus of 2019 (Covid-19) has affected life in every facet. To surviveduring this period of COVID19 one has to adopt a new lifestyle which is the ‘New Normal’(NN). The purpose of this study was to explore the challenges and opportunities of the NewNormal to schools due to COVID19 pandemic. A descriptive survey research design wasadopted. The sample consisted of six participants: 3 females and 3 males. Data was collectedusing Personal Interviews (PI). Data were analyzed thematically. The results show that all theparticipants experienced unemployment, minimum resources, and regrets for not having an extraincomebefore the pandemic. The challenges includefinances, teaching and learning, and socialdistancing. Also, teachers doubt how NN will work in their contexts. This state of uncertaintysuggests that external support may be necessary to meet their challenges as a NN strategy.

**Introduction**

On 11 March 2020, the WHO declared COVID19 to be a pandemic (World Economic Forum,2020). By August 12, 2020, globally there were 20 330 351 confirmed cases of COVID19 with742 413 registered deaths. The United States of America (USA) shows a record of 10 976 368confirmed cases with 164 537 deaths and Africa has 1 065 544 cases with 23 858 deaths. Europeand Asia are bleeding greatly too. The globe is in a panic mode because there is no Covid19 cureor vaccine. The outbreak of the Corona Virus of 2019 (Covid19) has affected life in every facet.To control the spread of the virus many countries instituted economic lockdowns and isolation ofpatients. To survive during this period of COVID19 one has to adopt a new lifestyle which isthe ‘New Normal’ (NN). Previously, taking people’s body temperatures has been the prerogativeof medical personnel and now it is assigned to security guards at the entrances of buildings toascertain the first symptoms of Covid19. NN is an innovative form of ‘Survival for thefittest.’ Thus, one is obliged to wear face masks, wash and sanitize hands, eat well, and keepsocial distancing. While these procedures are necessary for survival, they present challenges andopportunities in education. Challenges may require institutions to increase the number ofteachers and infrastructure to ensure social distancing. Conversely, the new setting createsopportunities for learners to get more attention since there will be fewer learners per teacher. TheNN may ensure more learner support through virtual teaching and learning. Thus, this studyfocused on experiences of head teachers and teachers and examined how they are adjusting to theNN caused by COVID 19 pandemic.

**Statement of the problem**

Teachers and learners are expected to be in school for most part of the year. In some countriesschools use two semesters, while in Uganda the school system uses three terms a year. During these periods there isteaching and learning as well as assessment, mid-term and terminal. In March this year there wasa Great Lockdown instituted by International Monetary Fund (IMF). The lockdown affected 2.7billion workers (ILO, 2020). The government of Uganda also directed a national lockdown for schools, colleges,and universities. At this time, learners were not yet assessed for the term. So, schools werecaught unaware and the lockdown was initially for two weeks but now it is six months already.This means half of the year is gone. This lockdown may impact on learning and therefore need tofind the NN of doing things. The current situation in schools has affected both teachers andlearners alike. Teachers are no longer employed and they have to find a New Normal to survive inthe current situation. This study highlights teachers’ experiences, challenges, and anyopportunities in the New Normal following the COVID 19 lockdown.

**Theoretical Framework**

The crisis and the intervention theory (Lindemanne, 1944; Caplan, 1964; Mcgee, 1974) and thecrisis management theory (Gephart, Van Maanen&Oberlechner, 2009) formed the basis of thisstudy. The term crisis refers to Greek word ’krisis’ which means decision or turning point (Poal,1990). The Crisis Theory has emotional challenges with four stages (Sifneos, 1960). Thus, the Crisis Theory’s has stage set in one by one as follows: 1) the startof chain reactions leading to a crisis. In our case, the extension of lockdown over 6 months now has generated a chain reaction regarding teachers’ challenges, 2) the teachers have become susceptible to the situation which harms the teaching and learning, 3) aggravating events, and 4) the crisis.According to Lindemann (1964), a crisis worsens if it is not resolved between 6 to 8 weeks. Thecrisis depends on the relationships of one’s internal and external factors. Thus, the interventiontheory stipulates that the subjects desire external intervention (Caplan, 1964). Similarly, theCrisis Management theory encompasses two aspects: internal and external. The internal dealswith the within-organization dynamics (Gephart, Van Maanen&Oberlechner, 2009), while theexternal focuses on external stakeholders (Bundy &Pfarrer, 2015; Coombs, 2007) to solve thecrisis. In education, teachers need to address their personal issues and also corporate issues.Therefore, these theories were deemed fit for the study.

**The purpose of this study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the challenges and opportunities of the New Normal toschools due to COVID19 pandemic. The specific objectivesof this study objectives sought to: 1) examine the experiences of principals, and teachersregarding the New Normal in schools; 2) identify challenges in schools regarding the NewNormal in schools; 3) establish opportunities of implementing the New Normal in schools.

**Literature Review**

*Schools closure*

The United Nation revealed that schools’ closure have kept 90 per cent of students worldwide(1.57 billion) out of school and caused over 370 million children to miss out on school mealsthey depend on. Lack of access to computers and the internet at home means remote learning isout of reach of many. About 70 countries reported moderate to severe disruptions or a totalsuspension of childhood vaccination services during March and April of 2020. COVID19 isreversing decades of progress on poverty, healthcare and education, among others (UnitedNations Report 7 July, 2020, New York).

*Pandemic*

Lie (2020) asserts that in spite of the pandemic’s disruption the online learning has provokedteachers out of their comfort zone to think out of the box. She continues that it has forcedteachers to teach using the virtual learning space. Lie (2020) observes that the traditionalclassroom has since disappeared and there is need for online learning. Lie (2020) statesthat schools need to adopt the NN to survive during the outbreak. Lie (2020) claims that despite all theCOVID19 maladies, the pandemic disruption has brought awareness to new possibilities ineducation.

*Crisis management*

Crises are unavoidable for all time and thus crisis management is very necessary for humanity tosurvive (Zamoum&Gorpe, 2018)). According to history, humanity has witnessed varioustypes of crises: multiple, complex, political, military, and economic. Coombs (2012) defines acrisis as a major threat that results in negative consequences. Currently, the COVID19 pandemichas become the worst human and economic crisis of our lifetime with the global death tollexceeding 500,000 and the number of confirmed cases at more than 10 million people (UNreport June, 2020). The pandemic calls for quick action from heads of schools, the ministry ofeducation, teachers and parents. It calls for crisis management.

Crisis management consists of a set of factors used to combat a crisis and to reduce the actualdamage inflicted by it (Coombs, 2006). Often the literature on crisis management addresses theprocess of management, types or crisis and the partnership involved. According to Ulmer et al.(2007) crisis management means that one is prepared to handle or manage adversity in anenvironment of chaos, making sure that it causes the least impact without affecting anybodyinvolved adversely. NyBlom (2003) adds that crisis management has to involve crisis-organizing, leading, planning, controlling activities and assets before, within and when the crisisis over.

**Methodology**

*Research Design*

This research used a qualitative research approach (Collins & Hussey, 2003) because thequalitative approach offers opportunities for in-depth information. A descriptive survey researchdesign (Jackson, 2009) was adopted because the researcher wanted to describe the new normal inschools due to Covid19.

*The population and sample*

The target population comprised two schools: one from urban (school A) and one from ruralschool B). These schools were purposively (Cohen et al., 2007) selected because they wereavailable for the study. Both schools are mixed gender and admit both day and boardingstudents. These schools were deemed to provide vital information on urban and rural challengesand experiences at primary and secondary levels. The sample consisted of six participants (3females and 3 males). It included two principals, and four teachers purposively selected becausethey were available and willing to participate in the study. Their teaching experiences rangedfrom 1 year to 33 years. Their qualification also varied greatly. One had a masters’ degree and aBachelors’ degree, two had a primary certificate in teaching, a diploma in education, and adegree in teaching. Three teachers had a Bachelor of education. The participants were coded asfollows AH1 and BH2 for head teachers from school A and from school B, respectively. Theteachers were coded as AT1 and AT2 from school A and BT3 and BT4 from school B.According to Creswell (2012), the sample ranging from 2 to 25 participants can be utilised in aqualitative study. Therefore, this sample of 6 teachers was deemed adequate for the currentstudy.

*Location of the Study*

The two selected schools are located in Wakiso and Nakaseke Districts in Uganda. Wakiso District is in urbansetting, while Nakaseke District is a rural setting.

*Data collection Technique*

Interview questions were designed by the first researcher. The questions were validated by twoexperts in education: one professor and one lecturer. Recommended changes from the twoexperts were addressed before data was collected. The close-ended interview questions involvedthree areas: experiences, challenges, and potential opportunities. There were also follow-upquestions. Six questions that were used are as follows: 1) what is your experience during thistime of lockdown? 2) what challenges are you facing as a result of Covid19 outbreak? 3) Whatopportunities are available to you during this period of the corona virus? 4) During these difficulttimes do you need additional support and services? Which one? 5) Do you have any online orvirtual teaching and learning now during this new normal? How many students access it? 6) Howcan teachers help students cope with the times in this corona virus period? The second authorconducted Personal Interviews (PI) from 6 participants from the two schools. All interviews wereaudio-taped, and each interview lasted for 30 to 40 minutes to document challenges andexperiences of teachers regarding COVID 19.

*Data Analysis*

Data were thematically analysed. Audio-taped interviews were transcribed using open, axial, andselective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Grbich, 2007). During open coding, texts were readsentence by sentence to identify the main ideas and form groups. During axial coding, theresearchers looked for connections between those groups and joining those with similar ideastogether. This was done by paying attention to conditions, contexts, interactional strategies, andconsequences (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) of each participant’s responses, which resulted in sub-themes. In the process of axial coding, the sub-themes with similar ideas were merged into largethemes (Strauss, 1987) in line with the purpose of the study.

**Results**

The results show that schools in Uganda were unprepared for the pandemic and that many of themare not sure of how the New Normal will work in their contexts. All the participants agreed thatCOVID 19 has created new experiences and challenges in their lives. Results from the interviewsgenerated two themes: 1) setting priorities, and 2) context management.

Theme 1: Setting priorities

Participants have had to find a new way of surviving. They learnt to set new priorities to surviveoutside the teaching duties. They are going through new experiences such as unemployment,coping with the minimum resources, and regrets for not having an extra income before thepandemic. Below there are statements attesting to the participants’ experiences.

BH2 contended: “I have new priorities now. For sure, I am glad I have a piece of land around here. When my family and I wake up, after our morning prayers, we all head to the land and do digging.”

BT4: “The school has not been able to pay salaries since the lockdown in March 2020. As a newgraduate teacher and having taught for one year, I am now ready to take up any jobas the new normal to survive. Currently, my priority is to get money for survival and now I am aporter at a construction site.”

AT2 stated that “As teachers, we were fully engaged in teaching and many of us have no other income. Now we are not teaching any longer and we cannot find other work to do. Even if we could find it, it needs money. Even to start a business, the landlords need upfront rent, which we do nothave. Indeed, coping with the New Normal is a challenge.”

Theme 2: Context Management

All the participants agreed that there is a need to manage the New Normal in three areas: a)finance, b) teaching and learning, and c) social distancing.

*Finances*

All six participants, the two head teachers and the four teachers were concerned with financial challenges both on personal and school level. Below are two extracts from the two head teachers.

AH1 stated that: “There is a challenge of finances to pay for salaries, food, utilities and servicingthe bank loans.”

BH2 noted that: “Teachers are asking for salaries, accommodation rent, and the school has a challenge to pay bank loans.”

Similarly, all the four teachers echoed what the two head teachers stated by stating that: AT2: “We as teachers have not received salaries since the month of March 2020. The headteacher did her best to see that we got paid. After, that we have not received any salary.”

AT1: We received salary for March, 2020, we have received neither allowance nor salary since.”

BT3: “Yes, the challenge is getting paid salaries. The school has not got fees for the month of March when the lockdown was put in place.”

Other than finances, there were challenges with getting food, utilities like water and electricity,allowances, and payments for the extra materials that learners received and other forms ofcommunications through WhatsApp and through the cellphone. A few extracts showexperiences the teachers are going through.

AH1: “The school has experienced inability to sustain teachers on compound because there was no transport for teachers and their families to travel to their home villages when the COVI 19 lockdown was declared. We have 33 teachers that reside at the school accommodation premises. Since we are in the city environments, food is to be secured from the markets and yet the teachers have not been paid. Also, the teachers have not received utility and other allowances. The school has a small piece of land where teachers do small market gardening, but it is not enough.”

AH1: “We have experienced challenges to continue with the construction of the dining room, bathrooms for girls, and toilets.”

AT1: “When the school was closed due to Covid19 threat, the head teacher and I were requestedto stay on school campus on a voluntary basis. No renumerations. So, the headteacher and I,alternate to ensure that there is someone on the school premise during the day throughout theweek, in order to attend to any eventuality. Also, I do some reading concerning my masters’proposal although I am not sure when I will resume my studies.”

AT2: “Sometimes, we go to the villages to do some cultivation, but we do not do much. It would have been beneficial to employ other people to assist us to increase acreage, but we do not have the money to pay for that labour. Again, we are limited by finances.”

*Teaching and Learning*

On teaching and learning issues the headteacher and the teachers had challenges to sustaincontacts with their learners using technology. The following statements depict their challengesduring the lockdown.BH1: “We experienced unwillingness of parents to pay for the photocopied materials. Thereasons were parents wanted to pay very low because they were not sure of the assessment thatculminate in the promotion to the next class.”

BH2: “Learners are used to face to face contact. So, it seems many are not motivated to use technology. Since we are in rural areas, there are few parents that access TV and Radio lessons from other schools in the country. Again, to know who accessed what and how to assess learners’ attainment is indeed a challenge.”

AT1: On teaching and learning, we had started a WhatsApp group, but it was discontinuedbecause many learners were not responding as it was intended. This was because many learnersare used to face to face type of teaching. Some thought the lockdown would last a few weeks.After two weeks, it turned out to be 5 months, many parents and learners were demotivated. Manyparents’ work has also been negatively affected and as such cannot pay for their learners’ data onWhatsApp. Also, there were rumours that 2020 was to be declared a dead year, which to somemeant that learning could be postponed until next year 2021.”

AT1: “Learners cannot pay for learning materials provided, and consultations done via thephones because their parents are not sure of the assessment that would culminate in promotion tothe next level.”

BT3: “Parents could not pay for the learning materials provided to their children because theyare not sure how much their learners have acquired from those learning materials.”

BT4: “Ahhh! there is not much teaching through the phones. Learners expressed a desire to waituntil the schools open.”

On additional support, the participants expressed a desire for financial support although they had no idea as to where the money would come from.

AH1: “May be the board of directors would be asked to provide funds, but again there is a need for money for them to come and attend a meeting. Also, the limited funds may not do all sinceour main source is the fees from learners. Nevertheless, we need extra funds to keep afloat.”

The participants were asked if they have online programmes to meet the learners’ needs. All of them admitted that they had no online services. One school relied on TV and Radio programmes that were broadcast from other schools, while another school had set up WhatsApp group for primary 6 and 7. The following extracts from two headteachers express their words.

AH1: “We established a WhatsApp group in the first few weeks of the lockdown, and we hopedthat parents would support by paying some dues. Unfortunately, many parents were not certainof their employment. Some parents suggested Uganda Shillings 5000.00 which was not enoughto sustain the group and moreover there were few parents suggesting that amount. So, they didnot pay and as a result the arrangement was suspended for some time. Now that the second termis coming to an end, we have re-opened the group. Again, some parents are not on WhatsAppand this complicates the matter.”

BH2: “Since we are in a rural set up,only a few parents access TV and radios. Some parents havechallenges of batteries for their radios. On a few occasions some students who reside close to theschool walk in one by one for assistance. To date, there are a few learners that come in forassistance with academic work. Basically, many learners are no longer motivated to learn.”

*Social Distancing*

The New Normal in this Covid19 era is to abide by the stipulated Standard OperatingProcedures (SOP). These include washing hands with soap, applying sanitizers, wearing a facemask at all time in public spaces and keeping a social distance of 2 meters between individuals, toavoid the spread of the virus. In addition to those general SOP, there are those that thedepartment of education has set for schools. The following statements highlight the experiencesand what teachers envisage as a result of COVID 19.

AT1: “The SOP for the schools include making sure that there are 15 to 20 learners per class. Bythe time of lockdown, we had 45 to 50 learners per class which suggest that we will need twoextra classes and two extra teachers per class. In dormitories, the SOP recommends the use ofsingle beds 2m apart in the dormitories instead of double decker (one bed over the other) in use andall learners to keep 2m apart on school compound.”

AT2: “Actually, the SOP can be met except the social distancing of 2m. You know children arechildren and it may not be possible to interact keeping 2m distance between each other. Again,the same distance in class during classwork may be indeed a challenge. Let us hope that by thetime schools open, a vaccine or medicine for the virus will have been discovered, otherwiseteachers and learners’ social distancing experiences at schools will remain a myth.”

1H1: “Some parents have social challenges with their children. They wish schools should opensooner than later. Sometimes parents call, and we assist to the best of our abilities. All teachersact as counselors to learners.”

BT3: “There is a social concern for female learners during this lockdown who become pregnantand parents seek some counsel from teachers on how to handle the situation. The parentswant teachers to advise girls how to avoid motherhood situations, but they have no payment toteachers.”

*Discussion*

The purpose of the study was to explore experiences, challenges and opportunities of the New Normal (NN) to headteachers and teachers in schools due to COVID19 pandemic. The results show that all theparticipants experienced unemployment, minimum resources, and regrets for not having an extraincome before the pandemic. This suggests that teachers need to set new priorities. Thechallenges include: finances, teaching and learning, and social distancing. Also, teachers doubthow NN will work in their contexts. The results show that the head teachers and the teachers experienced unemployment, whichsuggest that they have no source of income. They have to look for jobs and yet the state andprivate companies are cutting down on employment by either 25% or 50%. It is no wonder thatthe head teacher stated that teachers are engaged in cultivation. The challenge of cultivation in oneschool was that they had very small pieces of land. This observation is in agreement with Sifneos(1960) who contends that events that start and have no solution may lead a chain reaction thatlead to a crisis. Moreover, Lindemann (1964) states that a crisis worsens if it is not resolvedbetween 6 to 8 weeks. The lockdown is now over six months and thus a ‘crisis.’ The dilemma isthat if teachers dig those small gardens, there are high chances that there will be no market forthe produce. They needed more land to diversify the crops. Again, some teachers may not do it wellbecause they lack experiences. Thus, the setting of priorities gave teachers a challenge. On onehand, one teacher lamented that there was no money to employ someone to dig. The lamentationof the teacher shows a regret on the current circumstances and there was a wish for having started a second income generating activity before the outbreak of the virus. On the other hand, onehead teacher and his family were satisfied that he enjoys digging.

All participants had financial challenges. It implies that teachers had no money for rent, food,utilities, and medical expenses. To find something to do was a challenge too. One teacher statedthat even if there was work, but it would need money to go and look for that work in companiesoutside the school compound where they resided. Again, to start a business, the landlords needupfront rent. Indeed, coping with the New Normal is a challenge. The teachers may need externalinterventions (Caplan, 1964). Furthermore, the Crisis Management theory highlights the need todeal with both the internal and external forces. The internal forces are the individual teacherattitudes and abilities (Gephart, Van Maanen&Oberlechner, 2009), while the external the otherstakeholders (Bundy &Pfarrer, 2015; Coombs, 2007). Teachers set up WhatsApp group in one school, but it was not sustained due to parents’ failure tosupport it. The parents were challenged in two ways: 1) some parents were not employed, 2)some parents who would have finances were not sure of what they were paying for. Also, the cost ofthe printed materials was not pre-set by the governing body. It is no wonder some parentssuggested a price as low as Uganda Shillings 5000.00, which was way below the cost of printing.At this point one can see a crisis caused by the lockdown due to the COVID 19 and making a decision becomes really hard. This observation isin line with the Crisis Theory where a crisis determines a decisive moment since the lockdown isover 6 months now. Furthermore, the teachers went through four stages of the crisis (Sifneos, 1960): first lockdown resulted in unemployment, second teachers had to look for alternative income where they had to choose among the conflicting alternatives such as to teach online with no pay or to cultivate the land or set up shops. Third is the aggravation stage where teachers were further challenged to decide which alternative worked best for them and fourth is the crisis where teachers’ decision would imply survival of the education system and their economic needs.Thus, thechain reaction regarding teachers’ challenges has caused some teachersto lose hope in the resuming schools this year.

The results show that the schools need to follow the Standard Operation Procedures (SOP) ofCOVID19. The head teachers and the teachers had a lot of reservations on social distancing of2m distance of beds in the dormitories and in the classrooms. How on earth would the SOP of2m apart be applied in the classroom and yet it is not applied in the taxi which the learners use tocome to school! In a taxi or a car they allow 2 people per row, but the distance is hardly 1mapart. Actually, one teacher emphatically stated that this tantamount to an impossible casebecause children cannot enjoy playing at such a distance, anyway. Furthermore, the reduction oflearners per class from 45 to 50 to the SOP recommendations of 15 to 20 per classroom suggeststwo extra classrooms and employment of 2 extra teachers per class. In reality it means setting up two otherschools which may not be possible due to financial constraints.

*Recommendations and Areas for further study*

The study dealt with only six participants; it is not clear what the results would be if a largesample was used. Also, the qualitative study may not capture other aspects which can becaptured through a quantitative survey. Therefore, a large sample covering many schools andnations is recommended. There are also other school stakeholders who were not interviewed.Therefore, more studies would be necessary to include more school stakeholderssuch as parents,members of school governing bodies, the departments of education as well as friends of school who would providevital experiences.

Conclusion

The findings show that participants experienced unemployment, minimum resources, and regretsfor not having an extra income before the pandemic. They had challenges of finances, teachingand learning, and social distancing. Also, teachers doubted on how NN will work in theircontexts. This state of uncertainty suggest that external support may be necessary to meet theirchallenges as a NN strategy.

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