COVID-19 Pandemic in Pre-Primary Children in Tanzania: Strategies and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed at exploring challenges faced by pre-primary children during COVID-19 pandemic and the strategies adapted to help them to cope with the pandemic in a Tanzanian context. Fifteen parents whose children were in pre-primary schools were interviewed through mobile phones on the challenges faced children and the strategies used to help their children cope with COVID 19 pandemic. The main challenges reported were loneliness and inactiveness. Majority of the parents could not device strategies that would help their children cope with the pandemic but reported to connect their children with the media such as educative cartoons. Based on the findings, it is recommended that necessary measures should be taken to empower parents to stimulate, play, communicate, and support their children's learning at home. Guidance should be provided to parents on how to engage their children in age-appropriate ways in order to develop literacy and numeracy skills at home.

Keywords: *Covid 19, Pre-primary school children, strategies, challenges*

INTRODUCTION

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is a pandemic characterized by severe respiratory syndrome. The pandemic was firstly discovered in the year 2019 as an airborne disease which spread from one person to another through social contact as well as touching materials or surfaces infected by the virus. The COVID-19 pandemic has been defined as a global health crisis and the greatest challenge the world has faced since World War Two. Being reported as a dangerous disease, many nations adapted social distancing strategies such as lock down, avoiding social

contact, cleaning hands with running water, applying sanitizers and wearing masks. It also involved creation of quarantine centres for those who were crossing their borders. Furthermore, air flights were shut down hence causing the absence of inter-country travels. Tanzania adopted almost all coping strategies including closing schools to rescue children from the pandemic.

COVID-19 has brought about a number of challenges to the majority, but more specifically to the young children in many aspects. Literature highlights three factors that directly changed school children's lives on a massive scale: (a) school disruption, (b) emotional distress, and (c) increasing poverty.

A study conducted by Cuevas-Parra and Stephano (2020) to explore children and young people's reflections and perceptions towards the COVID-19 outbreak in 13 countries reports that school closure, which was affected in almost all countries in the world, greatly affected the education of young people and emotional aspects, which are foundational of child growth and development (see also Devercelli, 2020; UNICEF, 2020). A report by UNICEF for example points that the pandemic has deprived children from the culture of playing together which is a crucial part of their moral and emotional development. In peer groups for example, children learn positive behaviour such as sharing, patience, cooperation and empathy. Saavedra (2020) observed that remote learning was more challenging for poor families that could not afford social media gadgets such as smartphones and laptops. In some report areas, lack of internet connectivity and electricity were the major challenges that affected both the parents and young children as well. As Devercelli (2020) has argued, young children aging 0 to 5 years are more vulnerable since this is the period that their brain develop very fast, and social interaction facilitates this process. This critical period needs children's stimulation by learning from various groups, something which might not be possible due to the outbreak of the pandemic.

Since pre-primary children's stimulations are done   through social interactions with teachers and peers largely, confining them at home might have affected their growth, both emotionally and morally. Furthermore, research points that the change in children's lifestyle due to school closure and the perceived negative impacts may extend to adulthood (Xiang, Zhang & Kuwanara, 2020).

Kim and Rose (2020) in Ethiopia reported that although radios and televisions can reach young children, they are unable to achieve developmental gain without support from their parents especially if the latter are illiterate. This observation supports a view of Drajea (2015) and Ghanney (2018) that supporting children to learn at home is dependent on the literacy level of parents. According to these scholars, parental education and literacy skill levels to a large extent affect children's acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills.

During the COVID-19 crisis, which resulted to school closure, parents were presumed to be involved in the child's learning per se by facilitating literacy and numeracy skills at home. However, few researches have been done to investigate the challenges facing parents in supporting their pre-primary children in Tanzania. This is a significant gap in knowledge, which this study sought to address.

Several studies report that online and offline learning as the best opportunities to cope with COVID -19. For example, Aga Khan Foundation (2020) suggests that COVID-19 provides an avenue for young children to be connected to their teachers using offline teaching activities through pre-recorded videos. In both developed and developing countries for example, the Ministry of Education encouraged school children to continue with education from home. A study by Kim and Rose, (2020) in Ethiopia, for example reports that children in primary schools had opportunities to follow radio lessons and television at home. However, there was no strategy for pre-primary children.

UNICEF (2020) discusses ways of coping with COVID-19 for young children such as planning route together, open conversations and provide children online and stay in touch with their teachers. On the other hand, Saavedra (2020) advocates for social networking through WhatsApp, messages, remote and online learning as a major opportunity to cope with COVID-19. Devercelli (2020) also suggested a support through distribution of books and learning materials at home. Devercelli further advocates for provision of entertainment for young children through radios, televisions, internet and social media. These strategies were supported by Gallagher (2020) who pointed to moving classroom lessons online and connecting children to media.

However, these scholars did not consider the challenges that parents be facing as they accessed the opportunities available for their children during the pandemic because not all parents have reached a level that they can help their children as teachers do. The argument is in line with that of Gashman and Bhattacharjea (2020) who observed that, while parents can help their children by reading them stories, this can be limited to affluent and literate parents.

Researches report that due to COVID 19, students at different levels have continued with education from home, however, there were no strategies put in place aiming at supporting pre-primary children (Kim & Rose, 2020). Devercelli (2020) argues that young children can be supported through books distribution or community education in a form of entertainment using games, which is not possible due to the pandemic. Furthermore, Gallagher (2020) advocates for connecting children to the media and playing games with them. Research further report that parents have a number of strategies aiming at supporting young children during the pandemic, however, only children with literate parents have access to a positive circle of learning while poor and illiterate parents lack knowledge on what children should learn and how to help them (Cashman Bhattachaejea, & Sabates, 2020).

In Tanzania, all education institutions were closed following the global COVID-19 pandemic. The aim of the closure was to protect children against coronavirus infections. This strategy was coupled with daily measures/strategies such as keeping distance by going into lockdown; whereby children were supposed to stay at home and were requested to observe all the strategies set to mediate against the spread of the coronavirus pandemic.

Some of the learning institutions and schools ensured that students continue with studies in the country. For example, The Open university of Tanzania which practices online learning platforms such as Moodle and Zoom, students were not affected by the COVID-19 pandemic compared to other higher learning institutions. For primary and secondary schools, the Ministry of Education Science and Technology (MoEST) through the Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE) adapted online teaching and learning. The main delivery modes were through WhatsApp groups, radio and television broadcasting. Other schools especially those privately owned were also providing online lectures (recorded; using zoom), and

weekly assignments posted on school websites. However, this remained a challenge for those who were in remote locations and economically disadvantaged since the mode of delivery required an individual to possess digital infrastructures such as television, laptop, smartphone and bandwidth as well as availability of electricity and internet.

For young children, especially pre-primary children, COVID-19 has brought challenges to all development aspects of the child; socially, emotionally, morally, academically and psychologically. Social interaction being a source of learning which promotes child growth in many aspects has been highly affected. Children learn from multiple settings such as at home, in the community, and at school, which was no longer possible due to COVID-19 pandemic. In homes, parents were solely responsible for their children's social, psychological and physical development through physical teaching or exposing them to available programs prepared for young children in Tanzania such as Ubongo kids and Sesame cartoons.

However, there are few programs for young children in Tanzania such as cartoons of Ubongo kids and Sesame. Few children from affluent and literate parents could benefit from these programs (Saavedra, 2020); nevertheless, these methods are not sufficient for young children. For example, watching cartoons for many hours can pose challenge for young children as they cannot concentrate on one thing and it is difficult for them to stay in one place for a long time.

Thus, the outbreak of COVID 19 rendered young children, especially pre-primary children vulnerable due to limited movement and being forced to access education remotely. It is not clear how the children coped and strategies that the parents used to help them. There is no study that has been done to understand this situation and how it was managed and the challenges that the children faced and strategies used by parents used to supported their children during COVID-19 Pandemic in Tanzania. Considering that parents are key figures in the lives of young children, it is worth exploring their perceptions and experiences of educating their pre-primary children during the pandemic. Specifically, this study aimed at addressing the following objectives:
   i)   To establish challenges faced by young children after the school closure due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

ii) To explore strategies used by parents to help young children cope with stay-home after school closure due to COVID-19 pandemic.

iii) To explore opportunities available for young children during the COVID-19 pandemic.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Bronfenbrenner ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) posits that home environment has an influence on the child's development; parents play an important role in influencing the child's behaviour including coping with unfriendly situation. Parents have direct influence to the child's life, especially when the environment surrounding the child is not friendly, in this case, COVID-19 pandemic. According to ecological theory, parents lay foundation of children development including adapting coping strategies at home. The theory guides the understanding of the challenges, strategies adopted by pre-primary children and their parents; and opportunities available during stay home on the perspectives of the parents. In this theory, parents form the proximal in helping children cope with the pandemic outbreak. In this study we propose that for children to successfully cope with the COVID-19 pandemic, the same will depend on the strategies applied by the parents in the home context.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Fifteen (15) parents with pre-primary children were purposively selected to participate in this study. Since people were keeping social distancing, interviews were done through mobile phone. Two researchers were involved and each interviewed the same respondents at different time in an interval of five days. This approach helped to crosscheck consistency of the information reported. The interviews were done in Kiswahili; the common language used by the majority of people in Tanzania.

Data Management, Processing and Analysis

Collected information was noted in notebooks and saved in phone audio recorder. Recorded information allowed preservation of participants' words and retrieval of information at any time needed during data processing and report writing. The analysis of qualitative data combined both, deductive and inductive strategies. Researchers neither approached the data with rigid set of pre-conceptions nor fully inductively but rather abductively, a combination of the two. This assumes that a better and

broader understanding of the phenomenon under investigation is informed by both research objectives/questions and emerging insights from the data. All interview was audio taped and transcribed by researchers. The first authors checked transcript against the audiotaped for accuracy, authors read through the transcript to identify the relevance and significance of the representative. Thematic analysis therefore was adapted where themes from interview were identified and categorized. We explored interview transcripts, audio records, and emerging themes; key findings in each theme were reported and discussed.

Ethical Considerations
The following ethical issues were adhered to: participants were informed of the purpose and nature of the study, privacy and confidentiality, and potential harm and benefits of the study. This information helped the participants to make informed decisions to participate or not, and withdraw from the study if they would like to do so. Since we were keeping social distance informed consent was done verbally. About 12 respondents out of 15 asked researchers to consider voice conversation as confidential and this was observed.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
The study explored challenges encountered by pre-primary children during COVID-19 pandemic period in Tanzania. Furthermore, strategies adopted and opportunities available in a bid to cope with the pandemic were explored. Findings are presented in three categories which are challenges, strategies and opportunities. From these, emerging themes are reported and discussed as key findings.

Challenges faced young children during COVID-19 pandemic
The findings of the study reveal that there were various challenges faced by young children after the school closure due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The reported challenges were associated with social, emotional and psychological wellbeing as describe below.

Social emotional and psychological wellbeing
According to Mihaela (2015) positive emotional to the child such as feeling happy, experience love, inspiration and inner peace play important part in social emotional and psychological well-being. School represents the most important environment for the child's social emotional and psychological well-being (Mihaela, 2015), which was lacking during

COVID-19 period. This situation affected children in many aspects; for example, it was reported that some children felt lonely and they didn't play as they used to do in school, this was exemplified by children keeping on crying and feeling bored at home. Participants in most data sources demonstrated this type of behaviours as the most challenges as exemplifies by the following quotes:

> My child all the time feels lonely because she misses her friends and teachers to play with. All the time she asks me to send her to school or call her friends to come home and play with her (Parent 1 & 3)

> My child is no longer active because she sleeps a lot. She sometimes cries because she misses friends. I can't be of help because I'm not a teacher, only teachers are trained to help our children so I let her cry… (Parent 4, 7 & 9)

> My child seems to be bored staying at home and doing the same thing; with no peer to play (Parent 5).

Ecological model of social and emotional wellbeing is based in the interaction of multiple setting such as homes, schools, and community where a child interacts with multiple people including peers (See also Mihaela, 2015). When one of the settings lacks may affect the developmental trajectory of the child. For example, peer groups have been identified as significant factors for child development as illustrated by the following quotes:

> My child is so reserved; sometimes he keeps quiet for hours. He does not respond to my calls. He tells me that he needs his friend to play with. I note his health is affected as he becomes thinner as days go on, I'm afraid, as I don't know when Covid 19 will end (Parent 6 & 10).

> My child sometimes asks me to call his teacher so that they can talk or even ask when the school will open (Parent 2).

> My child enjoys having meals with friends especially at school, at home I used to call his friends so they come home and eat; but due to corona this is not possible, this situation makes my child unhappy (Parent 3).

Some parents get frustrated with situation of their children as they found the situation is not helpful to their children as demonstrated by two parents in the quote below:

> My child can't play, read, sing, is like everything has stopped, she keeps asking when will I send her to school. The situation is frustrating; my fear is that she may get frustrated; nothing is going on (Parent 12 & 15).

The findings are in line with that of UNICEF (2020) arguments that COVID-19 has limited children the culture of playing together which may affect their moral and emotional development in the future. Furthermore, it was revealed that the reported findings were associated with poor health as reported by parents 6 and 10. These finding are inline with findings from other studies which report that children's lifestyles of isolation from peers is a source of stress and anxiety which limit child's development cognitively, physically, socially, emotionally and morally (Elkind, 2001; Rosenteld & Wise, 2000). The stay home and isolation have been effective measures against the pandemic, however, it has deprived the social interaction of the child which may affect the child's holistic development in future (Esenturk, 2020).

The deprivation of social interaction due to isolation has been reported as an inhibitor of creativity in children, which may affect the cognitive development of a child. Furthermore, parents perceive that children face multiple challenges which can be solved by the teachers. This indicates that not only children facing challenges, but also parents are facing multiple challenges in supporting children; the same challenges were reported from Ethiopian parents (Kim & Rose, 2020).

The study also explored opportunities available for young children during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since parents are the best models for their children, it was our assumptions that they can plan something different to help their children cope with the pandemic.

Time to spend with my child
During interview, some parents described that COVID-19 brought children back home which was an opportunity for parents to spend time with their children. It was at this time that parents get to know their children's behaviour and shared skills of literacy as exemplified by the following quote:

> As a parent, I have time to spend with my child. I got time to know the behaviour of my child; I also have time to read and sing with my child (Parents 2, 4, 7 and 11)

> My child has an opportunity to be with me at home all the time, so she is learning and doing daily household activities like sweeping and cleaning dishes (Parent 5)

Despite parent's acknowledgement opportunity of COVID-19, some parents didn't perceive it as an opportunity because children were deprived of their learning environment which may limit freeness and innovation. After all, parents perceive that classrooms are made for children to concentrate and built-up innovation skills and parents described that:

> The best opportunity is to help children remain home with their parents, but we can't say this is an opportunity at the moment because children do not concentrate in one place for a long time, the child is always in movement which can be managed only by teachers and peers (Parent 10).

Some parents reported that there is no opportunity out of COVID-19 rather than chaos because they noted that their children were deprived to play, and literacy development as illustrated below:

> Corona virus brought chaos because children could not read, sing and play because schools have been closed. You know teachers are the one who teach children to play as well as acceptable (Parents 1, 8 &13)

> My child has an opportunity to watch cartoons (Parents 3,6 &14)

> My child has an opportunity to learn good hygiene practices such as regular and thorough hand-wash (Parent 10).

Kuehn (2021) posits that siblings can impact each other's development more than parents, where older ones can influence younger one positively or negatively. Findings from interview revealed that during COVID-19 it was an opportunity for siblings to work together as young children learned from the older ones which was a positive impact as stated in the quote below:

> I have three (3) children, one in Pre-primary Education (PPE), and others are in primary three and five classes. Those in primary school were given weekly assignments by their teachers. So, when doing their assignments, their sibling was also forced to write or draw. I consider this as an opportunity for him to learn from older siblings (Parent 2).

This study aimed to explore opportunities available for pre-primary children during COVID-19. It was revealed that parents had different views; some parents had time to spend with their children which helped them to monitor the behaviour of their children. For example, it was reported that children had opportunities to learn good hygiene from their parents and older siblings. This implies that to some children's behaviours were nurtured closely during this period since both parents and children stayed at home. Children also learned literacy from their older siblings and parents; in some families, older children were teaching the younger ones. The findings are in line with that of Ginsburg (2007) who argues that parents' reading with their children has a great influence on a child's literacy development. However, some parents view that there was no opportunity for their children because children were displaying strange behaviours that were to be managed by the teachers. This implies that some parents escape their roles as parents are considered the first teachers in the home context. However, to a larger extent, child stimulations are done during interaction with teachers and peers in the school context where they learn different social skills (see also Deverelli, 2020). Nevertheless, school closure and stay home has changed the children's lifestyles which may bring negative perception in future, the argument is in line with that of Xiang et al. (2020).

Strategies used by parents to help young children during COVID-19 pandemic
Several strategies used by parents to help young children cope with stay-home after school closure due to COVID-19 pandemic were identified. These include: teaching children literacy at home, allowing children to watch educative cartoons and buying story books.

Teaching children literacy at home
Parents form the best people who build a foundation of literacy in their children and form the best predictor of early literacy success in their children. From interview, it was revealed that literate parents played their part by teaching literacy to their children at their homes. This was done through buying books for their children and sometimes singing with children. On this, some parents had these to say:

> I'm always reminding my child to watch Ubongo kids which is suitable
> for children, thereafter I design questions for my child to answer, like

repeating the song and style. I allow also him to watch cartoons which are designed for children (Parents 3 & 6)

Since my child is very active, I decided to buy him three storybooks with pictures. Sometimes his siblings and myself read stories and ask him to identify pictures and re-tell the stories (Parent 2).

Luckily, I am a secondary school teacher, I often ask my child to count and write (Parent 11).

Furthermore, some parents adopted a strategy of designing songs and used to sing with their children. These strategies helped children to enjoy their stay at home. However, these strategies were possible for children with literate and affluent parents as commented by Cashman and Bhattacharjea (2020), since it is difficult to connect children with the media without television, smart phone, and/or lack of electricity. In addition, it is equally difficult to choose developmentally appropriate media activities for children when parents are illiterate (See also Kim & Rose, 2020).

Allow children to watch educative cartoons
In the process of coping with the pandemic, it was revealed that some parents allowed their children to watch "Ubongo kids" a common television program in Tanzania. Some parents narrated that:

I'm always reminding my child to watch Ubongo kids which is suitable for children, thereafter I design questions for my child to answer, like repeating the song and style. I allow also him to watch cartoons for children (Parents 3 & 6)

The strategy of connecting children with media was supported with Gallagher (2020). However, this strategy is possible for children with literate and affluent parents as commented by Cashman and Bhattacharjea (2020), since it is difficult to connect children with the media without television, smart phone, and/or lack of electricity. In addition, it is equally difficult to choose developmentally appropriate media activities for children when parents are illiterate (See also Kim & Rose, 2020).

Buying and reading storybooks
Another strategy adopted by parents was to buy simple story books with pictures. Parents set aside time to read and count with their children. However, parents who engaged children in these activities were teachers

and the educated ones. Kim and Rose (2020) have the same arguments that supporting children at home is dependent on whether parents are literate. Furthermore, the findings are in line with that of Drajea (2015) and Ghanney (2018) that parental literacy skills affect children's acquisition of literacy and numeracy, which was useful for some of the parents during the pandemic.

However, some parent's view that only teachers can manage their children and that nothing can be done without teachers. This indicates that not all parents have skills to manage their children as indicated in the quotes below.

> I have nothing to do with my child. You know teachers are very good at designing strategies that help children cope with problems like corona virus, but when children are at home nothing can be done (Parents 4, 6 & 9)

> With corona virus nothing can be done, children are so stubborn at home, I'm looking forward to the solution of corona so that children resume schools (Parent 1)

> Teaching young children is not a simple task, I bought an exercise book for my child to write every day; but sincerely speaking, I rarely teach him. Right now, I don't even know where the book is (Parent 5).

> What should I do? I ask my children to stay at home and play around the home vicinity. My child who is at pre-primary class is just playing with his siblings (Parent 13).

Interestingly some parents reported to have no strategies; claiming that teachers are responsible to help children in all aspects in the pre-primary education setting. The findings were conceived as unexpected since it is our belief and referring to literature, parents are the first teachers in the home context (Ceka & Murati, 2016). However, the findings are in line with that of Kim and Rose (2020) from Ethiopian context who argue that little attention was paid to pre-primary education as the government encouraged only primary and secondary school students to continue education from home. But parents' ability to support their children's learning from home is highly dependent on whether they have had any experience of schooling, or whether they can read.

According to parents, it is only teachers that have good strategies to help children, the best solution was to wait till the end of the pandemic for teachers to play their roles. The findings are contrary to the norm that parents are the first teachers, so we expected almost all parents to report strategies aiming at helping their children cope with the pandemic. On the other hand, parents feel that they don't have skills similar to those possessed by teachers to help their children. This implies that most parents perceived learning to solely be done in classrooms; which is contrary to literature that developmental domain of the child is stimulated in multiple contexts, such as homes, schools and community where relationships and socialization are taking place (Mihaela, 2015).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS
This study has highlighted challenges faced by young children especially pre-primary children during the peak period of COVID-19 pandemic. Opportunities available and strategies adopted by the parents were also explored. Multiple challenges faced by children were reported; which was caused by the deprivation of children's social interaction with peers and the community at large. Since the child's brain develops very quickly at the age of 0-5 years through social interaction, the challenges reported are more likely to deprive children's development in many aspects; physically, cognitively, socially, emotionally and morally. We feel that these challenges are not limited to children but are more likely to be facing policy makers, school practitioners, early childhood stakeholders, families as well as education institutions. However, in this study we noted two significant challenges, these were; deprivation of their right to education and limited socialization with peers. These remain to be challenges especially for poor families and families with illiterate parents.

Recommendations; parents need awareness on early child development issues so that they can support holistic development of their children and policy makers should advocate on this. In order to ensure educational continuity during and after the pandemic, the government should develop strategies to empower parents to support their children in learning at home. Guidance should be provided to parents on how to stimulate, play, and communicate with their children in age-appropriate ways; and on how to develop literacy and numeracy skills at home. It is also recommended that simple story and picture books for pre-primary children should be prepared and distributed to remote areas; this will

serve children who can't be connected to the media due to various reasons.

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