

Article

Inclusive Learning for Children in Northeast Nigeria: Radio School Response During a Global Pandemic

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Abstract

With a burgeoning out-of-school population and illiteracy rate, the situation of protracted conflict and crises fuelled by the Boko-Haram insurgency further exacerbates educational inequality for children in northern Nigeria. The Covid-19 pandemic further deepened the “educational poverty” experienced there. This article focuses on data generated around ACE radio school, an initiative to mitigate the impact of Covid-19-related school closures in northern Nigeria. The initiative targeted young learners using radio as a medium to support their continued learning remotely in numeracy, literacy, sciences, and civics education. Daily learning activities were broadcasted in the local Hausa language, supported through “listening groups” that engaged local learning facilitators in the communities. Despite the known existing barriers that have been identified to hinder access to quality education in the region, including poverty, religion, socio-cultural factors, and protracted conflict situations, our interviews revealed that parents were committed to supporting their children’s attendance at listening groups, due to the use of their mother tongue as a mode of instruction. Drawing on a conversational learning approach, we argue that understanding local conditions and adopting local solutions, such as the radio lessons delivered in these children’s mother tongue, have implications for enhancing improved learner outcomes in marginalised contexts.

Keywords

alternative education; Covid-19; education inclusion; girls’ education; northern Nigeria; radio school; vulnerable communities

Issue

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1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic and school closures disrupted the way education is practised. During the health crisis, 190 countries closed schools as part of control measures to protect children and teachers. This affected almost 1.6 billion learners (UNICEF, 2020).

For many children in some developing countries, there was unequal access to education before the pandemic, but the Covid-19 crisis has drawn attention to concerns about existing educational poverty and the exclusion of some children (UNICEF, 2021). Since the pandemic’s beginning, the typical practice has been for

education stakeholders to promote remote learning for children via technology. However, capacities to implement this have been diverse and uneven. Remote learning remains a challenge for children from low-income families who may face challenges accessing informational communication technologies (ICT) and the internet. During the Covid-19 pandemic, a survey carried out by UNICEF suggested that distance learning was not reaching vulnerable and marginalised children due to a lack of digital tools and poor connectivity for learners, particularly in poor and hard-to-reach locations (UNICEF, 2020). In addition, children from marginalised contexts often struggle with learning due to poor fluency in the

language of instruction (Nishanthi, 2020). Even when children access learning materials, unstable political-economic conditions, and low parent education levels, including parents' inability to use digital tools, may impact their learning at home. These issues have significant implications for young learners' inclusive education in addition to family circumstances, geography, and economic status. Hence, the need to reconsider inclusive learning opportunities for children.

As some countries continue to find ways of addressing learning challenges in a "new normal," there is an urgent need for alternative education interventions that could address the needs of children in developing countries such as Nigeria, whose educational aspirations and learning are affected by multiple factors including conflict, poverty, and the Covid-19 pandemic.

We draw on interview data generated from local learning facilitators (LLFs), learners, and their parents or guardians. We seek to explore how the initiative drew upon existing partnerships with LLFs who used radio lessons delivered in the children's native languages to support them locally. We provide insights into ensuring access to education using LLFs to reimagine education through alternative learning for children from marginalised communities who do not have access to the internet or mobile devices. We aim to offer insight into how the LLFs were recruited to support the radio lessons and their motivations. We then touch on the challenges LLFs experienced and how they responded. Finally, we consider perspectives around the effectiveness and impact of the initiative on learners, especially girls.

We examine these elements through the following overarching research question: In the context of Covid-related global school closures, how did a radio school initiative support young people from disadvantaged communities to continue learning?

2. Context and Conceptual Framework

Inclusive education has continued to permeate global debates in academia and practice, including regional and national education policy agendas. Conceptualisations of inclusion and approaches to promote inclusive education vary across contexts and remain highly contested (Artiles et al., 2011). The conceptualisation of inclusive education across various disciplines, including psychology and education, relates to efforts to respect diversity (Hick et al., 2009) and linked to global agendas such as "leave no one behind" and "endeavour to reach the furthest behind" (United Nations Development Program, 2018).

The research of Muthukrishna and Engelbrecht (2018) in educational settings across four low-resourced contexts shows that conceptualisations of inclusive education are shaped by colonial agendas, which often negate local philosophical understandings, beliefs, and practices drawing on local cultural resources (Dart et al., 2018; Phasha et al., 2017). The problem with these conceptualisations is that they are exclusive and inflexible

to adjustment to stay relevant as the needs of learners change (Florian, 2014). They also reproduce social inequalities that create further complexities for learners who require diverse support (Walton, 2016). Hence, the call for local responses is underpinned by the inclusive principles of social justice and equity (Muthukrishna & Engelbrecht, 2018). Our view is that a social justice framing for inclusive learning practices should support all groups vulnerable to exclusion both in schools and out-of-school settings. This remains essential for disrupting exclusive practices and structural disadvantages while responding to learners' cultural and situational demands (Nilholm & Göransson, 2017; Simón et al., 2021).

In northern Nigeria, inequality in education presents several complex and interdependent barriers to education access among girls (Okafor, 2010). The National Policy on Education (FME, 2006) identified as one of its primary aims the need for quality education for all Nigerian children, irrespective of circumstances. However, Kazeem et al. (2010) argue that the policy framework fails to recognise the intersectional nature of the dimensions of socioeconomic and geographical inequalities, which present difficulties for girls. The lack of consensus on the recognition of the culture, context, experiences, and learning needs of disadvantaged and marginalised groups in planning or designing educational initiatives (Olaniran, 2018) results in the "continued domination of homogenous policy approaches," which is one of the reasons that social justice and gender inequality in education persist (Bishwakarma et al., 2007, p. 27). The abduction of over 276 girls from their school in Chibok in April 2014 and the subsequent abduction of over 110 schoolgirls aged 11–19 years by the Boko Haram terrorist group from their school in Dapchi, all in northern Nigeria, are extreme illustrations of the violence against women and girls that occurs in this region and their implications for girls' education (Abayomi, 2018; Okafor, 2010).

The nationwide school closures that started in March 2020 significantly disrupted learning in Nigeria (Eze et al., 2021), presenting even greater complexities for girls' education in northern Nigeria. Covid-19 shed light on pre-existing discriminatory social norms, gender roles, and power dynamics for girls, who often suffer marginalisation in education resulting from religious and cultural dynamics, economic and geographical inequalities, and family poverty.

Before the pandemic, ACE Charity, a non-governmental organisation, was dedicated to improving educational outcomes for children from marginalised communities in Nigeria. During the pandemic, which widened an already existing educational gap, ACE Charity initiated the ACE radio school in nine states in northern Nigeria including the Federal Capital Territory Abuja which carted to neighbouring states such as Niger, Nasarawa, and Kogi. Other states included Adamawa, Kano, Borno, and Kaduna.

Logistically the ACE radio school lessons were designed for children to listen independently using family-owned radios or to listen together with LLFs in one of four “listening groups” (LGs). This initiative was supported by volunteer teachers who broadcast the radio lessons three times a week. Numeracy, literacy, and English language sessions were broadcast on Mondays for primary school students, and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) subjects and English language for secondary school students were broadcast on Wednesdays with repeat lessons aired on Fridays. The thirty-minute sessions covered three subjects for ten minutes each.

To ensure that the lessons aligned with the Nigerian school curriculum, instructional materials for radio lessons were developed and designed for consistency with the Nigerian education curriculum. The radio episodes are then translated into local languages, Hausa and Fulfude. To effectively engage a wider group of target beneficiaries, external personnel reviewed and validated translated episodes with local language fluency. Experts were provided with the scripts to compare and validate the translated content. The scripts and audio lessons were reviewed by qualified staff members with degrees in education and extensive teaching experience. This article will focus on how LLFs locally supported learners, particularly girls, to continue learning during a global lockdown through the LGs.

Equitable educational response during a global crisis must ensure that marginalised learners are reached through alternative forms of education (UNESCO, 2019). This aligns with sustainable development goal no. 4, which focuses on quality education. Our understanding of alternative forms of education is based on flexibility and variety and adapted to the complex realities of disadvantaged populations while providing new possibilities and avenues for overcoming learning barriers (Vayachuta et al., 2016). Within this understanding, alternative schooling allows for flexibility and context-sensitive approaches, particularly those that create spaces for school-family partnerships. Epstein (2018) argues that the shared responsibility between school, family, and community creates interactive spaces where learners’ needs are met. Learners’ needs are a product of diverse, interdependent factors, including socio-economic, individual learning history, and background language (Musgrave, 2017). These multi-level interactions between school-family-community remain central to influencing children’s improved learning (Epstein et al., 2018). These insights align with Holmberg’s (1999) conversational learning, which recognises the dynamics of interaction and communication for improved learner outcomes.

Other studies have looked at Holmberg’s conversational learning from a distance learning perspective (Kanuka & Jugdev, 2006; Wanami & Kintu, 2019; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2020). This article captures Holmberg’s conversational learning approach to illus-

trate distant learning based on a radio school initiative and to understand how shared interactive spaces between school and family can foster improved learning outcomes for learners from marginalised communities.

The data was examined through Holmberg’s theory to understand the experiences of young learners involved in the ACE radio school intervention. Other elements of Holmberg’s theory that explain the expected nature of transactions relevant to this article include effective communication between the LLFs, the learners, their families, and the community. Holmberg argues that feelings of personal relations between the teacher and learner tend to promote study pleasure and motivation, notably if well-developed instructional materials and two-way communication between the learner and the educator support such feelings. Within the context of this article, we frame Holmberg’s conversational learning to understand how these interactions move beyond teacher and learner to include family and community to foster improved learning outcomes. Other scholars emphasise that the strong links between language and gender injustice can disrupt the two-way communication between the learner and the educator (Corson, 1993). However, evidence suggests that learners experienced successful learning outcomes and academic progress using local languages compared to learners who are not exposed to similar experiences (Benson, 2002; Nishanthi, 2020).

3. Methodological Approach

A qualitative approach was used to answer the research question for this study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain an in-depth understanding of how radio lessons were facilitated locally to support learners during the Covid-19 school closures. Given the pandemic situation, the LLFs were invited to take part in an online interview and the learners were interviewed face-to-face by the LLFs. In total, 15 interviews were carried out with nine LLFs and six learners who were purposively selected for the interviews.

We went back in early 2021 after schools reopened to interview the learners again and three purposively selected parents of learners who engaged in the LGs. Our intention was to understand if the earlier claim during the initial interviews held during the 2020 pandemic, that the radio lessons delivered in their mother tongue, combined with their participation in the LGs, supported their learner confidence. We were particularly interested in knowing if this new confidence supported learners, especially girls returning to school.

Data collection occurred in four LGs located in Kano, Borno, Adamawa, and Kaduna states. Two LLFs provided support for learners in each LGs, except in Kaduna, where we had only one LLF. In total, we had approximately 276 learners attending the LGs across the four states (Kano, Borno, Adamawa, and Kaduna). In each of these LGs, we had 60 learners attending (30 primary-

and 30 secondary-level students). This was in spite of the LG in Kaduna, where we had 36 learners attending (21 primary- and 15 secondary-level students). The initiative had been ongoing for sixteen weeks at the point of the first phase of data collection. The second phase of interviews was structured around understanding how the LGs supported learners to return to school when schools reopened.

To ensure no language barriers, particularly for the learners, the interviews were conducted in local languages and translated into English. Interviews with LLFs were carried out in the English language, as all nine LLFs interviewed could speak and understand English.

Interviews were transcribed and analysed using colour coding. Excerpts from the interviews have been reported verbatim. The data were analysed through Holmberg's (1999) conversational learning approach, which emphasises that effective communication is at the centre of teaching and learning and is vital for enhancing children's learning development. The authors also used a thematic analysis approach, an iterative process (Braun & Clarke, 2006) that incorporates many procedures, including familiarising with the data, generating initial codes, searching for main themes, and reviewing themes.

Prior to collecting data, informed consent was obtained from each participant. Participation in the interviews was completely voluntary and participants were informed that they could withdraw their participation at any time if they wished to do so. For anonymity, tags and numbers have been used to represent participants (for example, "L" will stand for "learner" and "POL" for "parent of learner").

One of the study limitations is that the number of participants used in this study cannot be generalised to other populations due to the small sample size. In qualitative research, sample size tends to be small and purposive and often selected to provide rich, in-depth, and thick descriptive narratives relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. However, learnings from the inclusive LGs initiative can be useful in similar contexts.

4. Research Findings

We draw on interviews with LLFs, parents, and the learners themselves to present our findings. The analysis demonstrates how the initiative drew upon existing partnerships with LLFs who used radio lessons delivered in learners' native languages to support learning in communities during Covid-related school closures in 2020.

4.1. Recruitment of Local Learning Facilitators

When schools closed, ACE Charity drew from its existing network of ACE Charity field staff, who are qualified teachers from participating communities. LLFs supported the children to listen to the radio lessons through creative, interesting, engaging, and interactive LGs.

LLFs were driven by their passion to support children who did not have any other means of learning during the global school closure. They felt that all children should be given equal learning opportunities irrespective of their family backgrounds. LLFs noted that, by supporting children, they were making their contributions to society, especially in the face of a global crisis:

Well, when I was told, I jumped into the opportunity because, at that moment, I felt that it was time to just reach out to children using my gift as a teacher. I teach children who cannot afford it. So, it was just like an opportunity for me. (LLF 1)

I am a maths teacher and teach children here in this community. (LLF 2)

Some of them are familiar with me because I am part of the community. I teach in the community school where most children attend. (LLF 3)

The LLFs are well-known teachers in the community. As noted in Power et al. (2021), such initiatives require the engagement of people who are already active, known, and trusted in the community.

In their interviews, LLFs mostly expressed their commitments and their desire to see the children in their community succeed:

I am a teacher, I am also a parent myself, so what I want for my children is what I want for other children, that they will be very important tomorrow in the society. (LLF 4)

I talk to them and their guardians and encourage them to allow the children to attend the ACE radio lessons because it would build them up. (LLF 2)

My concern was for children to continue learning because, as a teacher, I know that if these children are out of school for a long time, they forget everything, and it is difficult for them to return to school. (LLF 6)

The narratives of the LLFs suggest a sense of empathy and commitment in their response to the learning needs of children during a global crisis. They took on this task to support children using their existing experience as teachers. We also see that their roles and responsibility as parents themselves drove this motivation.

4.2. How Children Engaged in Listening Groups

Urgency was a driving factor in program planning, considering the unprecedented nature of the pandemic. The radio lessons needed to reach those for whom the program was designed and intended and that it achieved its goal of promoting student outcomes. The radio school project had anticipated two ways learners could benefit

from them: (a) in in-person sessions with small groups of learners through LGs supported by community teachers serving as LLFs or (b) through independent engagement at home using family-owned radios. The LLFs interviewed described how they recruited children to participate in the LGs:

First of all, I started selecting 20 children. From the primary side and then from the secondary side, I went in between my street and the other line on the next street in the same community. (LLF 1)

I approached some of the children directly and then allowed them to talk to their parents about the radio school. Then some of the parents even came and met me and asked me about the lesson. I told them what ACE radio is all about. (LLF 2)

Yes, when you sent the information concerning the radio school, I went to the village with other facilitators. So, we have to get some children that are out of school, mostly girls and some boys, so we gathered them, we discussed with them and asked them whether they will be able to participate in the ACE radio school. Some of them consented, some of them refused. So, we had to contact their parents before they could give their time to attend the school. (LLF 3)

The above narratives suggest the need for children and parents' involvement in deciding on participation in the learning process. The role of parents, particularly fathers or senior male family members, in decision-making regarding their children's involvement may be necessary in this context. This appeared to be particularly true for girls' involvement in the LGs, considering that some of the girls may depend on their fathers' consent to access education due to religious and cultural practices that create barriers to girls' access (Okafor, 2010). This notion of interaction aligns with our understanding of Holmberg's (1999) conversational learning about how interactions extended to family and community contribute to improving learner engagement.

In the interviews, LLFs were asked about their experience teaching children during a global lockdown in the community. We intended to understand the extent of resistance or receptiveness they experienced, particularly concerning girls' participation in the LGs. We also wanted to understand how LLFs encouraged learners and ensured parent buy-in for girls to continue participating in the LGs. Our interest in girls' participation is due to the barriers confronting girls' educational access in these communities, even outside of the Covid context. LLFs described how parents encouraged them to continue supporting their children. Some parents took it upon themselves to tell other parents about the LGs:

So far, since I started, none of their parents came and said, no, I'm stopping a child or I'm stopping my child

for this reason. No none of them has said anything like this. (LLF 1)

Yes, in my street, in the street that I do that lesson, one man supports us by giving us his compound, so it's inside his compound that we are, [it is what] we use to gather the children. (LLF 2)

In their interviews, LLFs also talked about their experiences of resistance, especially from parents who did not want their female children or wards to attend. LLFs noted that they dealt with such resistance through dialogue with the learners and their families. They approached the family head, who is often the father, uncle, brother, or the oldest male member of the family, to encourage them to allow their girls to attend the LGs. LLFs described that they encouraged families by explaining the benefits of girls' education to the community and the girls themselves:

I had to calm them down, meet their parents, their guardians. You know some of them are not even from the community. They were taken from their relations to their neighbours, from their parents to their relations, and sometimes some relatives don't even care to educate children that are not theirs, so I have to encourage them. We talk to their guardians and encourage them to allow them to attend the ACE radio because it would "build" them up. (LLF 3)

Moreover, LLFs spoke about challenges they experienced because of the economic situation in most families. In some of these communities, there was existing poverty before the Boko Haram crisis, which resulted in further loss of livelihoods. The Covid-19 crisis further worsened the poverty situation experienced by members of these communities. As the pandemic persisted, their economic situation worsened, with many families struggling to feed themselves. In situations like this, children are made to work to support their families, which affects their ability to focus on their studies:

The only challenges that we [had] was during harvesting, or maybe during the rainy season...some of them use[d] to go search of money. (LLF 1)

You know, especially [in] this dry season, [the rice harvesting season] that they are doing now...some of them use[d] to go [to the market] for work [to sell their harvests, make some income for themselves and their families]....So we use[d] to encourage them...to come to school...even if they go there [to the market], when it's time for the radio school, they should make sure that they avail themselves in the class. So that's one of the challenges. (LLF 2)

While the LLFs shared how they supported inclusive learning for all learners, including those with diverse learning needs, they also reported some challenges:

Mostly the arithmetic part of the course and even the writing part of it is somehow difficult for them, they preferred multiple-choice questions. (LLF 1)

Yes, most especially if they did not understand, I start by slowing down the radio, or I download the lesson first. I have to play and pause, play, and pause, and explain it to them. (LLF 2)

The interviews showed that the challenges experienced in meeting diverse learner needs were a source of frustration amongst some LLFs. Others noted that additional training to support learners with diverse learning needs would have made it easier for them to support these learners and made learning more enjoyable for the learners themselves:

Because if they're given the writing part for them to write, you'll find out that they didn't, they'll not even write anything. Some will just sit down and submit their book empty without writing anything there. (LLF 1)

After the lesson, sometimes we encourage them to write because, you know, in a class like this somebody that cannot read and write...it's very difficult to teach that kind of student. (LLF 3)

In an initiative to mitigate the impact of Covid-19-related school closures in rural Zimbabwe, Power et al. (2021) pointed out the need to draw from the experiences of local networks of learning professionals to support diverse learner needs. Kirshner (2020) suggests that these local networks and partnerships support educators innovatively and collaboratively to find new ways of working together to support learners with diverse needs. These new networks present benefits to the learners and educators themselves. Such networks help improve their practice and their identities as educators.

Additionally, LLFs shared how they managed to keep in touch with children and their families, particularly girls, to ensure they continually participate in the lessons, especially during Covid-related school closures:

We used to give information; we passed it through the town crier [a community informant], that tomorrow there will be radio school. All the registered students should make sure they avail themselves during the lesson. (LLF 1)

Yes, so I used to tell them myself that they should not miss the lesson. (LLF 2)

Yes, in every group I have, I delegate a leader among them. So, when I want to contact the group, I inform their leader who I delegated to gather them. (LLF 3)

4.3. Perceived Impact on Learners

LLFs were asked to see how they could help as many learners as possible. Small LGs were set up in the villages. The in-person LGs supported children to continue learning even when schools were shut down. Without such support, children may be at risk of losing their confidence as learners and their connections to learning experiences; these have implications on whether they will return to school when schools reopen. Their confidence as learners was further heightened due to the language of delivery used in broadcasting the radio lessons. The children in their interviews expressed how much they have learned since they began to engage in learning in their native languages and how the support, they received helped facilitate their return to school when schools reopened:

Yes, I went back to school. It helped me a lot because [of the] things they did for me, they did for us at ACE radio. I found that they started it at school...and it came to me easy.

All the LLFs interviewees said the radio lessons delivered in the children's native languages were beneficial and contributed to the children's continued engagement. Parents and guardians noted that the learners particularly enjoyed the radio lessons delivered in the languages they spoke at home. They noted that the topics and subjects their children struggled to learn in English became clearer when taught in their local languages:

Yes, because some of them might not understand English very well and I think, in that instance, the language they are taught in should be their mother tongue, which they understand very well. There is no reason [to teach] someone in a language she doesn't understand well. So, what he understands well is his mother language, and indeed if his mother tongue can be used to teach a child, he can grasp the lesson very well. (POL 1)

LLFs interviewed discussed how the radio lessons were creatively designed to adopt localised approaches to illustrate specific topics, especially science lessons. There were certain words in the science lessons that did not exist in the local languages, for example, words like "gravity" or "evaporation," the radio lessons, started by defining and explaining the concept in the local language for the learners to understand the concept:

I gained a lot from the ACE radio lessons, which I can always remember. Examples are the addition and subtraction of numbers in maths that are being taught in Hausa. (L 1)

Yes, I learned nutrition under biology, I know the types of nutrition, and they translate and use

examples where we can understand it in our own language. (L 2)

When I used to listen, I felt really happy with this radio, because I am now understanding something from it. It helps me, the radio. (RL 3)

The teaching...and the kind of songs they sang helped me to understand the topic. (L 5)

One of the most common ways LLFs assessed learning from the radio lessons delivered in local languages and participation in the LGs was through the baseline and end-line assessments. At the beginning of every month, the children were given a baseline assessment to test their knowledge of the topics to be taught for the month. After four weeks of radio lessons, they were given an end-line assessment consisting of the same questions asked at baseline. This allowed LLFs to assess learners' progress over time. The LLFs also spoke about how the numbers of learners in the LGs continued to increase, often by the learners sharing their experiences with their friends or parents encouraging their friends to allow their children and wards to participate.

Before the pandemic, children who were out of school had possibly already lost their connection to learning (Girls' Education Challenge, 2016). However, through their engagement with the LGs during the global lockdown, they became more confident to learn and this new confidence supported them to return to school after the long school closures.

To better understand this, we went back early in 2021 after schools reopened to interview learners engaged in the LGs. We intended to test the claim shared during the 2020 initial interviews that the radio lessons delivered in local languages, combined with participation in the LGs, supported learner confidence. We were particularly interested in how this new learner confidence translated to the school setting, particularly for girls:

Honestly, I have changed a lot because I was going to the listening group. The truth is I understood a lot of things, no limit to it. Of course, even now in school...there [were] many things I could not do, but now, at school, I can do many things very well....Even if I sit on my own, because of radio school I understand something, I am able to do things by myself now. (L 4)

I stopped going to school after school closed. For a while, my friend was talking to me about a radio program that has learning through the radio, and the listening groups where they can explain everything to us. I have been thinking since I stopped going to school, so how can I learn to read on the radio? I always come because of listening to lessons. (L 6)

Yes, I went back to school. It helped me a lot because of the things they did for us at the listening groups

and the radio lesson. I found that they started it at school...and it came to me easily because I already know what it is. (L 7)

We also interviewed some of the parents of the learners to hear their views as parents on how they feel the radio lessons in local languages, combined with LG participation, supported their children to return to school after the extended period of school closures. In their interviews, parents discussed how engagement with the radio school helped mitigate learning losses for their children and improved their confidence as learners:

There is a difference between the radio lessons and the lesson that was given in school, so that my children can pay attention and listen well to the instructor, and they have gained more than I think from what they are being taught in the school. (POL 2)

Okay, the difference the radio lessons made is actually very nice, because the kind of teachers that were selected to give the instructions in the listening groups were the real experts. So, they know their work well, they know when to start, where to start, and how to deliver the lessons. So, indeed the lessons are quite structured, and they are very good and now my children are very happy. (POL 3)

These insights align with research evidence that suggests that learning loss is not only ascribed to loss of learning resulting from school closures but also to knowledge that is forgotten over time due to a continued disconnection from learning (Azevedo et al., 2021 de Barros Angrist et al., 2021). This loss is even more severe for vulnerable learners (Smith, 2021).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The fact that the lessons were taught in my native Hausa language made me understand better because, in our school, they just teach, not minding if we understand it or not, so I am happy I was part of the listening groups. (L 1)

We explicitly reflect on the overarching research question: In the context of Covid-related global school closures, how did a radio school initiative support young people from disadvantaged communities to continue learning?

The article reflects on how radio lessons were delivered in local languages and supported through locally facilitated LGs. The facilitators were experienced teachers in the community and understood the dynamics of the community and the barriers to children's education, especially for girls. Girls' education access in the context of northern Nigeria is impacted by several complex and inter-dependent barriers, including gender, age, religion, child marriage, family economic status, and socio-cultural norms. The limited access to girls'

education is underpinned by pervasive gender inequality. Girls often fall through the cracks of different educational policies and may be excluded from national and regional education provisions (Joda & Abdurashed, 2015; Williams & Istifanus, 2017).

However, the radio lessons delivered in local languages and supported through locally facilitated LGs enabled parents to engage and interact with those responsible for their children's learning. This suggested that any perceived language barrier in learning was addressed, as learning became more accessible to parents, the value they attached to education increased, and they supported their children to attend the LGs. The notion of shared responsibility is based on the understanding framed within educational sociology that emphasises the need for school, family, and community partnerships for improved children's learning experience and outcomes (Epstein et al., 2018). These insights align with our conversational learning framing and is consistent with literature from Sub-Saharan Africa that demonstrates that, when children are supported to learn in their native languages, there is greater interaction and parental engagement, thereby resulting in increased student participation and learner confidence (Nadela-Grageda et al., 2022). One parent of a female learner identified that the benefits of the radio lessons that were delivered in Hausa language and supported through local facilitators should also be linked to parents as well. He noted that "this experience allowed parents to understand what their children are taught and created an opportunity for parents to become more engaged in their children's learning."

A significant mechanism that fosters the reproduction of inequality, especially in education, is seen in the language barrier that exists in teaching and learning and as experienced by learners from disadvantaged backgrounds (Benson, 2005, p. 1). A learner's native language is key to making schooling more inclusive for all disadvantaged groups, especially girls from marginalised contexts (Matengu et al., 2019).

For example, in Kailahun, the Eastern Province of Sierra Leone, one educational response to the Ebola outbreak was the introduction of a radio education programme called *Pikin to Pikin Tok* (meaning "child to child talk), delivered in Krio language (Barnett et al., 2018). Responding to the educational need of children in their own language is consistent with literature from low-income contexts, which identifies that when lessons were taught in their native language, young learners from marginalised communities become more engaged and this has a positive impact on the learners' self-confidence and self-efficacy (Rubagumya, 2009).

Other scholars mention that local-language-based learning is an effective strategy for addressing girls' continued participation in education (Benson, 2005). More girls enrol and remain in school when they can learn in a known language. Our interviews with radio listeners in the LGs show that girls and their families were

more receptive to the ACE radio school lessons because they were broadcast in their native languages, connoting a familiar culture, and set of values. When teaching and learning is carried out using a familiar language, it increases family access to information about the schooling processes, resulting in higher parental involvement in children's learning (Benson, 2005).

While we do not claim generalisation of this knowledge, we understand from this context that, post-Covid, teaching learners with diverse experiences of educational inequality using their native languages would be a valuable approach to meeting their immediate learning needs. This approach would support education to become more accessible and relevant, particularly for girls from similar contexts.

We also identified that to mitigate learning loss for children, the LLFs adapted social behaviours that enabled them to stay connected and forge new networks. It was precisely through these connections that educators were able to offer this support. For example, the LLFs shared how community members loaned their large compounds for use by LGs. Some others helped spread the news about the LGs and convinced other parents who did not believe in girls' education to allow their daughters to attend.

While LLFs talked about how they drew on existing networks to develop new connections with community members and how these networks supported program success, it was not evident that they leveraged these networks to offer support to children with diverse learning needs. While LLFs developed their understanding and practice of creating engaging LGs, the interviews showed that LLFs felt overwhelmed supporting the learning needs of multiple learners with different learning needs. The interviews disclosed that some children with special learning needs struggled to learn. This feeling of stress to provide adequate learning support for learners with diverse learning needs was in relation to the inadequate support the LLFs themselves received in supporting these groups of learners. Evidence from similar educational responses suggests that drawing on a network of practice with others, not only facilitates information exchange that is seen as useful for improving learning support for learners, but also informs new perspectives and presents new opportunities for educators' professional development (Kirshner, 2020; Power et al., 2021).

Conflict of Interests

Kiki James, Temitope Monyeh, and Hassana Shuaibu are employees of ACE Charity, the organization that implemented the intervention discussed in the article. The authors declare no remaining conflict of interests.

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