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**ACCESSING FUNCTIONAL EDUCATION BY STUDENTS FROM LOW-
INCOME HOUSEHOLDS IN THE MIDIST OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN
SOUTH EAST NIGERIA**

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Abstract

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The sample for the study is 334 Upper basic three students identified as students from low income-households and drawn from eight schools in three out of five south east states of Nigeria. This comprised two schools each (one each from urban and rural schools respectively) from the sampled local government areas. The instrument for data collection was a 20-item researchers' developed questionnaire titled: Accessing Functional Education by Students from Low-Income Households Questionnaire (AFESLHQ). The instrument was validated by three experts: one from measurement and evaluation and two from Economics education all from College of Education Michael Okpara University of

Agriculture Umudike, Abia state. The Cronbach alpha statistic was used to test content reliability of the instrument which yielded a coefficient of 0.87. Three research assistants helped in the administration of the instrument and for data collection. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the three research questions raised for the study while t-test statistic was used to test the three null hypotheses at 0.05 alpha level. Results revealed among others that students from low-income households in the rural areas access functional education in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic by listening to radio lessons, watching television lesson series at home and joining the Zoom and WhatsApp virtual lessons at home, while their challenges include inability to afford funds to access data for online instructions and inability to attend good and desired schools due to inadequate funds for fees. Based on the results, the paper recommended among others that government should make the few school terms within the COVID-19 pandemic tuition-free for all the category students.

Keywords: Functional Education, low-income household, Students, COVID-19, Pandemic.

Introduction

Nations and generations could go into extinction without sound school system or education. Outlining the functions of sound education, Osuji (2017) noted that it does not only transmit culture but preserve, transmit and instill social norms, values and beliefs into the younger generation. For those reasons, it's the utmost desire of every nation to transfer her worthwhile values, norms, religion and skills to her succeeding generation through a functional education.

Functional education according to Idowu (1999) is the total process of bringing up individuals to develop their potentials to the fullest and consequently be able to contribute maximally to the development of the society. Eke (2019) went further to describe functional education as the transmission, acquisition, creation and adaption of information, knowledge, skills and values for the purpose of self-reliance and sustainable development of a nation. From the definitions given, it could be said that functional education does not only emphasizes on the acquisition of relevant and worthwhile knowledge but also that of the use of the acquired knowledge to solve personal and societal problems with the help of relevant skills. According to Nwokolo in Udo and Akpan (2014), functional education is capable of producing Nigerians who can manufacture raw materials, machines and tools needed for local and international market, invent new designs, discover drugs capable of curing diseases hitherto transform the nation from consumption to a manufacturing status. Nwaka (2017) concluded that functional education is an education that is active, stimulates and

empowers an individual with saleable skills and values to positively solve immediate problems for self and the society, live as ordered and disciplined life, understand his interest and vocation and have the zeal to succeed amidst of all odds.

Education is said to be qualitative and functional only when it could be useful to its recipient and the society at large. It's on that note that Nwaka (2017) maintained that functional education could only be attained if it could translate into the establishment and improvement of infrastructure such as electricity, roads, health, education, water supply, integrated rural development, poverty reduction, improvement in people's standard of living, reduction of crime and increase in economic growth. However, the attainment of goals and roles of functional education could remain a dream where there are political and social crises, poor funding of education and outbreak of diseases or pandemic such as SARS, Ebola and Corona virus (COVID-19) among others in such a nation.

The outbreak of Coronavirus commonly known as COVID-19 in the world in December, 2019 truncated the normal scheme of different sectors of the world economy. From the time of the outbreak first in the Wuhan Province of the republic of China, it spread across the whole world which has forced nations to remain locked down. This halted all the religious, cultural and socio-economic activities all over the world. Infection and death rate from the pandemic continued to rise globally as there is no known vaccine discovered and approved by the World Health Organization (WHO) to cure the disease over nine months after the outbreak.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education sector are enormous since schools, colleges, universities and other educational institutions closed down to prevent the spread of the disease among children in schools. In Nigeria for instance, as the lockdown lingered longer than expected while the children were at their various homes, different schools and governments devised the means of using online or virtualteaching to substitute the physical student/teacher contact classroom. In other words, the pandemic changed learning from traditional face-to-face contact to the online instructions.

An online instruction is an educational model where students and instructors connect via technology to receive lectures, submit assignments and communicate with one another. According to Ahmed (2019), this mode of teaching and learning poses more problems to the children in the lower basic education who needs to learn better seeing their teachers demonstrate while teaching. Others who may find it difficult to learn effectively using online learning are the physically challenged especially those with sight and hearing impairments who may need to use any of the challenged organ to comprehend what is presented online as well as the children from low-income

households who may be challenged to have the necessary online gadgets to learn with due to paucity of funds.

Low-income household otherwise known as poor family is one whose income is low relative to other households of same size. Low-income households or families are families with incomes below 200% of the federal poverty level. Such families engage in menial jobs that donot earn much incomes (Aces & Nicholas, 2006). Epstein (2017) described such families as those where the head does not work full time throughout the year, and broken families especially those headed by womenand those that do not maintain their own household but make their home with a relative.It could be described as the households that live below the international poverty line of \$1.90 per a day (World Bank, 2020). They are also known to experience some material lacks and hardship, skip meals and not always be able to provide or pay for meals and other necessities of life. Children from low income families face a lot of challenges while trying to access qualitative and functional education. Zhang, Washington and Yin (2014) maintained that children from such families suffer low self-esteem for their economic condition.Zaka (2020) added that they are the most vulnerable in both the social, health and educational disparities.

In the event of virtual and online instruction, Zhang, Washington and Yin (2014) revealed that no home computer and internet connectivity are the biggest problem for low income families in accessing literacy and quality online education. They discovered in their study that low income students were less likely than the affluent students to use their home computers for Word processing and school assignments. On the other hand, North (2020) noted that children from low income households get distracted from other family members while online instruction was on as they share small space or room with other family members. He expressed fear that Coronavirus would end up worsening America’s existing educational inequality making it harder than ever for low-income students to learn and put them at an end even greater disadvantage compared to their wealthier peers.Epstein (2017) concluded that children from low-income householdsface the highest drop-out rate in the schools.

Assessment so far on the effectiveness of the use of online instructions during COVID-19 pandemic lockdown showed that many children in different homes especially from the rural and low-income find it difficult to follow in online instructions.Ahmed (2019) opined that children from poor families lack all the necessary gadgets and materials to learn which invariably affect their academic performances. In Nigeria context, Idris(2020) lamented that some poor households do not have radio set and mobile phones for their children to listen to instructions and to submit assignmentsrespectively. She went on to state that most parents can’t afford the

cost of data to allow their children take part in online instructions. Similarly, Sulisworo, Astuti, and Fatimah, (2020) noted that though some parents buy batteries to power the available family radio sets and as well leave behind their personal phones for their children to join in an online teachings before going out to their work places, most of them find it difficult to provide money regularly for data. Soetan, and Cokerb, (2018) holds that children from low-income households especially those in the rural settings are experiencing major disruption in already inconsistent routines and less-than-adequate resources critical to learning. Other difficulties which COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the children from low-income households according to Eze (2020) include chronic absenteeism, inability to get nutritious meals previously provided by the government during school hours and removal of key resources available at school such as consistent and caring adults who can help build resilience and offer holistic support.

In the midst of all those posed challenges, government, individual households and schools devised different strategies to ensure that academic activities go on for the children. For instance, as the lockdown policy of the government continued, some school teachers were trained to deliver lessons daily through some designated radio stations and televisions that have wider coverage while the students learn at the comforts of their homes. Proprietors of private schools on the other hand, teach their students using some educational online applications as such as WhatsApp and Zoom applications while parents on the other hand made sure that there are adequate fuel to power their generation sets, batteries on their radio sets and data on their telephone so that their children are adequately involved in the online teaching. As soon as there was reduction in the rate of infection nationwide, government began to announce the gradual reopening of schools and providing in some cases free handsanitizers and face masks to schools. Also, there was a reorientation and retraining of the teachers on how best to cope with the pandemic in their schools to avoid the spread of the virus. Government further established COVID-19 guidelines for schools and set up a committee to monitor adherence to those guidelines. Schools on the other hand reduced the class sizes of their various classes and avoided those activities that encourage crowds in the school such as school assemblies and sporting activities. They also ensure that every student and visitor to their school compound wears face masks. Parents came up with their own strategies of bringing and taking their children or wards to school to avoid contracting the virus through the crowded school bus. Some of them hired home teachers to argument the number of few subjects which school teach everyday since most of the schools suspended lesson after normal school hours in order to reduce the number of hours students spend in the school.

Those adjustments and strategies adopted by both the government, schools and parents to ensure that schools are open and that students receive functional education in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic were considered very expensive and challenging

to parents and guardians who were not so rich. This paper therefore, assessed the extent children from the low-income households accessed functional education in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic in the south-East Nigeria. Based on that, the following questions were asked and answered as well:

1. How do students from low-income households access functional education in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic in South-East?
2. What are the challenges students from low-income households face in accessing functional education in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic in South-East?
3. What are the strategies used by students from low-income households in accessing functional education in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic in South- East?

Methods

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The sample for the study is 334 Upper basic three students identified as students from low income-households and drawn from eight schools in three out of five south east states of Nigeria. This comprised 135 and 199 students from urban and rural locations respectively. The sample was drawn using multistage sampling. In the first stage, three out of the five states in the south east were drawn using simple random sampling technique. These included Enugu, Ebonyi and Imo states respectively. In the second stage, proportionate sampling technique was used to select eight local government areas from the three sampled states in the south east. In the third stage, 16 schools were purposively selected from the sampled eight local government areas in the sampled states. This comprised two schools each (one each from urban and rural schools respectively) from the sampled local government areas. The instrument for data collection was a 20-item researchers' developed questionnaire titled: Accessing Functional Education by Students from Low-Income Households Questionnaire (AFESLHQ). The instrument was validated by three experts: one from measurement and evaluation and two from Economics education all from College of Education Michael Okpara University of Agriculture Umudike, Abia state. The Cronbach alpha statistic was used to test content reliability of the instrument which yielded a coefficient of 0.87. Three research assistants helped in the administration of the instrument and for data collection. All the 745 students in the junior secondary II and III classes in the sampled schools were given the questionnaire to respond to. The questionnaire administered sought for other information among which was the income level of their parents. Students were allowed to take the instrument home to find out the income level of their parents. It was during the data cleaning that questionnaire of 334 students whose parents earn less than 1.90 US. Dollar (equivalent of #680) a day was separated and classified as students from

low-income households (World bank 2020) and were used for the study. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the three research questions raised for the study while t-test statistic was used to test the three null hypotheses at 0.05 alpha level.

Results

Research Question 1

How do students from low-income households access functional education in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic in South-East?

Table 1: How students from Low-Income Households Accessed Functional Education in the midst of COVID-19 Pandemic N=334

S/No	Items	Urban			Rural		
		X	SD	Remark	X	SD	Remark
1.	Listening to lesson through radio set at home	3.23	1.03	Agreed	2.84	0.81	Agreed
2.	Watching television lesson series at home	2.76	0.89	Agreed	2.13	0.78	Disagreed
3.	Joining the Zoom and WhatsApp virtual lessons at home	2.66	0.78	Agreed	1.88	0.67	Disagreed
4.	Visiting friends or relatives to listen to radio lessons	1.89	0.65	Disagreed	1.36	0.73	Disagreed
5.	Visiting friends or relatives to watch television lesson series	2.01	0.81	Disagreed	1.87	0.71	Disagreed
6.	Hiring home-lesson teachers	2.15	0.77	Disagreed	2.09	0.89	Disagreed
7.	Through the school segmented lessons	2.71	0.92	Agreed	2.32	0.80	Disagreed

The results in the Table 1 indicated that the mean responses in all the items excepts items 4, 5 and 6 were above the mean benchmark of 2.50 indicating that the respondents in the urban areas agreed that how students from low-income households access functional education in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic include listening to lesson through radio set at home, watching television lesson series at home, joining the Zoom and WhatsApp virtual lessons at home and through the school segmented lessons. However, items of 4, 5 and 6 which were below the mean bench mark of 2.50

showed that they disagreed that they access functional education through visiting friends or relatives to listen to radio lessons, visiting friends or relatives to watch television lesson series and hiring home-lesson teachers in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic. Also the mean responses in all the items except item 1 were below the mean bench mark of 2.50 which showed that the respondents in the rural areas disagreed that students from low-income households in the rural areas access functional education in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic through watching television lesson series at home, joining the Zoom and WhatsApp virtual lessons at home, visiting friends or relatives to listen to radio lessons, visiting friends or relatives to watch television lesson series, hiring home-lesson teachers and the through the school segmented lessons. Item 1 which has the mean response of 2.88 and above the mean bench mark of 2.50 showed that the respondents agreed that the listening to lessons through radio set at home is the only how students from low-income households access functional education in the midst of COVID-19.

The corresponding hypothesis is

HO₁: There is no significant difference between the mean responses of teachers in the urban and rural areas on how students from low-income households access functional education in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic in South-East

Table 2: The t-test Analysis of Mean Responses of Students in Urban and Rural Schools on how students from Low-Income Households Accessed Functional Education in the midst of COVID-19 Pandemic

Students	N	X	SD	Df	t-cal.	Sig.	Remark
Urban	135	2.49	0.84				
				332	2.15	0.03	S
Rural	199	2.07	0.77				

The data in Table 2 show a significant P-value of 0.03 which is less than the alpha value of 0.05. this however indicated that the hypothesis of no significant difference was rejected and the alternate upheld. Therefore, there is significant difference between the mean responses of respondents in the urban and rural areas on how students from low-income households access functional education in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic in South-East

Research Question 2

What are the challenges students from low-income households face in accessing functional education in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic in South-East?

Table 3: Challenges faced by the Students from Low-Income Households in Accessing Functional Education in the midst of COVID-19 Pandemic N=334

S/No	Items	Urban			Rural		
		X	SD	Remark	X	SD	Remark
8.	I can't afford funds to access data for online instructions	3.03	1.05	Agreed	3.45	1.18	Agreed
9.	There are no available gadgets such as phones, radios, televisions for me to join online learning	2.61	1.21	Agreed	2.78	0.69	Agreed
10.	I can't attend good and desired schools due to inadequate funds for fees	2.59	0.81	Agreed	2.88	0.87	Agreed
11.	We lack funds to acquire the needed books and other materials for quality learning	2.87	0.91	Agreed	2.73	0.91	Agreed
12.	I skip classes to join parents in the family business in order to get food for the family	2.91	0.79	Agreed	2.76	0.78	Agreed
13.	I trek long distances to school as I can't afford school bus fare	2.75	0.80	Agreed	2.88	0.92	Agreed
14.	Poor concentration in the class due to too much involvement in family business	2.58	0.73	Agreed	2.66	0.74	Agreed

The results in the Table 3 showed that the mean responses of respondents in all the items ranged between 2.58 and 3.03 and above the mean bench mark of 2.50 indicating that the respondents in the urban areas agreed that the challenges students from low-income households face in accessing functional education in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic included inability to afford funds to access data for online instructions, inability to attend good and desired schools due to inadequate funds for fees, lack of funds to acquire the needed books and other materials for quality learning, regular skipping of classes to join parents in the family business in order to get food for the family, trekking long distances to school as they can't afford fares for the school bus and poor concentration in the class due to too much involvement in family business. They also agreed that non-availability of gadgets such as phones, radios and televisions to join online learning as challenges students from low-income households face in accessing functional education in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic. On the other hand, all the items (8-14) had mean responses ranged between 2.66 and 3.45 indicating that the respondents from the rural areas agreed that all the challenges mentioned above are the challenges students from low-income households face in accessing functional education in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic.

The corresponding hypothesis is

HO₂: There is no significant difference between the mean responses of students from the urban and rural areas on the challenges students from low-income households face in accessing functional education in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic in South-East.

Table 4: t-test Analysis of Mean Responses of Students in Urban and Rural Schools on challenges Students from Low-Income Households face in Accessing Functional Education in the midst of COVID-19 Pandemic

Teachers	N	X	SD	Df	t-cal.	Sig.	Remark
Urban	135	2.76	0.90				
				332	-2.12	0.312	NS
Rural	199	2.88	0.87				

The data in Table 4 reveal a P-value of 0.312 which is greater than 0.05 alpha value. Since the P-value of 0.231 is greater than 0.05 alpha value, the null hypothesis stated was not rejected. Therefore, there is no significant difference between the mean responses of respondents in the urban and rural areas on the challenges students from

low-income households face in accessing functional education in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic in South-East

Research question 3

What are the strategies used by students from low-income households in accessing functional education in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic in South- East?

Table 5: Strategies Used by the Students from Low-Income Households in Accessing Functional Education in the midst of COVID-19 Pandemic N=334

S/No	Items	Urban			Rural		
		X	SD	Remark	X	SD	Remark
15.	My Parents registerme to the available school closer to our homes to reduce transport fare	2.87	0.84	Agreed	3.11	0.91	Agreed
16.	My Parents registerme to the school with reduced school fees	2.76	0.78	Agreed	3.01	0.87	Agreed
17.	My parent teamed up with others to hire Home-lesson teachers	2.65	0.71	Agreed	1.88	0.88	Disagreed
18.	The COVID-19 palliatives received by my parents helped me so much in my education	2.41	0.69	Disagreed	2.81	0.70	Agreed
19.	Some of the COVID-19 provisions by the government in my school assisted my learning	2.73	0.81	Agreed	2.70	0.76	Agreed
20.	Since schools opened in phases in each day, I choose the period most convenient for my lessons	2.69	0.89	Agreed	2.51	0.93	Agreed

The results in the Table 5 reveal that the mean responses of the respondents in all the items except item 18 ranged between 2.65 and 2.87 which were all above the mean bench mark of 2.50 indicating that the respondents from the urban areas agreed that the strategies which the students from low-income households could be used in accessing functional education in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic include parents registering them to the available school closer to their homes to reduce transport fare, parents registering them to the schools with reduced school fees, parents teaming up with others to hire home-lesson teachers, provision of palliatives to parents and schools as well as schools opening in phases in each day. Item 18 which has mean responses of 2.41 and less than the mean bench mark showed that respondents disagreed that

COVID-19 palliatives received by their parents was a strategy used by the students from low-income households in accessing functional education in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic. Also, the mean responses of the respondents from the rural areas in all the items except item 17 ranged between 2.51 and 3.11 which were all above the mean bench mark indicating that the respondents in the rural areas agreed that all those strategies could be used by students from low-income households in accessing functional education in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic. Item 17 which was below the mean bench mark of indicated that they disagreed that their parents did not team up with other parents to hire home -lesson teachers as strategy to access functional education in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic.

HO₃: There is no significant difference between the mean responses of students from the urban and rural areas on the strategies used by students from low-income households in accessing functional education in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic in South-East.

Table 6: t-test Analysis of Mean Responses of Students in Urban and Rural Schools on Strategies used by Students from Low-Income Households in Accessing Functional Education in the midst of COVID-19 Pandemic

Teachers	N	X	SD	Df	t-cal.	Sig.	Remark
Urban	135	2.62	0.79				
				332	-2.19	0.97	NS
Rural	199	2.67	0.84				

The data in Table 6 reveal a P-value of 0.97 which is greater than 0.05 alpha value. Since the P-value of 0.97 is greater than 0.05 alpha value, the null hypothesis stated was not rejected. Therefore, there is no significant difference between the mean responses of respondents in the urban and rural areas on the strategies used by students from low-income households in accessing functional education in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic in South-East.

Discussions

The results in Table 1 showed that the students from low-income households in the urban areas access functional education in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic by listening to lessons through radio set at home, watching television lesson series at home, joining the Zoom and WhatsApp virtual lessons at home and through the school segmented lessons. The result equally showed that their counter parts in the rural areas access functional education in the midst of Covid-19 pandemic only by listening to

lessons through radio set at home. The results indicated a significant difference between the mean responses of students in the urban and rural areas on how students from low-income households access functional education in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic in the South-east. The results implied that those in the urban areas have more ways of accessing functional education than those in the rural areas. The results suggested that students from low income households in the rural areas are less susceptible to the effects of poverty than their counterpart in the urban areas. The results agreed with Akpan (2020) who holds that children from low-income households especially those in the rural settings are experiencing major disruption in already inconsistent routines and less-than-adequate resources critical to learning. The results further indicated that low income students in the rural areas access functional education in the midst of COVID-19 by watching television lesson series at home, joining the Zoom and WhatsApp virtual lessons at home, visiting friends or relatives to listen to radio lessons, visiting friends or relatives to watch television lesson series, hiring home-lesson teachers and the through the school segmented lessons. These could be as a result of paucity of funds due to low level of their parents' income.

The results equally revealed that the challenges students from low-income households in urban areas have accessing functional education in the midst of COVID-19 include inability to afford funds to access data for online instructions, inability to attend good and desired schools due to inadequate funds for fees, lack of funds to acquire the needed books and other materials for quality learning, regular skipping of classes to join parents in the family business in order to get food for the family, trekking long distances to school as they can't afford fares for the school bus and poor concentration in the class due to too much involvement in family business. The results further showed that those are similar challenges students from low-income households in the rural areas encounter accessing functional education in the midst of COVID-19. The results agreed with Ahmed (2019) who opined that children from poor families lack all the necessary gadgets and materials to learn which invariably affect their academic performances. Zaka (2020) concluded that children from low-income households are the most vulnerable in both the social, health and educational disparities.

Finally, the results revealed among others that students from low income households in both the urban and rural areas can easily access functional education in the midst of COVID-19 if parents register their children to the available schools cheaper and closer to their homes to reduce high school fees and transport fare respectively, parents teaming up with others to hire home-lesson teachers, as well as schools opening in phases in each day. The results implied that some of the challenges which children from the low-income households encounter accessing functional and quality education in the midst of COVID-19 hinges on their parents cutting the costs in all their expenses to access education before the pandemic. For instance, children should be enrolled in schools that are closer to their homes as it will enable them to trek

to such schools instead of dropping out of school due to inability to pay for bus fare that convey them to and from school. Also, if classes are scheduled in phases, it will enable such children to choose those and attend classes in those period that are most convenient to them instead of dropping from school because they are engaged in their family business.

Conclusion

It is no doubt that inception of COVID-19 pandemic destabilized every sectors of the world economy to the extent that every effort is towards accommodating it as the normal diseases and pandemic which one has to live with. In the educational sector for instance, as classes are being resumed and keeping the national COVID-19 pandemic protocols, children from low-income households in the bid to access quality education, are exposed to so many challenges which among others include lack of gadgets such as laptop computers and phones to be used for online instruction as well as inadequate funds to pay for fees and bus fares in order to access functional education from the desired schools. based on these, the parents and the students devised some coping strategies.

Recommendations

Based on the results, the following recommendations were made:

1. Government should make the few school terms within the COVID-19 pandemic tuition-free for all the category students.
2. To reduce cost for the parents, government should provide free educational materials like books and uniforms to students within the period of covid-19 pandemic.
3. Schools should endeavour to buy good and inexpensive phones to their students and spread the cost in the school fees over the years.
4. Schools should provide free face masks and hand sanitizers to their students to avoid not only the spread of the infection but also to reduce the financial burden on the parents.

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