

Effects of Covid-19 Pandemic on The Academic Perception of Class 8 and Form 4 Students Towards Their National Exams: A Case Study of Narok County, Kenya

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Abstract

National exams in Kenya have been seen as the bridge to better livelihoods. Passing the exams translates to more chances of selection to quality schools and professional courses. On contrary, failing these exams is perceived to render the candidate 'a community failure', with little chances of making it in life. The exams therefore carry a lot of weight in the minds of candidate students. The covid-19 pandemic resulted to indefinite closure of learning institutions. This closure affected many dynamics responsible for candidates' performance in their national exams. A study was hereby conducted aiming to assess how the pandemic had affected candidates' (class 8 and form 4) perception towards national exams in Narok county, Kenya. The research used a mixed design involving a case-study and cross-sectional design of study. Questionnaire guides were used. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the findings. The findings indicated that the candidates' perception of passing in essential subjects were completely altered. The pandemic had also made the learners to switch their dream professions. The study found out that there was little online learning activity with numerous excuses for the same. Most of the learners indicated that their perception on school resumption largely dependent on how the government would contain the pandemic. In conclusion, the pandemic had significantly ruined how the learners perceived national exams. The authors recommend all education stakeholders to move with speed in ensuring the candidates are engaged with learning activities either online or through community-based learning platforms.

Keywords: Class 8 and Form 4 candidates, covid-19 pandemic, perception towards national exams

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1. Introduction

National exams are subjected to students at a certain level (usually in their exit classes). In Kenya, the two major national exams are conducted at the end of primary school level (class 8) and secondary school level (form 4) (standardmedia.co.ke, 2019). The exam conducted after class 8 is called Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) while that conducted after form 4 is called Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) (standardmedia.co.ke, 2019). The examining body is Kenya National Examination Council (KNEC) under the Ministry of Education (MoE) (standardmedia.co.ke, 2019). The main goal of the exams is to evaluate students understanding of the existing syllabus using a national standard (Dolan and Collins, 2015). The exams enable curriculum developers to assess students learning process and outcomes systematically and sustainably (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). In the current curriculum in Kenya, national exams have been used to determine students placing in the next level classes and their career professions. A lot of emphasis is thus placed on students' performance in national exams.

The current curriculum integrating KCPE and KCSE is known as the 8-4-4 system involving 8 grades in primary school level (Amutabi, 2003), 4 in secondary school level and 4 at bachelor level (standardmedia.co.ke, 2019; Wanjohi, 2011). This curriculum began in 1985 after replacing the earlier 7-4-2-3 system (Wanjohi, 2011). The graduates of the current curriculum have been criticized for being incompetent and lacking hands-on technical skills. Due to pressure from curriculum reviewers and the general public, the MoE initiated a more technical curriculum. The curriculum taskforce experts working on the task settled on the competence-based curriculum (CBC) which was launched in 2019 (theelephant.info, 2019). The curriculum adopted the format 2-6-3-3. In this new system, less emphasis was placed on national exams. This was to ensure 100% transition from primary school to secondary school. The curriculum also proposed more emphasis on technical experience and diversification of career paths at secondary school so as to cushion those who do not pass the secondary school national exams. A lot of emphasis has also been placed on technical and vocational training (TVET) institutes which admit students

who do not make it to universities (theelephant.info, 2019). These measures have relieved the psycho-economic burden that was earlier imposed on students who failed national exams. Nevertheless, the CBC system is being implemented in phases and KCPE and KCSE exams are still ongoing (by 2020) (theelephant.info, 2019).

Passing KCPE exams imply transition to good quality government sponsored (partially) secondary schools (Wanjohi, 2011). On the other hand, passing KCSE exams imply more chances of selection to the learners' dream university and career profession. These paths later translate to higher probabilities of landing the learners dream jobs and by extension, good livelihoods. On contrary, failing these exams prophecy the exact opposite and their future is spelled doom. The students who do not get good grades are regarded as failures right from their schools, families, community and to the society. This mentality negatively affects their psycho-economic life. To avoid this, guardians, teachers and the learners' schools spend a lot of money and time to ensure the students pass national exams; by whichever means. Both ethical and dubious means are used to enhance the learners pass the exams. There have been cases whereby the four parties (student, guardian, teachers and the school) have colluded in examination cheating (theconversation.com, 2018). Students spend sleepless nights revising for the exams. Parents spend a lot of money to acquire modern stationery, private tutors and schools for their children. Teachers craft the education pedagogy to enhance more revision; including instilling a cramming-mentality to students. On the other hand, schools enforce numerous tuitions and punish students who do not perform well in pre-national exams. All these behaviors affect the perception of learners towards national exams.

Being a marginalized county, transition rate from one education level to the next in Narok has always been quite low (Westervelt, 2018). Female students in the county also face a lot of challenges in their pursuit for higher learning; especially due to the Maa culture which discourage girl empowerment through learning. On the other hand, the boy child in Maa region has other options apart from learning (most notable pastoralism). Actually, to many of the students, learning has always been an alternative. Any interruption such as school closure is ever a welcome option as their illiterate parents force the students to take care of their livestock. Therefore, the pandemic might have pleased some of the parents as their livestock can now get more attention. It is therefore interesting to get the perception of these students during these unclear times.

On the wake of covid-19 pandemic in Kenya, all learning institutions were indefinitely suspended (nation.co.ke, 2020). The suspension aimed at protecting learners, teachers and other education stakeholders from acquiring the deadly infections. The traditional KCPE and KCSE dates (October to November of each academic year) appeared to start wavering. With the persistence of the pandemic, the dates and actualization of the exams continued to be questioned. By June 2020, majority of the students were uncertain of actualization of the exam dates in the academic year 2020. A worse concern was on the level of students' preparedness for the exams even in a future uncertain date. This study aimed at assessing the impacts of covid-19 pandemic on students in their primary and secondary school exit classes perception towards national exams. The pandemic is hypothesized to affect examination dates and attendance and performance. By extension the transition rate and future professions of the learners will be affected.

2. Research Design and Methodology

2.1 Design of Study

The researchers adopted case-study and cross-sectional designs in the research. A case-study design was chosen because the phenomenon was universal, especially in most developing countries. In these countries, online learning was not popularly adopted and learning had ideally stopped for majority of the learners. It was therefore more feasible to concentrate on a small area and reflect the findings to other regions of similar set-ups. This will enhance the quality of the findings while minimizing research resources. Narok county (figure 1) was chosen for its metropolitan setup. Like other counties in the country, there is a rich matrix of schools in Narok county. The county has mixed and single schools, private, government and community owned schools, day and boarding schools at both primary and secondary level. A cross-sectional design of study was chosen to enable the researchers assess the effects of the pandemic on students' perception towards national exams during these unprecedented times. The study was conducted in June, 2020 when there were no clear predictions of how and when the looming pandemic would come to an end. Descriptive analysis was used in the research. Data were collected using questionnaire guides.



Figure 1: Map of the study area, Narok county (Source: docplayer.net, 2020)

2.2 Sampling Techniques

Randomized block sampling design was used in this study. The study targeted Form 4 and Class 8 students of both gender (1:1). The study area was divided into blocks depending on geographical location. There was a total of 6 blocks spread throughout the county. A team leader (research assistant) was assigned to supervise distribution of the data collection items in each of the blocks. For each of the blocks, the data collection tools were sub-divided into four (for each gender and class) and respondents randomly sampled.

2.3 Sample size

A sample size of 120 was used in this study. For each of the 6 blocks, 20 samples were taken. The samples were equally sub-divided based on gender (10 male and 10 female) and grade (10 form 4 and 10 class 8). The research thus used 60 male (30 form 4, 30 class 8) and 60 female (30 form 4, 30 class 8) students as illustrated in figure 2.

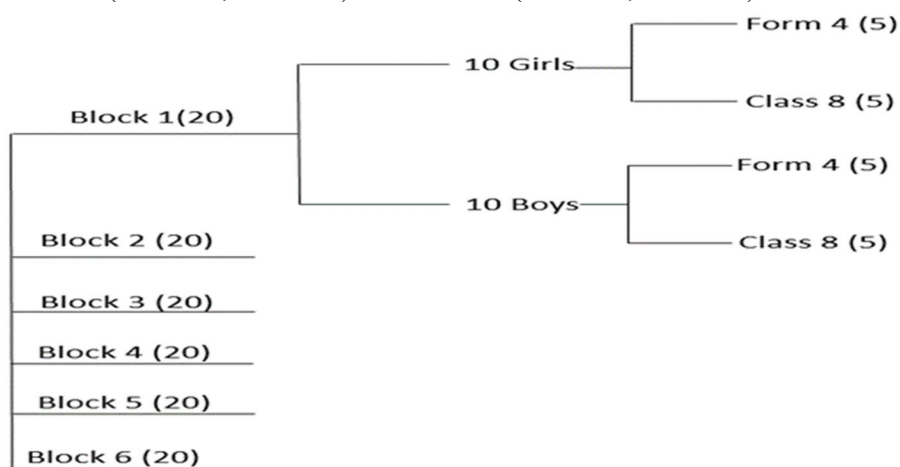


Figure 2: Sample distribution in the study area

2.4 Data collection items used

Data was collected using questionnaires guides (Appendix 1). The questionnaires were unstructured and had both open ended and closed research questions. The questionnaires were divided into 3 main sections i.e respondents' demographic section, school information section and a section on the academic perception of the students towards national exams. The questionnaires were assigned by the block team leaders who would collect them from the respondents after 1 day. During the collection process, the researchers accompanied the team leaders to assist any respondent with clarifications or interpretations where need be. Any interesting clarifications by the respondents was noted down at the back of the questionnaire guides.

2.5 Validity and reliability of the research guides used

Questionnaires were quite reliable since they were easy to administer and encouraged confidentiality thus, reducing biasness. They were subjected to the test-retest reliability method to check for their consistency in results

after a duration of 10 days. A group of 12 respondents (volunteers) was used. There was a similarity index of 71% in the results at the two instances of testing. A face validity of the research guides was conducted by 5 volunteers. A pilot study was then conducted to determine the validity of the questionnaires. Each of the 60 initial distinct research questions in the questionnaire guide was assigned to 2 different respondents. In total, there were 120 respondents (volunteers). The data was then debugged and the minimum and maximum values recorded. After a critical analysis check, 12 questions were found to be confusing and leading. These questions were plucked out. The ultimate validity score was thus 80% and the outcomes were found to strongly favor the use of these research guides.

2.6 Data analysis

The data collected was analyzed and presented using descriptive statistics. The data collected was analyzed using Ms Excel (2016).

3. Results and Discussions

3.1 Learners demographic information

The age distribution of the learners averaged 14-15 years for class 8 students and 18-19 students for form 4 students. About 42.8% and 35.7% of the students in class 8 were aged 14 and 15 years respectively. According to Ngondi (2018), most of the candidates doing KCPE are in this age bracket. Since the 2020 academic year calendar for class 8 students was altered, it was rather obvious that the students would be a year older while doing their KCPE exam. There is a slight correlation between learners age and passing national exams (Ngondi, 2018). The older the students, the wiser and brighter they are therefore in a position to score better than their younger counterparts. This is because comprehension of ideas increases with age of learners (Bhagat *et al.*, 2015). From the findings, all the students will be a year older by 2021 when the exams will be conducted. It is therefore expected that their performance will be better; assuming age plays a key factor in their performance. The same is expected of the form 4 learners. Only 7.1% of the KCPE candidates were 13 years and below while 14.3% of the class 8 learners were 16 years and above. According to Chen *et al.*, (2018), family size has a direct correlation with learners' performance in school. The smaller the family (nuclear), the more the learners get attention from their guardians. The learners also face less competition for resources such as stationery, fees and guardian follow up time. Only 2.9% of all the students sampled were in a family of less than 5. On contrary, 41.2% of the families had 5 to 8 members while 55.9% had more than 8 members. The bulk of the learners' families were thus skewed towards a higher family size. These two demographic factors (age and family size) have a direct impact on learners' grades and by extension their perception towards national exams. While it is certain the learners age will have increased after the pandemic, it is not clear whether the learners' family size will have changed.

3.2 School information

Most (85.3%) of the learners came from county-level schools. These were the former district schools which were upgraded to county schools after devolution. County schools have more resources such as infrastructure, teachers and stationery compared to constituency development fund (CDF) schools but less than regional and national schools. The high number of students in these schools imply moderate access of learning resources by the learners. 5.9% of the learners attended CDF schools while 11.7% of the learners were in regional schools. By default of the standard of their schools, the 11.7% learners in regional schools were better positioned to score higher grades in the national exams. Smedley *et al.*, (2001) showed that students in schools with more learning resources have more confidence in national exams compared to those in schools with fewer learning resources. This in turn has a positive perception on the exams. 83% of the respondents were in government owned schools, while 14% were in private owned schools. Only 3% of the learners were in community owned schools. All the 14% of the learners in private owned schools were class 8 students. Alimi *et al.*, (2012) showed that there was a significant difference in the performance of students doing West African Secondary School Certificate (WASSCE) and the type of school ownership. Students in private owned schools perform well than those in government owned schools due to the resources, especially learner-teacher time in the private schools.

About 71.4% of the learners were in boarding schools while the rest were in day schools. Learners in boarding schools spend more time in school with their colleagues and teachers. These learners are accustomed to their school learning environment and can thus be affected by a different learning environment such as that at home. It is thus more certain that little learning was taking place to the students from boarding schools compared to those from day schools; who are already accustomed to learning at home. The relatively higher number of learners from boarding schools (now at home) is of worrying concern to the guardians and other education stakeholders. These students are also more susceptible to immoral activities compared to those from day schools (Evans-Campbell *et al.*, 2012). This is because they were used to strict guidance at school by their teachers and school administrators. At home, there are no school guidelines to follow therefore students can end up doing immoral activities especially

if their guardians and siblings are busy. The difference in learning environment is also a key factor that can alter the candidates' perception towards their national exams.

About 68.5% of the learners were in single-gender school set ups. Out of this category, 51.5% of the learners were in form 4. This implies that more than half of the students in form 4 schooled in single-gender schools. Single-gender schools are preferred by guardians for their ability to minimize gender distraction amongst the learners. Students in mixed-gender schools face more gender distraction especially because of their age (adolescent). These distractions lead to coupling which later translate to low academic grades, unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections amongst the learners (Henry *et al.*, 2012). To minimize gender distractions, most guardians take their learners to single-gender schools. Most of the students in mixed-gender schools were in class 8 and in day schools. These learners were still under their guardians watch. These learners thus faced less gender distraction. Due to school closure resulting from covid-19 pandemic, all the learners were now at home where there were more gender distractions. For some of the students, their guardians and elder siblings were not always with them at home (as they were busy with their economic lives). It is therefore evident that the learners perception towards national exams were altered by the pandemic.

Most (72%) of the schools had between 9 to 32 teachers per school. According to planipolis.iiep.unesco.org (2018), most of the schools in Narok county have 8 classes for both primary and secondary classes (single stream in primary school and double stream in secondary schools). This translates to an average of 1 to 4 teachers per class. Most of the classes had 41 to 48 (median = 44.5) students in a single class. Using the calculations above, the teacher:student ratio ranges between 1:11 to 1:45. **Table 1** illustrates the number of teachers per school and learners per class in Narok county.

Table 1: Distribution of teachers and students in Narok county

Number	Teachers and classroom learning resources	
	Teachers per school (%)	Students per class (%)
1-8	13	0
9-16	22	1
17-24	29	5
25-32	21	12
33-40	10	31
41-48	4	41
>48	1	10

1

The global recommended teacher:student ratio is 1:40 (Perlman *et al.*, 2017; Appiagyei *et al.*, 2014). The findings thus indicate that there was no significant deviation in teacher:student ratio between the recommended standards and that of the learners in the study area. The lower the ratio, the more attention the learners get from their teachers. The opposite is also true. The lower ratio of 1:11 was mainly for learners in private school while the higher one (1:45) represented most of the government owned schools. 62.8% of the learners were allocated only 1 text book per subjected by their schools. This is despite the MoE issuing free text books to all learners in Kenya. The deficit in number of text books to the learners can be attributed to many factors, chief amongst them embezzlement of government funds by those in charge (Kirya, 2019). 2.9% of the learners did not have any text book at all. 34.3% of the learners had 2 test books per subject. The extra text book was privately owned by the learners. From the findings on teachers, classes and textbooks, it was observed that the learners had moderate resources required for their preparation for national exams. However, the learners admitted that they no longer have access to these resources while at home. Without access to the resources, the students are incapacitated to proper preparation for their exams. This can potentially affect their perception towards performance in national exams.

3.3 Effects of covid-19 pandemic on academic perception of the learners

3.3.1 Effects on career professions of the learners

The goal of every learner is to land their career profession after completion of their studies. Students performance in national exams are directly related to their career professions. The Kenya University and Colleges Central Placement Service (KUCCPS) place learners to different profession courses based on their performance in KCSE (advance-africa.com, 2020). On the other hand, good KCSE performance are dependent on the type of schools. Most top-performing secondary schools pick students who score well in their KCPE exams. To achieve their dream professions, learners are therefore required to pass the two exams. The major professions chosen by the learners are indicated in **figure 3**.

1 Distribution of teachers in school and students in class

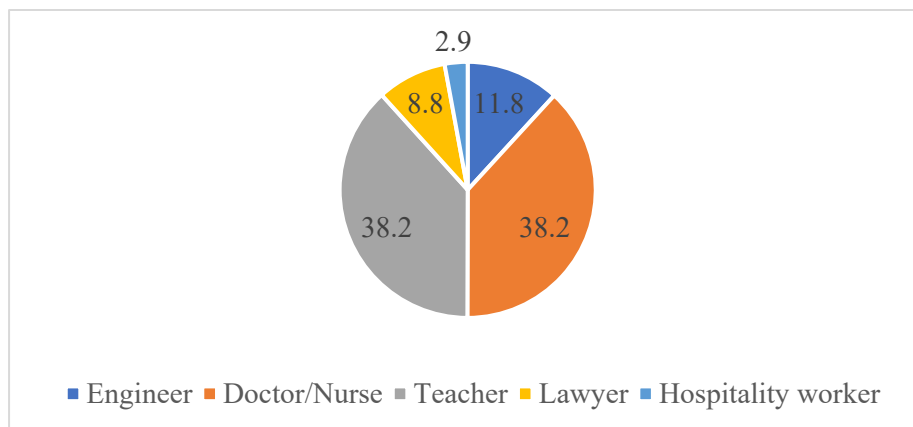


Figure 3: The major professions preferred by the learners after the pandemic

Majority of the learners in Narok wanted to become a teacher or a doctor (both 38.2%). The learners indicated that the two professions had a lot of passion for humanity. Teachers were their role models back at school and they had a strong desire to fit into their shoes after their studies. One of the respondents revealed that teaching was good because the teachers earned their salaries even while passive. The learner was quoted as;

...our teachers have been earning even during this pandemic. Despite staying at home and engaging in little teaching activities, our teachers (especially those employed by the Teachers Service Commission, TSC) are still earning normal wages. This is not the case in many other professions. For this reason, I want to become a teacher in future.

From the explanation of the learner, it is evident that covid-19 pandemic had an influence on the learners' choice of profession. Another student whose choice of profession was affected by the pandemic was quoted as;

...Initially, I wanted to become a pilot. I had a strong desire for high altitude and travelling to far off lands. I wanted to go to America, Turkey, Australia, Japan and many other countries. However, after the pandemic, most air travels were banned globally. Several pilots and cabin crew lost their jobs or took compulsory pay-cuts. It was then that I started questioning the profession. It is no longer as job-secure as I initially thought.

Covid-19 pandemic had increased the desire of some of the learners to medicine and nursing profession. Apart from paying well, the learners cited that the profession had played a big role in mitigating the effects of the pandemic. One of the learners was quoted as;

...I did not have any desire for working in hospitals and handling sick or dead people at all. I just loved to be in offices doing other jobs. When covid-19 pandemic struck, most of the other professionals were forced to stay at home. The only professionals operating were the essential service providers. The most notable ones were health workers. They did a lot of work to look after those infected by the virus. They appeared to be the most useful people. They earned a lot of respect and I strongly felt the urge to join them. Since then, my dream is to work as a doctor or a nurse.

About 11.8% of the learners indicated that they wanted to be engineers. This category of learners had a strong passion for science, geography and technical subjects. Engineering was thus the most feasible job to them. The learners indicated that working as engineers was comfortable and well paying. 8.8% of the learners yearned to be lawyers while 2.9% wanted to work in the hospitality sector. The reduction in urge to join these careers can be as a result of the pandemic whereby the two sectors have been critically affected. For example, courts were indefinitely closed in Kenya during the pandemic (pigarifimbi.africauncensored.online, 2020). On the other hand, majority of workers in the tourism and hospitality sector were greatly devastated by the pandemic due to closure of the sector. Most of the workers lost their jobs.

3.3.2 Registration for national exams

About 91.4% of the learners had already registered for their national exams that were scheduled to be done at the end of the academic year. The high registration was attributed to effective MoE and school preparedness and strict adherence to deadlines. On the other hand, students fear missing out on the exams and the repercussions that would follow. This is an indicator of the stress put on national exams in Kenya. The learners who had not registered for the national exams (8.6%) were in the process of doing so before schools were closed. The learners cited different reasons such as being absent from school during registration and lock of necessary documents required for registration. Registration fee for the exams had been waived by the government through the MoE (capitalfm.co.ke, 2020). All the primary school students had registered the five compulsory subjects (Mathematics, English, Kiswahili, Science and Social studies & Religion). There was a slight variation in number of subject registration by the secondary school learners. 63.3% of the learners had registered 7 subjects, 29.2% had registered 8 subjects while 7.5% had registered 9 subjects. Registration of more subjects increase the chance of selection to the students' professional courses. Subjects that the students have failed are cushioned with the extra ones that the learners

passed.

3.3.3 Learners perception towards passing key subjects

The key subjects for both primary and secondary school students in Kenya are Mathematics, English and Kiswahili (Piper *et al.*, 2016). The three subjects are compulsory to all learners in the two academic levels. The subjects also contribute immensely during calculation of cluster points required for choosing a professional course and the specific university to offer the course (Kenyaote.com, 2020). The perception of learners concerning the three subjects cannot be directly used to represent the other subjects but is a good indicator of the learners' position towards national exams. The learners' perception towards passing the 3 subjects are illustrated in **table 2**.

Table 2: Learners perception towards the essential subjects registered in national exams

Subject	Learners perception towards passing the subject (%)				
	Very Simple	Simple	Moderate	Challenging	Very challenging
Mathematics	3.3	0.0	20.0	50.0	26.6
English	3.2	22.6	71.0	3.2	0.0
Kiswahili	0.0	19.4	71.0	9.7	0.0

1

The perception of the learners towards passing mathematics was skewed towards the challenging end. This indicates that the learners did not have enough confidence in the subject. Half (50%) of the learners actually agreed that the subject was very challenging and they did not anticipate good grades in their national exams. According to Darling-Hammond (2020), to pass the subject, one requires close monitoring of the learners with regular exercises. Close monitoring of learners by their learners is not possible during the pandemic as the learners are physically detached from their teachers. This in turn affects the students' perception towards the subject. The learners had moderate perception towards passing English and Kiswahili (71% for each of the two subjects). Passing languages is also an involving task requiring teachers' guidance. In Kenya, the two subjects are tested for proper grammar, reading skills, comprehension and writing composition (Roy-Campbell, 2014). These activities also rely on teachers to monitor.

Most of the learners could not recall the last unit they were covering in the two subjects. This highlights how the learners' attention towards the subjects had been affected by the pandemic. 45.5% of the learners could not recall the last topic they were learning in English. According to those who could recall, 12.3% of the learners had not completed the previous class English syllabus. 28.7% of the learners were in the first half of their final class syllabus. The majority of the candidates were therefore far from ready to do their national exams. A similar scenario was observed for Kiswahili subject whereby 39.9% of the learners could not recall the last topic covered. Another 10.1% were still tackling the previous class syllabus while 34.5% were in the first half of their final syllabus. The candidates therefore needed more time to cover on the untaught concepts. Poor syllabi coverage has a negative perception of learners towards national exams. This is because the learners are guaranteed they cannot correctly attempt questions whose concept they lack. The extent of syllabi coverage in the 3 essential subjects done in national exams is illustrated in **table 3**.

Table 3: Syllabi coverage for essential subjects covered in the national exams

Subject	Syllabi coverage by learners (%)				
	Still in previous class syllabi	1 st half of current class	2 nd half of current class	Finished	Cannot recall
Mathematics	9.8	20.4	5.5	4.5	59.8
English	12.3	28.7	10.5	3.0	45.5
Kiswahili	10.1	34.5	14.2	1.3	39.9

2

Out of the three essential subjects, mathematics was the least reviewed subject by the learners (considering the high number of learners who could not recall the last topic taught). Only 40.2% of the learners recalled the last topic taught. Out of this fraction, 9.8% of the candidates were still tackling the previous class' syllabus while 20.4% were in the first half of the final year syllabus. These findings indicate that the learners were far from preparedness towards national exams. The covid-19 pandemic and the resulting learning break have worsened the students' perception towards passing the three subjects.

3.3.4 Status of the learners' preparedness for the national exams while at home

About 73.3% of the learners were learning while at home. The learners cited uncertainty in the national exams and poor preparedness before schools were closed as a key factor that made them continue learning while at home. The candidates feared failure in national exams if they did not prepare in advance. The candidates used several methods in their studies as illustrated in **figure 4**. About 72.1% of the learners had their text and note books at

1 Students perception on essential subjects performance

2 Students coverage of essential subjects

home which they used for revision of the national exams. This was the most common method used by majority of the learners because it did not involve using other people or resources. One of the learners was quoted saying; *...Apart from my teachers, I do not trust other teachers or means of revision. While I was in class 8, I had many tuitions which confused me. I did not pass well and ended up in this school. Since then, I do not rely on other modes of learning except my teachers and notes. Therefore, revising text books and teachers note books is the only method that I wholly trust.*

Apart from reliability, teachers' notes are tailored to what the learners had learnt. The learners could thus easily comprehend the notes. On the other hand, text book notes had a bigger scope of what the learners had learnt or were to learn (Bonney, 2015). Most of the text books also contain topical revision questions at the end of topics or sub-topics. 13.6% of the learners depended on their elderly literate guardians or siblings to assist them revise. This category of learners indicated that their siblings and guardians understood their strength and weaknesses and therefore taught them at a friendly pace. However, the learners admitted that there was no serious follow up on the learning tasks given by their siblings and guardians. Some of the learners also admitted that they did not take their siblings seriously during the session. 6.7% of the learners had private tutors. The tutors would spend 2 to 4 hours daily with the candidates, usually in the afternoons and evenings. The tutors were either registered teachers or university students with close relationship with the guardians. According to the learners, the tutors were more serious with the revisions and exercises given. However, most specialized in some subjects at the expense of others. Most of the tutors taught mathematics and science subjects. Only 1% of the candidates indicated they had meaningful revision with their friends. The learners indicated that their friends were never serious while studying together. One of the learners was quoted saying;

..when we plan to meet and discuss with my friends, it always ends up in unnecessary talk and plays instead of discussion. My friend and myself love football, so when we meet we forget about books and discuss matters football..

2.3% of the learners relied on social media (WhatsApp and Facebook) for revision. They indicated that they had formed revision groups where education content and questions were sent to the learners. The answers to the given questions would also be posted later. The students admitted that this mode of learning was expensive because of network bundles and subscription fee to the group administrators. 4.3% of the learners relied on radio for learning. The learners who depended on radio indicated that this mode of learning was effective but they had to compete with their siblings or guardians for the radio gadgets.

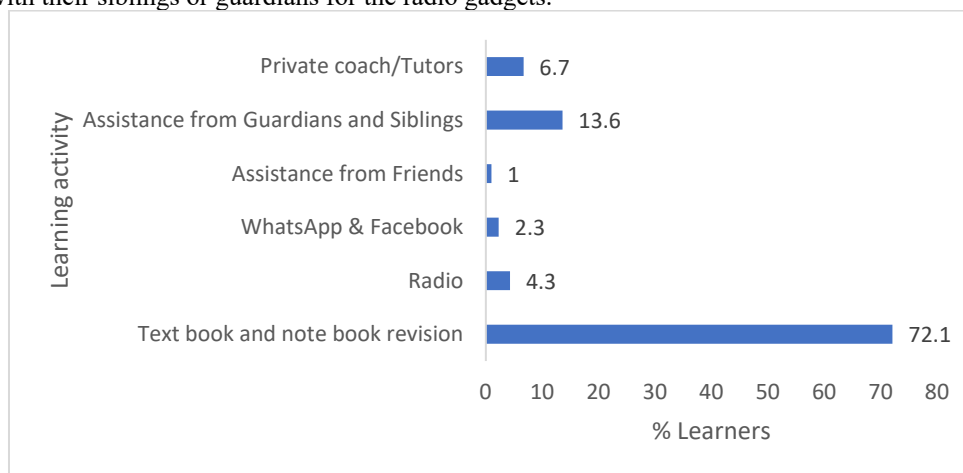


Figure 4: Some of the learning activities the candidates engage while at home

About 26.7% of the candidates indicated that they were not learning while at home. The learners cited various reasons such as lack of time, learning resources, proper guidance amongst others as the key reasons for not studying while at home as shown in **figure 5**. 51.0% of the learners indicated that they did not have any learning materials at home. The learners had left their books at home as explained by one of the form 4 students in Loita (Narok); *...when we were asked to go home in March, I thought that we would resume after 2-3 weeks. I thought that corona was here for less than a month. I did not therefore see the urgency to carry along my books. All my books are in school and my siblings and neighbors are in different classes. I do not like bothering my friends by borrowing them books so I decided to relax until schools are re-opened. My guardians do not have money to buy other books.* About 25.2% of the learners cited the illiteracy of their siblings and guardians as the main reason why they were not studying at home. The learners indicated that the concepts covered were quite challenging and intervention by a literate person was required. Since their teachers were away and their siblings and guardians were illiterate, the learners did not find a reason to study while at home. This can well fit to be an excuse used by lazy students since the students could exploit other avenues to study at home. 11.5% of the learners cited a lot of distraction while at home as the primary reasons for not studying. The learners' studies were frequently disrupted by many activities

such as television and radio, mobile phone calls and chats, siblings and friends' attention amongst others. 8.8% of the learners who could not manage to study while at home cited too much engagements from their guardians. The learners claimed that their parents involved them in tedious family duties which consumed a lot of time and effort. When they were done with the chores, they were very tired and could not concentrate in their books. Some of the learners indicated that they were engaged as family co-breadwinners. They went to work with their guardians for the family to earn more revenue in order to sustain its basic needs. 3.5% of the learners indicated that they had literally given up with their studies until the pandemic was over. They did not feel any urge to strain with books over an uncertain academic future. The distribution of the reasons used by the learners not studying at home are indicated in **figure 5**.

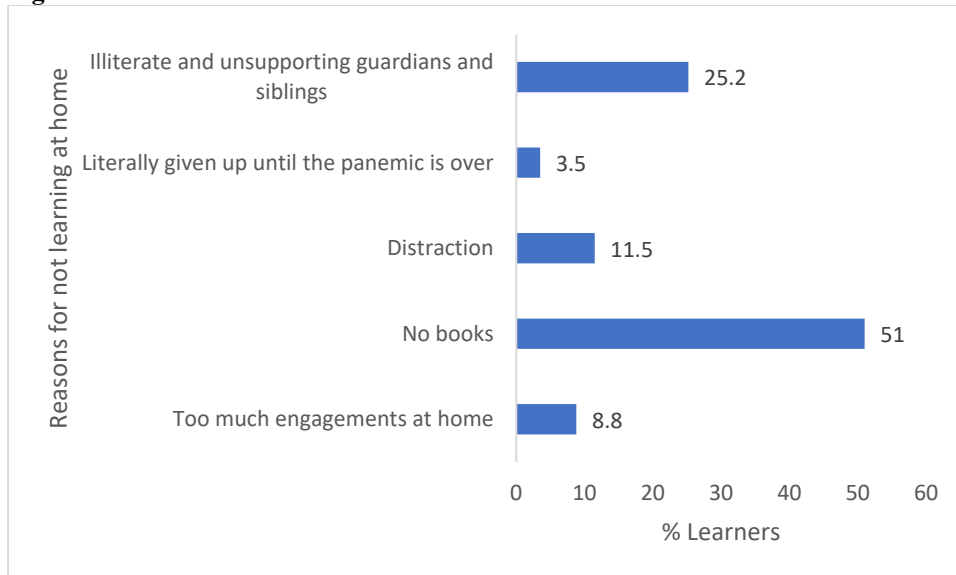
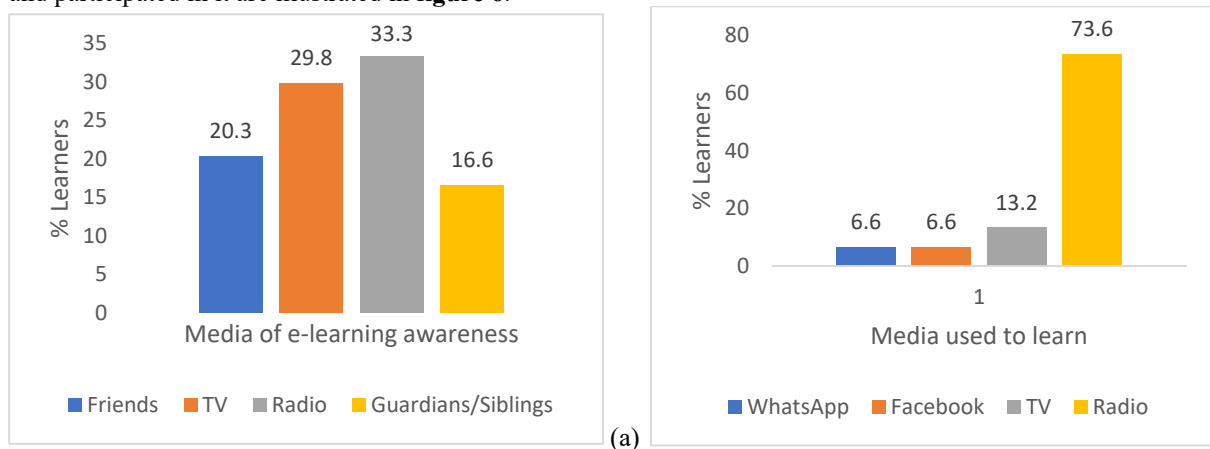


Figure 5: Some of the reasons why learners could not study while at home

The relatively high number of learners not involved in learning at home for one reason or the other is of great concern bearing in mind the uncertainty in school resumption dates. This category of learners can easily end up quitting their studies if the duration at home is prolonged. Bearing in mind the chauvinistic Maa culture, a good proportion of girls in this category might never resume their studies.

3.3.5 The effectiveness of e-learning to the candidates at home

Only 37.1% of the candidates attested to know e-learning. All the rest of the learners indicated that they were not aware of e-learning. The little penetration of the concept of e-learning in the marginalized Narok county paints an image of very little learning not only in the county but other parts of Kenya and other developing nations. E-learning was intended to substitute physical learning since the latter is not realistic during the covid-19 pandemic era (Almaiah *et al.*, 2020). Its absence to candidates in Narok indicates very little awareness about the same by MoE and other government or school administrators. The media through which the learners knew about e-learning and participated in it are illustrated in **figure 6**.



(b)

Figure 6: The media used in enlightening the learners about e-learning (a) and learning in the platform (b) Radio was the most utilized media in informing the learners about e-learning as well as educating them in the

platform. The two common radio stations in Narok, according to the learners were Mayiang' FM and Sidai FM. Both broadcast their content in the local Maa dialect. 33.3% of the learners (a third) knew about e-learning in this platform out of which 73.6% of them continued with learning through the two radio stations. Another 29.8% of the learners were made aware of e-learning through television. Out of this proportion, 13.2% of them continued studying using television. The relatively higher ratio of e-learning through radio and television compared to other media imply that most learners spend a significant period of time listening or watching the two media. The learners also have a lot of trust in the content delivered by the two media. Therefore, the MoE should utilize the two platforms to increase the awareness of e-learning while allocating more time for e-learning programs. Friends, guardians and siblings constituted 36.9% of the total media used in enlightening the candidates about e-learning. This value might be a trickle-down effect from radio and television implying reiterating that more effort should be put on the latter. The learners indicated that they preferred e-learning radio programs because the educators could switch from English and Kiswahili to their local dialect (Maasai) to enhance students understanding. The learners could also ask questions by calling at waived charges and express their questions and opinions in any language. These activities indicate the candidates strong desire to adequately prepare for their national exams. 24.4% of the candidates were assisted by their guardians and siblings in the learning activities.

Unfortunately, out of the 37.1% of learners aware of e-learning, 58.5% were not able to learn. The candidates gave several reasons for not participating in the process as indicated in figure 7.

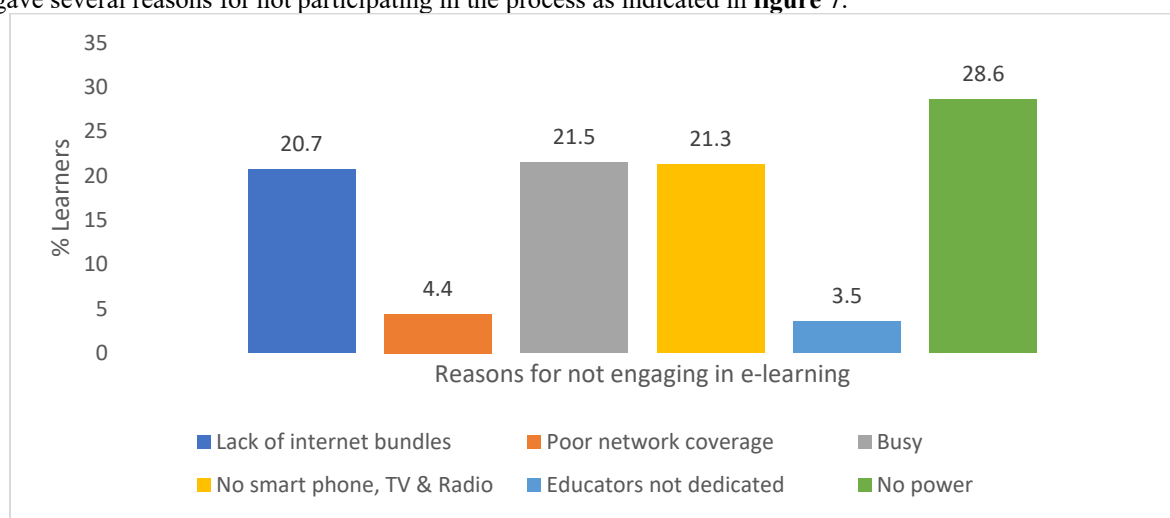


Figure 7: Some of the reasons why learners could not engage in e-learning

About 28.6% of the learners cited lack of power as the key reason for not participating in e-learning. Being a marginalized county in a developing country, the electricity connectivity in Narok is quite low (energypedia.info, 2020). A good proportion of the residents do not actually have permanent houses to even warrant electrification. This is because they are a pastoralist community (Caulfield *et al.*, 2016) who keep on moving with their herd of cattle in search of pasture. 21.5% of the learners indicated that they were too busy with other activities to find time for online learning. This category of learners preferred other forms of learning that spent little time. They thought that e-learning meant tuning to radio, TV or radio which they considered as leisure activities. They indicated that the time used for such activities, could be used engaging in domestic chores or other learning activities. 21.3% of the learners lacked electronic gadgets such as TV, radio sets and smart phones while a further 20.7% of the learners lacked internet bundles to assist them in e-learning activities. The two situations were worsened by the covid-19 pandemic which had affected the economy. Any finances obtained were prioritized to cover basic needs. A few learners cited poor network and mistrust to online educators as the reason for not participating in the learning activities.

A more worrying concern is the number of students who indicated that online learning was ineffective i.e 81.3%. The learners indicated several reasons for considering it ineffective. Some of the reasons given include: the platform did not harmonize learners of different individual abilities, the platform assumed that the students were at equal levels in their syllabi coverage, some of the educators were too fast, some educators were boring and the educators did not follow up to check how the learners had performed in the assignments given. This indicates major loopholes in online learning in Narok county.

3.3.6 Learners perceptions and recommendations going forward

Majority (60.5%) of the learners indicated that they would comfortably resume to school in January, 2021 and May, 2021 (5.2%) if the covid-19 pandemic is contained. The learners did not have any optimism of the condition being contained in the current year. One of the class 8 candidates elaborated;

...I listen to Mayiang' radio daily. I keenly listen to the covid-19 updates and there is very little hope of a vaccine

or cure being found in 2020. It is also unlikely the government will effectively contain the disease for us to resume school in 2020. I also don't think that our school is effectively prepared to meet all the safety regulations as guided by World Health Organization (WHO) on institutions re-opening.

Only 15.3% of the learners were optimistic of school resumption in 2020 (September). Majority of the learners in this category indicated that they were tired of staying at home. The learners were anxious that the president would instruct MoE (on 6th June, 2020) to enforce safety regulations for them to resume learning. 19% of the learners had completely given up on resumption until the pandemic was completely contained. They did not see the urgency to resume to school and contract the disease. It was rather obvious that the candidates' perception on passing their national exams was completely altered by the pandemic. The pandemic was the key priority to the candidates; not their national exams.

Regarding the candidates' status of readiness to do the national exam at the instance, only 3.1% were ready. 96.9% of the learners were not ready to do the exam because of various reasons such as poor syllabi coverage and lack of revision. The learners felt that they would fail in the exams if they did them at the moment. This would affect their selection to good secondary schools and their dream professions. 78% of the learners already felt that it would be difficult to attain their initial academic standards and had given up on their dream professions. This attitude can negatively impact the learners' perception towards learning and eventually national exams. Poor learning attitude is the key cause of failure by learners (Najimi *et al.*, 2013). 65% of the learners were ready to repeat the current grade. They indicated that almost half of the year had been lost (by June) and it was not worthwhile continuing. The learners indicated that there was no need of the national exams being done in the first or second terms. The only viable option was to call off the academic year and restart again when the pandemic had been mitigated. On the other hand, 35% of the learners were adamant that the academic year should not be nullified but rather supplemented when schools resume. They indicated that the 2 months learnt were critical and should not be rubbed off. Doing away with the 2 months would prolong their stay in school which was against their desires. It was rather evident that to these students, passing their national exams was not their key priority. About 83.3% of the learners had fee arrears in the range of Ksh. 1,000 to 10,000. The learners were however optimistic that the balance would be cleared by the time of doing the national exams. Failure to fee clearance would disqualify the learners from doing the exams or receiving the certificate. This rule is however dependent on the school management.

About 79.5% of the learners did not trust public service vehicles preparations towards preventing them from acquiring corona virus. The learners perceived the transport sector not to be very serious with the condition. This factor reduced their desire to travel to school when the schools are re-opened. 83.3% of the learners were worried that they might be denied the chance to play with their colleagues when they resume learning. A similar proportion was equally worried that it would be difficult for them to share stationery with their colleagues at school. On a more positive note, 81.9% of the learners indicated that they were willing to have their masks on all the time while at school. Nevertheless, all (100%) the students attested that this was an uncomfortable ordeal which they would undertake to minimize their chances of acquiring corona viruses. The overall perception is that learners were ready to resume learning when it is safe to do so that they can adequately prepare for their national exams.

4. Conclusions

Covid-19 pandemic had totally altered the dream professions of most of the learners. The pandemic was also responsible of affecting their perception towards passing essential subjects tested during national exams (Mathematics, English and Kiswahili). The three subjects had very poor syllabi coverage by the time schools were indefinitely closed. Majority of the learners attested to studying notebooks and text books while at home. There was very little online learning ongoing with too much excuses of not having the same by the candidates. The learners' perception concerning dates, performance and attendance of national exams were wholly dependent on how the health pandemic would be contained.

The authors recommend the MoE and all education stakeholders in Narok county to create more awareness concerning the importance of learners finishing their studies. From the study, there is a significant population of learners who stopped learning immediately schools were closed. These students have since been engaged with other family activities or are idle. Bearing in mind the strong Maa culture around which has some elements against formal education, then it is likely that a good percentage of the learners will not do their national exams. The MoE and county education officers should enforce online learning with all possible means. Since radio was perceived to be the most popular media for online learning, these stakeholders are requested to input more effort on the same. The authors also recommend the stakeholders to do more awareness on community-based learning as a means to engage the students academically. All TSC registered teachers should not shy away from the initiative.

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