# COVID-19AND EDUCATION: A CASE FOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING THEORY

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**ABSTRACT:** *Education is a key player in addressing any social problem; it provides individuals with the necessary skills and knowledge to cope with any eventuality. Conceiving the fact that the school is a veritable tool to fixing the society in all spheres of life, including outbreak of diseases such as COVID-19, this study makes a case for Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) as an appropriate pedagogical approach so that information and facts about the disease can be brought to real life situations. Opinions and ideas on COVID-19 were obtained from secondary sources and analysed qualitatively leading to the suggestion that schools should reopen for students to leverage the opportunities which COVID-19 has presented to education.*

**KEYWORDS:** Learning, covid-19, experiment, disease, teachers, distancing

## INTRODUCTION

In the wake of any crisis which has the propensity to claim many lives, safety is usually placed above every other consideration. Such crises come in different forms namely: earthquake, volcano eruption, flood, war, insurgence, disease outbreak, famine and communal conflict. They affect all the thresholds on which the society survives especially education and economy. During wars, for example, schools are shut down for safety of both the teachers and the students; economic activities such as tourism, farming, mining, trading and indeed all productive activities operate at their lowest ebb or may not operate at all in extreme cases.

However, the aforementioned crisis situations are the hallmark of the social problems which nations are confronted with from time to time in their existence; human existence cannot be devoid of them. In fact, instead of reducing in dimension, they increase with the turn of events and circumstances, sometimes occasioned by human actions or inactions. To state the obvious, we should begin to radically learn to diffuse their effects on society or better still, leverage the advantages that accrue from their occurrences. This study is therefore anchored on this perspective. Simply put: every social problem is a potential experimental workshop for learning.

Social problems are series of conditions and abnormal behaviours which are seen as manifestations of social disorganization (Scott & Marshall cited in Obisike, 2018). This means a social problem has the propensity of creating disorder in the affected environment. The ability to make people feel its impact is the overriding characteristic of a social problem. Coronavirus (also) called COVID-19 is a social problem which World Health Organization (WHO) declared as a pandemic on 11th March, 2020 because of the number of countries that were affected and are likely to be affected within a short period of time (Cucinotta &Vanelli, 2020). Even though, some persons doubt the existence of COVID-19, its impact on the global economy is felt by all. WHO has acknowledged that the outbreak has far-reaching consequences on countries hence collaborative effort is required to tackle it (WHO, 2020). How a country handles a social problem will determine how long the problem will live with them. This fact explains why countries do not experience a particular social problem in the same dimension.

According to Obisike (2018), tackling a social problem begins with acknowledging the problem and understanding its nature which includes the opportunities accruable from its occurrence such as new innovations. It is a mark of a changing society. According to Ornstein and Levine (2003, p.403), "as a society changes, individuals must adjust themselves to "cope with the climate of change" and it is the responsibility of schools to help the individuals to acquire the relevant knowledge needed for the adjustment by changing their programmes. By doing this, education (school) has realized its purpose: to fix the challenges of a broken society which find expression in outbreak of poverty, terrorism, kidnapping, injustice, natural disaster and diseases because "the school is a perfect tool for making the needed repairs" (Sadker & Sadker, 2005, p.133).

COVID-19 is not an exception; it is one of the current challenges faced by the globe. According to UNICEF (2020, p.1), COVID-19 is a disease "caused by a new strain of coronavirus" and was initially called "2019 novel coronavirus" or "2019-nCov". The virus falls within the family of viruses known as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). It is spread through direct contact with an infected person's droplets while coughing or sneezing. Consequently, social distancing has become an inevitable measure which has led to the closure of many public places, offering some opportunities such as increase in home delivery services and electronic transactions. Specifically in education, there are emerging opportunities which COVID-19 has brought. The opportunities derive impetus from experiential theory.

**Experiential Theory**
Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), as the name implies, sees experience as a catalyst for acquisition of knowledge and skills. By implication, the learner is made to feel the real world of a concept. As the focus is more on the learner's self-recognition of a concept, the act of indoctrination or imposition of ideas on the learner is circumvented. This explains why Zhou and Brown (2015, p.51) see ELT as "a cyclical psrocess that capitalizes on the participants' experiences for acquisition of knowledge". According to them, the process includes setting goals, thinking, planning, experimentation, reflection, observation and review. Through these activities, students define concepts from their own perspectives; react to situations which have bearing with the concepts according to the constructs they gave to the concepts. These reactions manifest the students' cognitive, emotional and physical aspects of the learnt concepts (Zhou & Brown, 2015).

The concept of ELT agrees with these Chinese proverbs: "I hear and I forget. I see and I remember" and "I heard is good; I saw is better". The understanding here is that ELT connotes what is known in a popular parlance as "experience is the best teacher". This means that the application of ELT helps the learner to play an active role in the teaching-learning process by connecting lessons in the classroom to activities in the real world, giving the students an opportunity to understand concepts, become more creative and engaged in what they are being taught (Barton, 2020).Experiential learning is beneficial in a classroom. Its benefit is in the engagement of the learner in the subject matter and the theory has proven to be effective in making students develop interest in their lessons (Barton, 2020).

Carlton University (in Barton, 2020) gave the following benefits of experiential learning:

- ELT gives learners an opportunity to put what they have been taught theoretically into practice; that is real life situations.
- It enables students to develop critical thinking, problem-solving and decision- making skills.
- It also enhances memory retention by building strong relationships between feeling and thinking processes.
- Students develop skills for lifelong learning by encouraging them to reflect, conceptualize and plan for next actions.
- ELT enables students to develop positive attitude towards learning.
- It makes students to realize that what they learn is for the good of the society, which is to meet community needs.
- It provides a safe learning environment.
- It also encourages feelings and emotions as well as enhancing knowledge and skills of the learners.

**COVID-19 and ELT**

United Nations (2020) and Joshi (2020) noted that COVID-19 has impacted negatively on schools. This is because schools were shut down by various governments across the globe. The simple reason was to contain the spread of the disease. By this arrangement, schools could not play much role in public awareness of the disease and its control. If schools are reopened, pupils and students will have good understanding of the pandemic as teachers will ensure that safety measures are obeyed in order to stop its spread. This is true because schools have always remained a powerful instrument of socialization, transmission of worthwhile behavious and curriculum implementer much more than other agents.

Involvement of schools in the enlightenment of the populace on the spread of COVID-19 has multiplier effect on other communicable diseases. Schools as custodians and means of transmission of what society considers worthwhile will incorporate Covid-19 precautionary measures as part of curriculum content. This was the case during the outbreak of HIV/AIDS which today has been incorporated as a curriculum content in General studies courses in universities and social studies, integrated science courses in secondary and primary schools. For example, the precautionary measures for COVID-19 can be applied to tuberculosis (TB). According to Federal Ministry of Health, FMH (2016, p.6), TB is a "chronic, infectious disease caused by bacteria

generally referred to as *mycobacterium tuberculosis complex*. Transmission is airborne through inhalation of the released TB germs. Nigeria is among the 22 countries with the highest TB burden in the world". The ministry further states that infected individuals spread TB through coughing, sneezing, talking or spitting. These means of transmission are the same with COVID-19 and it means that the fight against COVID-19 can be leveraged to combat TB.

Both TB and COVID-19 can be contained if the populace is educated on the need to maintain social distance, high level hygiene in terms of coughing and sneezing, and above all, be willing to be tested and treated. The goal of TB control in Nigeria is to realize a 50% reduction in the prevalence rate and 75% reduction in deaths resulting from TB by 2025 (FMH, 2016). This is achievable if schools are incorporated in the fight against TB. By this line of thought, schools will incorporate and implement policies and guidelines for prevention of both TB and COVID-19. Making students to experience the realities of these diseases will create lasting impressions on them and their families.

The collaborative effort which WHO advocates for the control of COVID-19 includes schools as well as other agents of socialization. However, the education sector as noted by UNICEF (2020, p.3) embraces children and young people who are "global citizens and powerful agents of change and the next generation of caregivers, scientists, and doctors. Any crisis presents the opportunity to help them learn, cultivate compassion and increase resilience while building a safer and more caring community". The organization concluded that making information and realities of the pandemic available to students will help them to lessen the fears and anxieties (including false information) which people have built around the disease. By so doing, students will learn to cope with any impacts that the pandemic may have on their lives.

The ELT is a veritable pedagogical approach which schools can explore to bring students closer to the realities and facts of COVID-19 and other diseases that affect social relationships. If students are made to experience COVID-19 guidelines in schools, the following benefits are obvious:
1.      Students will be exposed to risk management techniques. Students studying health related programmes have the opportunity of learning how to adapt and maintain safety protocol while dealing with patients in a real life experience.
2.      Students will be encouraged to put into practice simple hygiene methods which they have learnt.
3.      Schools' level of compliance to standards will be exposed and assessed. Most classes and hostels are overcrowded because of teeming population of students. It is an opportunity for all stakeholders in the education industry to re-examine the areas in which schools especially public schools have failed in standards.
4.      Authorities will begin to think outside the box on how to manage available resources in schools such that everyone will have equal access to learning without endangering the safety of participants.
5.      Schools will learn how to improvise to make up for insufficient devices.
6.      Schools will learn how to be organized and orderly in all activities; it will ensure discipline in the life of students.
7.      Students will be taught to value life by obeying safety rules.

8.      Students will be conscious of time management.
9.      Students will be sensitized to avoid crowds.
10.     Learning will be more student-based and result-oriented.

**CONCLUSION**

Education is a key player in addressing any social problem; it provides individuals with the necessary skills and knowledge to cope with any eventuality. Conceiving the fact that the school is a veritable tool to fixing the society in all spheres of life, including outbreak of diseases such as COVID-19, this study makes a case for Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) as an appropriate pedagogical approach so that information and facts about the disease be brought to real life situations.

**Suggestions**
1.      Schools should reopen for students to leverage the opportunities which COVID-19 has presented to education.
2.      Schools should ensure that learning must not take place in overcrowded environments.
3.      The need to expand existing structures has become inevitable to accommodate increasing population of students.
4.      E-libraries should be developed for schools.
5.      E-learning platforms should be activated and made compulsory such that every school must have, at a least, a platform for interaction with students/parents as the case may be. This will help also in dissemination of information and ease of administration.

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