

**Promoting the Practice of Social Distancing in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions during COVID-19 Era: A Fundamental Public Health Measure for Containing the Pandemic on Campus****OLOFU Paul Agbade****&****UGBE Theresa Beyin**Department of Adult and Continuing Education,
University of Calabar**Abstract**

Sequel to the outbreak of corona virus in Wuhan City, China in December, 2019 and its declaration by the World Health Organization on 11th March, 2020 as a global pandemic, WHO came up several measures of containing the pandemic. Thus, one of such measures which is the cardinal focus of this work is the practice of social distancing. This study is therefore, titled: promoting the practice of social distancing in Nigerian tertiary institutions during COVID-19 era: A fundamental public health measure for containing the pandemic on campus. It is aimed at basically examining how the practice of social distancing can be used to minimize the spread of COVID-19 pandemic among tertiary institution students; upon their resumption to campus as proposed by the Federal Government of Nigeria recently. Being a non-empirical study in nature, this work was organized and elaborately discussed under the following sub-headings: the concept of social distancing, its historical perspective, types of social distancing measures, importance of observing social distancing on campus during COVID-19 pandemic, challenges of practising social distancing and conclusion. The study recommended that both staff and students as well as the outsiders visiting tertiary institutions in covid-19 era should observe all social distancing principles.

Keywords: Social Distancing, COVID-19, Pandemic and Public Health**Introduction**

COVID-19 spreads mainly among people who are in close contact within about 6 feet for a prolonged period. According to National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases (2020), the spread of COVID-19 basically occurs when a person who is infected sneezes, talks or coughs and the droplets from his/her mouth or nose are released into the air and land in the mouths or noses of people nearby. The droplets can also be inhaled into the lungs. Infected persons who are asymptomatic play great role in the spread of COVID-19. This because infected persons who are asymptomatic may not even know they are positive unless tested since there are no obvious symptoms for them know they have the virus. The spread of corona virus can also be made possible when droplets are released on objects and someone touches the objects and then touches his/her own mouth, nose or eyes. National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases maintained that corona virus can survive for hours or days on a surface, depending on several factors like sunlight, humidity and the type of surface.

Therefore, there are usually several public health interventions taken and recommended by profession health organizations and the government at all levels on the event of disease outbreak with a view to minimizing and controlling the rate of spread and transmission from high-risk population/persons to healthy ones as well as ease the burden on

health system and its workers. These measures/interventions range from social distancing, frequent hand washing, vaccination to the use of face masks among others. Hence, with the outbreak of corona virus in Wuhan City, China in December, 2019 and its subsequent declaration by the World Health Organization on 30th January and 11th March, 2020 as a public health emergency of international concern and a global pandemic respectively, there was need for both pharmaceutical and non-pharmaceutical public health measures to be put in place in order to contain the spread of COVID-19 pandemic. It is a non-pharmaceutical intervention intended at minimizing and [preventing the spread](#) of a [contagious disease](#) by maintaining a physical distance between people and reducing the number of times people come into close contact with each other (WHO, 2020).

The Concept of Social Distancing

Different scholars have given divergent views on the concept of social distancing. Venske observed that the term social distancing in public health is otherwise referred to as physical distancing. However, *Harris et al (2020) maintained that* during the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Health Organization chose to use the term physical distancing as opposed to social distancing. This is because it is physical distance which prevents transmission; as people can remain socially connected via technology. Despite the semantic debate, both terms were used interchangeably in this. During the [2009 flu pandemic](#), WHO described social distancing as "keeping at least an arm's length distance from others and minimizing gatherings". The U.S.A. Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2020) described social distancing as a set of methods usually adopted to reduce the frequency and closeness of contact between people in order to decrease the risk of transmission of disease. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the CDC revised the definition of social distancing and defined it as the act of "remaining out of congregate settings, avoiding mass gatherings and maintaining distance; approximately six feet or two meters from others when possible". However, it is not clear as to why six feet or two meters was chosen but *Letzter* maintained that some have suggested that the required distance is based on debunked research from the 1930s and 1940s or confusion regarding units of measurement.

John et al (2020) defined social distancing as "a set of non-pharmaceutical interventions or measures taken to prevent the spread of a contagious disease by maintaining a physical distance between people and reducing the number of times people come into close contact with each other". In the view of *Pearce (2020)*, social distancing "involves keeping a distance of six feet or two meters from others and avoiding gathering together in large groups" *The need for practicing social or physical distancing on the event of disease outbreak is very necessary; as it reduces the probability that an uninfected person will come into physical contact with an [infected](#) person, the [disease transmission](#) can be suppressed, resulting in [fewer deaths](#). Social distancing as a non-pharmaceutical measure is used in combination with good respiratory [hygiene](#), face masks and [hand washing](#) etc.*

In the view of *Yoga (2020)*, social distancing simply refers to the requirement to keep a distance from others to limit the spread of a virus or an outbreak of a disease. *Yoga* observed that the practice of social distancing in the educational setting is very necessary; as most teens and youths may not have full understanding of COVID-19 and its damaging impact on the society as a whole. Hence, social distancing, hand hygiene and other measures will be essential and will also need to be adhered by students, teachers and other staff when schools reopen. *Yoga* maintained that social distancing will be very important and necessary when schools reopen because of the nature of COVID-19 transmission. In *Yoga's* opinion,

the virus that causes COVID-19 is mainly transmitted through droplets generated when an infected person coughs sneezes or speaks and the droplets are too heavy to hang in the air. Thus, they fall on floors or surfaces and anyone who goes in contact with the droplets without washing his/her hands and decides to use the hands on his/her eyes, nose or mouth is very likely to contact the virus.

Santa Clara Valley Health and Hospital System (2020) perceived social distancing as a term applied to certain actions that are taken by public health officials to stop or slow down the spread of a highly contagious disease. Social distancing measures are taken to restrict when and where people can gather to stop or slow the spread of infectious diseases. Social distancing measures include limiting large groups of people coming together, closing buildings and canceling events. National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases (2020) defined social distancing as a public health safety intervention used to reduce the likelihood of transmitting communicable disease. It involves minimizing exposure to infected individuals by avoiding large public gathering venues, adhering to spacing requirements in the workplace, and following proper personal hygiene practices.

History of Social Distancing

Within the domain of public health, social distancing as a method of minimizing crowd interactions and preventing the spread of disease has been a common practice that has been in use for a long time now. Historically, social or physical distancing evolved in the twenty-first century but can be basically traced back to as far back as fifth century BC in the Holy Bible (*Drews, 2013*). Thus, the [Book of Leviticus 13:46](#), states that "And the leper in whom the plague is he shall dwell alone; outside the camp shall his habitation be". *Drews* observed that "during the [Plague of Justinian of 541 to 542](#), emperor [Justinian](#) enforced an ineffective quarantine on the [Byzantine Empire](#), including dumping bodies into the sea. Emperor [Justinian](#) predominantly blamed the widespread outbreak on [Jews](#), [Samaritans](#), [pagans](#), [heretics](#), [Arians](#), [Montanists](#) and [homosexuals](#)".

However, in modern times, social distancing measures have been adopted in several outbreaks of contagious epidemics and pandemics such as bird flu, Ebola and corona virus amongst others. For instance, *Yuetal (2017)* maintained that during the 1918 influenza pandemic, social distancing measures were adopted; thereby making it possible for a lot of people to escape the disease outbreak. The practice of social distancing was also adopted by several millions during the WW1 in several European countries. Similarly, *Jackson (2009)* reported that during the spread of 1957/58 H2N2 virus popularly called Asia Flu, the same social distancing was followed; as Asians were restricted from travelling across borders and also made to stay indoors during the pandemic. In the same vein, the outbreak of H1N1 influenza also known as swine flu in South Africa in 2009 was also contained by using social distancing among other measures in order to avoid or reduce human to human transmission of the disease.

Types of Social Distancing Measures

Social or physical distancing measures are those strategies or interventions which are aimed at slowing the spread of disease by stopping chains of transmission and preventing

new ones from appearing. Thus, the essence of social distancing is to ensure that students and staff are as insulated from the spread of the virus as possible. These measures secure physical distance between people of at least one metre) and reduce contact with contaminated surfaces while encouraging and sustaining virtual social connection within families and communities (Santa Clara Valley Health and Hospital System, 2017).

There are different types of social or physical distancing measures usually adopted on the event of contagious disease outbreak. Generally, these measures range from avoiding handshakes, to restriction of movement and travelling, staying indoors, closing schools and offices, maintaining 6 feet physical distance to avoiding crowd among others. Writing on social distancing measures, Mathew (2020) highlighted the following strategies or measures for effective social distancing. Among these are:

- i. Adherence to public health hygienic recommendations by washing hands after touching commonly used items or coming into contact with someone who is sick.
- ii. Avoid touching your face, nose and mouth and avoid rubbing your eyes.
- iii. Practicing proper coughing or sneezing etiquette such as sneezing into self 'elbow.
- iv. Properly dispose of anything that comes in contact with one's mouth such as tissues or plastic eating utensils.
- v. Avoidance of coming in contact with individuals displaying symptoms of the illness.
- vi. Avoiding congregation in large public venues.

In educational context, social distancing measures according to Henebery (2020) encompass the cancelation of gatherings, excursions, travel, some events and conferences, not sending sick children to school, sanitizing hands at regular intervals when entering the school, avoiding queues and deferring activities that may lead to physical proximity among staff, students and parents. In the same vein, Uscher-Pinesetal (2018) identified social distancing strategies in the school system to include suspending affected classes or year groups or changing the school organization structure to reduce students mixing by closing playgrounds, cancelling non-essential activities and meetings, keeping students in constant class groups or classrooms, increasing spacing between students in classes, shortening the school week and staggering school start and lunch or break times across year groups or classes.

Similarly, Yoga (2020) maintained that as schools reopen after COVID-19 lockdown or school closure, students, parents, care-givers or any visitors, such as suppliers who display any symptoms of coronavirus (COVID-19) should not be allowed to enter the school environment. Consideration should be given as to how children arrive at the education or childcare setting and any unnecessary travel on coaches; buses or public transport should be reduced. Yoga also posited that class sizes must reflect the numbers of teaching staff available and are kept as small as possible. Lunch times, break times and the movement of pupils around the school must be staggered in order to reduce large groups of children gathering. Parents should also be discouraged from gathering at the school gates. All staff and children must wash their hands with soap and water for 20 seconds frequently and help those who have trouble doing so. While observing social distancing in the school setting, everyone within the system should be advised not to touch his/her face and must be told to use a tissue or elbow to cough or sneeze and use bins for tissue waste. The use of facemask should be made compulsory too. There must be increased cleaning of surfaces in

classrooms, including desks and handles as well as within toilet blocks and changing rooms, adhering to guidance on cleaning of non-healthcare settings possible coronavirus infection.

More specifically, Yoga (2020) identified eight social distancing tips or measures within the educational setting: i. Spacing of students and staff at all times: This implies that the usual sitting arrangement where students especially in public schools are compacted should be discouraged. Thus, school authorities should ensure that students and staff stay far apart; ensuring that everyone keeps at least 6 feet or 2 meters' distance. ii. In the playground and when doing physical exercise, children should be kept apart. iii. Visits to the toilet should be taken one at a time and break times should be staggered. iv. Guidelines should be put out in corridors and unnecessary staff gatherings should be avoided. v. Clear messaging to pupils about the purpose of social distancing, and personal hygiene is particularly important. vi. Once schools re-open, social distancing could involve only a few year groups attending or pupils taking it in turns between studying at school and at home. It could also see some children work one week and others the next or some attending school in the morning and others in the afternoons. vii. As much as possible, schools should prevent the sharing of food, drink, utensils, equipment and toys. Equipment, toys and surfaces should be cleaned and disinfected more frequently. viii. Avoiding handshake.

In the same vein, Santa Clara Valley Health and Hospital System (2020) pinpointed some examples of social distancing measures that may be adopted in educational setting during a pandemic to include: i. Suspending classes and adopting web-based learning activities. ii. Cancellation of all large campus gatherings. iii. Modification of libraries operations by restricting people from gathering, allowing people to come in only to pick up materials that have been reserved or requested on-line or by telephone. iv. Setting up flexible shift plans for staff, having employees telecommute and canceling any large meetings or conferences. v. School mass transit system for students should be regulated by reducing the number of students in order to observe physical distancing.

It must be stressed that several factors may affect the efficacy of social distancing on the event of disease outbreak. In the view of [Santa Clara Valley Health and Hospital System \(2017\)](#), social distancing measures are more effective when the infectious disease spreads via one or more of the following methods: droplet contact (coughing or sneezing), direct physical contact (including sexual contact), indirect physical contact (e.g., by touching a contaminated surface), [airborne transmission](#) if the microorganism can survive in the air for long periods as well as the efficacy of social distancing to contain airborne viruses compared to other measures such as widespread mask usage, is disputed. USA [Center for Disease Control and Prevention \(2020\)](#) stated that social distancing measures will be less effective when an infection is transmitted primarily via [contaminated water or food](#) or by [vectors](#) such as mosquitoes or other insects. Thus, [Brooksetal \(2020\)](#) submitted that [drawbacks](#) of social distancing can include [loneliness](#), reduced [productivity](#) and the loss of other benefits associated with [human interaction](#).

Importance of Observing Social Distancing in Tertiary Institutions

The relevance of observing social or physical distancing practice in tertiary institutions cannot be over emphasized; as it tends to limit students, teachers, school heads, other staff and parents' exposure to infectious viruses during a communicable disease outbreak. According to Santa Clara Valley Health and Hospital System (2020), past pandemics such as the 1957-58 pandemic, the spread of the disease; thereby killing millions of people was as a result of people's inability to adopt social distancing measures; as there

was public gatherings such as conferences and festivals despite the outbreak. During this pandemic, the highest attack rates were seen in school children due to their close contact in educational settings. Thus, observing social distancing in schools by avoiding crowds is very important; as it slows the spread of any disease outbreak. Hence, the practice of social distancing in the school system upon resumption from COVID-19 pandemic lockdown will help in ensuring that the rate of transmission of the disease among students, teachers, school administrators, other school staff, parents visiting schools etc is kept minimal; thereby guaranteeing healthy learning environment for both staff and students as well as visitors.

Corroborating the above assertion, Hassan (2020) stated that even though keeping a distance from other people may be unfamiliar act, awkward and unnatural for most of persons, limiting one's contact with other people on the event of disease outbreak will slow down virus transmission and flatten the epidemic curve so that people can reduce the number of cases occurring at the peak of the epidemic. Social distancing is also aimed at lightening demands on the health system when the epidemic is at its peak. Hassan further maintained that though it may be difficult to observe social distancing among peers and school mates who have been together over years, in order to put the social distancing into practice, students need to adhere to two principles. First, they need to assume that everyone they meet have coronavirus regardless of how they look or who they are. Second, they should assume that have coronavirus and could give it to others. Thus, it is important for all to act as though they are potentially carrying the virus; as close and extended personal contact increases people's risk of transmission.

Maharaj and Kleczkowski (2012) posited that an individual affected with COVID-19 has the ability to spread it to 2-3 people which will go on until they are distanced from each other. As such, social distancing practices allow individuals to maintain distances from each other for a period of time in order to ensure that the spread of the disease is minimized; as this would reduce the basic reproduction number (R_0) of the virus which would minimize the disease spread. *Maharaj and Kleczkowski further* added that the application of social distancing to control epidemics can result in decreasing or interrupting transmission of COVID-19 in a population by minimizing contact between potentially infected individuals and healthy individuals or between population groups with high rates of transmission and population groups with no or low levels of transmission.

Social distancing helps in preventing a sharp peak of infections or flattens the epidemic curve; thereby helping healthcare services deal with demand and extends time for healthcare services to be increased and improved (Wiles, 2020, Wiles, 2020 and [Anderson et al \(2020\)](#)). Finding from a study carried out by Premetal (2020) revealed that if social distancing practices were carried out properly among people, an estimate of 92% of cases will be lowered by the end of 2020. Conversely, if social distancing methods are ignored, the effect could last on for the upcoming generations; as the COVID-19 pandemic has the capacity of developing different strains.

Challenges of Practising Social Distancing in the School System

Though, the practice of social distancing in a period of infectious disease outbreak is quite a healthy measure but its realistic and full practice especially within the educational system is very challenging and difficult. Nigel (2020) maintained that social distancing is

not realistic in a school setting given the close proximity of students to one another. Nigel added that often times social distancing within the educational system is emphasized without considering the fact that school management cannot be everywhere with the students; as they can as well abuse or promote social of physical proximity after school hours or outside the school environment. Nigel also maintained that it is difficult to reschedule classes to reduce students' traffic through corridors and it can also be difficult to maintain social distancing during inclement weather when students need to be inside. Nigel concluded that though premature closures of schools could well have unforeseen consequences but it is the best option to adopt due the corona outbreak; disruption to education is inevitable.

In the same vein, Rashid and Collins (2015) observed that social distancing practices actually result in the reduction of disease transmission but noted that up to 70% of students might shift social contacts to other non-school sites during closures, reducing the effect of closures. Rashid et al therefore, submitted that there is likelihood that transmission may surge again once schools reopen. Fahim (2020) stated that the practice of social distancing in the school system is quite a challenging task for stakeholders in the system. This in Fahim's view is because in modern world, interactions are done on regular basis and majority activities carried out on a daily basis relies on social interaction. Social interaction is necessary; as it has become part of human daily engagement. Pearce (2020) maintained that since social or physical distancing is a behavioral change, it may be difficult for the students to sustain the act; as some of the students may not want to observe the change due to the fact that they are used to having close interaction among themselves. Pearce also stated that practicing social change in tertiary institutions especially in public institutions may be a bit challenging considering students' population or the huge number of students per course. In Pearce view, in a situation where over a hundred students are in one class, managing such number to observe social distancing in tasking for the teacher. Beyond the classroom environment, Pearce noted that the congestion of students in public hostels in Africa is an area that may make social distancing even more difficult; as students tend to even squat their fellow students.

Writing on the challenge of observing social distancing in the school system as a result of COVID-19, Mathew (2020) is of the opinion that the act of social distancing is very necessary if the learners, staff, parents and the school environment as whole must be safe and healthy for teaching and learner. Mathew however, maintained that the peculiarity of the educational system makes it difficult and even more challenging for effective operation of social distancing; as it will result in staggering or splitting lessons into different sessions which over stresses teachers and affect their morale and performance. Mathew also stated that some subjects such mathematics; physics and chemistry etc. are better studied in the morning hours.

In the view of Brooks, Webster, Smith, Woodland, Wessely, Greenberg and Rubin (2020) the practice of social distancing during disease outbreak may result in loneliness, reduced productivity and the loss of other benefits associated with human interaction such as meeting one on one to discuss relevant issues bothering an individual or group of persons. According to Ao (2020), there are concerns that social distancing can has adverse effects on participants' mental health; as it may lead to stress, anxiety, depression or panic especially for individuals with preexisting conditions such as anxiety disorders, obsessive compulsive disorders and paranoia. Similarly, Willis (2020) admitted social distancing during disease

outbreak can also bring about change in daily circumstances and uncertainty about the future; thereby adding onto the mental stress of being away from other people.

Conclusion

COVID-19 pandemic is real and it tends to spread mainly among people who are in close contact within about 6 feet for a prolonged period. It has devastating impact on the educational system and other sectors of the economy. However, its ability to spread among people in the society and the school system in particular can be contained by adopting social distancing measures among other interventions or measures. Thus, as educational institutions are set to reopen in no distant time, school administrators, teachers, parents, students and other stakeholders within the system have to ensure that the practice of social or physical distancing is introduced, encouraged and promoted in order to minimize the spread of the virus; thereby making the school environment safe and healthy for teaching and learning.

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