Grobler, A. *Plans and Interventions of South African Grade 1 Educators During the 2020 Lockdown Period*

Plans and Interventions of South African Grade 1 Educators During the 2020 Lockdown Period

Annemie Grobler

Email: grobleram@ufs.ac.za
University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa

Abstract

The extended lockdown in 2020 found South African educators employing innovative strategies to teach and assess Foundation Phase learners. Educators had to make do with reduced hours in the classroom and experienced new challenges in delivering curriculum content to learners that had barely grown accustomed to the formal classroom setup. Empirical research attempted to identify the plans and approaches used by grade 1 educators. The findings may indicate best practices as experienced in this time and help to inform the approach taken during future repetitions of extraordinary circumstances. A theoretical and conceptual framework based on the current constructivist approach adopted by the Curriculum Assessment and Policy Statement (CAPS) guided the empirical research and informed the construction of the questionnaire. The key findings were themed into strategies for presenting teaching and learning, communication, and the impact on schooling. Findings were compared to the premises of the theoretical framework and conclusions drawn. It was noted that educators were hesitant to move their schooling entirely to the virtual learning platform and eager to return to the school environment. Various obstacles posed by the digital divide were flagged as threats to future situations and the involvement of parents was emphasized. The resilience of educators to continue to ply their trade, and their belief in the indomitable spirit of children, may offer conducive circumstances for future innovations in education.

Keywords: teaching; constructivism; pandemic; lockdown; strategies; interventions; COVID-19.

Introduction

At midnight on 26 March 2021 in South Africa, a hard lockdown on level 5 due to the coronavirus pandemic came into force until 16 April 2021. After this date it was extended for another 14 days (SABC News Online, 2020). The amended school calendar of the Department of Basic Education (DBE) allowed teaching and learning in an online or virtual environment from

8 June 2020. A gradual and phased approach was taken to reopen schools on site. Grade 1 learners were only permitted to return to the physical school environment on 24 August 2020 (DBE, 2020a).

During the months of the extended lockdown in 2020, South African Foundation Phase educators felt compelled to resort to creative, alternative ways to teach and assess Foundation Phase learners. Especially grade 1 learners suffered from the severe measures taken to counter the spread of the virus. Deviating from the planned calendar comprising of 203 school days as published on 11 January 2018, the DBE published an amended calendar of 158 school days under the Disaster Management Act as published on 11 August 2020 (DBE, 2020b). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) admitted that COVID-19 posed not only a catastrophe for healthcare but also a global crisis in terms of education (UNESCO, 2020).

This article reflects on the outcomes of empirical research conducted to probe the plans and approaches used by Foundation Phase educators. It firstly expounds on the theoretical and conceptual framework on which the empirical research was based and defines the approach in the construction of the questionnaire. Secondly, it describes the process of the empirical investigation and then presents the findings. A discussion of the findings is presented in the third place, drawing conclusions on key aspects in the problem statement and reflecting on them in terms of the theoretical framework underlying the investigation. In conclusion, a way forward is proposed for future management of similar or resultant situations of flux and change.

Problem statement

During the COVID-19 pandemic, educators all over the world had to draw on their ingenuity to demonstrate their professional competence instead of relying on established practice. This unprecedented situation caused uncertainty and even despair at their own worth (Kirby, 2021). McCallum (2021) highlights the strain that these uncertainties posed to educators. Specifically, the challenge posed to educators of learners in their first year of formal schooling, that is Grade 1, triggered this research. The response to the catastrophe sparked by the discovery of the virus named SARS-CoV-2 by the International Committee on Taxonomy for Viruses of the World Health Organization (WHO) on 11 February 2020 (WHO, 2020) is an ongoing process, with the direction being plotted *en route* to the future.

The National Curriculum Statement (NCS) Grades R-12 is the policy document that informs the theoretical approach of the South African schooling system. The Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) provides guidelines according to phase and subject. The comprehensive NCS offers guidance on teaching and learning in different phases according to learner development, the Foundation Phase, inclusive of grade R up to grade 3; the Intermediate (grades 4-6) and Senior Phase (grades 7-9), and the Further Education and Training phase (grades 10-12). The CAPS document for the Foundation Phase lists a culture of "active and critical learning" (DBE, 2012, p.4) as one of the principles of the curriculum. The CAPS furthermore aims to produce learners who are able to critically and actively engage in the teaching and learning environment and communicate effectively in individual and group activities (DBE, 2012).

The situation that was created by the national response levels based on the Disaster Management Act in 2020 was in direct contravention of the principles of collaborative learning as laid out by the NCS. Grade 1 learners had only been in the formal schooling system for almost one quarter, with the end of quarter holidays being expedited by a week due to the pandemic. When the date came for the schools to reopen after the planned two-week holiday, the country was still in lockdown level 5 which prohibited all movement except for essential services. Schools therefore remained closed, and only on 8 June 2020 did tuition resume – and furthermore, exclusively in an online or remote setting. Wolhuter and Jacobs (2021) point to the global employment of emergency remote teaching (ERT) or emergency remote learning (ERL) in order to continue with the school year. This was an inaugural step for education, one that was not universally embraced (Taylor, 2020; Jones, 2020). Some schools were not in a position to move their teaching to an online platform at all. Many educators protested against the practice, calling on the tenets of collaborative teaching and learning and arguing that learners would suffer from the absence of peers in the learning environment (Timmons et al. 2021; Kirby, 2021; Taylor, 2020).

Because it is accepted that desperate times call for desperate measures, it is possible that innovative solutions may be devised during periods of adaption and flux. Now, more than ever, it is appropriate to consider the lessons to be learnt from the recent past to strengthen educators' approach to crisis management in the likelihood of future instances of global disasters such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Globally, the crisis that was sparked by the pandemic has produced, and continues to produce, concerted efforts to research the impact of the pandemic. The quest for information on the virus and its effects is evident in the newsworthiness of the COVID-19 keyword. As the pandemic disrupted normal life on various levels of society, its impetus is being felt in fields as diverse as health, the economy and education. At present the provision of research results on COVID-19 and its impact on the world is prolific: an information search on the Google search engine with keywords "lockdown, COVID-19, education, grade 1 plans" provided no fewer than 7 650 000 hits (13 September 2021). It is accepted that the impact of the extreme measures taken to combat the pandemic should rightfully be documented if any lessons are to be learnt from this experience. In order to specify the results to a manageable number and to ascertain whether any local South African research has been done, extensive literature searches on 7 databases was conducted on the ebscoHOST platform and on SABINET on 13 September 2021 using the keywords "grade 1, COVID-19, education". The result was little, if any, research localized to South Africa to track and evaluate the plans that Foundation Phase educators devised to manage the ensuing situation on schooling. This investigation was done to provide further insight into the lived experience of educators specifically in South Africa, particularly in the Mangaung metropolitan municipality as representative of the average South African school affected during this time.

Given the basic premise of a collaborative teaching approach, the question that initiated this investigation was: What were the outcomes of plans and interventions actioned by grade 1 educators in the initial period of the hard lockdown and ensuing months in 2020?

Conceptual and theoretical framework

As mentioned above, collaborative learning occurs in a setting where the educator encourages active participation by the learners (Litshani, 2017). All learners are involved in meaning-making and are actively involved in the construction of knowledge. This process occurs typically in a learner-centred classroom, where the educator adapts the learning content and the approach to best suit the needs of the classroom in question. The variables may refer to social, economic, geographical or cognitive aspects, and the educator attempts to offer inclusive learning that is sensible to the diversity posed by the specific group (Fellowes & Oakley, 2010; Tlale, 2017; Wessels, 2014).

This study was directed by an interpretivist approach for the purpose of paving the way for conducting an empirical investigation on the lived experiences of Foundation Phase educators during the greatest part of 2020. It was also underpinned by Vygotsky's Social Constructivism theory (1978). According to this theory, "individuals must actively build knowledge and skills" (Wessels 2014, p.1). Building on the premises of the earlier theories of Dewey and Piaget, constructivists regard learning as ideally instituted in a collaborative fashion, with a learner-centred classroom at the heart of the approach (Landsberg et al., 2012). Peer learning is often employed as a teaching and learning strategy, as individual learners and the classroom community alike are co-responsible for constructing knowledge (Wessels, 2014). The educator thus becomes a facilitator in a process of collaborative learning that requires the active engagement of learners (Litshani, 2017). While this approach has already gained widespread popularity and is regarded as "the basis of South African school curriculum since 1997" (Jacobs et al., 2012, p.41), in the recent past, Fru and Seotsanyana (2017) indicated the necessity of further research on the effect of socio-cultural specifics on learners' learning practices. The restraints on the learning process presented by the COVID-19 pandemic pose a serious challenge to the concept of collaborative learning when learners were not able to participate in a class setting. This contextualization motivated the use of this theoretical framework in the current investigation.

Research conducted in Japan by Mochida et al. (2021) described the factors that modified learners' stress during the pandemic. They concluded that learners experienced heightened stress, although positive behavioural traits were also established during this trying time. A report by Nelson and Sharp (2020) indicated that the severely reduced school hours leave Foundation Phase learners with inadequate exposure to the principle of sticking with a task.

The propriety of teaching values was confirmed by Konstantinou's (2021) research on the development of perseverance through an intervention for teenagers. Speaking specifically about adolescents, Konstantinou (2021) reiterated the importance of character-building courses, especially in the new post-lockdown context. To build the moral courage that youngsters will need to negotiate daily life in the "new normal" of the post-pandemic world, it seems advisable to encourage positive values. The basis should already be laid at Foundation Phase level if these values are to be sustained and integrated in later years.

Atiles et al. (2021) noted that the lack of preparation for online or virtual learning is a mistake that the world cannot afford to repeat. Equitable access to digital resources, such as free data and appropriate technology, is indicated by Kirby (2021) as essential to support learning in

future. Irrespective of future pandemics, unrestricted and fair access to digital technology will craft the educational landscape globally (Timmons et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2021; Wolhuter & Jacobs, 2021). The influence of parental involvement during this time, when many parents were to a great extent prohibited from extending appropriate support to their children in the lockdown learning environment is also currently receiving scrutiny (Taylor, 2020; Formosinho, 2021).

The above framework provided the theoretical context to undertake an empirical inquiry on the plans devised and interventions made by Foundation Phase educators within the social context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Aim of the investigation

This article reports on an interpretivist investigation into the approaches adopted in different schools in the Mangaung municipal area in the Free State, South Africa, during the months of the hard lockdown and immediately thereafter in 2020.

Apart from portraying the lived realities of the educators who formed part of the sample, the investigation aimed to identify commonality or best practice and subsequently to suggest strategies for future management of extended periods of disrupted schooling. The effect of reduced rapport with the school educator, and viable ways to mitigate these circumstances, were also explored.

Method

Research design

A simultaneous, mixed method research design was motivated by the requirement for minimal non-essential exposure to public structures by the pandemic. The design was found appropriate for including both qualitative and quantitative items in the questionnaire (Cohen et al. 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Sampling

From an approximate number of 114 primary schools (schools4sa [online], 2021) serving a population of 775 184 residents, 29.3% of which are under the age of 15 (municipalities.co.za [online], 2021), ten schools (ranging from former model C types, quintile 1-3 schools, single gender and co-education schools) were selected within the Mangaung municipality, a municipality located in the Free State Province of South Africa. The schools covered a geographical range of 30 km, from the affluent northern suburbs to the densely populated urban core, to the blue-collar worker area in the south and the agricultural smallholdings to the east of the city.

One of the selected schools declined to participate and therefore a school of similar socio-economic profile was invited. At another school, both the educators who had been responsible for grade 1 teaching in 2020 had left the system (one had retired and the other had emigrated) and likewise, this school was replaced by another with a similar profile. Another school was able to furnish only one completed questionnaire. These situational specifics yielded a sample of 23 questionnaires from 10 schools.

Data collection instrument

A self-constructed questionnaire was used for data collection. It comprised of three sections, presenting 32 items that included binary, Likert-type and open-ended questions. Section A collected data regarding the experiential profile of the educator and the type of school. The overall number of years' experience and the number of years' experience teaching grade 1 were indicated. Respondents were requested to indicate the number of learners in their respective classrooms; the number of grade 1 learners in the school, and comment on the availability of a teaching assistant in the classroom.

Section B probed the approach to the pandemic by the school immediately after the lockdown. Items attempted to ascertain whether learners were permitted to come to school every day, on alternate days, every other week, for a fortnight at a time, or not at all. In the event that learners did not return to school physically, a question was asked to ascertain whether tuition was offered online or not at all. Finally, the question was asked whether any learners had declined to return to school once the school opened its doors again.

Section C constituted the bulk of the questionnaire and centered on the approach to teaching and learning in the classroom. Here respondents were requested to provide further detail regarding the strategies applied by the school regarding to the new situation; the mode of lesson delivery; and the nature of teaching and learning material. The type of teaching platform was also probed. Participants were also requested to share their experience of frustrations, insights and reflections on future improvements.

The final part of the questionnaire investigated the impact of the lockdown on learner knowledge in different Foundation Phase learning areas. Respondents were requested to indicate the area most and least affected during the lockdown and the consequence of the lockdown on areas of soft skills (for example as taught in life skills). Finally, an open-ended response was solicited on the future of the current school system in South Africa.

Pilot study

After obtaining permission from the Free State Department of Education (FSDoE), an electronic survey via SurveyMonkey (surveymonkey.com) was conducted at one of the identified schools as a pilot. The results of the electronic survey were not included in the results, as the items in the questionnaire were thereafter developed further, and the questionnaire eventually presented as a paper-based inquiry.

Qualitative data capturing and generation

The principal of each of the selected schools was invited to offer their school's participation through requesting two of the educators who had been responsible for grade 1 teaching during 2020 to complete the questionnaire. The hard-copy questionnaires with an information letter were distributed by hand and collected on a mutually agreed date. Although the completion was anonymous, the researcher allocated a numerical code to the questionnaires to distinguish different copies. The questionnaires were collected by the researcher from the schools.

Data analysis

Following the above exposition, all the raw data were captured manually by the researcher and sorted by question into categories. Graphs were compiled from the numerical data items and qualitative responses were grouped into emerging themes.

Ethical considerations

Permission to conduct the research was obtained from the FSDoE and approval granted by the General Humanities Research Ethics Committee (HSREC) of the University of the Free State (UFS). Questionnaires were submitted anonymously: participants were not requested to provide biographical details, other than stating their years of teaching experience. Neither were the schools' names divulged; the only possible identifiers were the categories of schools. A numerical code was allocated to each questionnaire to ensure anonymity and confidentiality whilst allowing the researcher a way of validating the individual copies.

Possible limitations

The study was limited to the immediate area accessible to the researcher in the interest of generating data without the temporal and financial encumbrances associated with a large-scale investigation. In addition, it was assumed that the microcosmos of the central area in the Free State would possibly be representative of the middle-section urban society in South Africa. The selection of schools did not conclusively guarantee universal access to technologically driven approaches to teaching. More extensive investigations that probe the applicability of the findings to the greater area of South Africa, or beyond, may shed further light on the situation.

Findings

This section presents the findings of the questionnaire data without discussion of the results, which will follow hereafter. Section A of the questionnaire attempted to profile the schools that made up the random sample. The numbers are presented below to profile the composition of the sample and not to correlate any of the resultant findings. Whilst the sample consisted of 10 randomly chosen schools, there were 23 educators who filled in the questionnaires. This led to the following results: 1 educator represented a private school, 2 educators reported their workplace to be a no-fee school, 15 educators were from ex-model C schools, and 5 from schools in the quintile 1-3 range. The number of years' experience teaching grade 1 ranged from a maximum of 36 to a minimum of 1 year, with the average years of experience as an aggregate between respondents at 10.5 years. 11 educators had between 1 and 9 years of experience, 10 had between 10 and 19 years, one had between 1 and 29 years of experience and 1 had 30 or more years of experience in teaching grade 1. Similarly, the number of years' experience teaching any grade ranged from a maximum of 36 to the lowest count of two years' experience. 4 educators had more than 30 years of experience, teaching any grade, 1 had between 20 and 29 years, while 12 educators had between 10 and 19 years of experience teaching any grade, and 6 educators had between 1 and 9 years of experience. The class size ranged from 38 for the largest class to 2 in the smallest class. An overwhelming majority (21 out of 23) of respondents indicated that they did not have the assistance of a teaching assistant in the classroom.

Section B attempted to explore the approach of the school to the pandemic immediately after the period of the total lockdown. Questions 7-13 probed into the frequency at which learners attended school and the changed response of learners to physical school attendance when learners were again allowed on the school premises.

Most educators (17 of 23) confirmed that the school encouraged the daily attendance of learners, while six educators reported that this was not possible. Of the latter, one school solved the problem of creating more space for learners by shuffling the initial two groups into three classes. The option to allow learners to attend on alternating days was met with equal interest and disinterest: 12 educators reported that this was not done at their school, while 11 of the 23 reported that this approach was carried forward at their school. Interestingly, only 8 of 23 educators reported that their school touted attendance every alternate week, in contrast to 15 out of 23 educators who reported that this was not the case. Notwithstanding the above trend, educators were unanimous in reporting that their schools did not favour attendance by one group on a fortnightly rotational basis.

It was noted that none of the sampled schools failed to re-open. All 23 educators attested that their schools re-opened physically after the initial lockdown period, with no reliance on a purely online process of teaching and learning. However, the reluctance of certain learners to return to the classroom is evident, with 14 of the 23 educators noting that at least one of their charges did not return to the physical classroom. One educator explained that two learners who did not return suffered from comorbidities and were kept at home, returning to the classroom after hours to complete the assessments required. 9 of the 23 educators did not observe fewer learners returning to the physical classroom.

Section C investigated the approach in the classroom. The use of specific strategies, teaching and learning material, online or printed support material, and the impact on learner participation in various spheres were investigated. Open-ended questions provided an opportunity for educators to reflect on the situation and the impact of their practices in managing the post-traumatic conditions with a view to adapting to the much-cited 'new normal' that is still under construction.

Respondents were overwhelmingly aware that the new situation required them to adopt strategies tailored towards crisis management. Only two respondents denied that their schools implemented any special measures to address the pandemic. The most obvious strategy, adopted by 20 of the 23 educators, was to use video clips to convey learning content to their learners. 19 respondents also mentioned that they made use of printed material, while 9 respondents sent soft copies to parents that they could print themselves. Other strategies included the use of WhatsApp group messages (8 educators). Individual educators also attested to means such as YouTube videos, practical exercises to execute at home; using electronic classroom platforms such as Zoom or Google Classroom. One school was fortunate enough to have their own broadcasting channel for electronic teaching.

Some of the physical interventions that the new situation required were the prohibition of sharing any resources whatsoever and removing the second learner at desks traditionally occupied by two learners. Some schools inserted dividers between desks; others replaced their

twin desks with single learner desks, and one school split the initial two groups of learners into three to have them all in attendance every day.

Printed learning material was provided by all 23 educators. Six reported that this was provided once per month; seven reported that it was provided weekly, and 10 reported that printed material was issued daily. A cohort of 17 educators provided the parents with links or emails to print material at home: the majority of 11 educators used this approach once per week, 4 indicated that it was done every day or at parent's request, and 2 educators did this once a month.

Educators were not in agreement on the usefulness of the teaching and learning support offered by the DBE. While 11 of 23 educators reported that they depended heavily on the material provided by the DBE, an almost equal number of 12 out of 23 were dismissive of the material provided by the DBE.

A practice that was enthusiastically embraced was the filming of video clips, with 19 of 23 educators participating in this innovative approach. In the current report, the two educators who indicated that they did not make use of this technique conceded that during the initial hard lockdown when schools were physically closed, they did in fact turn to this solution in order to retain contact with their learners.

The frequency at which video clips was distributed was cited by 17 educators at once per week, while 4 educators recorded and sent out video clips daily. One of the major setbacks of this was the unreliable and fluid database consisting of parents' cellphone numbers. One participant complained that there was no way to check if learners had received the benefit of these interventions, as parents possessed multiple cell phone numbers. In cases of joint or shared custody, learners rotated between divorced parents and it was impossible to track which parent had the responsibility to supervise the learner's homework at any given time.

The length of video clips ranged from 1-4 minutes as the most popular length (16 educators), with 3 educators listing their video clips at the 5-10 minutes range and 2 educators reporting their video clips at 11-30 minutes. Echoing the sentiments of Nelson and Sharp (2020), the biggest frustration in this regard consisted of the hurdles experienced with parents not having sufficient data or connectivity to download or watch longer video clips. Notwithstanding the challenges, overall satisfaction in the current study with this approach was reported as the second most efficient communication channel, only surpassed by WhatsApp group messages as a more effective method.

Most educators were hesitant to use the electronic classroom opportunities available currently. Uptake of electronic teaching platforms was reluctant, with 2 educators utilizing Zoom, 2 using Class Dojo, 1 using Google Classroom, 8 using WhatsApp group messages, and 8 indicating non-specified platforms. While 6 of 23 educators viewed electronic classroom opportunities as the preferred route during this time, 17 of 23 were dissatisfied with the restraints laid upon the system during this time and pleaded for the re-opening of schools.

Overall experience by educators of the efficiency of the electronic platforms to reach their learners ranged from satisfactory to perplexing. The highest satisfaction score was attained by WhatsApp group messages, followed closely by video clips. Engagements on the zoom/ e-

teaching platform was least successful in the teaching and learning of Foundation Phase learners. However, the range of dissatisfaction regarding the effectiveness of reaching learners by furnishing parents with a written index of work to be covered was also quite broad, ranging from "very good" to "poor".

Educators were prompted to share any insights worth noting as an open-ended item. From the responses, several themes emerged, with parent participation flagged as the most pressing issue. Reflection by the educators on their own practices suggested an awareness that they had willingly gone the extra mile. Some educators mentioned that they had bought data for parents from their own pockets, couriered or hand- delivered printed material to learners, and incurred further expense on their side by using more data than before in order to communicate via WhatsApp group messages with the parents – which was generally construed as a highly effective solution to keep in touch.

Asked to express their frustrations as an open-ended item, educators were very much in sync with one another. Communication as the first broad theme was flagged by all educators and could be further categorized into the difficulty of communicating with learners, due to data or technological issues, the language barrier which caused problems communicating via the parents who were responsible for relaying the learning tasks to their children, and the lack of assurance that the learners had understood correctly. One of the participants explained: "It was challenging at times in the sense that I had to compile lessons for the parents (who mostly have little knowledge in the area of education instruction) and had to then rely on them to disseminate the knowledge/ strategies etc. to their children". The diminished contact time was listed as the second broad theme of concern, as educators were unsure whether their teaching had hit the target. During the pandemic, the aspect of mastery through time on task during physical school attendance was neglected. As one educator explained: "At school learners repeat work, at home they just do it to get it done."

Regarding the learning areas most impacted by the circumstances caused by the pandemic, educators were unanimous in reporting the resilience of learners in Life Skills. 15 of 23 educators indicated this subject as experiencing the least impact, and no-one believed the subjects of Literacy and Numeracy did not suffer at the hands of the pandemic. Only 5 of 23 educators indicated that Life Skills was adversely impacted by the pandemic.

The last scale question required educators to scale the impact of the pandemic on learners' general development and skills in the categories of dealing with stressful situations, their levels of assertiveness, their social confidence, the impact on introverted and extroverted personalities, and their eagerness to learn and explore. The aggregate results indicated that the highest impact was experienced in the area of stress tolerance with assertiveness affected second most, followed by eagerness to learn in the third place and ease of social interaction affected almost as much. To conclude the questionnaire, educators were invited to offer their thoughts on the future of the schooling system as we know it. The overwhelming desire that surfaced here was for Foundation Phase learners to be able to return to school physically for maximum contact time; if not daily, then on the basis of alternating weeks. The one-day-on /one-day-off approach proved too disruptive to establish the much-needed stability and routine for these learners. The second pertinent thought was the plea to go back to basics and

to relieve the burden posed by the CAPS document in the Foundation Phase. Extracurricular activities should be allowed only a small portion of time and effort. In academics, the focus should be quality rather than quantity.

Discussion

The findings from the data harvested through the questionnaire may be applicable for planning interventions for scenarios of future disruptions to the traditional school calendar and may assist Foundation Phase educators to plan according to best practice.

With most educators in the 10-19 years' experience group, and the average number of years' experience calculated at 15 years, it seems that the sample represents a fairly mature cohort of educators. The average ratio of educator to learners, construed as 1:27, constitutes a reasonably manageable classroom size. With the largest classroom size at 38 learners, none of the classrooms may be regarded as overcrowded as is often part of the educational landscape in South Africa. It is therefore acceded that exacerbated conditions may exist in rural schools or areas outside of the geographic sample.

Strategies for presenting teaching and learning

Most schools attempted to establish a regular routine of school attendance by keeping learners in a pattern of frequent attendance, rather than chunking the attendance into larger periods alternated by equal periods of non-attendance. This common practice is expressed by one of the participants: "Learners need to attend school on a regular basis". The sampled educators agreed that physical attendance on a regular and frequent basis is in the best interest of the learners. In the words of one of the participant educators: "I don't think online classes are effective for 6-year olds, as it takes physical presence to engage with them and help them maintain focus and actively learn."

The ambivalence portrayed towards the teaching and learning material provided by the DBE in whatever format (paper-based or radio broadcasts) may be indicative of the perceived standard of the DBE material. While those who were able to generate their own material, chose to do so, those who were dependent on the DBE material had to make do. It appears logical to infer that if the perception regarding the material provided by the DBE was one of higher esteem, the uptake of this offer would also have been higher. It is therefore imperative that material developed by the DBE should adhere to accepted norms and standards. It is therefore suggested that consultation and stakeholder engagement be strengthened by the DBE in providing supporting material that is deemed as applicable and useful by all Foundation Phase educators of schools across the spectrum.

The innovative approach of filming video clips offered an interesting perspective on the engagement of South African Foundation Phase educators. While the active engagement in the sample population was very good, a survey conducted in England indicated that local educators preferred to utilize pre-recorded video clips downloaded from the internet as opposed to original content filmed by each individual educator (Nelson & Sharp, 2020). It appears that local educators overlooked the possibility of drawing on existing offers available on the internet; alternatively, it may be argued that schools intended to build up their own repository of video lessons that may in future be repeated.

Communication

The challenge presented to learners to receive their schooling via mediation by their parents proved substantial. It appears that parental involvement in most cases featured as a deterrent to effective learning. Educators were dismayed at the lack of responsibility assumed by parents. Parents ostensibly proved ineffective both as medium of relaying the instructions and in offering guidance to the learners. While the educator participants were sympathetic to the increased workload of essential workers who could not harness the strength to keep up with their children's schedules, it was also remarked that some parents were perceived to be uncommitted to their duties as parents (Taylor, 2020; Jones, 2020). As mentioned before, Formosinho (2021) observed that elsewhere in the world, learners' schooling progress was often at the mercy of their parents who might not have sufficient data, or could not find the time or will to download or convey content for their children. In addition, one of the participants in the current inquiry commented on the challenge of parents who were unable to communicate in the language of learning and teaching of the school. These findings concurred with a project in England that reported on parents' inability to provide their children with the technological support to engage meaningfully in online schooling (Nelson & Sharp, 2020). Atiles et al. (2021) reported on parents in the USA and Latin America alike who were unable to support their children's learning due to the unavailability of technological resources. Timmons et al. (2020) described the panic of Canadian parents in finding themselves responsible for providing technological support for their children's tuition. Even though the actual teaching would be provided by the educator, it could not reasonably be expected of Foundation Phase learners to navigate the technology independently to access the learning. In this regard, Formosinho (2021) suggested that parents should be better trained to assume responsibility for their children's learning. Further scrutiny of the questionnaire data in this section indicated that the reasons suggested by educators for the inadequate level of engagement by parents could be grouped into i) technological and socioeconomic issues such as outdated or inadequate devices and lack of data; ii) communication challenges; including a lack of understanding of the assignment or due to the language barrier, and iii) parents' own work load that prevented them from spending more time on their children's learning.

Regardless of the factors that may influence the fragility of communication between the school and the parent, it is essential to establish reliable and immediate communication between these parties. This finding confirms Kirby's research (2021) as discussed above on the importance of communicating effectively with parents during such a time. In the current investigation, respondents were fairly satisfied with the results obtained by using WhatsApp group messages to convey information to parents.

The impact on schooling

The South African educational landscape is distinct from the British scene, where approximately 52 % of schools engaged their learners on a virtual learning environment (VLE), according to a report by Nelson and Sharp (2021) as mentioned above. The remainder resorted to "labour-intensive" measures such as posting learning material on WhatsApp or school websites (Nelson & Sharp, 2020, p.9) and was akin to the measures taken by educators in the current enquiry. These included making photocopies for parents, holding "drive-through" collection events, and

couriering material to learners in distant settings. Against this backdrop, respondents were noticeably hesitant to place their trust in the virtual learning environment.

The dissatisfaction experienced by educators regarding the impact of the decreased contact time with their learners is evident: 21 of 23 reported a very clear deficit in learner knowledge and development when they returned to the physical classroom. One educator said, "The deficit will never be erased". A further frustration of the decreased teaching time was the feeling of wading through quicksand: while the contact time had dramatically decreased, the pace was further stalled by the necessity to repeat learning content due to different groups attending school on different days.

Educators indicated that the learning area of Literacy was the hardest hit by the repercussions of the lockdown, with 18 of 23 educators listing this as an area of damage, and 13 of 23 noting the impact on Numeracy as concerning. However, the educators were unanimous in finding that "nothing will be the same again". In this regard, several educators pleaded for authorities to lighten the heavy load of a brimful curriculum and return to basics. This wish was expressed as follows: "The curriculum should be adapted so that the idea of catching up and being behind can be erased from educators' and learners' perspective and attitude towards everyday life." This remark is indicative of the forward focus of educators in preparing learners for a meaningful school career. Jones (2020) cautioned that parents should resist the desire to recreate the traditional school setup at home and rather allow children greater freedom in dealing with curriculum content.

The findings reiterated the basic tenets of a constructivist approach in that educators were unanimous in recommending a return to the collaborative environment of the physical classroom. In turn, the constraints imposed by the removal of learners from the physical classroom as experienced by educators prove the validity of the constructivist approach with its emphasis on active participation. Learners had to overcome the lack of peer participation as they were literally left to their own devices in construing knowledge. The findings also confirmed the importance of the physical environment on learning; this is conversely affirmative of the guidelines set out by Piaget and later theorists (Landsberg et al., 2012). If the National Curriculum Statement (2012) wishes to maintain its viewpoint that supports active and collaborative learning, it seems essential that the physical classroom should be retained post-pandemic.

Conclusion

The general feeling of frustration or dissatisfaction with presenting their teaching in an adaptive or blended manner indicates that Foundation Phase educators are hardly eager to retreat to the virtual world. In addition, as also mentioned by Taylor (2020), the engagement of parents in assuming responsibility for the education of their children needs to be reconfirmed. If parents are not able to support their children in the online environment, the likelihood of successful e-learning seems meagre. As mentioned by Atiles et al. (2021), the varying degrees of preparedness for the fourth industrial revolution will in future extend the digital divide between citizens who are empowered and the disadvantaged.

Equitable access to digital resources, such as free data, was strongly suggested as a basic requirement to support all learners in similar future scenarios (Kirby, 2021). Going forward, equitable access to learning will be of paramount importance all over the world (Timmons et al., 2020). An educator who is cognizant of collaborative learning design will be in a position to structure their teaching in a learner-centered manner to the benefit of their learners, even in predominantly virtual learning platforms.

It is evident that educators would rather return to the trenches than stay in their ivory towers; this authenticates their dedication to the teaching profession. More than ever, learners must be empowered to grasp the 'tools of the mind' (Vygotsky, 1978; Fru & Seotsanyana, 2017). The viva vox is indeed asserted to be essential in the Foundation Phase. As one educator explained, "It takes physical presence to teach a grade 1 learner". Educators agreed that the pandemic had devastating effects on the schooling of our grade 1 learners. Whilst the impetus of the blow that had been dealt will only manifest fully in years to come, the resilience of educators seems indomitable: "Nothing will ever be the same again. We can use the strategies to improve and build on what we have. We will be fine."

References

Atiles, J. T., Amodóvar, M., Chavarría Vargas, A., Dias, M. J. A. and Zúñiga León, I. M. (2021). International responses to COVID-19: Challenges faced by early childhood professionals. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, *29*(1), 66-78.

Cohen, L., Manion, L. and Morrison, K. (2018). *Research Methods in Education* (8th edition). Routledge.

Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. (2018). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research*. Sage.

Department of Basic Education (DBE). (2020a). *Amended school calendar 2020*. Retrieved from https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/202008/43609gen432.pdf

Department of Basic Education (DBE). (2020b). *National State of Disaster. Re-opening of schools 2020*. Retrieved from www.gov.za/about-sa/school-calendar#2020

Department of Basic Education (DBE). (2012). *Curriculum Assessment and Policy Framework*. Retrieved from https://www.education.gov.za/Curriculum/CurriculumAssessmentPolicyStatements(CAPS)/CAPSFoundation.aspx

Fellowes, J. and Oakley, G. (2010). *Language, Literacy and Early Childhood Education*. Oxford.

Formosinho, J. (2021). From schoolification of children to schoolification of parents? – educational policies in COVID times. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, *29*(1), 141-152.

Fru, R. and Seotsanyana, M. (2017). Curriculum Change in the 21st Century: Rethinking solutions for improved learner performance. In Magano, D., Mohapi, S.J. & Robinson, D. (Eds.). *Realigning Teaching Training in the 21st Century* (pp. 1-12). Cengage.

Jacobs, M., Vakalisa, N.C.G. and Gawe, N. (2012). *Teaching-Learning Dynamics.* Pearson.

Jones, D. (2021). The Impact of Covid-19 on Young Families, Children, and Teachers. *A Defending the Early Years Report*. Retrieved from https://dey.org/wp-

content/uploads/2020/09/The-Impact-of-COVID-19-on-Young-Children-Families-and-Teachers-A-DEY-Report-9-8-20-FINAL.pdf

Kirby, K. (2021). Teaching through a pandemic. In Thornburg, A. W., Ceglie R. J. and Abernathy, D. F. (Eds.). *Handbook of Research on Lessons learned from transitioning to virtual classrooms during a pandemic* (pp.46-91)*.* IGI Global.

Konstantinou, I. (2021). *Why embedding character teaching in schools matter*. In White, M. A. and McCallum, F. (Eds.). *Wellbeing and resilience education: Covid-19 and its impact on education* (pp.96-110). Routledge.

Landsberg, E., Kruger, D. and Swart, E. (Eds.) 2012. *Addressing Barriers to Learning*. Van Schaik.

Litshani, N.F. (2017). Positioning and realigning the role of the teacher for classroom practice. In Magano, D., Mohapi, S.J. and Robinson, D. (Eds.). *Realigning Teaching Training in the 21st Century* (pp.13-29). Cengage.

Magano, D., Mohapi, S.J. and Robinson, D. (Eds.) (2017). *Realigning Teaching Training in the 21st Century*. Cengage.

Municipalities of SA [online]. (2021). Demographic information: Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality. https://municipalities.co.za/demographic/8/mangaung-metropolitan-municipality

McCallum, F. (2021). Educators' wellbeing during times of change and disruption. In White, M. A. and McCallum, F. (Eds.). *Wellbeing and resilience education: Covid-19 and its impact on education* (pp.183-208). Routledge.

Mochida, S., Sanado, M., Shao, Q., Lee, J., Takasha, J., Ando, S. and Sakahika, Y. (2021). Factors modifying children's stress during the COVID-19 pandemic in Japan. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, *29*(1), 51-65.

Nelson, J. and Sharp, C. (2020). *Schools' responses to Covid-19: Key findings from the Wave 1 survey*. Slough: National Foundation for Education Research (NFER).

Schools4sa. (2021). *How many primary schools in Bloemfontein?* Retrieved from https://www.schools4sa.co.za/phase/primary-school/freestate/bloemfontein/

SABC News Online. (1 May 2020). *South Africa's lockdown level 5,4,3,2 and 1*. Retrieved from https://www.sabcnews.com/sabcnews/infographic-south-africas-lockdown-level-5432-and-1/

Taylor, N. (2020). School lessons from the Covid-19 Lockdown. *Southern African Review of Education*, *26*(1), 148-166. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/10520/ejc-sare-v26-n1-a10

Timmons, K., Cooper, A., Bozek, E. and Braund, H. (2021). The impacts of Covid-19 on early childhood education: Capturing the unique challenges associated with remote teaching and learning in K-2. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, *49,* 887-901. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-021-01207-z

Thornburg, A.W., Ceglie, R.J. and Abernathy, D.F. (Eds.) (2021). *Handbook of Research on Lessons Learned from Transitioning to Virtual Classrooms During a Pandemic*. IGI Global.

Tlale, L.D. (2017). Whole school improvement through inclusion. In Magano, D., Mohapi, S.J. and Robinson, D. (Eds.). *Realigning Teaching Training in the 21st Century* (pp.186-203). Cengage.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). (2020). *Covid-19 A global crisis for teaching and learning.* UNESCO.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in Society*. Harvard University Press.

Wessels, M. (2014). *Practical Guide to Facilitating Language Learning*. Oxford.

Williams, T.K., Macintosh, R.W. & Russell, R.W. (2021). Equity in distance education during COVID-19. *Research in Social Sciences and Technology*, *6*(1), 1-24. http://dx.doi.org/10.46303/ressat.2021.1

Wolhuter, C. and Jacobs, L. (2021). COVID-19, the global education project and technology: Disrupting priorities towards rethinking education. *Research in Social Sciences and Technology*, *6*(2), 96-109. https://doi.org/10.46303/ressat.2021.13

World Health Organization (WHO). (2020). *Naming the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and the virus that causes it*. Retrieved from https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/technical-guidance/naming-the-coronavirus-disease-(covid-2019)-and-the-virus-that-causes-it