Parents' Experience with Remote Learning During COVID-19 Lockdown in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The closure of primary schools during the COVID-19 pandemic led to a rapid shift to remote learning, placing more responsibility for learning on parents and guardians. This study sought to explore parents' experience while engaging in their children's remote learning during that period. The study is particularly timely in light of a dramatic growth in remote learning due to the continued disruption of face-to-face learning in schools. A study of parents' experience may yield useful data and identify trends to inform the development of programmes and policies targeting parental needs and support in this emerging form of learning. A descriptive qualitative design was used to conduct this study so that relevant responses could be sought to get insights into parents' experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. Questionnaires and online interviews were used to collect data from a purposive sample of 25 parents, whose selection was based on their involvement in their children's home learning and access to internet connectivity in the home. The results revealed that parents found the sudden closure of schools extremely disturbing, and they were concerned about their children's routines. Parents highlighted that they had difficulties with balancing responsibilities, adjusting to remote learning, children's lack of motivation to learn, poor accessibility of learning material, lack of capacity to assist multiple children, and finding appropriate space for learning. The results of the study have important implications for policy, and generated strong recommendations for teachers, school authorities, and policymakers.

Keywords: remote learning; experience; pandemic; parents

Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis has caused an unprecedented global disruption of the socioeconomic order. The whole world is adjusting to the reality of the pandemic by finding alternatives to the disruption caused so far. COVID-19 has upended the way of life worldwide, resulting in school closures from 24 March 2020, working remotely, and physically distancing as part of wider efforts to curb the spread of the virus. Parents, children, and teachers around the world felt the unprecedented and extraordinary ripple effect of the novel coronavirus as schools remained closed and lockdown measures were ordered to cope with the global pandemic. To reduce disruption in learning, many countries have come up with strategies for remote learning, including the internet, television, radio, and many other options that are available to schools (Wang et al., 2020). (By "remote learning" we mean learning that occurs when the learner and the instructor are separated physically—they cannot meet in a traditional classroom setting.) It has been generally observed that, since the end of March 2020, most schools moved to online platforms to provide education during the pandemic (Cullinane & Montacute, 2020). When schools in Zimbabwe closed on 24 March 2020, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPS) introduced alternative learning approaches to ensure the continuity of

education for all children. These included using radio- and television-programmed lessons, and online lessons on platforms such as ZOOM, Google Meet, and WhatsApp. Many schools in urban areas have adopted the online learning model as a way to institute remote learning. However, there are concerns that online learning may be a sub-optimal substitute for face-to-face instruction, given the absence of universal access to ICT infrastructure and lack of adequate preparation among teachers and learners for the unique demands posed by online teaching and learning (OECD, 2020).

Teachers are resourceful. They use a range of internet tools and social media such as WhatsApp groups, Zoom meetings, and other e-learning tools to create models of learning platforms. Although online learning certainly does not replace face-to-face attendance for lessons, it certainly can help learners with their schooling during remote learning (Sebata, 2020). However, without proper planning, there is risk further widening the attainment gaps between the rich and the poor (Cullinane & Montacute, 2020). Many learners with poor backgrounds have not been able to benefit from this alternative mode of learning due to (among other factors) lack of connectivity and equipment. Even for those who can connect, learning is compromised due to lack of preparedness on the part of both teachers and learners. In most developing nations, rural schools lack the necessary infrastructure to create an environment that can foster online learning (Sebata, 2020). This situation is further complicated by parents' lack of readiness and capacity to help their children learn remotely. However, the changes made to students' learning by the COVID-19 pandemic made parental involvement particularly crucial. The COVID-19 crisis resulted in schools closing around the world, leaving parents and guardians to educate their children at home. Many parents were forced to squeeze the additional responsibility of home-schooling their children between their own tight work schedules. Becoming surrogate teachers, was an additional burden to "working from home".

The problem

The closure of schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented challenges for everyone involved, from the students, to their teachers, and their parents (Cullinane & Montacute, 2020). The crisis has pushed many schools to harness the opportunities offered by online learning to continue learning while students are at home. Although a few schools are making the best of what online learning offers, many parents find it difficult to provide high-speed internet facilities. Moreover, many parents in low-income groups also have to deal with erratic power supply and antiquated electronic devices, which are often a hindrance to seamless access to the internet. Parents are confronted with difficult choices about many facets of their lives, work, and children's education. Furthermore, the economic impact of the crisis increases the likelihood of parenting stress, and abuse and violence against children (Cluver et al., 2020). The broader context negatively affects effective parental involvement in children's learning in the home across all socioeconomic groups.

This study therefore sought to reveal parents' experience from March 2020 to May 2022, when they engaged in their children's remote learning. The study focused on parents of primary-school aged children. The study is particularly timely in light of the dramatic growth in remote learning due to the continued disruption of face-to-face learning in primary schools.

Research questions

The following questions guided the study.

1. What are parents' views of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic-induced lockdown?

2. What teaching-related activities do parents engage in while helping children with their studies?
3. How are parents coping with their children's remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic-induced lockdown?

Literature

The literature review involved peer-reviewed and grey literature to capture the dynamics of remote learning during a pandemic such as COVID-19.

Educational interventions during pandemics

During communicable disease outbreaks such as pandemic influenza, social-distancing interventions that increase the space between people and decrease the frequency of contact can play an important role in an emergency response (Earn et al., 2012; Qualls et al., 2017). School closures are a possible means of ensuring social distancing in the pandemic influenza response plans of many countries (Public Health England, 2014; Wilson et al., 2020) and have been implemented widely in response to past pandemics (Cheatley et al., 2020; Cowling et al., 2020). To date, research on school practices to promote social distancing in primary and secondary schools has focused on prolonged school closure, with little attention paid to the identification and feasibility of other more sustainable interventions (Uscher-Pines et al., 2018).

The whole world is adjusting to the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic by finding alternatives to the disruption. Home-schooling has been practised to continue learning. Essentially, home-schooling involves commitment by a parent or guardian to oversee their children's educational development (Shaw, n.d.). For many families, home-schooling involves children learning from the resources available in their community and through interaction with family members.

The role played by parents in remote learning

Parents are central to education and it is widely accepted that they provide major input into a child's learning (Björklund & Salvanes, 2011). Parents are the child's first teachers—from the moment the child is born until they mature as adults. The traditional role of parents involves teaching, guiding, and raising children to become strong members of their communities. In this regard, the role of parents in educating their children is that of shaping their personality. According to Termize et al. (2021) the early education received by children is a crucial responsibility that all parents must fulfil. Furthermore, parental involvement in the child's education improves their educational achievements from early childhood (Epstein et al., 2018; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Henderson and Mapp further argue that parental support results in children staying longer in school, and encourages positive development. It is argued that children's achievement in school improves when parents are empowered to "play four key roles in their children's learning: teachers, supporters, advocates and decision-makers" (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 8). However, as children begin formal learning in school, parents allow the school to take responsibility for their children's learning in the formal education system. Parents then take on a supportive role in ensuring that children have the necessary provision and support to access education (Benjamin, 1993; Ceka & Murati, 2016; Emerson et al., 2012). Henderson and Berla (1994) argue that parents can support their children's education by creating a home environment that encourages learning, setting high but realistic expectations for their children's achievement and future careers.

However, during times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of parents in supporting their children in remote learning environments becomes even more important (Cullinane & Montacute, 2020). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent school closures, it became apparent that parents had to assume the full-time role of supervising their

children and supporting their learning (Kong, 2020). One significant challenge is that parents are expected to provide an appropriate learning space, because online learning requires a comfortable and conducive space that will help children to focus on their learning. Furthermore, this could prevent children from being disturbed by any noise around them (Amirudin et al., 2021). In addition, parents should provide children with appropriate technology tools to use during online classes.

The role of the school

Traditionally, schools are the major player in imparting education to learners, while the family focuses on children's wellbeing (Saxena & Saxena, 2020). The parents' role is seen as a supplement to the school's input. Studies carried out before COVID-19 argue that the preparedness of parents to support their children's education depends on the support they get from the school. For example, Epstein et al. (2018) contend that parental involvement in their children's education is effective when it is given in the context of a partnership between teachers and parents. Đurišić and Bunijevac (2017) also indicate that school, family, and community links are very important components in children' education. However, many parents trust the school and teachers for the education of their children. Schools are set for learning, with material resources, computers and internet access, other information resources, and suitable physical learning spaces.

Schools being closed during the pandemic didn't mean that their role ended. Over the years, schools have established routines and practices that provide learners with stability and certainty, which is especially important for vulnerable students (Bailey, 2002). During pandemics such as COVID-19, the school can prepare for the continuity of education, including working on online and remote learning options (Saxena & Saxena, 2020). However, the sudden shift to remote learning left teachers overwhelmed by the task of redesigning content and providing learners with feedback on their work (Garbe et al., 2020). Furthermore, most teachers lacked the skills to support remote online learning, because that was a new teaching approach for most of them. The study by Garbe shows that providing support to the student through virtual meetings with individuals and groups, and using questioning techniques, appeared to be a daunting task for many teachers.

The role of technology in remote learning

Difficult times such as the pandemic prompt an increase in the use of tools and resources to mitigate the challenges of the learning process (Anastasiades et al., 2010). Ash and Davis (2009) note that during pandemics such as a flu crisis, distance learning can be supported by technologies such as the internet, phone, radio, TV, phone messaging, or email communication. During the same time, BBC provided online schooling activities in the United Kingdom to complement school resources (Anastasiades et al., 2010). To allow learning to continue during the 2014 Ebola outbreak, remote learning was conducted through broadcasting, particularly through educational radio programmes that were aired in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone (United Nations Development Programme, 2015). During COVID-19 in Greece, the interactive videoconferencing (IVC) system design was proposed and implemented at elementary school levels (Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020) while in China and Vietnam, television broadcast was used (Hoang et al., 2022). In addition to these traditional technologies, several internet-based tools and learning platforms have been developed to address the continuity of the learning process during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although online learning could be considered new in primary schools, it can be considered for enhancing traditional schools and remote learning during pandemics (Basilaia, et al., 2020; Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020). Online classes can help learners overcome the disruption in their learning as a result of pandemics and other catastrophes (Rzymski & Nowicki, 2020).

However, debate in the literature shows that it is not yet clear how online proposals could be used in primary schools in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. Although there are many online tools and resources, the most effective solutions, and the best way to implement them, are not widely known. The studies that can be used as examples of how to use remote online learning during a pandemic mostly concentrate on small cases, not the magnitude of a global crisis as is happening with the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. There is a large gap in knowledge of what constitutes an optimal solution in areas where access to the internet, digital devices, and skills are limited or non-existent. It is not clear what could be best practice for different age groups in their online educational development from home in such emergencies. Furthermore, an area that is not being talked about adequately is the best way to support students with learning difficulties and special needs.

Methodology

Research design

The current study aims to explore the experience of parents regarding the management of remote learning during the peak of COVID-19. A descriptive qualitative design was used to administer this study so that relevant responses could be sought to get insight into parents' experience at that time. Qualitative research studies allow researchers to explore the phenomenon from an individual's personal experience in a range of situations and circumstances.

Sample

Data was collected from a sample of parents with one child who attended a traditional physical school learning environment before schools closed, just after the onset of the pandemic in March 2020. This purposive sampling was the most suitable choice for the selection of the participants, especially during the period when there were restrictions on people's movements and gatherings. A sample of 25 parents from the Midlands city of Zimbabwe was selected to participate in the study. Their selection was based on their involvement in their children's home learning, and internet connectivity in their home. Participants were recruited primarily via WhatsApp, for participation from 1 April 2020.

Data collection instruments

Data was collected using multiple data collection instruments—including an online questionnaire, interviews, and WhatsApp group discussions. The questionnaire included a mixture of closed- and a few open-ended questions that were designed to reveal parents' experience and opinions about COVID-19 and home learning. To maximise the number of respondents in such complicated times, the questionnaire was designed to be answerable in 5–8 minutes. The WhatsApp discussions centred on parents' experience in dealing with their children while learning remotely during the COVID-19 school closures.

Data collection procedure

During the period of school closure and the national quarantine that related to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was impossible to use personal contact to collect data. Therefore, the questionnaire was distributed via social networks. A WhatsApp group targeting parents with primary-school children was created for data collection. The interviews were conducted online between 1 and 9 April 2020. The questionnaires were administered online using Google forms.

Data analysis

Data analysis involved thematic coding, which identified passages of text linked by a common theme (Gibbs, 2007). Descriptive coding in an open coding cycle was followed by the second

cycle of pattern coding to analyse parental responses regarding their greatest experiences during the COVID-19 school closure. This coding process allows the categorisation of codes, ultimately enabling thematic analysis of ideas. The process started with reading responses several times to decrease possible researcher bias. This deep immersion process helped with familiarisation of the content and identification of themes in the data.

Limitations of the study

This study was conceptualised as a rapid response to the COVID-19 pandemic. One notable limitation of the study is that the sample is skewed towards internet-enabled parents, which was inevitable given the restrictions of COVID-19 protocols. It is recognised that using online data collection methods excluded some groups of parents that could have led to richer and more diverse perspectives on the experience, and more insights into the impact of COVID-19 on parental involvement in their children's education. Furthermore, most of the data gathered was self-reported by the parents, rather than by direct observation or externally verifiable evidence. However, the data was triangulated by employing data collection methods that included a questionnaire, interviews, and WhatsApp focus-group discussions. This range of methods offered a way to verify parents' accounts, which were found to be honest and trustworthy representations of their experience.

Results

This section presents and subsequently discusses the results. Descriptive questions are provided, and then the parents' experience is analysed by using thematic analysis under the three guiding research questions.

What are parents' views on remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic-induced lockdown?

The aim here was to find out whether parents viewed the learning that took place during the COVID-19-induced lockdown as useful. The results reveal that parents found the sudden closure of the schools extremely disturbing, and they were concerned about their children's routines. Although some parents expressed that they felt children were more responsive to their health and hygiene practices, and that they followed hygiene routines voluntarily, they strongly maintained that a scheduled learning routine was still a major gap in times of COVID-19. Many parents felt that children were deprived of access to schools, friends, exams, and sport due to the countrywide school closures and lockdown. They felt that because schools have a formal and structured daily routine, they are best placed to help children understand the importance of time, scheduling, and doing assignments in a given timeframe.

Parents pointed out that the major challenge for their children was the abrupt transition from face-to-face learning to online learning, which most of them were not used to. Many parents lamented the lack of seriousness and discipline in their children while they prepared for schoolwork. They noted that it was difficult for children to seriously engage in learning activities and it was difficult for them to maintain discipline and order when children were learning remotely. For many of them, the seriousness that the physical presence of a teacher can instil in children was not possible.

The following statements highlight some parents' experience with their children's online learning.

> Online learning is a problem especially since it found us unprepared, I am not sure if I am doing the right thing. (Parent 2)

> My wife and I are civil servants so other family members mostly help in our children's learning activities at home. Except at night, we check the study materials and assignments that must be completed by the children. (Parent 5)

> Learning has moved online on an unprecedented scale, with a lot of trial and error and uncertainty for everyone. No serious learning is taking place. (Parent 8)

It was evident that it was not only parents who were unprepared for this new and unusual way of learning; children and teachers were also not ready to embrace it. This ultimately means that children's learning was compromised, and parents were rightly concerned. Many parents were worried that the complete development of their children would be deeply affected as a result of online learning being instituted. They noted that loss of interaction with peers in school activities such as sports and clubs (and other co-curricular activities in the normal school environment) has had a negative influence on the development of children's social and emotional skills.

> Learning is not only about the subjects that are put on the timetable, children learn a lot by being with others, talking, socialising and interacting with their peers. They learn how to work and learn with others. They develop their social skills. We cannot do this at home as parents. (Parent 12)

Parents also highlighted that face-to-face interaction plays a key role in children's social development. They mentioned, for example, that playing games together, celebrating at parties, and eating and praying together during the assembly are important activities that teach children to live in harmony with others.

What teaching-related activities do parents engage in while helping children with their studies?

Parents reported activities that they were doing to assist with their children's learning during the lockdown. A few indicated that they helped their children to complete assignments less frequently, with some indicating that they did not help in any way. Most of those who indicated that they helped their children appeared to spend most of their time checking the quality of completed assignments, monitoring children's attention during live online classes, and ensuring that deadlines were met. Other reasons cited were that parents were too busy most of the time or could not afford the cost of supporting their child's learning. A few indicated that they supported task completion by explaining task instructions, and sometimes they found themselves teaching new topics. Parents who indicated that they were not supporting their children reported that they did not know how to assist them because they were not teachers.

The most common activity was online classes conducted by teachers at scheduled times. Applications such as Teams, Zoom, and Google Classroom were useful, and many children were listening and taking notes for a couple of hours during weekdays. Some important announcements and other forms of interaction were maintained through social media platforms of Facebook and WhatsApp. Off-screen work was also given to children.

One of the parents commented:

> The teacher sends some reading material, assignments which I download for my child and due dates are given to ensure children work to meet the dates. Often, I receive messages from the school to inform me about what to expect and what to do. (Parent 10)

There is evidence that some schools had put in place adequate measures to ensure that children's learning was not compromised and that children could experience some part of their usual routine even when at home, with the help of their parents. Sending electronic material and daily reminders, and involving parents in the process, was judged an effective way to maintain the flow of learning among children. Parents also mention that teachers kept reinforcing the

importance of playing games and staying physically active while children were restricted to home.

How did parents cope with their children's remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic-induced lockdown?
When asked about their biggest struggles while teaching their children during the lockdown, parents indicated that they generally felt overwhelmed. They highlighted several distinct struggles, which were grouped into six themes and are presented below.

Balancing responsibilities
For many parents, home online learning presented a struggle to balance responsibilities. The challenge to balance their employment demands and learner needs was the single most commonly reported struggle. The comments below elaborate on the emotions that parents had because of the struggle to balance employment and learning.

> Having to decide between work and helping/spending time with my children . . . lots of guilt. (Parent 7)

> My husband and I are both essential workers and struggle to provide the attention/interaction my children need along with our work. (Parent 16)

> Working in the hospital setting and maintaining a household while trying to maintain normalcy. It's not an easy balance on a normal day, let alone when facing a health crisis like COVID-19. (Parent 18)

Many parents admitted that the balancing act was very difficult although they saw the need to help their children learn.

> I don't want to get upset with the situation for not doing anything, but I'm struggling with the work. (Parent 10)

> I think we're all just afraid that we're not doing enough. But I know that it's helping our children learn. (Parent 16)

The situation was challenging, especially when parents were working from home with their own schedules to follow.

Adjusting to remote learning
The shift to remote learning had a significant impact on both learners and their parents because they were using this method of learning for the first time. Parents pointed out that the major change for their children was the abrupt transition from physical face-to-face classes to online classes, which most children were not used to.

One parent mentioned that:

> Learning online at home is a big challenge for my daughter and I. She is failing to adjust. Rarely does she do more than an hour or so of formal learning each day.

Parents were concerned that their children were taking a long time to adapt to the new learning environment as independent learners.

Lack of positive learner motivation
Many parents mentioned repeatedly that they had difficulties motivating their children to study. This was attributed to children's uncertainty about going back to school, because of the continual extension of the lockdown period. This uncertainty left children dejected and demoralised to learn at home.

One parent said:

> He is difficult to motivate, and I fear if I let him lead our direction of study we will not get far. (Parent 2)

> Children feel overwhelmed by this new way of learning and some find it difficult to motivate themselves to plan and organise their time. (Parent 2)

Many children treated the lockdown period as a vacation from school; hence they wanted nothing to do with a normal school routine. Instead, they wanted to spend time playing and watching television. Therefore, parents noted that asking their children to do any school-related tasks strained relationships.

As one parent remarked:

> Children are not very serious. They waste time sleeping and they have developed a habit of waking up late. They don't have access to many (physical) games at home, they only play games on the phone or computer. (Parent 12)

Parents noted that they had challenges with maintaining a positive relationship with their children because the children felt their parents were putting them under too much pressure. As a result, there was conflict, with parents expecting their children to learn while the children were not ready to learn at home. That was a potential threat to children's educational, social, and physical development.

Accessibility of learning material
Parents indicated that learning materials were difficult to access for several reasons. Internet connectivity was erratic, and most parents did not have devices to access it. The mobile devices that they were using had limited capacity to access all the reading material. As a result, parents preferred alternative forms of learning material in addition to online learning resources. They indicated overwhelmingly that they preferred hard-copy material because they did not have reliable data or consistent access to laptops for their children. Very few preferred internet-based learning material. Others referred to the cost and unreliable access to the internet, and had limited access to devices.

Parents were concerned about the challenges that remote learning brought for them and their children. Online learning requires computers and the internet to be available exactly when they are needed. The potential for clashing timetables was more challenging when there was more than one school-going child in a family.

> Lessons are conducted at specific timings according to the timetable, so I have to be available with the internet at any cost. This is difficult when you have 2 children or more at home attending the same school and having lessons at the same time.

Parents also noted that during online lessons (e.g., on ZOOM), poor internet connectivity prevented children from asking questions.

Finding appropriate space for learning
Most parents were from poor households with deplorable living conditions, with family members living in overcrowded spaces. These parents mentioned inadequate space for learning as a critical issue in homes that were already stretched by overcrowding.

As one parent highlighted:

> Children struggle to find space for study. There are no quiet places to work.

Almost all parents noted:

> Children share bedrooms with their siblings who are not going to school. So, this makes it difficult for them to get a place where they can concentrate on their work.

One parent also noted that:

> Some don't have stable homes and are sleeping on sofas with many people in the house; can't get to sleep until adults leave the sitting room.

In some cases, parents noted:

> Several siblings do not get on with each other so no opportunity to sit and learn together.

Even children from rich families faced deprivation or inadequacy of learning spaces, and the effects of noise or crime, due to the quality of the dwelling or the neighbourhood.

Children cannot work on their own
Many parents reported that children could not learn alone. They reported that getting children to settle and do their work was very difficult.

Some parents highlighted that:

> Children at home do not want to learn if not forced, also the material and tasks given by the teachers are difficult for the child to understand, they find it difficult to understand the material provided by teachers. (Parent 1)

> The children do not want to learn at home. The problem is that children listen to their teachers more than us, the parent. (Parent 8)

> . . . if not supervised they spend all their time playing games. We are stressed and frustrated seeing that children do not want to learn. (Parent 19)

Lack of knowledge about the content
Many parents pointed out that they had limited knowledge about the newly introduced learning areas in the recently introduced primary school curriculum. The statements below are examples of what parents said.

> I am concerned that I am depriving my child of learning because of my little knowledge about the new subjects that they are learning these days. (Parent 11)

> The maths is taught differently, and I'm just at a loss. (Parent 3)

Some parents felt that they could not replace teachers due to lack of expertise as bearers of content and pedagogy.

> I have never liked teaching. I'm not sure if I have what it takes to help my children with their online learning, with these computers. (Parent 13)

> The only challenge is that the methods I use are obviously not as good as those used by their teachers at school. (Parent 14)

Many parents acknowledged that they were not as effective as teachers would be in terms of the teaching methods that they used to help their children. They noted that teachers use better methods, and that they would provide more feedback on work. However, parents were not expected to be teachers, or to replicate the classroom environment at home.

What support do parents get from the school?
Because the school closure was unexpected, parents needed support from their schools. They were asked to indicate the support they got. A few parents indicated that there was some form of support system to help them make their way through the task. They also mentioned that they were grateful for how accommodating most of the teachers were. However, some parents highlighted that they would have liked the teachers to have a more direct presence during home-schooling. For instance, they pointed out that they expected teachers to conduct online lessons more often, talk directly to the children, assign tasks to them, and explain instructions rather than just send the tasks and assignments electronically. This suggests that there were circumstances where teachers would assign tasks and expect parents to explain instructions and check the quality of task completion.

Discussion

The study's findings show that parents are worried about the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on their children's education. The study notes that parents found the sudden closure of schools extremely disturbing and they were concerned about their children's education. Although learning has always occurred in the home with parents as the children's first teachers, their support for children who are learning at home has dramatically increased in significance during COVID-19. The shift to remote learning during the crisis has changed the balance of the provision of learning at home. Parents were faced with uncertainty about the future of their children as they struggled to manage competing job responsibilities and the school's expectations about their education. Although schools were doing their best to provide learning material and activities, many children experienced learning loss because they were using learning strategies that depended on the internet. Teachers were putting substantial effort into creating online learning material and sending it to learners by email and social networking channels. This effort helped to alleviate parents' concerns about their children's educational engagement. However, parents were concerned that many learners find it difficult to recover from the loss of education, and it may result in them dropping out of the school system.

The study's findings show that having their children learn at home is very challenging for most parents, and most were struggling to cope. Lack of support for children's online learning at home was largely due to parents' limited time and ability. Parents were busy hustling to earn an income to cover the cost of meeting the family's needs during the lockdown, so they did not have enough time to help their children. Their level of education also affected their ability to be involved in academic activities. Greenlee and Reid (2020) note that parents with high levels of education were more often involved in structured learning activities such as worksheets, online school resources, and other educational resources during pandemics. It is clear that learning at home is quite different from learning in a face-to-face environment at school. It calls for some reorientation of what we think about learning in general and how we approach the process with our children. The findings show that some physical space in which to learn—and additional learning resources such as a computer, printer, and internet or data access—are needed to facilitate children's learning at home. However, the study shows that many homes lack these resources. Some aspects of the curriculum also required access to laboratories, specialised rooms, or other resources that cannot be replicated at home.

The study's findings show parents' role in children's learning has changed, especially during the home-based learning session. Most of the teaching functions that were traditionally the teacher's responsibility to support learning (such as instruction, questioning, assessment, and feedback) are now facilitated by parents. Although the literature suggests that the time that parents spend with their children on educational activities is an important determinant of childhood development (Attanasio et al., 2020; Bono et al., 2016; Fiorini & Keane, 2014), parents cannot replicate the roles played by teachers. Parents cannot provide the infrastructural resources available in

schools. Schools should be careful not to add another item to parents' already long list of responsibilities and other things that they should be doing. The major concerns include the variability in preconditions for remote learning, the capacity of parents to support their children's learning, and the limited support by teachers. Furthermore, unforeseen circumstances such as power and network outages resulted in children missing online lessons. In such instances, the responsibility of teachers was transferred to parents, who assumed the role of reviewing their children's schoolwork.

The disruption to education caused by COVID-19 has exacerbated existing learning gaps and inequalities among primary-school learners. Children from low-income families were hit harder because they had far less access to the internet and/or the hardware required to access online instruction. These learners were already disadvantaged academically compared with their more privileged peers, and the situation was worsened by the pandemic. The UNESCO (2020) advocacy paper states that students who did not benefit from remote learning could become disinterested and face a higher risk of dropping out of school.

On the positive side, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that the world of education is full of inspiring innovations, and they are ready to be disseminated every day to reach their target audience—parents, students, and teachers. The most innovative solutions often come from a strong need to overcome a problem, and constraints can fuel the motivation to think of creative solutions. New areas of interest have emerged for many teachers and researchers. For example, learners now have the autonomy and agency to take control of their learning, to explore new ideas and experiences like never before. The creative use of technology, especially through mobile phone communication with parents, is an example of strategies that have emerged amid the pandemic and which, if sustained, could complement and strengthen children's learning in public schools. This crisis should therefore be seen as an opportunity to rethink the curriculum, and the teaching and learning process, to achieve the required competencies and skills development in learners.

Conclusions and recommendations

Remote learning at home has emerged as a substitute for face-to-face learning at school during the COVID-19 lockdown period. In the process, parents' involvement has played a significant role in mitigating some of the limitations of remote learning. However, parents whose time is constrained by work commitments and the burden created by the pandemic—combined with the responsibility of remote learning—require coordinated support from the school. Schools should focus on adjusting to new learning environments and strengthen engagement with parents to improve information and guidance on effective practices for supporting their children's learning. The school must provide carefully curated remote learning material and activities that include physical and psychosocial components other than the academic goals. The government should promote the installation of ICT infrastructure and affordable internet connectivity to meet the demand for online teaching in times of emergency.

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