COVID-19 induced online learning: the Zimbabwean experience

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ABSTRACT

Corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19) brought a lot of social, economic and political tensions worldwide, Zimbabwe included. All sectors of the social services were affected by the pandemic, the education sector also received its own fair share of challenges, as learners and educator's learning process, was affected by the pandemic. The COVID-19 induced online learning paper sought to bring out the experiences of learners and educators during the COVID-19 periods, laying out how the learning process took place, the challenges experienced, and the lessons learnt. In trying to answer the above stated problem the following objectives were used; to explore the experiences of learners and educators while conducting online lessons; to assess the challenges faced by both learners and educators when making use of technology. The study made use of a desk review and electronic media to collect data. The research found out that learners and educators in most government institutions could not make use of online learning after the closure of schools complying with the national lockdown period. Learners and educators in non-government institutions conducted online lessons but faced a myriad of challenges as the country was not well prepared for online learning. The study therefore recommends universal access to internet and for the government to partner with internet service providers so that it becomes accessible and affordable to the majority of the populace.

KEY TERMS: *COVID-19, online learning, learners, educators, electronic media, government schools and non-government schools*

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INTRODUCTION

Advances in communication technology have widened the scope of information dissemination. There is no doubt that millions of people across the world now use information and communication technology (ICT) on a regular basis for different reasons. With the Corona virus disease 2019 pandemic which resulted in national lockdowns across countries, there was need to adopt (ICT) in making sure that learners still had access to their basic right of education. There has been a shift towards virtual classrooms as a mode of education delivery with students being taught remotely through electronic platforms in many developed countries but for countries like Zimbabwe, virtual classrooms were prematurely delivered having being induced by the unforeseen COVID-19 pandemic. This paper hence tries to explore the experiences of learners and educators while implementing online lessons.

BACKGROUND

The Zimbabwean education system goes beyond the colonial era which was characterised by racial discrimination in favour of the white populace (Riddell 1998). The post-colonial era was driven by "growth with equity principle" and tried to address colonial biases to a great extent with the government of Zimbabwe building many schools; having growth in the student enrolment; addressing issues of gender equity and having favourable educational policies that were in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). This resulted in Zimbabwe having an increase in literacy levels from 77,79 %; 83,51 %; 83,58 %; and 88,69% in 1982; 1992; 2011 and 2014 sequentially (UNDP, 2011). This favourable increase only lasted for a few decades and created its own fair share of challenges that included high teacher- student ratios; overcrowding in most government schools; introduction of hot sitting and shortages of textbooks amongst other challenges that were parallel to the economic and political instability that the country was going through, which to a great extent eroded the gains of the first two decades of the post-colonial era (Chinhenga, 2017).

The education system in Zimbabwe is structured in three categories: the primary education, secondary education and tertiary education. All the three sectors are selective as there are non- government and government primary; secondary and tertiary schools that can either be boarding or day schools depending on the parent's affordability. Kanyongo, (2005) further notes that most learners in Zimbabwe attend day government schools which are within the economical reach of the majority of the Zimbabwean populace. An online learning curriculum was introduced by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education long before the COVID-19 pandemic, however it has been affected by a number of challenges (Chimururi, undated). The promotion of technology in the school system is one area which has not been moving fast enough in most countries like Zimbabwe. The problem is that while most schools and other educational institutions in the industrialised countries have ready access to computers and internet, the same cannot be said of in developing countries like Zimbabwe. Moore, (2000) further notes that around 700000 people in Africa (about 0.1 per cent of the population) use basic internet service such as email and WhatsApp due to lack of financial resources and poor infrastructure in most parts of Africa. Although computers have been part of the country's education curriculum for a long time, their use has been limited to a few well-funded non- government schools. The majority of schools do not have the basic facilities required for the use of computer technology like electricity.

Despite the above started challenges, global trends have indicated that children are now growing up having (ICT) as essential and natural parts of their daily life especially in this digital era. As they grow, they are expected to become active and self-directed members in their local communities and society at large. One should appreciate that technology creates versatile possibilities for the acquisition and creation of information, for self-expression, and for communication and interaction with other people locally, nationally, and worldwide. Active participation in the information society presumes novel knowledge, skills, and work approaches from children and teachers alike thereby building a conducive learning environment. Kankaanranta, (2002) is of the view that the rapid development of technology has challenged learning environments to adopt Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) to support learning and teaching and in guiding children to become its diversified users. Kangai and Bukaliya, (2011) are of the view that research and experience have shown that computer use serves as a trigger for transformations and technology-enriched instructional innovations, which involve profound changes in and affects the very nature of the entire learning environments. Beginning early in development, children learn from watching others and through social interaction. Some socio-cultural theories suggest that children learn in the context of their social and cultural environment (Mandoga, Matswetu and Mhishi, 2013). Some scholars suggest that since media is in children's learning environments from an early age, they are an important influence on burgeoning social cognition beginning at a very young age and continuing through adolescence and beyond (Mandoga, 2013). The advent of smart phones and laptops in Zimbabwe has opened new avenues of learning for students. In recent years, the use of online sites has grown tremendously especially among teenagers and high school students. However, very little is known about their ability and feasibility to make use of such learning platforms for academic learning purposes (Pappas, 2013). It is under such a background that this study seeks to bring out the feasibility of online learning in Zimbabwe.

The emergence of online learning has been reinforced by the national lockdown that was imposed as a result of the COVID 19 pandemic, with the aim of supporting education with modern learning and teaching tools. It is against this background that this paper seeks to explore the experiences of leaners and educators in the unexpected environment.

METHODOLOGY

The research was a desk review that made use of messages circulating on electronic media like Twitter; Facebook; YouTube; SnapChat; Instagram and WhatsApp. The researcher sought and joined the relevant groups on WhatsApp and Facebook over the mobile phone, with the aim of discussing issues of learners and educators. The data collected from the platforms was backed up and later extracted. As for YouTube; Instagram and snap chart the researchers depended on the comments that were posted by subscribers/ followers of the researchers accounts, the comments from subscribers/ follower's was backed up and was later extracted for research purposes. The data was analysed thematically. The following ethical issues were observed; there was voluntary participation as the respondents voluntarily joined/ subscribed or followed the researchers; the principle of enormity was observed were responses were in no way linked to the respondents of the study; confidentiality was also observed where the collected data was used for the purposes of the research only; the principle of the right to withdraw was followed where the participants could at any time unsubscribe to the electronic platform.

FINDINGS

Type of school and ICT learning outcome

The study found out that COVID-19 affected most learners who attend government schools as compared to their fellow counter parts who attended non-government schools. The ICT learning outcome differed with government schools as compared to their fellow counter parts in non-government schools. For learners and educators at most government schools ICT was beyond their reach and capacity. With most of the educators having basic mobile phones that could not access electronic media platforms like WhatsApp; Twitter; YouTube; Facebook; Instagram and Facebook. As for the learners owning a mobile phone to use for online learning was a dream. One Instagram follower reported that "…..*my children do not have mobile phones just like most of their fellow classmates."* The situation was different for learners who were attending non-government schools with most of the subscribers and followers of electronic media platforms noting that children attending non-government schools were not as affected as their fellow counterparts in government schools. It was learning as usual for these learners as they quickly embraced technology and continued with their studies in the comfort of their homes. It was interesting to note that such schools allow learners to come to schools with their digital machines from as lower secondary students. On the other hand learners in non-government schools attending primary education were mainly assisted by parents to attend to online lessons as most of the learners were not familiar with technology.

A respondent from a WhatsApp group reported that "….. *it's like l am now a learner, as l have to take my primary school child through every work that they are doing on Google class room since he is not yet conversant with the computer."* For most of the learners in non -government schools learning continued in the face of COVID-19 as they made use of internet based platforms like Google classroom, Zoom, Microsoft teams and Google meet. Most of the educators and learners reported to be mostly making use of Google class room and Microsoft teams. The learners reported to get access to such platforms upon payment of fees hence not all learners from non – government schools were covered, as learning was based upon payment for the service. One educator on Facebook wrote, "*Work for some of us is going on as usual as we are using Google classroom, we created classes where we interact with learners as well as post assignments and give the learners feedback…"*

Some of the learners in non- government schools despite the availability of such learning platforms did not attend all their lessons due to a myriad of challenges that were beyond their control like power cuts with no backup power at home; poor internet connectivity; no connectivity at all and depletion of the paid up bundle. One learner upon responding to why he was not attending lessons reported that, "…*we experienced an electricity problem in our area as one of the electric poles was hit by a car resulting in no electricity in our area for two weeks*…"

Area of residents and ICT outcome

The most affected learners were students that reside in rural areas as they were not attending any lessons as compared to their fellow counterparts who were in urban areas. It was saddening to note that most of the educators whose duty station was in rural areas were either in urban areas or at their rural homes during the entire national lock down period, this left most rural schools with a minimum or no educators at all at the school. This resulted in the learners in the rural areas being left with no one to ask for clarity even if they decided to study on their own. One educator on YouTube indicated that "…. *The entire national lockdown period l was with my family as l could*

not afford to spend the entire time alone…." One WhatsApp chart read, "*…all my rural student, parents and guardians depended on me for communication during the entire national lockdown period as they have no phones to make use of…..*"

To worsen the situation of rural learners most of the educators noted that even if the educators were available at their rural duty stations, no online learning could have occurred as there is no proper infrastructure and basic resources that could enable them to conduct online learning. The situation was even worse for some of the educators whose rural work station did not have electricity. On the contrary some educators whose duty station was in rural areas reported that they had received few computers from the government for computer studies and improving computer literacy, but they did not receive the education on how to make use of the digital gadgets; they did not have adequate infrastructure to house such equipment and they were still to receive a teacher knowledgeable in the area of ICT. One Facebook follower noted that "*…two computers were donated at my rural school but were not yet functional…*"

The study also found out the situation for urban learners was a different story as some of the learners were reported to be going for extra lessons with private tutors for a fee. The government learners who had such a privilege were from the better off citizens who could afford to pay private tutors for their service, but to the majority of the citizens COVID-19 resulted in a long layoff. This was evidenced by a common tweet that reported a female teacher at Ardbenie Primary School in Waterfalls, Harare who was conducting extra lessons and tested positive for COVID-19 together with the students she was teaching. A Twitter report read:

> *….a certain learner whose father works in the neighbouring country was reported to have sneaked back home without being quarantined, unfortunately the father infected his child with COVID-19, who later on infected the tutor together with some of the learners who were receiving extra lessons with him…*

It was saddening to note that a lot of people's phone status had a popular joke that depicted the agony of rural children when online learning started. The picture showed the different social classes that exist between rural residents and urban residents; most comments on social media noted that online learning was for the rich and not for the poor and it was beyond the ordinary populace of rural Zimbabweans. It further showed that for the rural child online learning was still a dream resulting in most rural children being affected to a great extent by COVID-19. One YouTube subscriber reported that "*…learners in rural areas do not have enough text books it was a joke talking of online learning which is far-fetched from them.*"

Experiences of learners

Most learners and educators reported online learning to be a challenge as both the learners and educators were not prepared for online learning. This was even made worse as both parties did not know what to expect and how to make use of the learning platforms that were being used for E-learning. Some of the Tweeter messages noted that it took some time for the educators to familiarise themselves on how best they could assist the learners. On the other hand the learners were not prepared for on line learning as most of them were not familiar with the on line learning platforms; could not afford data for on line learning; did not have the necessary gadgets for online learning. One Likee message read," *the on line learning process itself is a disaster as we are not so sure how to use the media communication channels....l spent the first half of my lesson trying to familiarise myself with Microsoft teams.*"

For most tertiary learners and educators, the study found out that on line learning was not common amongst most learners and educators in Zimbabwe as it was conducted but their semester had to be extended to incorporate the weakness of on line learning. Most of the learners and educators reported to use WhatsApp and email with a number of challenges, for both learners and educators. Social media like WhatsApp was more popular amongst learners even though most of learners felt that such media platforms were better off for social issues other than educational materials. It was noted that most learners and educators still made use of the traditional classroom before their exams when the lockdown was lightened to accommodate the different challenges that had been encountered by the learners even though online learning had been conducted during the COVID-19 lockdown period. One Twitter was recorded saying, "*…..multi-media devices are mainly used for communication and social purposes by learners and rarely used for educational purposes by both the learners and the educators.*"

The study also found out that online learning was faced with a lot of educator resistance as not much was done to ensure that the learning could be conducted in a conducive environment. The most cited challenge by the educators was footing the internet bill from their meagre salaries and making use of their personal gadgets to accommodate hundreds of assignments. One WhatsApp message read:

> *I stopped the online learning because my phone was now having problems with the huge amounts of messages that l was receiving from learners and feared that if my phone crashed l could not afford to repair it worse more talk of buying a new phone…*

The research further noted that it was very difficult to conduct the online learning as not all the learners and educators had the electronic devices that could be used for online learning. Most of the educators complained that the internet bundle was beyond their reach as they normally used Wi-Fi at work places, while the learners had to depend on a daily night bundle that was affordable. This meant that the learners could only access teaching material at night hence they missed the interaction with the educators. To worsen the situation some of the learners and educators lived in areas that did not have internet reception. This made it difficult for learners and educators to effectively interact. One Facebook chart noted that, "…..*l cannot afford to have internet bundles throughout the day as they are very expensive and beyond my reach.*"

The study also found out that lack of self-encounter with educators was a great challenge as there are some topics which require face to face interaction with the educator and difficult to understand while making use of social media platforms like WhatsApp, which were affordable to the majority of the learners and educators, like areas to do with numbers and experiments. Some of the learners reported that non - verbal communication like facial expressions helped many students to master their learning materials and in the absence of the non- verbal communication a lot of feedback was misinterpreted due to a number of factors like minimum concentration on social media. This however was not the story for students who were making use of platforms like goggle class room and teams. One respondent had this to say, "*….it was a real challenge as sometimes when you were in the middle of having the lesson there will be power cuts leading to some educators thinking that you had just decided to abscond the lesson…..*"

Learners were also socially and educationally excluded as evidenced by the findings from some rural based learners. Unavailability of electricity in rural areas for tertiary learners who had no access to solar power at their homes was one such a major drawback and technically excluded the learners from pacing up with others. With the lock down movement restrictions some of the learners reported that they lived in rural areas and they could only access internet at the nearest shopping area. This was the plight of most of the learners who resided in rural areas. One university student on Twitter had this to say, "…. *l had to call all my lecturers explaining my situation as l had no access to internet and there was nowhere l could get internet in my area of residence….*"

It was also a cause of conflict as most of the parents and guardians felt that one could not spend many hours on the phone and viewed that as an excuse for not doing household chores. Some of the respondents on the other hand felt that the home environment itself is not conducive for learning as there are a lot of disturbances. For some tertiary learners who were parents who had toddlers in their care during this period and they reported that it was really a difficult time as the toddlers could not understand why they were being ignored or why they were not being allowed to play with their parent's mobile phone. One respondent on Facebook commented that, "…*online learning has been such an emotional roller coaster…..*"

Another isolated case brought by spending too much time on the mobile phone attending online lessons was gender-based violence. Some of the married learners reported having experienced gender based violence as the learners were constantly quarrelling with their spouses as they did not spend more time with their family but online. This resulted in their spouses not being clear if they were still doing school work or were involved in an extra marital affair. In such incidents the learners opted to miss out on quite a number of lessons in order to create peace in the home environment and to avoid a lot of tension in marriages. One YouTube subscriber wrote this comment "…*most people have never spent time indoors with their family members….. a lot of quarrelling and domestic violence was the order of the day for most families.*"

There were a lot of emotional challenges that were being faced by learners in their endeavour to comply with the demands of online learning. Most University learners reported that they had to depend on their phone to write assignments and to access cheap internet which was hectic. The home environment itself was also reported not to be conducive for learning as some of them did not have a desk and a chair, worse more a separate room to conduct their studies. The learners were left with no option but to attend their lessons anywhere where there was free Wi-Fi or outside in the garden where they were less likely to be disturbed. One Snapchat follower indicated that *"…it was a common trend to see university learners loitering near houses with wifi connectivity…"* It was also a common theme reported by most learners that group work assignments were really difficult to conduct as some of the group members hardly participated due to reasons known to themselves. It was also difficult to coordinate the group itself for an assignment to be submitted and this resulted in others putting more effort than the rest. One learner from Facebook reported that "… *l suffered during the entire lockdown period as all my group members did not have the resources to do all the group assignments…*"

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The study found out that there was a wide disparity between the learners who reside in the urban areas and those who reside in the rural areas as evidenced by the rural learners not experiencing any form of learning during the lock down period while their urban counterparts were learning. This supports the notion by Kanyongo, (2005) which highlighted that education is depended on social class where the rich have access to better education as

compared to the poor. It can thus be noted that historically the country was in a position to address racial disparities in education at the same time creating social class disparities in the same Ministry. In support of this disparity the Grade 7 results of 2020 saw a decline of 9,79 pass rate from the previous year's results recording a national pass rate of 37,11%. (ZIMSEC, 2021). Evidence that the rural learners did not have the privilege of online learning good results were mainly recorded from the local vernacular languages as compared to Mathematics; Agriculture; General paper and English. An overall assessment of the results by ZIMSEC, (2021) revealed that 88 mostly rural schools recorded a pass rate of 0 %. This clearly shows that rural students were the hardest hit by the COVID-19 lockdown period as there was no form of learning for them due to the national lockdown.

Online learning is possible where there is enough infrastructure that is used for ICT, like electrification and internet connectivity, a feature which is still not obvious in most Zimbabwean schools. Machingura, (2016) further notes that most rural schools in Zimbabwe are marginalised. This is further supported by Zvavahera, (2014) who notes that as a result of the marginalisation of most rural schools most teachers are not interested in working in such remote areas. The literacy gap created by online learning, which was worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown may become a generational imbalance which will remain a serious inequality in opportunities in the wake of future generations. This will result in most of the gains of trying to address the historical imbalances in the education sector, which were experienced soon after independence to no avail (Chinhenga, 2017).

One theme that came out of the study was that online platforms were available and used in Zimbabwe by learners from urban areas as compared to learners in rural areas, while online learning was common in non-government schools as compared to government schools. In government schools most learners were familiar with platforms not mainly used for academic purposes but social media. Mbengo, (2014) supports this notion by indicating that learners and educators were not familiar with academic online platforms, and virtual learning platforms were always used as an alternative to face to face interaction. This was however contradictory to the connectivism theory which emphasizes the role of online platforms in creating new opportunities for people to learn and share information.

Another factor that came out of the study was that both the learners and educators had challenges with maintaining online platforms as this was something that both parties were not prepared to make use of, hence the study was in line with Mandoga et al, (2013) who brought out the notion that online learning had a number of challenges in many countries that needed to be addressed at national level for the learners and the educators to comfortably make use of the electronic platforms for educational purposes. This notion was supported by a number of educators who felt that ICT can be imposed overnight but there is need for putting in place the required infrastructure for ICT learning to be possible (Mbengo, 2014).

RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK

In view of the above, the study recommends the need for policy that addresses the disparities in the education sector especially between the rural and urban learners in light of the fact that all children have the right to education regardless of their social background. In trying to solve the immediate problem of most learners in the rural areas there is need to adopt more friendly platforms like making use of radio lessons on popular radio stations that are accessible to most rural areas. Online learning is still a milestone from being a reality in Zimbabwe; hence there is need for proper planning before it can be implemented at national level, making sure that all facilities that ensure the possibility of online learning are put in place. Robust efforts are to be put in place to cater for the rural and other disadvantaged urban populace to ensure access to education during pandemics like COVID-19 to curb inequality and exclusion. Efforts may include provision of community radios where learners can have access to information and necessary updates as well as educational lessons. Information hubs within communities have to be upgraded to at least accommodate such eventualities as brought by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The disparity in the availability; accessibility; affordability and usability of education in Zimbabwe is cause for concern and calls for social work intervention. Education is a basic right for all children and social workers have to ensure that this human right is upheld. There is need for lobbying for children's right to education and addressing all factors creating social structures in the education sector.

Online learning in Zimbabwe was introduced when the country was experiencing economic hardships. The economic state of the nation coupled with the pandemic worsened the situation of most learners and educators moving them further into poverty. There was need for social work intervention strategies to address the root of all the problems that are being experienced in the education sector for there to be feasible and realistic solution that can be adopted in the quest to address the plight of learners.

There is also need for social workers to advocate for policies that are not discriminatory in the education sector. Social Workers can also lobby and advocate with development partners to invest in the upgrading and equipping of community information hubs that are already in existence within each community in Zimbabwe.

Zeroing down to the field of social work, there were a number of challenges that the profession faced as the profession is about moulding learners with social work values and ethics which becomes a challenge assessing

one's character and conduct making use of ICT. There is therefore need for planners and educators in the field of social work to come up with relevant ICT technologies that can be used to improve training of social workers.

CONCLUSION

Finally, the study concludes that due to the spontaneous lockdown that resulted in the closure of all learning institutions, a number of learners missed their lessons as the learning was a trial and error approach. There is therefore need for the education sector to adopt fall back plans that can be adopted in the case of eventualities. The research further concludes that the disparities that are in the education sector in Zimbabwe are a cause of concern which need to be addressed urgently.

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