

AUTHOR:

Dr Annemie Grobler¹ 

AFFILIATION:

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Teachers' experiences of parents' involvement in Foundation Phase learning during COVID-19

Abstract

This interpretive study documents experiences of teachers regarding the impact of parental participation on the learning process of Foundation Phase learners during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The period investigated stretched from the "hard" lockdown in South Africa instituted on 26 March 2020, until the reopening of the physical classroom for Foundation Phase learners on 24 August 2020. A qualitative approach was taken to generate data from participants who taught Grade 1 classes during 2020, using a self-constructed questionnaire with open- and closed-ended items. The study population was localised to the Mangaung municipal area in the Free State, South Africa. The theoretical framework of socio-constructivism informed the inquiry. The key elements in this learning theory are the learners, curriculum, teachers and society. During the mentioned period, learners were deprived of the two key inputs of teachers and society, leading to an intensified dependency on parental involvement as a source of guidance. The questionnaire afforded teacher respondents the opportunity to voice their concerns, frustrations, successes and recommendations for future management of similar situations. Coding of the responses identified the theme of communication to emerge. Further thematic analysis refined the findings to indicate that teachers deemed parental involvement essential in i) providing technological support for their children; and ii) interpreting the tasks set for their Grade 1 learners. Barriers to effective communication as perceived by teachers were i) the language barrier where parents were unable to speak the language of learning and teaching of the school; ii) the digital divide posed by parents without effective digital support; and iii) the schooling level of parents who could not interpret the assignments for their children. The recommendation is that going forward, i) parents should have access to and embrace technological advances to support their children's learning; ii) themselves practice a learning culture at home, and iii) model positive values to their children by active involvement in their learning.

Keywords: *Foundation Phase teaching; transfer of learning; pandemic; impact, lockdown; parental involvement; COVID-19*

1. Introduction

In South Africa, the coronavirus pandemic resulted in severely reduced hours of schooling in 2020. The original school year was trimmed from a planned 199 days as

published on 11 January 2018 to only 158 days under the Disaster Management Act published on 11 August 2020 (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2020). This was a result of the contingencies caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus pandemic (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). School closure during a five-week period in South Africa was part of the hard lockdown response to the pandemic. From 8 June 2020, Foundation Phase schooling was offered through a virtual learning platform (VLP) or in some or other online fashion (SABC News Online, 1 May 2020). Physical school attendance by Grade 1 learners only resumed formally on 24 August 2020 (DBE, 2020). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recognised the immensity of the changes brought to the educational scene by the pandemic and declared it a calamity in its own right (UNESCO, 2020). This acknowledgement by UNESCO is equally applicable to the situation in South Africa where we had disparities in education even before the pandemic (Jansen, 2019:360) which aggravated the predicament posed by the pandemic, specifically in terms of education.

2. Problem statement

The reduced contact time had an adverse effect on the learners, who had to cope with the curriculum load in a novel mode of learning (Jansen & Farmer-Phillips, 2021; Jones, 2020) but also on the teachers, who had to redesign their teaching to support their charges (Kirby, 2021; McCallum, 2021; Jones, 2020). Grade 1 learners had hardly grown accustomed to the formal school day, having spent the first 11 weeks of their schooling career in the physical classroom, before schools were closed indefinitely on 18 March 2020. The process of adapting to the school routine was jeopardised by contingencies pertaining to the environment and the various role-players that assist Grade 1 learners in their learning (Timmons *et al.*, 2021). In a normal school year, Grade 1 learners would make a gradual entry into the formal school situation under the wakeful eye of an educational expert, the Grade 1 teacher. However, much of the gradual accompaniment offered by the Grade 1 teacher was foregone in 2020. Instead, this responsibility was by necessity (partially) delegated to the parents of Foundation Phase learners; to individuals and couples who had previously relied on the socio-constructivist system that heavily involved the teacher as knowledgeable partner (Jacobs, Vakalisa & Gawe, 2012) in the learning process.

During the hard lockdown period (up to 8 June 2020) and the months thereafter in 2020, teachers were challenged to adapt their teaching engagement with their Grade 1 learners. The situation called upon teachers to employ novel teaching methods that had not been tested by time (Wolhuter & Jacobs, 2021) and may loosely be referred to as emergency remote learning (ERL). Kirby (2021) and McCallum (2021) acknowledge the demands that were made on teachers to perform in these uncertainties. I conducted an investigation in 10 Mangaung urban and peri-urban primary schools in the second half of 2021 to gauge teacher responses to the changed reality in 2020 brought about by the pandemic. According to the teachers interviewed, the parents of Foundation Phase learners were partly to blame for the poor transfer of learning.

The directives of the Disaster Management Act (2020) resulted in the indefinite closing of schools, bringing all attempts towards collaborative learning and meaning making as intended by the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) effectively to a standstill. When the schools reopened on 8 June 2020 it was only in an online or virtual fashion – an unprecedented challenge for the teachers, society and the parents involved. The situation brought new impediments to successful learning (Taylor, 2020; Jones, 2020) through a variety of role-players. Some

schools were not ready to move to any form of online learning due to various factors (Spaull & Jansen, 2019; Motsa, 2021; Wolhuter & Jacobs, 2021; Jones, 2020). Some teachers were not keen on the change in curriculum delivery (Taylor, 2020; Kirby, 2021; McCallum, 2021) due to the lived principle of collaborative teaching and learning as promoted in the National Curriculum Statement (NCS, 2012), which emphasises the input of teachers and peers.

At the time of writing this article, research on COVID-19 and its impact on the world was in full production. The keywords “lockdown, COVID-19, education, grade 1 plans” typed into the Google search engine on 13 September 2021 provided no fewer than 7 650 000 hits. An attempt to narrow down the search for local South African research included searches on 7 databases of the EBSCOhost platform and SABINET with “grade 1, COVID-19, education” as keywords. The result was little, if any, research localised to South Africa to assess the experiences of Foundation Phase teachers regarding the role and impact of parental involvement in schooling during the pandemic. This investigation therefore attempted to provide further insight into the experiences of teachers of the role and involvement of parents in the success of the schooling provision for their Grade 1 children during 2020.

With this context as backdrop, the question that guided this investigation was: What were the experiences of Grade 1 teachers regarding the role and impact of parental involvement on the transfer of learning to Grade 1 learners during COVID-19?

The theoretical framework that guided the empirical research is described below. The findings are subsequently presented, together with conclusions on pertinent issues raised in the problem statement. The implications of the findings in terms of the theoretical framework (socio-constructivism) are considered to propose a direction for future management of this phenomenon.

3. Theoretical framework

The investigation was framed by the socio-constructivist theory of learning. This theory posits that four role-players constitute the essential learning process, viz. the learner, the teacher, the subject matter or content and the environment (Jacobs, Vakalisa & Gawe, 2012). Constructivism emphasises the transfer of skills (ibid, 41) over the attainment of content knowledge. In normal (pre-pandemic) times, the teacher as knowledgeable other facilitated a collaborative process that requires the active engagement of learners (Litshani, 2017: 22). The phenomenon of learning was thus augmented by “collaboration and the complexity or diversity of input” (Oguz, 2007: 9). During 2020, with the restrictions on physical attendance of school, teachers were unable to physically provide their usual teaching and learning support to learners. This situation created a gap in the extant framework of socio-constructivist teaching and learning. With learners stuck at home, parents were almost ambushed into taking up the responsibility of providing the guidance that would have come from teachers.

The last crucial role-player in the socio-constructivist theory of learning is provided by the environment. To borrow from Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, interactions with society create a multi-layered cultural experience that inherently influences the learning context of the learner. The specific family in which the learner grows up forms the most intimate circle of interaction, followed by the school and societal communities and other associations that may figure as important in the life of the child. Due to the new situation posed by the pandemic, parents were thus required to fulfil a double role. Even before the pandemic, Fru and Seotsanyana (2017) pointed to the need to further investigate the effect of sociocultural

interactions on learners' learning practices. They specifically pointed to a renewed attempt to determine the impact of the environment on a learner's success. Likewise, Matlabe (2017) mentioned that parental involvement led to improved learner performance, specifically mentioning that parents as the first circle of engagement should communicate to the class teacher any deterrents that they observe in the learner's learning. All of these theorists' views date from the pre-COVID era; thus, it is now even more pressing to investigate the limitations to deliver curriculum content in the collaborative learning environment, such as when learners were prevented from attending the physical classroom. The current investigation, therefore, reports on the experiences of teachers of parental involvement in the Foundation Phase teaching and learning process, specifically during the pandemic in 2020. Various factors that could affect parental involvement in the schooling situation of their Grade 1 children will now be considered.

Atilas *et al.* (2021) rightly maintain that the element of surprise posed by the sudden embargo on physical schooling should in future be expected. Therefore, equitable access to technological resources and Wi-Fi will in future be of quintessential importance for parents to support their children's learning (Timmons *et al.*, 2020; Kirby, 2021, Motsa, 2021). Williams, Macintosh and Russell (2021) confirm that equitable access to technology will also influence the equity of distance education. However, the element of parental preparedness in terms of technological *savoir faire* has been underestimated and may prove to be a decisive factor in learner success or failure (Taylor, 2020; Formosinho, 2021). Ironically, it seems that parents may in fact detract from the successful transfer of basic learning to their children due to their own ineptitude, irrespective of the nature of their inability.

In addition, a report by Nelson and Sharp (2020) indicated that learners in general had fewer opportunities to engage with learning material as a result of the reduction in school hours. When parents had to facilitate their children's learning, it seems that they did not afford the same length of time on tasks for their children to master the curriculum content – inevitably leading to heightened feelings of failure or ineffectiveness among Foundation Phase learners. Mochida *et al.* (2021) state that learners generally experienced heightened stress throughout 2020. They investigated factors that affected learners' stress during this period. One of their major conclusions is that parenting styles made a significant contribution to their children's levels of stress. It is therefore possible that parents inadvertently added to their children's stress levels due to their level of engagement in their children's learning.

It is worth mentioning that education should teach learners resilience, especially in these times of change and uncertainty (Van der Walt, 2020), if we are to prepare them for the future at all. Konstantinou (2021) investigated the opportunities opened up by the pandemic to teach values. He reiterated the importance of character-building courses, especially in the new post-lockdown context. Similarly, Nelson and Sharp (2020) noted the possibility to establish positive behavioural traits during the lockdown. Konstantinou's (2021) research proposed the introduction of an intervention aimed at adolescents to develop perseverance. The conclusion of the researcher, therefore, is that the post-pandemic world will increasingly require youngsters to possess positive behavioural traits and values that have been integrated and established as personal strengths. These values should already be established in the Foundation Phase. It is therefore argued that parents should co-assume the responsibility for teaching and modelling these values when they are involved in the teaching and learning of their children – something that, according to the interviews with teachers mentioned above, seemed to lack in their engagement with teaching and learning during the pandemic.

The interpretivist paradigm, known for its focus on establishing meaning through interpretative actions, underpinned this investigation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This paradigm is distinct from the positivist paradigm that features predominantly in portraying a single reality. The current study aimed at interpreting the research data presented by the respondents on the experienced influence of parental involvement and cooperation in learner success. A qualitative research approach allowed the researcher to examine data of the phenomenon at hand (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), namely of how teachers experienced the role and level of parental involvement in Foundation Phase learning transfer. Transfer of learning refers to the effective process through which learners attain the knowledge and skills demonstrated in the teacher's facilitation of material.

The above context framed the empirical investigation on the experiences of Foundation Phase teachers on the impact of parental involvement on the educational adaptation and success of their Foundation Phase children during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. Empirical investigation

4.1 Aim of the investigation

The aim of this investigation was to document and investigate the experiences of Grade 1 teachers regarding the role and impact of parental cooperation on the transfer of learning to Grade 1 learners during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

4.2 Research design

A qualitative research approach allowed me to examine a phenomenon in its natural setting to make sense of this experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The design can be described as phenomenological as it was tailored towards describing a phenomenon in its natural setting, namely the authentic experiences of Foundation Phase teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic, and interpreting the implications of these perceptions (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). The phenomenological research design allowed me to pose questions that would yield rich data from which themes emerged (Cohen *et al.*, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Based on an interpretivist paradigm, a process of inductive reasoning was followed, commencing with the specific phenomenon of teacher experiences on parental involvement and cooperation, in order to move towards the general in formulating conclusions.

4.3 Research instrument

In qualitative research, the researcher is already the instrument himself (Cohen *et al.*, 2018: 289), as no data generation is otherwise possible (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The socio-constructivist theory of learning, as discussed above, provided the theoretical framework for constructing a questionnaire for teachers concerning their lived experiences in these times. The questionnaire comprised 32 items in three sections. The first section (questions 1–6) established the biographical-experiential profile of the teacher and the type of school. The second section (items 7–13) used closed-ended questions to determine the approach of the school to the pandemic immediately after lockdown. The last section (items 14–31) explored the impact of the pandemic on the approach to teaching and learning in the classroom. Teachers were prompted to expatiate on the strategies they used; insights gained, frustrations and recommendations for future application. Four open-ended items (items 25, 26, 27 and 32) specifically requested respondents to share their insights on the situation that evolved; their

frustrations; their proposals for future management of similar situations; and their thoughts on the future of schools in the current format. As noted by Cohen *et al.* (2018: 475), a semi-structured questionnaire with open-ended items may catch the gems that might have been unnoticed in a more structured type of questionnaire. The focus in this investigation falls on the above-mentioned four open-ended items.

4.4 Pilot study

Once permission had been obtained from the Free State Department of Education and the General Human Research Ethics Committee (GHREC) of the University of the Free State with reference UFS-HSD2021/0280/21, a pilot study consisting of an electronic survey through SurveyMonkey was conducted. Of the four questionnaires sent out, only one was completed and returned. After finetuning the items, it was decided to present the questionnaire as a hard copy. The results of the pilot study were not included in the research findings reported below.

4.5 Sample

Ten primary schools in the Mangaung metropolitan municipality were conveniently sampled (Cohen *et al.*, 2018) as being in accessible proximity to the area where the researcher lived. The approximate number of primary schools in the Mangaung urban municipal area is set at 114 (Schools4sa, 2021). These schools serve a population of 775 184 residents with 29.3% aged below 15 years (Municipalities of SA, 2021). The ten schools included a range of socio-economic spheres, including former model C, quintile 1–3, single gender and co-education schools. The geographic area covered by these schools is around 30km and stretched from the well-to-do suburbs in the north to the southern blue-collar precinct. The sample further represented the densely populated urban core and the agricultural smallholdings in the east.

I visited schools in person to request participation. One school was only able to furnish one questionnaire while the others each provided data by two teachers. Finally, a sample of 23 questionnaires was collected from 12 schools, still within the constraints of the original geographic and socio-economic area.

Participants were selected based on i) having taught a Grade 1 class ii) during 2020 iii) at one of the schools in the sample. All three criteria were deemed essential for inclusion in the sample.

Table 1: Number of years' experience of participants, n=23

Number of years teaching Grade 1		Number of years overall teaching experience	
1–9	11 teachers	1-9	6 teachers
10–19	10 teachers	10-19	13 teachers
20–29	1 teacher	20-29	1 teachers
30–	1 teacher	30-	4 teachers

4.6 Qualitative data generation, capturing and analysis

I solicited participation by visiting the principal of each of the selected schools. The principal provided permission for two teachers who had taught Grade 1 learners during 2020 to participate on behalf of their school. I left the hardcopy questionnaires and an information letter with the participants and collected them at a date that was acceptable to all. COVID-19 protocols were followed during all physical interactions. After the above process, I captured

and coded all the raw data manually. Key findings emerged from which pertinent themes were identified.

4.7 Ethical considerations

This study adhered to principles of ethicality as indicated by Cohen *et al.* (2018: 471), and by obtaining permission from the GHREC of the University of the Free State (UFS) and the Free State Department of Education (FSDoE). Principals of schools were invited to approve participation by the Foundation Phase teachers in their schools. An information letter was appended to the questionnaire. I undertook to disseminate research results to all schools involved, thus satisfying the principle of beneficence. There was no risk of harm or loss due to participating in the research. Responses were completely anonymous as no personal identifiers were requested. The only personal detail requested was the number of years of teaching experience. The identity of the school was also protected as participants were only requested to name the category of the school. The questionnaire was thus deemed to satisfy the requirements of confidentiality, anonymity and non-traceability in the research findings (Cohen *et al.*, 2018). The principle of methodological rigour and fairness was promoted by phrasing the open-ended questionnaire items in a neutral and unbiased manner. All COVID-19 protocols in place at the time of the investigation were upheld in personal interaction with the principals and the participants. The submission of questionnaires remained anonymous. For administrative purposes a number was allocated to each questionnaire upon collection.

5. Findings

The key finding from the authentic experiences of the teacher sample indicated that communication between teachers and parents, or lack thereof, presented an important stumbling block for the successful delivery of quality teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The communication theme further diversified into problems relating to parental education and technological provision. Parental education can be further divided into the language barrier and the ineptitude with technology. These findings came from thematic analysis of the data collected through the open-ended items on questionnaires. Verbatim quotations from the responses will be provided below as applicable.

School and teacher profiles

The first section of the questionnaire profiled the type of school and the teacher's experience. Although the researcher attempted to target schools from across the socio-economic spectrum, the diversification of schools was not maintained in coding the data. It is therefore not possible to indicate the origin of a specific response. This was done in the interest of confidentiality and because the researcher was not concerned with establishing different categories of responses. The teachers self-reported the category of their schools to be as follows: 1 private school, 2 no-fee schools, 15 ex-model C schools, and 5 quintile 1–3 schools. Teachers had an average of 10.5 years of experience teaching Grade 1.

Table 2: Number of years' experience teaching Grade 1, n=23

Number of years teaching Grade 1	Number of participants
1–9	11
10–19	10
20–29	1
30–	1

The empirical investigation zoomed in on the aspect of teacher experience of the involvement of parents. Teachers were sensitive to the obligation that they had to respond to their learners with new and novel solutions for the adapted reality that did not include the collaborative environment of the classroom anymore. The teachers mentioned their deliberate efforts to compensate for the disrupted classroom situation. From the responses to this section, the issue of the extent of parental involvement regarding the success of learner adjustment and curriculum delivery emerged with surprising consistency. A major category that emerged from the coding process was concerned with communication. It became clear that the process of communicating with learners through their parents caused additional problems *per se*. These concerns pan out in several themes.

Overview of themes

Communication

- Challenge to establish contact with parents
- Tolerance for the dilemma of essential workers vs impatience with non-compliance
- Parental compliance
- Parental incompetence
- Technological deficit of parents
- Dissatisfaction with indirect communication
- Language barrier
- Incorrect relaying of information
- Uncertainties relating to loss of contact time
- Desire to return to school

Theme: The challenge to establish contact with parents

From 8 June to 24 August 2020, teachers sent work home to their learners without fail. Although the strategies to deliver the content varied, a common frustration reported by teachers was the uncertainty whether parents had received the work and had indeed conveyed the learning task to their children. One participant stated: “Not all parents came to fetch books.” Parents frequently did not inform the school when their cellphone numbers changed, which resulted in silence from some parents when teachers asked for feedback on the WhatsApp group: “Some parents did not communicate back at all. Their children just fell behind. Other parents did not have access to WhatsApp or even a smartphone,” according to one respondent.

To complicate the problem, it was impossible to gauge whether parents had conveyed the learning task accurately and as the teacher had intended. One respondent remarked in this regard: “Language was a problem. Parents did not understand the assignments and could

therefore not explain to their children." Another teacher added: "Parents didn't cooperate and due to the language barrier, kids struggled to complete work on their own." Yet another teacher added: "Parents were not always assisting at home and some learners would not work at home but most did."

Theme: Tolerance for the dilemma of essential workers vs impatience with non-compliance

Due to reasons beyond their control, some parents could not support their Grade 1 learners in the way that the teachers would have wanted. Some parents were prevented from supporting their children due to long hours at work, sometimes in the frontline of the health response to the pandemic. One teacher concluded: "Not all parents could assist the learners on the same level due to their own work responsibilities." Another teacher observed, "Some parents were essential workers and did not have the time to do the work with their children." Both Taylor (2020) and Jones (2020) also noted in their research the strong sympathy displayed to parents in the current sample group; however, this respect was challenged by their observations that many parents just did not seem to care enough. One teacher remarked, "Parents did not do their part." And: "Parents didn't cooperate." One teacher voiced the frustration as such: "The deficit will never be erased."

Theme: Parental compliance

Teachers observed that many parents struggled to follow the instructions that they had provided to assist the learners to complete learning activities at home. One teacher expressed their sentiment as follows: "Parents did not all cooperate with work to be done at home. This can be because of lack of knowledge, their own work pressure and lack of resources." Another teacher added: "Some parents did not understand what had to be done, others did not complete the work." The general feeling was echoed by yet another teacher: "Parents could not/did not copy the work from their phone." This may suggest that parents were non-compliant; a situation that reverberated negatively on the success level of their children's learning.

As an open-ended item, teachers were invited to divulge any further insights or comments that they might wish to express. Parent involvement was repeatedly cited as the most problematic issue. It was clear that well-weathered teachers found themselves exasperated by the level of disregard exhibited by parents. One teacher voiced it as follows: "Parents should take more responsibility for their children's education during a time where it is impossible for teachers to educate their children." This was reiterated by yet another teacher: "...Parents not being able to explain concepts and new phonics to learners."

This situation is worrisome, especially considering that teachers are not directly charged with the responsibility for parents, but for the learners in their care. It therefore seems that parental non-compliance has surfaced as a variant of concern, to borrow and re-apply some of the COVID-19 terminology. One teacher complained: "Parents had many cellphone numbers so they did not all receive the *WhatsApps*. Their data was limited."

Theme: Parental incompetence

The level of ineptitude displayed by parents not only perplexed the teachers but found some overcompensating on behalf of the learners. Several teachers attested that they had printed or couriered learning material to the learners at their own expense or provided parents with data bundles in order to enable them to download the learning material. One teacher remarked,

“Teachers did above and beyond all they could [to] assist learners buy[ing] data for parents to download. Print[ing] books and couriered it. Our kids worked. We went the extra mile.” Another one added, “Teachers did everything they could in order for our kiddies to continue with their work at home.”

Theme: Dissatisfaction with indirect communication with learners via parental mediation

Teachers freely voiced their dissatisfaction and frustration at having to depend on parental mediation in order to reach their learners. One teacher declared: “Learners need face to face time with [the] teacher – to motivate them and explain.” Many teachers experienced the indirect communication via parents as a stepdown from the direct engagement that had previously been a characteristic of the trust relationship between teacher and learners. A teacher explained: “Language was a problem. Parents did not understand the assignments and could therefore not explain to their children.” Another teacher elaborated: “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.” Yet another teacher declared: “Nothing can replace or imitate an actual physical classroom environment. You form a rapport with your learners and create a unique classroom atmosphere.”

Theme: Technological deficits of parents

Any communication with learners was subject to the level of technological aptitude of parents. In addition, a limitation in digital services due to provision of connectivity or socio-economic level was also a factor. One teacher noted, “Some parents could not view the video clips due to data problems.” A second teacher added, “Data was not freely available. Some did not have *whatsapp*, some had phones with sms that could not read photos.” If parents were able possess the required smartphone at all, they often could not afford the additional expense of data to access the lessons (Atilas *et al.*, 2021; Formosinho, 2021). One teacher observed, “Not all parents have data or the facilities to use technology at home.”

Theme: Communication impeded by the language barrier

Another cause of ineffective assistance by parents had its origin in the language barrier that is prevalent in many communities in South Africa. Effective communication with the parents was impossible when parents were not conversant with the language of learning and teaching of the school where they had enrolled their children. A teacher noted: “Some parents did not understand what had to be done, others did not complete the work.” Another teacher remarked: “...Only unfortunate [...] is that parents cannot help learners sufficiently since we are English medium and they come from Sotho homes.”

Semi-literate parents were not able to assist their children to interpret written assignments as provided by the teachers: “Some parents did not understand what had to be done.” The practice of enrolling learners in a school that uses a language of learning and teaching that differs from the home language (mother tongue) in this case disadvantaged the learners and left the teachers unable to communicate with the learners. A teacher observed: “Language was a problem. Parents did not understand the assignments and could therefore not explain to their children.” Yet another added, “... due to the language barrier, kids struggled to complete work on their own.”

Theme: Incorrect relaying of information by parents

Teachers mentioned the uncertainty of knowing whether tasks had been relayed correctly to learners and correctly interpreted by the learners. A teacher expressed their helplessness as follows: "Not knowing whether learners did not understand the work." Another teacher added: "Parents not being able to explain concepts and new phonics to learners." Yet another remarked: "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".

Theme: Uncertainties caused by loss of contact time

Another concern revolved around uncertainties triggered by the loss of contact time. Due to the limited contact with teachers, it was nearly impossible to gauge whether transfer of learning had taken place. The reduced contact hours resulted in less time for learners to practise their skills; consequently, skills and knowledge were possibly not captured correctly. Whereas in the pre-COVID era, teachers would in good faith act *in loco parentis*, the recent events found teachers asking parents to act *in loco magistri*. How parents managed this teaching role at home was not divulged to the teacher, who could only hope for the best. It is understandable that teachers felt powerless after the extra mile that they had covered in order to deliver curriculum content to their learners, only to be defeated by the (non-)involvement of an unwilling or inept parent. As one teacher remarked, "At school learners repeat work, at home they just do it to get it done."

Theme: Desire to return to school environment

The questionnaire concluded with an open-ended enquiry on the desires of educators for the future. Teachers were unanimous in professing the need to return to school for maximum contact time: "Learners should come to school every day. They like the routine and stability. Emotionally it is also better for them to come to school. The school is a safe haven for them." The wish to maintain rapport with their learners informed this request. The teachers remarked: "Learners need to attend school on a regular basis" and another added: "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 collaborative environment created by peers and teachers confirms the applicability of the sociocultural theory. Another teacher echoed this, saying: "School must continue as it is, because learners need contact of other learners and teachers to prepare them for lifelong learning." This finding confirms the value of the school environment, inclusive of the collaborative learning offered by peers and the expert guidance of teachers and corroborates the validity of a socio-constructivist teaching and learning theory.

6. Discussion

With the above exposition of parents' less than satisfactory contribution to their children's successful learning, it can be argued that parents need training in order to have a significant impact on the need of their children for learning support during a pandemic. This is affirmed by Formosinho's plea for "schoolification" of parents (2021: 141). A caveat is expressed by Jones (2020) who warns that parents should not try to recreate the traditional school environment at home; rather, learners should be allowed greater freedom in dealing with curriculum content. As remarked by one of the respondents: "The curriculum should be adapted so that the idea of *catching up* and *being behind* can be erased from teachers' and learners' perspective and attitude towards everyday life."

The respondents in the sample were convinced that teachers had not only provided what they would have done in normal times but had sacrificed on a personal and emotional level in order to assist their learners to function as normally as possible. These measures included buying airtime for parents, photocopying and dispatching learning material to offsite destinations and recording time-consuming video clips at their own expense on a frequent basis. Teachers were perhaps most painfully aware of the absence of collaborative learning as envisaged by the National Curriculum Statement (NCS, 2012) for their learners during the pandemic. Learners were deprived not only of the physical support of their peers (Landsberg *et al.*, 2012), but also of the first-hand expertise of the subject experts, the teachers, who were now dependent on the collaboration of parents in order to reach their Grade 1 learners. This calls to mind the words of Fru and Seotsanyana (2017: 9): "There is a need for social agents other than teachers to complement the classroom learning processes, since these agents embody the overall knowledge experiences of learners". Thus far, the months spent in lockdown due to the pandemic have confirmed the veracity of this theoretical statement. In addition, teachers had to improvise and compensate for parents' performance ((Jansen & Farmer-Phillips, 2021; Matlabe, 2017). It is ironic that the pandemic resulted in the teacher-parent responsibility roles frequently being swapped with the parent now acting in a double capacity – and often failing desperately. As mentioned above, Mochida *et al.* (2021) concluded that higher levels of stress experienced by learners during the pandemic point to the lack of school and peer support and the necessity to rely on parental input. In line with the socio-constructivist theory of learning, it is likely that the inability of parents to provide the required level of support to their children had contributed significantly to this stress.

A report for the National Foundation of Educational Research (NFER) in England by Nelson and Sharp (2020) similarly observed that the challenge of parents without the technological support of data or connectivity was a major issue for teachers in their attempt to provide teaching and learning material to the learners. Notwithstanding the low level of satisfaction expressed by teachers in the present study in this regard, WhatsApp group messages were regarded as the best way to communicate with parents.

A variation of this challenge was encountered with parents who were not digitally literate and who could not assist their children due to insufficient technological *savoir faire*. Timmons *et al.* (2020) documented the anguish of parents during the pandemic who realised that their inability to provide technological support would negatively affect their children's learning. Atilas *et al.* (2021) flagged this concern as the most likely decisive factor in future scenarios that will separate the empowered from the deprived.

Finally, the quintessence of effective communication with parents was reiterated by various researchers around the globe (Jansen & Farmer-Phillips, 2021; Formosinho, 2021, Kirby, 2021; Atilas *et al.*, 2021) and was reiterated by the teacher responses in the current investigation. With the fourth industrial revolution steadily gaining ground in all aspects of life, it is inevitable to adapt to the demands of digitalisation. As previously discussed, Van der Walt (2020) stresses the importance of setting the example for our learners in embracing innovation. Socio-constructivism emphasises the influence of an enabling environment for enhancing the learning transfer by our learners (Landsberg *et al.*, 2012) in which parents can intimately influence the situation of their children. It is ironic that some parents, who are expected to guide and protect their children, are apparently rendering themselves increasingly impotent in decision-making processes due to their inadequate mastery and control of technology. It is crucial that parents keep abreast of innovation to retain their social relevance.

7. Possible limitations

The investigation targeted a small and relatively urbanised area in the central Free State of South Africa. For this reason, the results cannot be generalised to the rest of the country or abroad. Further investigations on the availability of technological aids are advised. It is likely that the profile of parental involvement in other communities would portray similar trends, assuming that parents of Grade 1 children are broadly from the same generation. It cannot be guaranteed that similar results would be replicated in other areas of South Africa, yet this conclusion is in line with the characteristics of phenomenological research (Cohen *et al.*, 2018).

8. Conclusion

The lingering issue identified through the responses of teachers remains the lack of expected parental cooperation. This factor seems to be decisive for learner success at foundational level, as expressed by teachers. It is critical that parents realise that their obligation to their children's schooling includes donating their attentive time and honouring the responsibility of developing their own digital skills. If the uncertainties of the future prevent a full return to the physical classroom with maximum contact time, parents will have to become more involved. Parents will need to increase their input in their children's schooling activities if they wish to significantly augment a conducive learning environment at home. Additionally, equitable and fair access to technology is crucial to facilitate learning that is aligned to fourth industrial revolution requirements, repeating the imperative for parents to fulfil their obligations towards their children. The findings underscore the principles of collaborative teaching and acknowledge the inherent necessity of all the elements of the socio-constructivist theory of learning in South African educational settings. Finally, these glimpses into teacher experiences suggest that a more detailed investigation of the possible neglect of the parental role and its consequence may shed more light on the attainment of schooling objectives by learners during times of crisis.

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