
Tawanda Wallace Mataka¹, Tawanda Mukurunge², Takura Bhila ³

National University of Lesotho, Limkokwing University of Creative Technology, Lesotho, Limkokwing University of Creative Technology, Lesotho

ABSTRACT

Access to technology and internet is a challenge to third world countries such as Zimbabwe, because they seem to view them as luxuries that can only be placed in a few selected government offices that exclude learning institutions. This paralysis has been exposed as education has taken a knock as the world grapples with the devastating effects of Covid 19. Virtual learning has become the game changer in all education systems globally. However, this may not be agreed upon in the Zimbabwean context. There are two categories in Zimbabwe; the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’ and schools are categorised as such. There are private schools for the ‘haves’ that can afford almost all education gadgets including online technologies and the public schools for the working class ‘have nots’ that almost have nothing and cannot afford the necessities afforded by private schools including online learning which is a basic necessity. This has resulted in a life-threatening dislocation for the learners and educators in making education accessible. It is against this background that this paper explores the best practices to enable equal access to both privileged and marginalised learners in Zimbabwean primary and secondary schools. The focus of the study is to scrutinise possibilities of bridging the technological disparities between privileged (private) and marginalised (public) schools so that there is equal access to education despite the type of school one is attending during times of pandemics such as Covid 19 and in normal times. Open ended questionnaires were distributed to generate data from teachers across Zimbabwe providing their views on the current virtual learning process and what they recommend going into the future. The data generated were presented and processed into themes.

Keyword: Covid 19, marginalised, privileged, virtual learning, private schools, public schools, access, ‘have’ ‘have not’ epistemology

1. INTRODUCTION

Installing internet and the sourcing of electronic gadgets should be prioritised by the leadership in both government and at educational institutions for the best growth of the schooling child. Educationists and all concerned stake holders should join hands on the deck so that learners and students do not lag behind in times of crisis such as Covid 19 and other similar disasters. It should be a considered basic right in this 21st century for every schooling child or adult to have access to the internet and electronic gadgets such as a laptop for use outside school. This paper intends to explore the best technological practices and best platforms for virtual learning so that there is epistemological access by all learners despite geosocial positioning. Under scrutiny was how teachers in schools in Zimbabwe have been implementing virtual learning during this Covid 19 pandemic since inception of the lockdown on the 21st of March 2020. The paper analysed how teachers were going about online teaching in their various schools across the country. Questionnaires were emailed to teachers in various provinces in both private and public schools. The study adopted a qualitative approach because it intended to pronounce the best practices to implement for epistemological access during the learning process in both private and public schools. The data generated were presented and processed according to themes.

2. BACKGROUND OF STUDY

As the World Health Organisation declared Covid 19 a world pandemic on the 11th of March 2020, schools in Zimbabwe closed on the 28th of March
2020, two weeks earlier than initially planned. This was the common trend in many schools globally. This was to break the cycle of transmission of the coronavirus. Contact learning was stopped at once to allow for social distancing.

When the new term in Zimbabwe began on the 5th of May, public schools remained closed because the environment was not safe for the children. This was the same case with schools in neighbouring countries such as South Africa, Namibia and others. On the contrary, private schools did not delay starting the term; they switched to virtual learning (online learning). In Zimbabwe a private school is founded, conducted and maintained by a private group rather than by the government usually charging tuition and often following a particular philosophy. https://www.dictionary.com/browse/private-school. They were able to switch to virtual learning because infrastructure and resources were readily available and in place. This was not the case in public schools. A public school in Zimbabwe is owned by the government and learners attend without paying a fee. Learners from such institutions are automatically shut out or left behind in disaster situations like the Covid 19 pandemic because they have no resources to enable access to epistemology. This exposes the economic divide that has ravaged the country.

In private schools they have unlimited choices of online programmes to select from. Their class sizes and needs determine the programmes and licences to buy. Alumni, private companies, and individuals sponsor them. The common and modest platforms that are dominating are video telephony software and zoom. Some are using less sophisticated ones like chatroom and others. However, the opposite is true for public schools in Zimbabwe. Many of the schools have no electricity, and if it is there, it is only in the headmaster ‘s office and a few teachers’ houses. Further, if it is available in some classes, there is no internet connection and the computers. Sadly, most of the public schools are dilapidated that if they happen to be fortunate to get the computers, they will be stolen because security is not available.

The virtual learning approach must have been resolved 10-15 years ago if the government of Zimbabwe was committed to aligning education with global trends. According to Nziramasanga Commission, 1999, it was recommended that education in Zimbabwe should embrace Information Communication Technology because that is where the world is heading. This was suggested to enable the learners and students to be compliant to global trends. Private schools took the advice and they mechanised their schools with the latest technologies hence in this era of Covid 19 they are not found lacking. Again, this document seems to have been read in other countries and they implemented the recommendations. A case in point is South Africa where they have made strides in equipping their schools with ICT facilities, but it has a young democracy unlike Zimbabwe whose democracy is an adult of 40. In Zimbabwe, no strides have been made in public schools.

The glaring disparities between private and public schools are exposed because of Covid 19. The ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’ of Zimbabwe are exposing themselves through education. In trying to compensate for its failures in planning, the government of Zimbabwe is proposing radio and television lessons which may not even take off. This is gross negligence by the government because not all corners of the country can receive television and radio signals. They are too rural. Even if there is that opportunity, a child with access to the internet and a computer stands a better chance of understanding concepts than one listening to the radio or watching television. Radio and television do not offer opportunities for revision and the revisiting of concepts. There is no teacher/learner interaction compared to virtual learning. In as much as the government is trying to portray itself as committed, they failed the citizens by not implementing what the Nziramasanga Commission recommended 21 years ago. There is no valid excuse for the non-implementation of ICT because the economy was not yet as bad despite cracks showing. If the responsible authorities continue with their lackadaisical approach to pertinent issues surrounding education Covid 19 could be an appropriate recipe towards mental genocide in Zimbabwe.

3. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Information Communication Technology should be the epicentre of all education systems. The government of Zimbabwe must cease treating it as a luxury that is optionally installed in schools. It must be policy that all grades from primary to secondary should have access to ICT in their respective rooms with internet available.
throughout the schooling day. It is a shame in a country like Zimbabwe whose literacy rate and personnel are lauded the world over to still have schools that do have access to Internet connection and ICT. Only private schools are helping because of abundant resources at their disposal and public schools are on the receiving end because of a government with misguided priorities.

4. STUDY AIM

The study intends to illuminate how Covid 19 has brought to light the gap between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’ in the Zimbabwean education sector through abilities to productively teach and learn virtually and how the situation can be resolved to avoid such sad disparities in the future.

5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The activity theoretical framework informs this study because it illuminates the specific system that connects ICT learning and its sociocultural setting especially in times such as Covid 19 pandemic. It is there to gauge and prove its usability in bridging the gap between the teacher and the child during these complex times (Miettinen, 1998). The major advantage is its offering of conceptual tools that are usable in complex disaster situations so that the academic project does not suffer. It considers the various learners’ experiences. According to (Chen, Hsu & Hung, 2000) ICT tools “play different mediating roles in the instructional process: informative tools, situating tools and constructive and communicative tools” (p.23). For this study, communicative tools are central because they are a conduit of information sharing between the teacher and the learner or among students beyond the physical barrier (either by space, time, or both) of the classroom. The communicative tools include email, electronic bulletin boards, chat teleconferencing and electronic white boards (Chen, Hsu & Hung, 2000). The theory affirms that the various tools named can allow learners and their teachers to continue with the academic project in times of crisis at different geographical locations. It is during these times of Covid 19 that the non-availability of ICT in public schools is now causing damage to children from the marginalised societies. The situation prevailing is demanding the presence of ICT in their schools or their homes or they should be connected to their schools via internet. This framework can aid the Zimbabwean government to speedily bring equality in the schools despite the type of school one is enrolled so that all learners have epistemological access. This is coordinated with the prevailing situation and geosocial positioning of children during this Covid 19 pandemic whose lifespan is beyond human imagination.

6. LITERATURE REVIEW

Virtual learning is learning experience that is enhanced through utilising computers and/or the internet both outside and inside the facilities of the educational organisation. The instruction includes teaching and learning activities based on an online environment. The physical space (in terms of place, time, or both) separates both teachers and learners. It is distance learning conducted in a virtual environment with electronic study content designed for self-paced (asynchronous) or live web-conferencing (synchronous) online teaching and tutoring. (https://www.vedamo.com/knowledge/what-is-virtual-learning/). Virtual learning has several educational advantages despite being the solution to the current global crisis in education. Virtual learning allows autonomy over the learning process because learners and students have some control over their learning and learning organisation. They can revisit the processes through other independent platforms that are independent of the teacher (Taylor, 1996). Importantly, they have the capacity to make informed judgments regarding their academic ability, “learning needs, and construct their own knowledge based on the information available; and ultimately, they may adopt a favourable approach towards learning and operate more efficiently in a learning environment” (Taylor, 1996, p. 17). In as much as virtual learning has been applauded for being the panacea to the current lockdown crisis, it has more added advantages. The learners have some form of freedom and can structure their own learning. It trains learners and students to be good managers of their time and have an expended view of the global village. Through virtual learning the students and learners can engage in asynchronous discussions with their classmates. Again, it promotes high cognitive development, confidence and improved digital skills (Taylor, 1996).

Further, online teaching is an effective teaching and learning technique which allows interaction and good corresponding between the teacher and
the learner. Presentations, discussions, tests, assignments, notes among other learning materials can easily be administered through online. The art of setting out platforms for presentations, discussions, assignments and notes is a confidence booster which cannot be experienced by learners who have been marginalised by the government. The pandemic can be blamed to a greater extend for crippling the education of all countries. However in exposing the widening inequality gaps in Zimbabwe between private schools that are ICT compliant is a blessing in disguise. The Zimbabwean government needs to be reminded that it has a commitment to develop the education system of Zimbabwe. There is no way learners from Zimbabwe can be global assert if there is a gap in their education.

The Zimbabwe government had made significant strides in education but the failure to follow the Nziramasanga Commission report recommendations has placed parents and learners in a quagmire. If the curve of Covid 19 does not flatten, that means all learners whose access to virtual learning is limited will have an entire year of learning lost and those are lives lost too. The gap between the ‘haves and the have nots’ will continue to exist glaringly.

It is upon this basis that the government and other concerned stakeholders need to take out the Nziramasanga commission report and implement what was recommended especially making our schools digital because this is not the only pandemic, many more are going to be experienced and education will be negatively affected and those who will have invested in technology will benefit. It will be naïve on the part of the government after this pandemic or during not to start improving digital infrastructure in schools because ICT is now part of the school's sociocultural setting on many fronts (Salmon, 1993). Most school heads have adopted whatsapp for easy communication with superiors and to reduce transport costs and even internally in the school itself, then why not help the children by digitalising their classrooms. The activity theoretical framework has been adopted to expose the fractured relationship between the public schools and the society, which is not supposed to be the case. In support of the significance of implementing ICT in schools (Vygotsky, 1978) argues that “learning is the claim that higher mental functioning and human action in general are mediated by tools (or ‘technical tools’) and signs (‘psychological tools’).” (p. 57). Basing on the stated argument, learning is no longer a process in isolation, which only the minds of the learners are at play but a wide range of tools are in place to be applied to explore the existing learning environment and mediate towards achieving stated goals (Vygotsky, 1978). This resonates with the earlier argument of making it mandatory for all schools to have ICT facilities than for them to be for the privileged few.

In a country like Zimbabwe whose economic base has crumbled because of poor corporate governance, it will be ideal to partner with private companies that are engaged in mining activities in various parts of Zimbabwe so that they can digitalise schools. An incentive can be put in place so that mining companies can adopt schools and digitalise them. I have selected mining because Zimbabwe is endowed with a lot of mineral resources. Additionally, district councils can liaise with their communities and find out from different families those with the financial resources to help modernise the schools. Above all, accountability should be upheld because the country is well known for being loaded with corrupt officials who cannot be entrusted with anything. This is happening during this Covid 19 pandemic. Individuals are coming in with loads of materials and expertise but some of them seem to be going into the wrong hands.

7. METHODOLOGY

The focus of this study is to illustrate how Covid 19 has brought to light the gap between the ‘haves and the have nots’ in the Zimbabwean education system. This is illuminated by the teachers’ abilities to productively teach learners online. In the same vein highlighting different views regarding the benefits of the process and how some parents and teachers feel about the neglect of the children from the government which own the majority of the schools. The data was generated qualitatively through open ended questionnaires that were distributed via WhatsApp and through emails. Processing and presentation of data was qualitatively done. The qualitative approach was applied in this research because this study occurs in an authentic setting and it is interpretive with more human interaction (Cresswell, 2009). In addition, convenience sampling was used. It is also known as haphazard
or accidental sampling. Members of the target group meet the criteria such as easy accessibility, willingness to take part and suitable for the purpose of the study (Dornyei, 2007). The main assumption of convenience sampling is that members of the targeted population are the comparable (Dornyei, 2007). The sample was fifteen teachers from primary and secondary schools, five parents and five learners from the same parents. Three of the learners were in high school and two were in primary school. The teachers were across the eight provinces of Zimbabwe. The choice was prompted by the need to get diverse views from different teachers across the divide on the impact of online teaching during this lockdown period and the views of the digitally incapacitated rural and farm teachers.

8. FINDINGS

8.1. From teachers

All the fifteen teachers pointed out that online teaching is the way to go despite Covid 19. However, five of the teachers said that the government need to digitalise rural schools because there are no online facilities and electricity. These were rural teachers highlighting their plight. They went on to say currently they are helpless because they do not have the capacity to do anything to help their learners. One teacher said he tried WhatsApp teaching but most of the learners’ parents’ phones do not have WhatsApp facilities. They said that the government should walk the talk because they promised introducing ICT in schools, but it is not doing anything. They said after this lockdown most rural children will have forgotten all content learnt and they will have to start teaching the same concepts all over again. Further one among the five opined that the disparity in technology is equal to the bottleneck system type of screening which was prevalent during the colonial era. Despite the challenges one teacher who is at a private school had this to say about online teaching: The joys of online teaching are that it allows me to catch up on syllabus deadlines, also there is continued connection and interaction with my students, and I am also able to identify and evaluate my students’ strengths and weaknesses. This is a teacher who is at a school that has embraced online teaching unlike in public schools where virtual teaching is a pipe dream. From the situation in Zimbabwe it seems it is a preserve of private schools. There was total agreement among all the teachers that the government of Zimbabwe was all talk but no action in making schools digital hubs. They consented that the current government is not doing anything to help the rural child and schools in the high-density suburbs. On a positive note the five teachers who are teaching virtually acknowledged that they are learning a lot from the programmes implemented in their schools. These are teachers in private schools that are adequately and digitally offered. The teachers are realising that their learners are fascinated with the use of technology. And they affirmed that the learners are free to express themselves compared to when they are in class. This is a sad scenario because the beneficiaries are very few because learners in disadvantaged schools are not experiencing these joys. It is at this backdrop that teachers recommend that there is need for the immediate installation of ICT hubs in schools. Secondly, they suggested that the government partner with the private sector and Information Technology companies to mechanise all schools in the country. Importantly ten teachers from marginalised schools suggested that teachers must be trained to be technosavvy so as to manage, maintain and mediate learning through technology.

8.2. From parents

There were three major highlights from parents which were mainly data costs, lack of face to face interaction to explain and demonstrate to the young learners. The main worry was on data costs, they said that it appears this pandemic has given the service providers the opportunity to rip them off because of data costs. However, those with children writing grade 7 and ordinary level were happy because technology was helping their children to be in school away from school despite the charges. As for grade one the parents highlighted that they were overstretched because of sitting in the home class with the child whilst the teacher is facilitating online. Lastly they worried that online learning is devoid of demonstrations because grade ones learn most through action and social skills are not attended to. Despite all, they appreciated the schools and teachers’ efforts.

8.3. From learners

There were five learners who took part, and all were engaged online. There was undisputed agreement among the three high school learners. They pointed out that online learning is helpful
and makes them have something that is teacher directed rather than just doing it themselves. They affirmed that one must be alert and punctual because once you miss catching up will be difficult. The same goes with submissions. Along the same line they expressed joy from learning in the comfort of their homes and that technology is making them discover many things. Additionally, they highlighted that you can replay some videos that will have been used during the lesson if you have missed something. Similarly, the learner in grade 7 said that learning online is interesting because she will be able to read other subjects. However, she said she needs more explanations from the teachers, and this is not readily available during online teaching. On a sad note, one student in high school said he could not do his practical lessons in chemistry and biology and he cannot access the simulations for the practical lessons. Further, one student highlighted that online learning limits the use of body posture to aid one’s explanations. Despite the positives, all said they miss being in class because the pressure and competition from peers allows them to focus.

9. ANALYSIS

The findings above are testimony that online learning is playing a huge role in the lives of learners who have access in Zimbabwe. All the learners and teachers are expressing appreciation of the impact of virtual learning. Even though they agree that online teaching and learning is the game changer even after Covid 19 they are disappointed by the laxity of the government to digitalise public schools in Zimbabwe. They intend to see all learners gaining both physical and epistemological access despite geosocial position.

This is suggestive of the new stance that the government and concerned stakeholders in education must take. It has been pointed out by all teachers that the government is not doing anything; hence they advised that the ministry of education in Zimbabwe should start rolling out programmes to equip schools with ICT infrastructure and to train teachers on its operations. It will be an exciting moment to have all learners competing at the same level in the long run because provision of resources will be well balanced unlike now where the playing field is not even.

The government must start renovating all schools in the country and install Internet. It is unfortunate to hear men and women who claim to be educationists talk about radio and television lessons whilst knowing well that reception is poor countrywide. It is at this juncture that the citizenry is realising how ill equipped the education system is compared to the blue print on papers where they talk of modernisation of the schools and the irony of it all they say ICT is starting from grade 1. It is stipulated in the curriculum, but the stipulations are not accompanied by material provision by the government of Zimbabwe. It should be government policy that regardless of disastrous situations that will make schools inaccessible, online teaching should be part of daily lesson delivery so that teachers and learners get used to the environment. All these should be supported by treasury budget and an audit of schools done. The government must not sit on its laurels but must have an aggressive approach to ensure that all schools are ICT compliant so that virtual learning can take place. Even, now it should have negotiated with the network providers to have subsidised data for schools. South African schools are in partnership with Vodacom and other software providers to allow learners to continue with schooling online during this lockdown.

10. CONCLUSION

Emerging from the study is that digitalisation of schools should be a priority for all schools and the government must take responsibility. The study illuminated that no matter the kind of disaster, online learning is almost equivalent to face to face classroom interaction. Therefore, there should be heavy and speedious digitalisation of schools. The experience of Covid 19 should act as a revelation to policy makers that there should be more investment in education than buying guns when the country is not at war or under imminent threat. Further exposed is the failure by the government of Zimbabwe to help the thousands of learners from marginalised families to access education in times of crisis such as Covid 19.

11. RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that the Zimbabwean government through the ministry of education should form partnerships to digitalise all public schools so that they are comparable with public schools. This can be done at district level for easy auditing. All mining companies should be convinced to invest in ICT in schools within their
mining areas with incentive packages from the government.

Secondly, all teachers should be trained to run online classes regardless of whether there is a crisis or not. Again, it should be made policy that all lessons should have a percentage of ICT so that learners’ cognitive skills are enhanced. Taylor, (1996) argues that virtual learning promotes high cognitive development, confidence, and improved digital skills.

The government must start renovating and supplying security to all schools in preparation for massive roll out of ICT infrastructure. For this to succeed it must consult other functional departments of education such as South Africa which is closer home. The South African department of education is in partnership with Telkom South Africa towards mechanising all schools in the townships and rural areas.

Lastly relations with private schools should be cordial not the current situation where they have become enemies of the state. There is more to gain from these partnerships than animosity. Previously the government was subsidising a certain percentage to private schools and this should be restored for collaboration between schools to reduce the gap between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’.

REFERENCES


