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Challenges for Foundation Phase Teachers in Interacting with Parents during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study of Mangaung Primary Schools, South Africa

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Abstract
The sociocultural theory of learning acknowledges parents as integral role players in the process of their children's learning. As in many other parts of the world, when South African schools moved to remote online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers became increasingly dependent on the agency of parents. Using an interpretivist lens and a qualitative approach, this study probes the experiences of Foundation Phase teachers in South Africa's Mangaung Municipality in their interaction with parents in 2020, during the pandemic lockdowns. The findings point to the following challenges during the pandemic, as perceived by the teachers: difficulty in communicating with parents; difficulty in working with parents to support learning; and insufficient parental commitment. The findings also point to shortfalls in respect of three dynamics—collaboration, feedback, and trust—as being central to the perceived challenges. The study concludes with a call for improved relations between Foundation Phase parents and teachers, regardless of whether the teaching and learning are occurring remotely or in-person, in order to optimise the sociocultural dynamics at play in children's schooling.

Keywords
COVID-19 pandemic, schools, Foundation Phase, sociocultural theory of learning, transfer of learning, remote learning, teacher–parent interaction, parental participation, communication, collaboration, feedback, trust, Mangaung, South Africa

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1. Introduction

The unprecedented disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021 obliged educators to adopt novel ways of teaching (Wolhuter & Jacobs, 2021). The situation required a transition from traditional classroom-based teaching to decentralised options, with heavy reliance on digital technologies to connect with learners (Timmons et al., 2021). Prior to the pandemic, parents of Foundation Phase learners had ample opportunity to engage personally with the teachers of their children, via regular visits to the classroom, parent evenings, and informal social contact (such as during a sports event). The pandemic closed off such opportunities for face-to-face interaction between teachers and parents. Due to the closed-door policy adopted by schools, teachers were forced to resort to digital communication with parents. As Foundation Phase educators worked hard to continue teaching their learners via remote means, it was imperative that they be able to interact effectively with the learners' parents (Formosinho, 2021).

The urgency of engaging parents, as part of the process of conveying learning to children, created a predicament for many teachers worldwide (Kirby, 2021; McCallum, 2021). The challenges associated with parental involvement in schooling are not new (Epstein, 2001; Lemmer & Van Wyk, 2006), and the pandemic brought into even sharper focus the essential nature of interaction between teachers and parents, particularly for young learners in the Foundation Phase. While older learners were able, during the pandemic, to independently use digital platforms to access their learning, Foundation Phase learners were dependent in a variety of ways on their parents (or caregivers) to unlock the learning opportunity being made available, on a remote basis, by teachers. During the pandemic, the involvement of parents of Foundation Phase students had a direct impact on delivery of the curriculum and transfer of learning. This set of circumstances prevailing during the COVID-19 lockdowns in South Africa in 2020 led to the problem that this study sought to explore.

2. Research context and problem statement

The COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa caused widespread disruptions, including in the field of learning and teaching. The declaration of a National State of Disaster[1] required a prohibition on traditional school attendance by all learners during an initial hard lockdown period from 16 March to 8 June 2020 (DBE, 2020a). For Foundation Phase teachers, offsite teaching continued until late August 2020, when learners were allowed to return to the classroom in a staggered manner (DBE, 2020b). The staggered approach taken by government to the return of learners to the physical classroom meant that Grade 1 learners only returned to the classroom on 24 August 2021, and then only by taking turns to attend in order to adhere to the 50% occupancy rate allowed by the Department of Basic Education (DBE).

1 See https://www.gov.za/documents/disaster-management-act-declaration-national-state-disaster-covid-19-coronavirus-16-mar.

This meant that teaching and learning in South Africa, as in much of the rest of the world, was remote and delivered via digital means (Wolhuter & Jacobs, 2021). Foundation Phase teachers found themselves unable to communicate with their learners without the mediation of the parents (Formosinho, 2021; Taylor, 2020).

From early June to late August 2020, South African Foundation Phase teachers provided all learning and teaching materials in a digital format for their learners to study at home. The approach to curriculum delivery taken by various schools differed along a spectrum that can be linked to individual school's circumstances, with some relying on technology more than others. In all cases, however, the teachers depended heavily on the intercession of parents to help Foundation Phase learners with accessing and engaging with the learning materials. This caused great urgency for establishment of high-quality interaction between educators and parents—both of whom need to be invested in the education of the learner (Epstein, 2001; Mavuso et al., 2017).

Before the pandemic, learners had face-to-face access to the teaching expertise of the teacher, and received most of their instruction at school, with homework only regarded as supplementary material. The reality of the disrupted period of the pandemic meant that, regardless of the effort that Foundation Phase schoolteachers took to deliver curriculum content to their learners, the outcome of their teaching was highly subject to the active participation of parents. The involvement of parents was essential in downloading material, in providing data and devices to learners in order to watch video clips or listen to recordings explaining the learning content, and in ensuring full learner engagement with instructional materials. Intentional and focused communication between teachers and parents, and subsequent involvement by parents, were thus essential to establishment of a learning environment for Foundation Phase learners that was conducive to their engaging with their school activities.

The research reported on in this article attempted to investigate the perceptions of teachers regarding the challenges of interacting effectively, during the pandemic lockdown, with parents of Foundation Phase learners in the Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality of the Free State Province, South Africa. The school phase that was the focus of this investigation, called the Foundation Phase, refers specifically to the introductory stage of formal schooling. In South Africa, the Foundation Phase includes the pre-primary year known as Grade R, followed by Grades 1 to 3. In this study the emphasis was on Grade 1, as the first year of formal learning, characterised by the major achievements of learning to read and write (DBE, 2011, p. 6; Phatudi, 2019, p. 227).

The research question that guided this investigation was: What were the challenges perceived by Foundation Phase teachers in interacting with parents during the pandemic, and what lessons can be learned from the management of the disrupted reality?

3. Theoretical context

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of learning (1978) provided the theoretical foundation for the exploration. In broad terms, Vygotsky argued that learners internalise and assimilate the culture of their peers and significant others (Oguz, 2007, p. 2). The sociocultural theory of learning posits that a learner actively constructs their knowledge and skills (Wessels, 2014, p. 1). In this sense, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory is a constructivist line of argumentation, whereby optimal learning takes place in the collaborative process of interaction provided by culture, cognition, and language.

All learning, according to Vygotsky (1978), is culturally influenced and thus contextually bound. In other words, the cultural environment of a learner has a strong impact on the learning process, which is simultaneously influenced by cognitive processes or abilities and the medium through which learning takes place. Cox (1997, p. 53) aptly conveys the constructivist view in this way: "Education then becomes a set of embedded cultural practices, and the science of learning becomes obtaining a detailed awareness of how they fit together."

Vygotsky's theory stresses the importance of collaborative teaching and learning—elements also emphasised in South Africa's National Curriculum Statement (NCS) and Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) (DBE, 2011, 2012; Jacobs et al., 2012). Collaborative learning as envisaged by the sociocultural theory implies the active input of the teacher, learner (Litshani, 2017), and the social context (Maphalala, 2016; McLeod, 2018; Vygotsky, 1978; Wessels, 2014).

Vygotsky (1978) considers the input by a knowledgeable other (most often the teacher expert) as critical to the outcome of the learning process. Litshani (2017, p. 22) points to the role of the teacher as being to "encourage active collaboration by learners" during the process of learning. The normal context of learning before the pandemic provided learners not only with input from the expert teacher, but also the collaborative experience of engaging with peer learners. Both these aspects were missing during emergency remote learning and teaching, with parents having to improvise and perform elements of both roles. When the pandemic forced teaching and learning to move to remote platforms, there was great concern about students' loss of, among other things, collaborative learning via peer input (Kirby, 2021; Taylor, 2020; Timmons et al., 2021).

Learning is subject to internal factors, such as the school environment, and external factors, such as parents, families, and governmental structures (Matlabe, 2017). Fru and Seotsanyana (2017) note that education in the 21st century demands an extension of the focus on "social agents other than teachers" (2017, p. 9), confirming the need for the active collaboration of parents, among other possible stakeholders. Previously the social context was supported by the active input of the teacher as well

as the peer learners but, during the pandemic, because of being isolated from social contact, teachers had to rely greatly on parents to deliver their communications to the learners.

As mentioned above, communication between teachers and parents was a crucial link for Foundation Phase learners unable to physically attend school (Timmons et al., 2021). At the same time, it must be noted that communication is reciprocal, complex and iterative (Jacobs et al., 2012; Sanchez, n.d.), and the possibilities for miscommunication increase with the addition of agents in the process (Landsberg et al., 2012).

Learning requires assessment in order to evaluate the successful reception of material taught, and feedback provides the norms against which learners' progress is documented (Wessels, 2014). Without valid assessment and reliable feedback, the progress of learners will remain inconclusive and undefined (Cox, 1997). Therefore, in a remote-learning context, if communication received back from the parents of learners is scarce, teachers are not in a good position to evaluate whether learning has been successful.

The concept of transfer of learning (Day & Goldstone, 2012) is vested in the cognitivist theory (Cox, 1997) and recognises that learning is modelled by the teacher or instructor in order to assist learners to grasp the cognitive concepts (McLeod, 2018). The input of an expert, such as the teacher, is recognised as crucial to the effective transfer of learning (Day & Goldstone, 2012, p. 160). With the emergency remote teaching during the pandemic, the active input previously rendered by Foundation Phase teachers needed to be replaced, to some extent, by parental input—with parents needing to provide their children with, among other things, the instructions given by the teacher and also interpretations of the instructions.

4. Research design

The 2020 pandemic lockdowns generated a unique situation for South African Foundation Phase teachers—a situation that warranted explorative research. A case study approach was adopted, with the case comprising the experiences of Grade 1 teachers in Mangaung. Ten primary schools were conveniently sampled from the approximately 114 primary schools situated in the Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality (schools4sa, 2021) on the basis of geographical proximity. They were all situated within a radius of 30 km from my workplace at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein, which is Mangaung's major urban centre. Only teachers who had taught a Grade 1 class in the Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality during 2020 at one of the 10 schools were included.

I compiled a questionnaire (see Appendix) comprising closed-ended, scale, and open-ended items. The closed-ended questions aimed to confirm the number of years' experience of teachers, the approach taken by schools to address the chal-

lenges of responding to the lockdowns, and the learning area most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The open-ended questions invited respondents to share their personal views on, and experiences of, teaching during the emergency remote learning. The semi-structured format gave the respondents the freedom to provide a wide range of responses, and their answers could thus reflected the teachers' authentic lived experiences.

Twenty-three questionnaires were distributed to respondents at the 10 schools, to be completed in writing by the respondents. All 23 questionnaires were collected on a mutually agreed date. All COVID-19 protocols in force at the time were upheld. The data generated by the open-ended items were coded and categorised using the ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software. From the subsequent coding and categorisation process, themes emerged from which key findings were formulated. (No surprising or innovative findings pertaining to the identified focus of this investigation emerged from the closed-ended and scale questions, and they were therefore excluded from further scrutiny.)

All open-ended answers were coded in ATLAS.ti according to repetitive phrases. The coding generated the common themes, and the dominant perceptions of the teachers. These dominant perceptions are discussed in section 5 below. It should be noted that while the questionnaire was not focused on teacher–parent interactions, it was those interactions that generated the strongest commons themes in the data—as becomes clear in section 5.

Ethical clearance for conducting the study was obtained both from the University of the Free State and the Free State Department of Education. Participation was anonymous, as respondents were not identified in any way and no personal identifiers were requested. The names of the schools are not disclosed in the research findings. Upon receipt of the completed questionnaires, a random number was allocated to each respondent for administrative purposes. The respondents had the freedom to voice any concern that they might have had with the research process. A study limitation was the fact that the conveniently sampled schools were all located within a radius of 30 km and all were in the fairly urban section of the Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality.

5. Findings

Three core teacher perceptions emerged from the thematic coding of the data.

Perception 1: Difficulty in communicating with parents

Some teachers had positive reactions to the use of WhatsApp group messages. One teacher wrote, "Whats[A]pp groups worked excellent[ly] as a brilliant communication system between parent and teacher." However, a significant number of responses indicated that it was difficult to communicate with parents. "Some parents did not

communicate back at all", one teacher observed, and "[o]ther parents did not have access to WhatsApp or even a smartphone." According to another teacher: "Parents […] do not have the necessary resources e.g. Wi-Fi or printers at home."

Another teacher stated, "[s]chool and teachers need a good electronic communication system e.g. D6 communicator, WhatsApp group etc. to communicate with parents at short notice." A fluid and unreliable database of parent cellphone numbers proved to be an obstacle to effective communication. As one teacher observed, "[p]arents […] did not all receive the WhatsApps".

The cost aspect of data was also emphasised. One teacher noted, "[d]ata—not everyone could afford it", and another wrote: "Not all parents had enough data." As one teacher stated, "[d]ata was not freely available. Some did not have WhatsApp, some had phones with SMS that could not read photos", and "[n]ot all parents have data or the facilities to use technology at home." Differences in platform adoption also posed problems. As one teacher remarked, "[n]ot all parents had WhatsApp." Another added: "[s]ome parents had Telegram and no WhatsApp."

Perception 2: Difficulty in working with parents to support learning

The remote learning environment meant that learners had to access the learning material via the intervention of their parents. This proved to be a weakness in the communication process. As one teacher explained: "It was challenging at times, in the sense that I had to compile lessons for the parents (who mostly have little knowledge in the area of education instruction) and had to then rely on them to disseminate the knowledge/strategies etc. to their children."

Teachers raised their concerns about not being a party to the learning process that took place in the remote settings. One teacher voiced the common frustration as being one of "[n]ot knowing whether learners [understood] the work." In the words of one teacher, "[s]ome parents did not understand what had to be done." According to another, "[p]arents didn't cooperate and due to the language barrier, kids struggled to complete work on their own." The aforementioned "language barrier" was explained in this way: "[Unfortunately many] parents cannot help learners sufficiently since we are English medium and they come from Sotho homes." Another added, "[l]anguage was a problem. Parents did not understand the assignments and could therefore not explain to their children." One teacher complained of "[p]arents not being able to explain concepts and new phonics to learners." Another acknowledged the pressures faced by working parents, stating that "[w]orking parents could not do all the work." One teacher summarised the challenges 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."

Perception 3: Insuffi cient parental commitment

Many of the teachers voiced dissatisfaction with the level of dedication displayed by parents. Many said that even before the COVID-19 pandemic, they were often disappointed by the lack of parental commitment. The pandemic exacerbated the situation. In the words of one teacher, "[p]arents did not do their part. Their children just fell behind." Another teacher stated, "[p]arents did not always do the work." According to one teacher, "[p]arents were not always assisting at home and some learners would not work at home." In the words of another: "Parents should take more responsibility for their children's education during a time where it is impossible for teachers to educate their children." At the same time, some teachers acknowledged the impact of the pandemic on parents' ability to support their children's learning. In the words of one, "[n]ot all parents [could] cooperate due to COVID." Digital challenges were also seen as playing a role in undermining parental commitment. As one teacher explained, "[s]ome parents could not view the video clips due to data problems."

The teachers' dissatisfaction with parental commitment contrasted sharply with their self-evaluations of their own levels of involvement. According to one, "[t]eachers did above and beyond all they could [to] assist learners [and to] buy data for parents to download. [To] print books and courier [them]. […] We went the extra mile." Another wrote: "Educators did everything they could in order for our kiddies to continue with their work at home."

6. Analysis

The teacher responses outlined above indicate several factors that influenced teacher interaction with parents, leading to suboptimal transfer of learning to Foundation Phase learners. Three of the key factors are now discussed.

Collaboration

As explained above in the "theoretical context" section of this article, the sociocultural theory of learning positions collaboration as central to learner success. It is thus significant finding that the teachers perceived that, during the remote Foundation Phase teaching and learning necessitated by the pandemic, there was, for the most part, insufficient collaboration between parents and teachers, and insufficient collaboration between parents and the learners (their children). The pandemic increased the need for parent collaboration with both teachers and learners and, in the eyes of most of the teachers, parents generally did not rise to the challenge. The teachers' survey responses point to several possible reasons for shortcomings in the parents' actions—some beyond the control of parents (e.g., data access, the language barrier, work commitments), others within the control of parents (e.g., greater appreciation of, and commitment to, their roles as collaborators in their children's learning).

Feedback

The earlier discussion of theoretical context also established that feedback to teachers on learner progress is a central element of successful learning. It is thus significant that the teachers felt frustration, during the remote learning period of 2020 when they had precarious contact with learners, that they were dependent on parents for not only communications with students but also for inputs on their learners' progress. More than one teacher noted the exasperation they experienced when it was unclear whether learners had correctly grasped the learning content—a situation exacerbated when teachers were unsure if the parents had comprehended the assignment correctly. This dependence on parental comprehension was deemed by the teachers to be a significant weak link in the chain of teaching and learning during the pandemic—and again the language barrier was perceived to be one element of this weakness.

Trust

The conviction held by many of the teachers that parents were not sufficiently committed to investing their time and effort in mediation of the learning process of their children points to a breach in the trust relationship between parents and teachers. Among other things, this is indicative of the discomfort generated by a significant shift, caused by the pandemic, in the balance of power (and responsibility) between teachers and parents. The pandemic required a greater emphasis on the parental role, but parents were not, according to the teachers, willing or able to embrace this new responsibility.

7. Conclusions

The remote learning of 2020 for South African Foundation Phase students, precipitated by the pandemic, greatly heightened the need for high-quality interactions between educators and parents who, even in non-pandemic times, need to both be actively invested in the education of the learner (Epstein, 2001; Mavuso et al., 2017). In some respects the pandemic can be said to have brought existing weaknesses—e.g., sub-optimal teacher-parent collaboration, sub-optimal parent-learner collaboration—to a head. At the same time, the pandemic also offered lessons that can be used to initiate necessary reform.

Already at the initial application for admission to the institution, the parent has an obligation to engage with the school on behalf of the learner. Mavuso et al. (2017) hold the parent responsible for maintaining and sustaining positive engagement with teachers. Yet once the learner has been admitted, the communicative relationship between parents and teachers is often dominated by the teachers. This one-sided process dynamic should not be allowed to develop, as parents are part and parcel of the sociocultural processes at play in education. Specific, reliable, and accessible communication between teachers and parents is an essential instrument, regardless of whether the learning is remote or in-person. In both modalities, collaboration effected between teachers and parents can be decisive in the successful delivery of

teaching and in the optimal of transfer of learning, especially in the Foundation Phase years. A pattern of commitment must be established from the beginning of the relationship between the school and the parent. A concerted, broad-based effort is needed to encourage parents to become more actively involved in their children's collaborative learning, and greater collaboration and trust need to be built up between parents and teachers.

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Appendix: Questionnaire

Section A: Biographical detail

1. Number of years teaching grade 1?
2. Number of years teaching any grade?
3. Type of school:
    - Ex-model C
    - quintile 1-3
    - no fee
    - private
4. Number of learners in your class:
5. Number of grade 1 learners in the school:
6. Teaching assistant in your class?
    - Yes/no

Section B: Approach of the school to the pandemic immediately after the lock-down

7. Learners came to school every day
    - Yes/no
8. Learners came on alternate days
    - Yes/no
9. Learners came to school every other week
    - Yes/ no
10. Learners came to school for two weeks at a time
    - Yes/ no
11. No physical school
    - Yes/ no
12. Only online school took place
    - Yes/ no
13. Any learners that did not come back when the school re-opened?
    - Yes/ no

Section C: Approach in the classroom

14. Did the school apply specific strategies to manage the new situation?
    - Yes/ no
15. What kind of strategies were used?
    - Printed material
    - Soft copies to print at home
    - Video clips
    - Other please specify:
16. School/teacher provided printed learning material
    - Once a month
    - Once a week

- Every day

17. School/teacher provided online learning material for parents to print
    - Once a month
    - Once a week
    - Every day
18. School/ teacher relied on other resources e.g. DBE, radio/ TV broadcasts
    - Yes/ no
19. Teacher made video clips for learners
    - Yes/ no
20. Video clips for instruction were given
    - Once a week
    - Every day
21. Length of video clips
    - 1-4 min
    - 5-10 minutes
    - 11-30 minutes
22. School preferred to use Zoom or other type of electronic classroom
    - Yes/ no
23. Which type of platform
    - Zoom
    - Blackboard Collab
    - MS Teams
    - Other
24. On a scale from 1-5, where 1 is very good and 5 is very bad, how did the strategies work?
    - Video clips
    - Zoom or electronic classroom
    - WhatsApp group message
    - Written index of work to be done for the day
    - Photo or pdf of work to be done for the week
25. Any special insights worth noting?
26. Any frustrations?
27. Anything to do differently in a similar future scenario?
28. In your personal opinion, was there generally speaking a deficit in learner knowledge after the lockdown?
    - Yes/no

If the answer was yes, then please complete questions 29-31 as well:

29. Which area of learning was the most impacted during the lockdown?
    - Life skills
    - Literacy
    - Numeracy
30. Which area of learning seemed least impacted after the lockdown?
    - Life skills

- Literacy
- Numeracy

31. What soft skill area was impacted the most by the lockdown. Number from 1-5, where 1 is most affected to 5 which is least affected:
    - Tolerance to stressful situations
    - Assertiveness
    - Interaction with peers
    - Introvert/ extroverted personalities
    - Eagerness to learn
32. Your thoughts on the future of schools as we know them?

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