

**SOUTH AFRICAN PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF ONLINE LEARNING DURING
THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

A research report submitted to the Faculty of Human and Community Development, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Educational Psychology (by course work and research report)

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DECLARATION

I declare that this research report is my own, original and unassisted work and that ethical clearance was obtained for this research from the University's Human Research Ethics School Committee (Non-Medical) under protocol number MEDPSYC/22/02. No part of this research report has been, nor will it be, submitted for a qualification at any other university. This research report is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Educational Psychology in the Department of Psychology, School of Human and Community Development, at the University of the Witwatersrand.

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic caused substantial disruptions in daily life, with the education system being significantly affected. Schools were shut down due to lockdown regulations and South Africa's unequal education system was exposed. While numerous studies have examined the experiences of teachers and learners, few have focused on parents, especially within the South African context. Therefore, through a qualitative approach, this study explored South African parents' perceptions and experiences of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The sample consisted of 12 parents with children in Grades 5 to 10, attending private mainstream schools in Johannesburg. Data was collected through online interviews and through a thematic analysis of the data, four core themes were identified. These include: The Advantages of Online Learning During the Pandemic; The Challenges Related to Online Learning During the Pandemic; Coping Under Pressure; and Factors Influencing Learner Motivation. The findings showed that there were both advantages and disadvantages to online learning. It also highlighted the vital role parents have in online learning when compared to face-to-face learning. The findings of this study have implications for the professional development of teachers, emphasizing the need for training in online teaching methods that incorporate parents' insights given their first-hand experiences with online learning. The findings also highlight the need to ensure learners have access to digital devices in order to engage effectively in online learning.

Key words: Online Learning, COVID-19, Parent Experiences

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CHAPTER 1: RESEARCH AIMS AND RATIONALE

Title

South African parents' perceptions of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Aims

The aim of this study was to gain insight into the experiences and perceptions of parents of private primary school and high school learners during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Rationale

The coronavirus was detected in China in December 2019 and proceeded to be declared an international pandemic in March 2020 (Chakraborty et al., 2020). The pandemic caused substantial disruptions in daily life, with the education system being significantly affected (Frohn, 2021; Marshall et al., 2020). The significant impact on the education system is noted by Bordoloi et al. (2021) who stated that the pandemic has presented the greatest challenge that the schooling system has ever had to deal with. The necessary step taken by most countries was to close schools and transition to distance learning to curb the spread of the virus (Kolak et al., 2021). In South Africa, schools closed in March 2020, ahead of the national lockdown that was imposed on March 26th. All schools were closed for several weeks with in-person learning coming to a halt. Thereafter, schools reopened and closed dependent on the severity of the virus as well as new strains of the virus being discovered (Haffejee et al., 2024). Traditional schooling - meaning face-to-face learning - had to be shifted to online learning virtually overnight. This abrupt transition came with difficulties such as educators' and learners' lack of experience with online teaching and learning as well as the issue of device access. In a study conducted by Marshall et al. (2020), it was found that 92,4% of the teachers surveyed did not have experience

teaching online before the pandemic. Parents and teachers had to switch roles as parents were forced to become substitute teachers while educators were at a distance, overseeing learning (Kolak et al., 2021).

Parents had to spend a great deal of time with their children when the pandemic began and institutions had to close. University Wire (2021) conducted a poll aimed at gaining insight into the perspectives of parents on the subject of learning during the pandemic, which found that 67% of parents are more involved in their children's academic lives since the pandemic arose. The poll consisted of parents of children in pre-school all the way to high school. The increased engagement between parents and their children could provide rich, descriptive data into how online learning was experienced by both parents and their children – school students.

A number of studies have been conducted internationally on the experiences of teachers and learners during the pandemic (Chakraborty et al., 2020; Doll et al., 2021; Gouseti, 2021; Marshall, et al., 2020; Stevanović et al., 2021; Trust et al., 2021), however there are fewer studies on the experiences and specific challenges that parents have had to face during this incredibly stressful period, such as those carried out by Heyworth et al. (2021) and Kolak et al. (2021), which brought forth inconsistent results. The first study obtained unenthusiastic perceptions of online learning with parents feeling disappointed by the lack of support from the school, while the latter discovered that parents were pleased with school feedback during the transition to online learning and exhibited positive attitudes.

It is also important to acknowledge the role that motivation plays in learning and the significance it has when it comes to academic success (Shroff et al., 2007; Taran, 2005). Taking into consideration that South African learners had to spend a lot of their time at home with their parents instead of in a classroom with teachers, it would be valuable to gain insight into the

experiences of parents regarding the transition to online learning and their children's motivation levels. Furthermore, Epstein (2010) argued that the way a parent handles stress in their lives influences the child. This is especially the case during a pandemic when levels of anxiety are heightened (Pratiwi et al., 2020). For this reason, delving into parent coping strategies is also beneficial.

Understanding the South African context is vital because factors such as unequal access to devices and loadshedding — issues that may not impact online learning systems in other countries — may play a significant role in shaping the educational experience in our country. Therefore, the aim of this study was to gain insight into the experiences and perceptions of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspectives of private primary and secondary school parents, in a South African context. Insights from parents could highlight gaps in current education policies, prompting necessary improvements and sparking discussions about the future of online or blended learning approaches.

Research Questions

1. What advantages and challenges did parents experience as a result of the abrupt transition from traditional to online learning in the wake of the pandemic?
2. What are parents' perceptions of their children's motivation levels for schooling during the pandemic?
3. What coping strategies did parents use to deal with the transition from traditional schooling to online learning?

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will present an overview of the existing literature on experiences of online learning during the pandemic, taking both challenges and advantages into account. The theoretical framework of this study will be discussed before the perspective of parents and their experiences related to online learning is presented. Additionally, this chapter will explore literature on learner motivation and coping strategies parents employ during challenging times.

Introduction

The pandemic caused a major shift in the way learning takes place (Le Grange, 2020). Learners were required to learn from home - in the absence of a teacher and in the presence of a parent. Thus, this literature review will begin by discussing the impacts of COVID-19, specifically on education. The focus will then be turned to online learning as a consequence of the pandemic. Afterwards, Lev Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development will be discussed, including the ways in which parents play a significant role in children's development and functioning. The term 'parent' will then be explained in addition to parental experiences and perceptions regarding online learning. The literature review will then shift its focus to parental coping strategies needed to maintain a healthy parent-child relationship for development and lastly, motivation will be explored in relation to online learning.

The COVID-19 Pandemic: Effect on Education

The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the COVID-19 virus a global pandemic in March 2020 (Gruzd et al., 2020). Across the globe, the pandemic caused havoc and disorder, putting pressure on health systems and economies, restricting the freedoms of people, and forcing schools to close (Le Grange, 2021). Over a billion learners experienced a shift in their

learning environments across the world (Heyworth et al., 2021). South African president, Cyril Ramaphosa declared a national state of disaster on 16 March 2020 and the country proceeded to go into lockdown on 23 March 2020 (Gruzd et al., 2020). As a result of this, schools were closed, with approximately 17 million learners affected (Landa, 2021), and South Africa's unequal education system was exposed.

There was a disparity between public and private schools, as private schools transitioned to remote online learning due to resource accessibility, while public school learning was temporarily shut down (Gruzd et al., 2020). Private schools¹ transitioned to online learning for the duration of lockdown periods, with different schools adapting their approach dependent on the evolving situation of the pandemic and government regulations. Learners lost 54 per cent of learning time according to The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2021).

The Transition to Online Learning

Prohorets and Plekhanova (2015) provide a discussion concerning the distinction between face-to-face and online learning. Face-to-face learning refers to the physical presence of the teacher and the learner in a classroom while online learning, on the contrary, does not include a physical classroom with teacher and learners in the same venue, at the same time. It is further divided into synchronous and asynchronous. Synchronous refers to the situation in which the teachers and learners are simultaneously working at a different place. Asynchronous teaching means that lessons are not delivered in real time and learners can watch the session at their

¹ In South Africa, private schools are also called independent schools, as most of their funding is not state provided (McKay et al., 2018; Motala et al., 2008).

convenience. During the pandemic in South Africa, both synchronous and asynchronous teaching approaches were adopted. Some classes were conducted in real time, while others were recorded and shared through social media platforms such as WhatsApp groups, as teachers took the time to record themselves explaining material for better understanding (Jantjies, 2020).

There are challenges and disadvantages related to online learning. Dwiyanti et al. (2020) comment on one of these challenges, which is that non-verbal communication is a crucial aspect of learning in the classroom, however it does not always occur in online settings. Kolak et al. (2021) discuss another challenge that comes with online learning, which is device access. Some individuals are simply more privileged than others when it comes to the type of devices they have access to, if any at all. The authors also mention that the learning process will be experienced differently on different devices – learning over a smartphone will not provide the same effect that learning on a laptop would (Kolak et al., 2021). Isnawan et al. (2023) also found that parents struggled to fulfil the demands of their children with regards to the technological tools required for online learning due to the cost. One of the biggest stressors parents faced during the pandemic was the deterioration of the economy and financial difficulties (Pratiwi et al., 2020). Marshall et al. (2020) refers to another challenge of online learning which is internet connection. 57,2% of the teachers surveyed said that at least 25% of their learners did not have internet access, while those who did faced their own difficulties such as poor connection or siblings who needed to use devices simultaneously. South African learners of various ages reported similar difficulties with online learning, as well as the expense of data and insufficient space to work from home (Taylor, 2020). In line with the discussion on finances and their impact on learning, it was also found that teachers in lower-income schools do not always receive the

same level of professional training as their counterparts in higher-income schools, which may affect the quality of their teaching approaches (Giorgio-Doherty et al., 2021).

Having said that, Doll et al. (2021) mention that online learning has gained popularity in the past twenty years due to the benefits that accompany it. One of the mentioned benefits is flexibility and the ability to work at one's own pace (Ceylan et al., 2017; Prohorets et al., 2015; Taylor, 2020). Another benefit of online learning could be the child's support structure at home. Taylor (2020) found that South African learners feel more comfortable and supported when learning from home in the presence of supportive family members. Learners were also perceived to have flourished during the learning transition internationally as a result of supportive relationships in the home (Heyworth et al., 2021).

Motivation and Online Learning

Motivation is an important factor in learning (Stevanovic et al., 2021). It is needed for us to achieve our goals as it keeps us stimulated and inspired (Serin, 2018). Brophy (2010) defines motivation as 'a theoretical construct to explain the initiation, direction, intensity, persistence, and quality of behaviour, especially goal-directed behaviour' (p. 3). Motivation can either be intrinsic or extrinsic. Extrinsic motivation is associated with incentives or rewards while intrinsic motivation is linked to enthusiasm and independence (Serin, 2018).

Due to aspects of time management and flexibility involved in online learning, learners are required to be more independent. More is expected of students with regards to responsibility as there is an element of freedom associated with online learning (Heyworth et al., 2021; McHone, 2020; Taylor, 2020). Suwastini et al. (2023) discuss that even though online learning allows learners to be flexible with their learning, it may also lead to procrastination. If a learner

is intrinsically motivated, they will put more time and effort into their studies (Serin, 2018). For this reason, intrinsic motivation is a key factor in determining a student's success during online learning (Shroff et al., 2007). Furthermore, it has been mentioned that parents and teachers play a crucial role when it comes to motivating children (Hassan et al., 2020; Puspita, 2021). However, Chak (2001) argues that even though adults are the social agents who guide learning in the zone of proximal development, there is still a focus on the child and their level of motivation to move forward. Development is affected by a child's intrinsic motivation.

Understanding the factors that drive students' motivation during their online learning has a profound influence on their ability to facilitate their academic progress (Taran, 2005). It has been discussed that challenging activities stimulate one's intrinsic motivation (Shroff et al., 2007). However, in Doll et al. (2021) study of teacher experiences of COVID-19, teachers perceived some learners to be less motivated or "lazy" than they were during traditional learning. It was however found that some high school learners did not participate and had a preference of asking questions outside of online classes in order to avoid any attention being on them (Dwiyanti et al., 2020). Studies also discovered that learners would make excuses such as poor internet connection in order to not attend online classes (Doll et al., 2021; Marshall et al. 2020).

Shi et al. (2023) discovered that older individuals may possess more intrinsic motivation in comparison to their younger counterparts, however on the contrary, Stevanovic et al. (2021) found that high school learners felt a lack of motivation during online learning as they found it difficult to concentrate and missed social interaction. Furthermore, Martin (2012) concluded that learners in higher grades were not as academically motivated as those in lower grades as factors such as anxiety and disengagement increase as learners get older. Another finding was that engagement among primary school learners was observed to decline during subjects such as

Mathematics, as it requires hands-on support for optimal understanding (Giorgio-Doherty et al., 2021).

Strauss (2020) on the other hand, found that parents perceived their children to have more control over their time, which in turn gave them the opportunity to engage in tasks better than before and feel a greater sense of confidence and accomplishment. Furthermore, it has been found that intrinsic motivation is increased when students are allowed more freedom to make choices regarding their learning, particularly in online learning environments as it is more self-directed (Shroff et al., 2007; Reeve et al., 2003). Lastly, it is noteworthy to mention that it has been discovered that a learner's readiness to engage in online learning impacts their motivation (Dwiyanti et al., 2020). This is particularly relevant given that the transition to online learning during the pandemic occurred abruptly, leaving learners with little time to adjust.

Theoretical framework

Vygotsky: Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

As previously mentioned, relationships and interactions are crucial factors that influence how learners engage with online learning. Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) was a psychologist known for his work on child development. He emphasized the importance of social interaction in the process of learning and brought attention to the role adults play in children's learning (Chak, 2001; Hall, 2007). Vygotsky et al. (1978) discuss the Sociocultural Theory of Cognitive Development, which posits that an individual's cognitive growth is largely influenced by their social interactions and rooted in cultural context. Central to Vygotsky's theory is The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which is defined as the difference between a child's actual developmental level assessed through independent problem-solving and their potential level of

development achieved through collaborative learning or formal support and guidance from an adult. The child needs the assistance of others in order to reach their full potential as learning has to be mediated (Hall, 2007). Regarding online learning, Sazali et al. (2022) discuss that activities which promote interaction during online classes can assist learners through the Zone of Proximal Development. Vygotsky places importance on the role of social interaction and the way in which it contributes to cognitive development as he believed that children's mental functions need to mature and this maturation can only be achieved through social interaction (Dastpak et al., 2017; Kapon, 2016). While Vygotsky's ZPD (1978) is especially relevant for younger learners, it also applies to adolescents who are encountering new knowledge and skills. Since learners in school are continually acquiring new information, this theory remains significant across all age groups.

It was my intention to apply this theory to my current research on online learning, which has changed the level of social interaction learners encounter with teachers and peers, as well as their parents. There are however limitations associated with Vygotsky's theory, and Chak (2001) draws attention to one of them - the hinderance of a child's creativity. Vygotsky argues that adult guidance is necessary for learning, but it could be possible for a child to reach the same goal they would with the help of an adult, through trial-and-error or an alternative method. There is also uncertainty as to whether the adult's way of doing something is truly the most advanced way or simply the preferred way of accomplishing something (Chak, 2001). Another possible disadvantage of the theory, as mentioned by Levykh (2008), is its lack of specific methodology.

Vygotsky's theory is relevant in the South African context as diverse cultural contexts and social interactions are significant to the educational experience. South Africa places importance on community and the notion that "it takes a village to raise a child", and this aligns with Vygotsky's idea that cognitive development is enhanced through social interactions with

more knowledgeable others. It is worth noting that the social agents who facilitate the learning process could go beyond educators and the school setting (Chak, 2001). Clark (2021) states that the family plays a vital role in the development of a child, which brings us to the role of the parent – and in the South African context, the involvement of extended family members such as aunts, uncles, and grandparents. Positive relationships are an important part of Vygotsky's theory, as emotionally positive relations and interactions create a better ZPD (Levykh, 2008). A fundamental characteristic of human nature is emotion, according to Vygotsky (1978). Individuals interviewed by Heyworth et al. (2021) and Taylor (2020) mentioned that supportive relationships at home allowed students to thrive during the online learning transition. Parents also believed that their children valued the teachers with whom they developed a strong rapport (Heyworth et al., 2021). Since parents became the stand-in teachers, as mentioned above, it may have eased the learning process due to the trusting and supportive parent-child relationship.

Parental Involvement and Experiences During the Transition

While student interaction with teachers may have declined, the opposite was the case for parent-child interaction during the pandemic (Doll et al., 2021; Kolak et al., 2021).

What is a parent? A parent has been defined in a few ways; (1) someone who bears offspring; (2) a person who brings up and provides care for another; (3) a mother or father of an individual; (4) someone who looks after a child in the same way a parent would (Persson, 2019). These definitions consist of two different aspects: one being genetic or biological, and the other being social. This draws a parallel to Bainham (2007) who mentioned that a person becomes a parent in three ways: by genetics, gestation and social/psychological. He suggests that a person who cares for a child is equivalent to a parent and the relationship need not be biological (Bainham, 2007; Coyne et al., 2020). This is particularly relevant to the South African

context, given that many children are looked after by people other than their biological parents, such as aunts, uncles, and grandparents (George et al., 2019).

Parents have a vital role to play in the education of their children when their children are engaged in remote learning (Isnawan et al., 2023), as Kolak et al. (2021) discussed; parents took on the role of being substitute teachers during the pandemic. They had to maintain their usual 40-hour work week while also providing 40 hours of childcare and teaching time for their children (Cox et al., 2020). The primary source of guidance for children in navigating life is derived from their parents (Branco & Linhares, 2018), and this became even more evident with the closure of schools. Difficulties came with the role change as parents reported challenges in setting boundaries while teaching their children, taking into account that the personal and emotional parent-child relationship is not the same as the formal teacher-child relationship (Taylor, 2020).

Parental experiences of online learning. As a consequence of the pandemic, parents found themselves having to manage their jobs as well as full-time childcare (Cox et al., 2020; Pratiwi et al., 2020). Seeing that learners of all ages were required to work from home, Heyworth et al. (2021) found that the heavy weight of responsibility fell primarily on the parents due to the lower levels of support from schools. Parents' experiences of online learning were mixed, encompassing both positive and negative aspects.

There are a number of challenges associated with online learning from a parent's perspective, one of them being a lack of communication and support from the school. Many parents reported feeling disappointed by the lack of support they received during the transition, with only a few saying that they were in regular contact with their child's teacher (Heyworth, 2021). Fitriani and Yanita (2023) additionally found that some parents did not feel fully capable of delivering lessons to their children due to a lack of guidance. Pillet-Shore (2015) emphasizes

the importance of a partnership between parents and teachers. A successful partnership involves collaboration, and for this reason communication between parents and educators is of utmost importance (Azad et al., 2016). The authors do, however, note that maintaining regular contact can be challenging in everyday life - so it would stand to reason that it would be even more difficult during a severe situation, such as a pandemic.

A similar sentiment was shared by South African parents in a study conducted by Taylor (2020) regarding parents' experiences during lockdown. The majority of the parents reported having received inadequate guidance from schools, with public schools offering less assistance than private schools. Parents also expressed concern and uncertainty about their children's academic future due to the lack of information provided by schools. On the contrary, Ishaque et al., (2022) discovered that several parents believed that online classes were well facilitated by teachers during the pandemic. It is however important to note that their sample included parents with children under the age of 6, which may explain why they perceived the online classes to run smoothly, as the demands of this age group might be less challenging.

Another shortcoming of online learning, according to parents, was the schools focus on academics and the disregard for peer interaction. Parents of learners across various age groups were not happy about the school's level of support for children's contact with peers and social relationships (Heyworth, 2021). The school environment contributes to the child's support system since they spend six to eight hours a there a day (Clark, 2021), therefore importance should be placed on social relationships. Furthermore, Strauss (2020) discovered that parents faced challenges when attempting to bridge the void that arose when social activities were not available for their children. The inability to do so led to boredom and frustration, as students grew tired of the limited home-bound activities that were available at the time (Ishaque et al.,

2022). On the other hand, some parents of primary school aged children enjoyed the time at home as they believed that they were able to bond with their children in a way that they were previously unable to due to the usual business of life (Fitriani & Yanita, 2023). This was the case for fathers in particular, as they mentioned that they were able to play sports such as cricket with their children during their time at home (Ishaque et al., 2022).

There are a number of advantages that parents experienced during the time of online learning. Firstly, online learning allowed for learners to receive an education during the pandemic while remaining in the safety of their homes, curbing the spread of the virus (Rakhmatullaev, 2023). In addition to this, Strauss (2020) as well as Fitriani and Yanita (2023) discovered that parents began to see a shift in their children's confidence and abilities as they became more independent during their time at home. Moreover, due to classes being online, parents were happy that students were able to increase their sleeping hours, as waking up early to get ready for school was not necessary (Strauss, 2020). Time was not the only aspect that was saved, as Rakhmatullaev (2023) also found that the costs associated with travelling to school were alleviated. The flexibility that comes with online learning was also viewed as a benefit as it allows for the learning process to happen at any given time and place (Suwastini et al., 2023). Furthermore, online learning allowed siblings to get closer and work together (Strauss, 2020). Fitriani and Yanita (2023) additionally found that parents gained more admiration and respect towards the field of teaching when they were required to do it themselves. Moreover, online learning allowed for parents to relearn information that they were educated on in the past, and learn new information in the process of assisting their children (Fitriani & Yanita, 2023). Another advantage is that online learning gave learners the opportunity to work with technology

and become more technologically literate, as they were required to use different platforms such as Zoom and Google Meet (Fitriani & Yanita, 2023).

Parents also need to treat themselves well in order to be good parents; this goes beyond how they treat their children. Epstein (2010) argued that the way a parent handles stress in their lives influences the child. This is especially the case during a pandemic when levels of anxiety are heightened (Pratiwi et al., 2020). Furthermore, a study by Coyne, et al., (2020) found that parents who encounter elevated levels of stress are more inclined to exhibit reduced efficacy in fulfilling their parental responsibilities. For this reason, coping strategies of parents are fundamental in maintaining healthy parent-child connections.

Coping strategies

There has been a great deal of stress brought on by the pandemic due to the unexpected school closures and uncertain financial circumstances (Fitriani & Yanita, 2023). Studies suggest that daily stressors have an impact on the parent-child relationship as parents may experience a profound effect on their emotional state (Chak, 2001; Chung et al, 2020). This sentiment is echoed by Clark (2021) who argued that relationships can be adversely affected as a result of the stress suffered by caregivers during the pandemic. At a time as challenging as a global pandemic, it would be imperative for parents to adopt healthy coping strategies for themselves as well as their relationships with their children.

There are two general categories of coping strategies: approach strategies and evasive strategies. An approach strategy changes the problem itself or the feelings associated with it, whereas an evasive strategy avoids the stressor (Freire, 2020). Epstein (2010) found that even though stress management was ranked as being a major contributing factor to a good parent-child

relationship, parents' abilities to deal with stress was lacking. It is important to recognize that the quality of the parent-child relationship directly influences the quality of their interactions, which in turn affects how children acquire knowledge within the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky et al., 1978). This is due to emotionally positive relations and interactions creating a better ZPD, as discussed by Levykh (2008).

A study was carried out by Pratiwi et al. (2020) in which parent coping methods during COVID-19 were investigated. The authors found the following coping strategies to be utilized by parents: trying to remain optimistic and seeing the good in every situation, crying in order to release their feelings, avoiding the situation, and finding time for themselves as well as seeking support from others. Ishaque et al. (2022) found that in order for parents to navigate through challenging periods, it is crucial to have a strong support system. The significance of a support system was also highlighted by Scrimin et al (2022). During the pandemic, however, it was common for individuals to put aside their longing to be around loved ones in order to give precedence to their safety (Ishaque et al., 2022). Alternative coping strategy suggestions for parents include meditation, breathing exercises, the challenging of negative thought patterns and better organizational practices such as creating a schedule (Fitriani & Yanita, 2023; Epstein, 2010). However, some parents may opt for punitive disciplinary measures as a means of addressing stress and coping (Ishaque et al., 2022; Chung et al., 2020). These studies were carried out in Asian settings such as Pakistan, Singapore and Indonesia, so it is important to note that findings may differ in the South African context.

In the South African context, Radzilani-Makatu (2014) discovered that parents use approach strategies such as communication with other parents to cope with challenges regarding their children. Furthermore, a belief in a higher power was revealed to keep parents going in

difficult times. On the other hand, some parents displayed evasive coping strategies, such as distancing, in an effort to escape stressors in their lives. While this study sheds light on coping strategies used amongst South African parents, there is scarcity in the literature on coping strategies employed by parents during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

The pandemic severely affected the learning and teaching process in the education system. In addition to the effect the pandemic has had on learners and teachers, we should also consider the effect on parents since they served as substitute teachers during this time (Kolak et al., 2021), playing the role of a social agent (Vygotsky et al., 1978) in their children's learning and development. In the South African context, few studies have been carried out which have taken the parents' perspective into account. Therefore, this study allows for parental experiences to be captured as they navigated online learning firsthand during the pandemic. By understanding parental perceptions of online learning, we may be able to develop more effective intervention strategies going forward.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter will outline the methodology employed in this research study. It will begin with a discussion of the research design, followed by a description of the participants and the data collection procedures utilized. Next, the chapter will detail the data analysis process. Finally, it will address reflexivity, the trustworthiness of the study, as well as ethical considerations.

Research Design

For the purpose of answering this study's research questions, a qualitative research design (Bless et al, 2018) was utilized. I aimed to obtain in-depth accounts of parents' experiences and perceptions of online learning during the pandemic and how the transition affected them as well as their school-aged children. The study was situated within an interpretivist paradigm as it focused on the experiences of parents from their own perspectives.

A qualitative approach allows for people's subjective experiences to be shared and in turn, for the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of specific situations or phenomena. Essentially, qualitative methods provide insight into the participant's internal perspectives and realities (Silverman, 2020). This approach was particularly valuable for my goal to acquire detailed accounts of the experiences related to online learning during the pandemic.

There are limitations to consider when it comes to qualitative research. Rahman (2017) firstly mentions that qualitative research places importance on experience and neglects contextual issues. Secondly, there is the matter of representativeness seeing that sample sizes are usually quite small. Furthermore, qualitative research does aim for replicability as results can

vary significantly depending on the researcher or the context in which the study is conducted (Stahl & King, 2020).

Participants

This study made use of a non-probability technique known as snowball sampling (Bless et al., 2018) in order to recruit parents of children in grades 5 to 10 who attended mainstream private schools and had experience with online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. As mentioned by Bless et al. (2018), snowball sampling can be useful as it relies on a few individuals to direct the researcher to more people who may be eligible for the study. It starts with a small number of people who meet the study requirements, and these people then refer others they know who also fit the criteria.

Six parents of primary school children and six parents of high school learners were interviewed – this allowed for both primary and secondary school learning experiences to be shared. I interviewed private school parents as they experienced online learning when South Africa went into Level 5 lockdown (Gruzd et al., 2020). I wanted to have an equal number of mothers and fathers in my sample of participants as Kolak et al. (2021) found that parents attitudes and perspectives differ based on their biological sex. Therefore, the criteria for recruitment included sex but not age. Unfortunately, the sample was not balanced, comprising of seven mothers and five fathers, which was attributed to the availability of parents for interviews. All participating parents were educated at a tertiary level, employed during the period of online learning, and their ages ranged from 35 to 57. The racial distribution of the participants was as follows: 50% Black; 25% White; 17% Coloured; and 8% Indian. The parents had to have their children enrolled in mainstream private schools. They also had to work from home during the time of the face-to-face to online learning transition, as this meant that they had first-hand

experience of the situation and took on the role of a social agent in their child's learning. For this reason, parents who are essential workers and had to go to work at the beginning of lockdown did not meet the criteria for participation. Active involvement in their children's learning was also necessary for participation.

Data Collection Procedure

I recruited participants by distributing a participation request letter on my resident's association group and social media platforms. This meant that participants were most likely from the Johannesburg West area and had their children enrolled in schools close by. I appealed to parents of children who were between grades 5 and 10 in order to generate a sample for my research. An attempt was made to gather a diverse sample from various schools via social media, but this goal was not fully achieved. I received responses from five parents on social media, who then connected me with other parents who met the study's criteria and were willing to participate. Participants were emailed forms in order to obtain informed consent (see appendix C) and we communicated via email to set up convenient times for the interviews to take place. Thereafter, the collection of data began. In addition to a demographic questionnaire (see appendix D) – which asked for information such as age, gender, current employment and education level – I used semi-structured interviews to gain insight into parents' experiences and perceptions regarding online learning during the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. This structure encouraged participants to share their experience (Bless et al., 2018) while also allowing for the necessary interview questions – such as “what were your experiences surrounding the transition to online learning during the pandemic?” – to be asked across interviews with each participant. A series of eleven open-ended questions were asked (See appendix A), surrounding experiences of online learning during the pandemic, perceptions of learner motivation as well as coping

strategies employed by parents at the time. The interview schedule and questions were constructed based on the information deemed necessary to answer the study's research questions. The questions were developed to ensure that they would elicit relevant insights from participants. Interviews were done with 12 parents individually – each interview was done online via Microsoft Teams or Zoom depending on the participants' preferability. Interviews lasted approximately 40 to 60 minutes. Interviews were then recorded for transcribing purposes with the consent of participants (see Appendix C). While online interviews are an effective method of gathering information from participants, it is not without its shortcomings. The more impersonal nature of online interviews may lead to participants feeling disengaged, which could result in them providing less thorough responses. Furthermore, there is the issue of unstable connectivity which may disrupt the flow of interviews, as well as the researcher's inability to observe participants' body language which limits the interpretation of non-verbal cues. In order to overcome some of these shortcomings, such as disengagement, prompting was used to encourage participants to elaborate on short responses and provide comprehensive answers to questions. Prompting also allowed participants to feel as though their input was valued and they were being heard.

Data Analysis

After recording the interviews, I familiarized myself with the data by transcribing each participant's interview verbatim to ensure an accurate record of their responses. The transcriptions were saved in Microsoft Word documents, and once all interviews were transcribed, the data was analyzed thematically.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview data. Thematic analysis seeks to identify and interpret significant patterns within and across a specific data set (Braun & Clarke,

2006). I began the process of thematic analysis by familiarizing myself with the data by transcribing each interview. Common themes were identified and coded for interpretation (Bless et al., 2018). I achieved this by thoroughly reviewing the transcriptions multiple times, identifying connections between participants' responses, and noting these links. At this stage, initial codes were developed, and all relevant data was organized accordingly under each code. From there, themes and subthemes began to emerge. These themes and subthemes were reviewed and refined until the final themes were established.

Data saturation occurs when there is no new information being uncovered in interviews (Fusch & Ness, 2015). The authors suggest that data saturation is not dependent on numbers of participants and interviews conducted per say, but rather on the detail and depth of the data gathered. For the purpose of my research, I interviewed all 12 participants and stopped analysis of data when there was no new information emerging.

Rettke et al. (2018) discuss the importance of reflexivity. Qualitative research and the information obtained from a qualitative study is subjective. It was therefore imperative for me as a researcher to engage in reflexive thinking. Korstjens and Moser (2018, p. 121) define reflexivity as “the process of critical self-reflection about oneself as researcher... and the research relationship.” This means that I needed to be aware of my own subjective views and opinions as a researcher and the ways in which I may relate to participants. Self-awareness is crucial to reflexivity, and failure to do so may result in bias when it comes to the research findings and interpretation. Keeping a reflexive diary (Korstjens & Moser, 2018) – in which I recorded my personal feelings regarding the process, the participant and their responses – helped me maintain awareness of my own beliefs and biases so that they did not influence my interpretations of the data I collected.

In any qualitative study, ensuring trustworthiness is imperative (Stahl & King, 2020). To evaluate the quality of this study, I used Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four principles of trustworthiness – credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The principle of credibility pertains to the alignment between the researcher's interpretations of the data and the participants' perceptions. As the researcher, I strengthened the study's credibility by engaging thoroughly with the data throughout the analysis phase. Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings of a study can be applied to other contexts by other researchers. A description of the participants and study setting has been offered to support this principle. Dependability pertains to the stability and consistency of research findings over time and in comparable circumstances. The study's dependability was established through an audit trail which included a record of all research activities and the rationale behind the theoretical and methodological choices made. Lastly, confirmability refers to whether the researcher's interpretations and conclusions are clearly based on the data. I kept a reflexivity journal to document my biases, assumptions, and thought processes in order to uphold the principle of confirmability.

Ethical considerations

Before recruiting participants and conducting interviews, I underwent ethics training (see Appendix E). Ethical clearance to conduct this study was received by the University of the Witwatersrand Ethics Committee (Protocol Number: MEDPSYC/22/02, see appendix G) Once clearance was obtained, a study invitation (see appendix B) was sent out to potential participants via social media platforms. The invitation included details such as who I am as the researcher and the purpose of my research study, as well as the criteria for participation and the expected duration of the online interviews for those who would be willing to participate. Participation was voluntary and potential participants were not unduly influenced to be involved. Those interested

in participating were asked to sign an informed consent form (see Appendix C) stating that they agree to partake in the research process. I made sure that they were aware of what the research study entailed by outlining what it was about (see Appendix B), as well as the aims of the study and the process going forward should they agree to participate. Furthermore, participants were informed that they are allowed to withdraw at any point without any penalty. Once informed consent forms were signed and returned via email, data collection commenced.

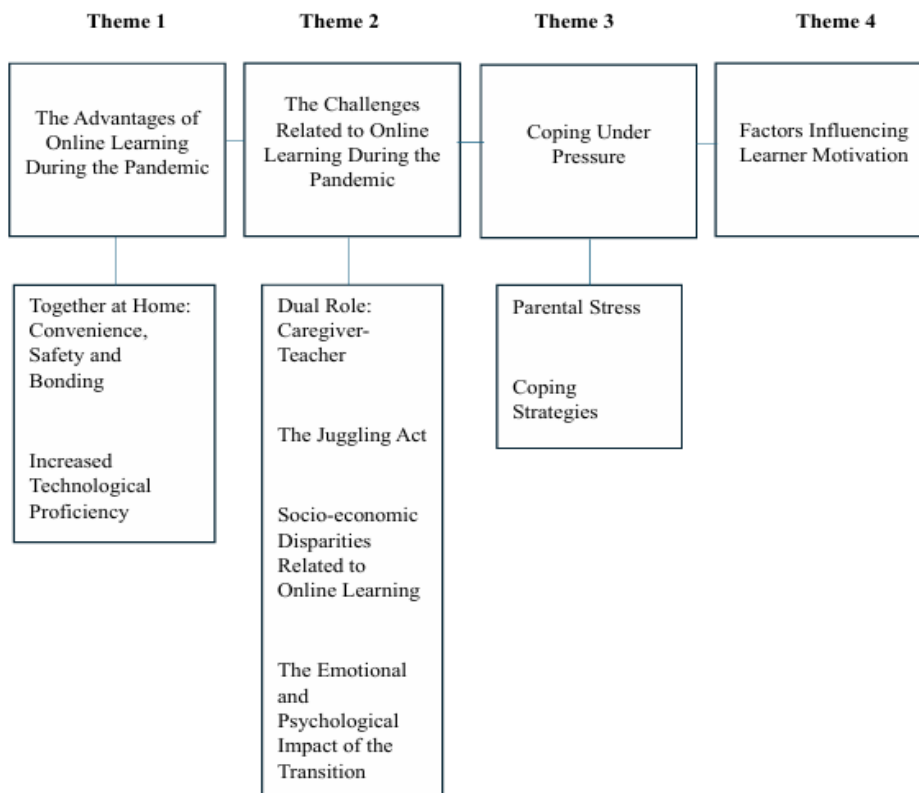
Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained. Pseudonyms were used to replace all participants' real names, children's real names in addition to school names in the transcriptions of interviews and the research report. Participants were allowed to consent to audio recordings of the interviews and it was clearly stated that the interviews will be recorded solely for transcription purposes and deleted thereafter. Participants were also informed that the data may be made available to the researcher's supervisor to aid in the research study. Recordings were kept on a password protected device during the duration of the transcription process, which was done by the researcher.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The previous chapter discussed the research methodology used to answer the current study's research questions. This chapter presents the results derived from the thematic analysis of the interview data collected during the study, including verbatim quotations from each participant to provide evidence of what is being presented. While analyzing the data, there were four main themes that emerged as depicted in figure 1, namely (1) The Advantages of Online Learning During the Pandemic; (2) The Challenges Related to Online Learning During the Pandemic; (3) Coping Under Pressure; and (4) Factors Influencing Learner Motivation.

Figure 1

Relationship Between Themes and Sub-Themes in South African Parents Perceptions of Online Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic



The Advantages of Online Learning During the Pandemic

In this theme, parents expressed their perceived advantages of online learning. Two main subthemes emerged, namely (1) Together at Home: Convenience, Safety and Bonding; and (2) Increased Technological Proficiency.

Together at Home: Convenience, Safety and Bonding

Several parents of both primary school and high school learners concurred that online learning offered convenience. Participants discussed the amount of time saved in the mornings due to not having to stick to their usual routine of waking up early in order to get to school on time as well as enduring traffic, as Parent A commented that “working from home, a lot can be done instead of sitting in traffic and driving there.”

The convenience of not following a “morning school routine” further reflected a perceived sense of relaxation in students and their parents. Parent B noted that “it was so relaxed in the mornings because [they] knew [they] were not having to sit in all that traffic to try and get to school. The children were a lot more relaxed and not stressed”, while Parent C went further by commenting “no waking up early, dropping them off, making sure they are having something to eat in the morning, their lunch boxes, you don’t have to worry about such.” A sense of relaxation was also mentioned by Parent D below:

I think actual school is more of a routine where they know that school uniform needs to be taken out, you need to get up, you need to eat, you need to dress. So I think the benefit I did see was they were less anxious, they were more relaxed. Even though there was a lot of homework to be done, it was done because it was done in their own time and at their own pace and not having someone there checking all the time. – Parent D

Furthermore, Parent C noted that ‘[she] would say [they] were saving a bit of petrol there because [they] don’t have to drop [the children] at school’, therefore demonstrating that in addition to not having to adhere to a specific routine, there were also savings made on petrol costs as everyone was at home during that period.

In addition to the convenience of online learning, there was the safety element that accompanied it as online learning allowed for learners to continue effective learning from the comfort and safety of their own home during the pandemic, which curbed the risk of contracting the virus. Parent E commented on this by saying “Actually, we enjoyed it. We liked it. From a safety perspective, it was very good, we didn’t experience any issues. We preferred it that way, no other way” as “it was safer to do the online because of the pandemic.” This sentiment was echoed by Parent G as he believed “that was the only advantage – [the children] were safe.”

Furthermore, Parent F perceived that learning and working from home allowed for bonding time between family members as they “got to spend some quality time together as a family” and viewed the situation in a positive light. He commented further by saying that they “definitely got closer during that time, that’s for sure.” Bonding between the parent and child during online learning was also mentioned by Parent B as she mentioned that her daughter could “still attend classes, but [they] sit next to each other, sort of actually form that bond again of being close.”

Increased Technological Proficiency

On another positive note, some parents commented on the way online learning helped their children become more technologically inclined. Parents of both primary and high school aged children shared the view that online learning has enhanced their childrens’ ability to use electronic

devices effectively. Parent D commented on how her Grade 7 child's confidence with technological devices increased compared to before online learning took place as "he is now able to use his laptop and he's comfortable with it", continuing by mentioning that online learning "has given [learners] that confidence to use technology and it's set them up." Additionally, Parent F commented on the hands-on experience his children had with technology, putting emphasis on its value considering the direction that the world is moving in regarding technology. This is underlined in the quote below:

For the kids I think it taught them a lot more, in terms of being hands-on with the computer, I think it taught them about the way the world is going and how all your roles is going to have some sort of technology involved. So, I think it helped them with that practical experience and being hands-on. – Parent F

Challenges Related to Online Learning

In this theme, parents expressed the challenges they experienced regarding online learning during the pandemic. Four subthemes emerged namely (1) Dual Role: Caregiver-Teacher; (2) The Juggling Act; (3) Socio-economic Disparities Related to Online Learning; and (4) The Emotional and Psychological Impact of the Transition.

Dual Role: Caregiver-Teacher

Due to students being at home as a result of lockdown regulations, parents found themselves having to take on the role of being, not only their children's caregivers, but their children's educators as well. This result was observed among both primary school and high school parents. Parent G perceived herself as being an "assistant teacher, unpaid". Playing this dual role of being a parent and a teacher required parents to organize their child's learning materials, which

required additional time. Parent H commented that there were “longer hours required to get through both work and school obligations at the time” which “potentially reduced sleep.” Parent D further commented on the ways in which she had to organize her children’s learning materials in the quote below:

I used to actually wake up earlier in the morning so I could go onto Google Classrooms and print their schedule. So the school would post on their chat to say that their work has been posted for the day and then I would go onto Google Classrooms and print everything that needs to be done for every subject and get that ready for the older one and say ‘okay that’s what you will do.’ So every day I would have to wake up early and prepare for that before starting my work. I practically was teaching at the same time. – Parent D

Furthermore, given the online platform of learning parents were required to explain the work content to their children as there was often not an opportunity for the material to be explained sufficiently in the duration of the online lesson. Parent E believed it was more difficult for learners to ask questions during online learning verses in-person schooling, which led to decreased understanding of material.

Online they’re very strict, it’s very difficult to ask questions during their teaching lesson so the questions have to be asked after and sometimes what happens is, when they teach you can’t interrupt whereas in class you can interrupt and say ‘I don’t understand this’ and the teacher will explain again. – Parent E

Teachers were not perceived as being completely dedicated to teaching during online lessons, according to Parent F, as they “did their time and then left” which resulted in parents having to “manage the actual teaching” and explain the work to their children. Parent H

commented on the limited availability of teachers as “it was difficult to get hold of teachers to get an indication or direction of what the ask was” and to clarify concepts to learners, which led to learners having to ask their parents for clarification as “they had nowhere else to run to.”

Challenges were faced when trying to clarify the concepts to their children and fill in the gaps in understanding, as parents themselves were grappling with a lack of comprehension of the material. Interestingly, it wasn’t only parents of high school students who struggled to explain the content; parents of younger children in primary school also found the learning material challenging and markedly different from their own educational experiences. Parent J perceived the material as being different than it was when she was at school, making it challenging to explain it to his Grade 7 child. He commented that “[parents] can’t help with the work because nowadays is different to [their] days.” This was viewed as having an impact on the learner’s level of understanding and achievement, as Parent H mentioned how the learner’s results can be affected due to the parent’s insufficient level of understanding when trying to explain the material as “the level of understanding as a parent and the level of understanding as a teacher when giving it to the learner is totally different.” She believed that teachers “spend most of their time with [the learners] so they know their weaknesses, they know their strongest points... they know how to balance that to make sure that the outcome is of the best ability.” The difference in the ways in which teachers and parents explain material was further commented on by Parent L, whose daughter was a high school learner at the time. She believed that parents could explain the work, but they would “explain how [they] understand it but not necessarily how it would be taught at school” as “teachers have a way of explaining concepts to pupils in a way they will understand, and at their level.”

Being substitute teachers and educating their children was especially difficult if there was not sufficient communication between the parents and teachers. Moreover, was the challenge of

learners not understanding or trusting their parents' explanations of material, as mentioned below by Parent H, who found that both her Grade 5 and Grade 10 children were more trusting of their teachers' methodologies. Parent L added that depending on the learner's age, some children did not want help from their parents. This was her experience with her Grade 10 daughter, who wasn't fond of being repeatedly pushed to finish her schoolwork.

For me, they thought I was misleading them in some stuff like they would say 'but the teacher said we must do it this way' and I was seeing it better being done in another way and I think that's what caused most confusion to the children - to say okay I'm used to this type of methodology of doing things but now I don't know why my parent is saying that this is how it has to be done. – Parent H

They like studying on their own. They only ask for help when it's necessary. I would tell her to do her work and she's a teenager so she would say 'ah mummy, I'm doing my work, why do you want to push me', so it was really bad for her, shame. – Parent L

The Juggling Act

It was discovered that parents faced challenges when trying to help their children due to their own professional responsibilities and occasional feelings of frustration. Parent D made a valuable point, highlighting that despite parents' efforts to plan, things do not always unfold as intended. She found herself trying to teach her children while also being on work calls, which led to frustrations as she juggled multiple tasks at once.

So I think as a working mother, it was a bit of a challenge only because I obviously needed to juggle both work and making sure that the kids were going through their online learning. There were days where I had back-to-back meetings and things don't always, like as much

as you want to plan, things don't always work out that way. There were times when I was on a call, with them sitting next to me doing homework or schoolwork and me trying to teach them something at the same time and them not getting it and my frustration and shouting and screaming – Parent D

Moreover, parental work frustrations could influence children's learning, as noted by Parent C and Parent I, who suggested that when parents are preoccupied or irritable, they may find it difficult to focus on their children, which can diminish the quality of their interactions and support. This is discussed in the quotes below:

Sometimes when they maybe need to ask you something, you won't even be concentrating, you won't be able to help them because you will be frustrated with your own work and it will affect their learning. – Parent C

If you're stressed in the office and they're kind of not doing what they're supposed to do, they're picking up on that sort of energy because you're going to be short with them and take out that frustration on them. – Parent I

It was especially difficult when companies did not allow parents the flexibility to assist their children with schoolwork during work hours. Parent L commented on the limited time available to assist her children due to her company's inflexible working hours and micro-management whilst working from home.

There was also a lot of micro-management, time management, where that flexibility wasn't there. Like if you were offline for a certain time you would need to explain. It was 'you are at work, the working hours is this time and this time and your lunch hour is an hour, if you

want to teach your kids, you teach them in between your lunch hour and that's it. ' – Parent L

Socio-economic Disparities Related to Online Learning

The theme of socio-economic status impacting online learning experience emerged prominently during the parent interviews. Adequate device access and suitable spaces to work from home – both of which are affected by one's financial circumstances – were two of the most common frustrations expressed by parents. Parents found that they not only needed to purchase extra devices for their children to participate in online learning, but they were also required to find spaces in the home for conducive learning to take place. It appeared that parents of younger children encountered more difficulties regarding functional workspace, as they needed to work in the same vicinity to supervise their children, as mentioned by Parent G whose child was in Grade 5 at the time.

He had a tablet, but it wasn't a tablet you could use every day. It was a tablet that he had that he just used to play games on now and again, when we go on holiday he'd use it in the car, you know what I mean. So, I had to buy him a proper laptop for school. Then the little one, I also bought a proper tablet. The tablet that he had, like I say, it wasn't you know, so I bought him a proper Samsung tablet that he could go on and use so I had to buy all of those. – Parent D

I had a little corner for them where they had their desks and all of that. When it was time for him to do school, to make sure he was actually participating, I had a section in the same room so I could see him while he was doing his schoolwork. At least we had that space. – Parent G

The data also suggested that the socioeconomic status of schools and training made available for teachers based on said status had an impact on online learning. Schools that had greater resources and were in a more favorable financial position were perceived as being capable of delivering superior online instruction. This is evident from Parent A's interview extract below, whereby she suggests that private schools were at an advantage.

(speaking about private school) They used to get teachers, like the best teachers from other schools and it was easy because they could just log into teams and speak to the teachers everywhere, so her performance improved. I was helping the little one because public school they don't teach them how to use a computer, how to organise your work, so I had to teach her how to organise her work and to remind her to do her work because they didn't have sessions as such – it was just whatsapp most of the time. – Parent A

The disparity between private and public schools was also mentioned by Parent J and Parent D, who both have two children, one who attends a private school and the other who attends a public school. Parent D, who moved her child from a public school to a private school, remarked that private schools had already been utilizing the applications needed for online learning before the pandemic occurred, which placed the learners at an advantage.

I almost want to say that the pandemic actually helped learning and I'll tell you why. I moved him from a public school to a private school and the private schools actually used chrome books – so because during the pandemic in grade 7 he had already started with online classes, getting used to using the laptop and everything, it actually did benefit him when he was in the private school when he was using these things. – Parent D

In contrast, Parent J commented on his daughter's academic performance which dropped by 20 percent while attending a public school during the pandemic, stating that they were not content with the way public schools approached online learning. Both Parent D and Parent J are discussing their Grade 7 children.

The way the public schools approached it, it was not okay for us. It affected the kids' performance. My daughter's performance, her averages are in the 80s and during that time it was in the 60s and she was so depressed. – Parent J

Private school parents appeared to be satisfied with the amount of support received from teachers, and this sentiment was found across various grades. Parent K believed that teachers tried their best at the time “under the circumstances” and did not “necessarily think they could have done more.” Parent C commented on the satisfactory involvement and support the teachers provided while Parent G echoed the same sentiments by saying that teachers also tried to provide one-on-one assistance when possible and did not believe that learning online changed the way primary school learners understood the work content.

The teachers were trying, I must say, they were there and trying. I'm happy with the involvement they were giving us, the support they were giving. There were groups that we normally didn't have before where we would discuss today's job like 'today we will be discussing this, we will be dealing with 1 2 3'. We were almost back to school as well. – Parent C

I'm not sure if it made a difference in the way kids understood the content. They would have classes, one-on-ones to get assistance from the teachers, so I think they tried. They

tried. It was difficult because of the number of students, it was a bit limited but I think with what they were given at the time, they tried their best. – Parent G

Parent F, on the other hand, was not satisfied with private school teachers' delivery of material. He believed that teachers were not prepared for online learning in order to carry it out effectively.

I didn't think it was particularly good. Just from a delivery perspective, the schools were obviously not set up to cope with that or understand how to do it. The teachers didn't really have a handle on how to prep for online teaching. A lot of them weren't prepared, didn't understand how to do it. – Parent F

However, Parent L made a noteworthy point – online learning was new to everyone, not only learners and parents, and teachers had to adjust and work with the resources at their disposal.

It's not just as a parent we were not prepared, the schools were not prepared as well. The resources were not there, not necessarily because the teachers did not want to do the teaching, but they didn't have the resources to do formal teaching at that time. – Parent L

It should be mentioned that despite the best efforts of numerous educators, teaching practical subjects such as Mathematics and Science online proved to be challenging, even for younger grades as mentioned below by Parent D (Grade 7 parent).

He was fine but with math you know he struggled a bit, and science as well. It's practical work and a very specialized field where a teacher needs to explain that to them. I think that's kind of where it affected learning. – Parent D

The Emotional and Psychological Impact of the Transition

The shift from face-to-face learning to online learning had diverse emotional and psychological impacts on learners. The impact of the isolation factor that accompanied online learning during lockdown was discussed by multiple parents in the study, who felt as though isolation hindered their children's social interaction with others. Parent L and Parent K referred to children as being "social beings" who require social interaction, a necessity that was not available at the time. Parent K went as far to say that "from [her] end, [she believed] that's what they struggled with the most" during the period of online learning. Additionally, Parent F discussed how his children (both primary school and high school learners) depend on face-to-face interactions rather than social media to build relationships with friends, which meant that they lost some of their friendships during the period of online learning.

I'd probably say the social part of it was the hardest. They do a lot of sports and them not being able to go there was hard. We also don't let them do a lot of social media and things, so a lot of their friends are on those platforms but their main interaction with friends is more on a physical, face-to-face type stuff, so with that gone and not being allowed on Facebook or Instagram or whatever, it kind of broke some of the relationships they had. – Parent F

The lack of social interaction was also a concern for Parent B, who worries that her Grade 9 child may not be able to effectively communicate with others in person due to the nature of online communication not being interactive.

What I realized though is that interactive communication is not taking place. If you're at a counter and I come in, I can start a full conversation with that person without ever speaking to him. And they say the newer generation can't do it because the conversations are online. – Parent B

The same sentiment was shared by Parent E, even though she prefers online learning as opposed to traditional schooling. She stated that while she prefers online learning, children still need to participate in social activities rather than only be focused on electronic devices.

I would still prefer to do online but the children need to get out, they need to expose themselves. Today's children don't take the opportunity of doing outside the school activities. They don't do sports, they only do it at school and when they get home they're glued to their phones or whatever devices they have. – Parent E

Interestingly, Parent G believed that the lack of social activity was beneficial for his child academically as “he also had enough time for work because there were no activities whatsoever. He did well. [He thought] he did better than when he was in class for that particular year.”

It is worth noting that certain schools tried to incorporate social elements into online classes, however it was not perceived to be successful. Parent G expands on this in the quotation below:

They tried to have some social events online but it was very challenging, it was not an easy process. They would send them school t-shirts and they would do games online and compete, things like that to keep them active and all that. But it was not the same. – Parent G

In addition to feelings of isolation during online learning, children also faced heightened self-consciousness, which impacted their psychological and emotional well-being. A few participants mentioned the ways in which self-consciousness affected their children's levels of engagement in online learning. Parent B noted that her teenage daughter found it stressful and uncomfortable to turn on her camera or speak during online lessons. She explained that “when she

had to put the camera on, she's a very conscious person so it was stressful for her. Funny enough, she would never go listen to a recording when she spoke." Furthermore, Parent F commented on how shy learners can easily hide and avoid asking questions during online learning. This was his experience with both his primary school and high school children as they are quiet, as mentioned below.

They're also, they're fairly quiet. So they don't even, even though on these platforms as easy as it is just to raise your hand without being seen, it's also easy to hide. So you don't tend to ask questions, whereas in a face-to-face thing if the teacher sees a child with a bit of a confused look on their face, they'd ask a question to see if they understand or whatever.
– Parent F

Furthermore, schools occasionally combined different classes into one online class to save time and educate learners from different classes at once. This seemed to contribute to feelings of shyness, according to Parent E, as there were not only many learners present but also new classmates of the opposite sex.

Online isn't only one class, like for Maths there's about 80 to 100 children in the one class, you know. So in a big class, it's over 100, and if you ask questions it's like wasting time for the teacher as well and then nobody wants to ask questions because they don't know all the other children. So the shyness comes in a little bit, even with the girls, shyness comes in. – Parent E

Coping Under Pressure

This theme explores the impact of parental stress on learners and the strategies parents employed to cope with challenges and stress during online learning, as stress experienced by the

parent also affects the child. Two subthemes emerged, namely (1) Parental Stress; and (2) Coping Strategies.

Parental Stress

The data collected indicated that parental stress was another significant factor impacting learners' emotional and psychological well-being. Parent K and Parent F both alluded to the idea that children have the ability to sense when their parents are stressed and take on that stress themselves. This may occur as it is not always easy or possible for parents to hide the challenges they are facing from their children.

I think definitely stress in a parent's personal life has an effect on a child's learning because if you are not okay they feel it. Most of the time they think it's because of them and they also want to take on the role of the parent and make you feel better, so it stresses them too. It means they now can't focus on being children, be it learning, they can't do that fully because now they're worried about you. – Parent K

A lot of us were going through financial challenges. It was also the fear of the unknown and some of those things you can't hide from the kids, you can't hide your anxiety about them. They can see it. So your stress passes onto them because you are sitting there and panicking in front of them. – Parent F

Due to the seriousness of the COVID-19 virus, some parents also felt that their children were concerned and anxious about their parents' safety, which affected them psychologically. Parent K observed that even simple activities like going to the shop to buy bread caused anxiety in her children, as they worried their mother might contract the virus. She felt that this fear and uncertainty had a negative impact on their learning during that period. Parent E brought forth a

similar notion as she commented on her child's stress about his mother's health. These points are discussed in the excerpts below:

It's like 'does this mean if my mom goes to Pick 'n Pay to buy us bread she can come back with Covid? And then that means she's also going to die.' So it had that effect on them in terms of them learning. – Parent K

I think his fear was what if something happens to mom. I wasn't eating so it was a big concern for him. He would always tell me 'Mom eat' even if it's toast but I couldn't. So I would say his stress was that fear. – Parent E

Coping Strategies

The parents interviewed utilized various strategies, both healthy as well as unhealthy, to cope with the stress brought on by the pandemic and the challenges of having their families at home during the period of online learning. Parent I utilized healthy coping strategies as he commented that “[his] son and [himself] tried a few things like yoga, meditation. [His] son took quite well to meditation, he has a mild form of ADHD.” Another healthy coping strategy used during the pandemic, and still practiced until today, is prayer as elaborated on by Parent E in the quotation below.

The only thing we could do was to pray. The only thing was to pray. We started praying every night because before you'd just pray in the morning, pray in the evening – just normal prayer. But now we were begging God to give us protection, we were begging Him, that's how it was. So from May that year right up to now, we pray every day – Parent E

As a result of parents being concerned about their children's academic progress in online learning due to the lack of teacher support, some parents felt as though the only way they could cope was by supplying their children with as much learning material as possible to support them. Parent A purchased additional books, printed past papers and registered her children on websites consisting of educational material in order to feel secure that they would pass.

I bought extra books and I also registered them on IXL and there's another one, I forgot the name of the website because there are videos there. I just went online and printed the question papers from 5 years ago and I told her to go through the papers and ask me. That's how I tried to cope because I was very worried if she would cope and pass because I felt like the teaching wasn't sufficient. – Parent A

Parent D also discussed how she used organization as a means of dealing with the disruptions. She believed that having structure and back up plans helped her cope and avoid becoming overwhelmed.

So for me, I think I just really tried my best to structure things so that I don't get anxious and it's not overwhelming. I think adding structure for me was one of the biggest coping mechanisms. Also just planning and planning and planning – making sure that if this doesn't work then we'll do that. That really helped me – Parent D

Some parents struggled to think of ways in which they themselves could cope and chose to focus on their children instead. Parent F formed a mini soccer team with the children in the surrounding area.

We started a soccer club in our park. It was actually my daughter's idea, so I'd train them and ya, started that with a lot of other kids from the neighbourhood. That kind of

took off, we did training every day, we played matches on weekends, just to give them something else to do allow them to maintain some sort of social connection.’ – Parent F

Parent I, on the other hand, noted the importance of distributing tasks among family members to manage the heavy workload experienced by parents during the pandemic.

As a parent I think the only thing, I’m going to be honest, is we just had chores that we needed to do that we’d share amongst ourselves. Just trying to make sure that we balance each other in terms of keeping ourselves busy. – Parent I

A few parents struggled with finding coping strategies and dealing with the transition in a healthy manner. Parent K struggled to put any coping strategy in place as she stated that “you basically dealt with whatever came at you at that time. Maybe crying sometimes. [She] wouldn’t say [she] had a strategy of how to deal with certain things.” Implementing coping strategies was not only challenging, but it was also tempting for some parents to turn to unhealthy mechanisms, as Parent H mentioned below, she sometimes relied on alcohol to cope.

The thing is there was no way you could go to a restaurant, take them to destress or whatever the case may be. I was drinking a lot I’m sure. Trying to act as if everything was normal. There was never a shortage of alcohol around.’ – Parent H

Factors Influencing Learner Motivation

Participants’ responses varied regarding their children’s motivation levels during online learning; however, most parents felt that their children (regardless of their age) were less motivated while learning from home.

Teachers were perceived as being a key factor in students' motivation, largely due to the attitudes they displayed while teaching online. It can be seen in the excerpts below that Parent E and Parent F both shared the belief that teachers have a significant impact on motivating students, but they had differing opinions on whether they actually achieved this. When teachers expressed frustration, learners sensed it, which may have diminished their motivation.

They picked up a lot of I think the attitude of the teachers. The teachers also kind of pushed that across like when they got frustrated and just 'I don't have to be here' sort of thing and just, I don't think they were cut out for online teaching. – Parent F

In contrast, teachers who adhered to school guidelines and invested in engaging discussions tended to motivate their learners.

Teachers were at home as well. They were doing online from home and they would still dress up very neat because when I used to go to Luke's room, I used to just quickly see the teachers teaching and all the students. So I think they followed very fast with the rules and regulations of online and I think that's what motivated the kids. Whenever I walked into his room, I could feel there was discussions and the teachers motivated them a lot.' – Parent E

Even though this may have been the case, some students struggled to stay motivated during classes due to online recordings being easily accessible as well as the lack of peer motivation. Parent B found that her daughter would procrastinate due to class recordings being accessible, and she as the parent allowed it.

She sort of started putting things off. She was like more relaxed and said “I have the recording, so I don’t need to attend the class.” I sort of allowed her to just put this off a little bit when previously I would’ve never allowed her. – Parent B

Parent G, on the other hand, attributed the decrease in learning motivation to the lack of peer motivation at the time, which was a result of decreased class interaction online.

He was motivated but I don’t think it’s the same as the motivation he has when he’s in class and he’s with a group of friends and they compete against each other, you know. Even sometimes they’d make bets about who could do better. There wasn’t that class interaction between the learners or peer motivation was not there in online learning.’ – Parent G

Furthermore, Parent C commented on the uncertainty that accompanied life during the pandemic which made it difficult for some children to stay motivated.

[The children] were not that motivated, remember with Covid, everyone was like you don’t know what tomorrow holds for you. So that anxiety that you don’t know what’s gonna happen tomorrow and that. Then they have to do something online, something that is new and they are not used to. It was not that motivating. – Parent C

Another factor perceived by parents as having an impact on motivation was a learner’s sense of independence and responsibility. Learners were required to invest effort and exert themselves during online learning as the explanations of topics online were not always thorough from the teachers. This required a level of independence and responsibility in order to complete tasks. Parent B noted that her Grade 9 daughter would procrastinate, and her reasoning would be that “[she] can do it tomorrow, as long as [she] sends it by that time to the teacher”, therefore as a parent she believed that “[learners] changed their responsibility towards their work.” This view

was contrary to Parent G, who perceived his Grade 10 child as being responsible for his learning. He commented that his son “was independent, he knew what he had to do, and he did it.” Furthermore, Parent E explained that students had to take responsibility, not only for their schoolwork, but also for their conduct and appearance even though they were at home. She commented that “[the children] had to be strict with themselves, they had to follow rules and regulations even though they were doing online. even when they did online, they couldn’t have their hair long.”

Some children struggled with self-discipline due to the seemingly easy-going nature of online learning. A number of parents shared similar sentiments regarding their children relaxing more than they were working. Parent G commented that his younger child “would usually take naps during the breaks and sometimes doze off during class”, while Parent H noted that her children were “focusing more on the eating, the TV, they know which program is at what time.” Furthermore, Parent A remarked that the absence of teachers in front of the learners led to a lack of discipline among them as they would take breaks more than work.

They liked sleeping. I think it’s discipline cause they watched TV very late, woke up late and worked in their own time. Because there were no teachers in front of them, there was no discipline. They relax more than they do their work. I used to say they take a break for 2 hours and study for 15 minutes. – Parent A

On another note, Parent D commented on the lack of structure affecting learners as they did not have a set timetable, while Parent I discussed his child’s struggle with self-discipline and maintaining focus while working on a device due to distractions from the internet. These ideas are expressed in the excerpts below:

I don't think that he gives the dedication [online] that he does when he's in the classroom. I think they struggled with not having that timetable that said to them 'this is when you need to do that.' Unless you're a child who, you know, you're able to give yourself that structure... I think they struggled a lot with how it all fits together by themselves. – Parent D

He has a mouse and keyboard and he can open more windows, he would open up an internet browser and see what the teachers are talking about, I don't know prehistoric something and then he'll open that and go down the rabbit hole of prehistoric dinosaurs and the teacher's already moved on speaking about something else. – Parent I

Interestingly, a number of parents perceived that their children's ages affected their motivation to engage in online learning, whether they were teenagers or younger learners. Parent I noted that a child's developmental level impacts their participation and outcomes in online learning, underscoring the importance of age in this context. He commented that "[online learning] has a place, it definitely has a place but it's important to know at what stage of the child's learning journey and development does it fit into." Parent D believed that older learners tend to stay more motivated because they are often more mature and independent than younger children, therefore she thought her 13-year-old son would be more engaged if he were a few years older during online learning.

He's a teenager and I think this age giving him that freedom, at 13, the independence to structure, listen and take notes on his own is very difficult. I think if you had to ask this question if he was like 16, it probably would have had a different answer because then I think he'd be more mature and know what he needs to be doing. But right now, for the ages that they are at, I think classroom learning is probably better. – Parent D

In contrast, Parent F, who has children in both primary and high school, pointed out that various factors influence motivation and focus regardless of the learner's age.

Especially when they're younger, it's a lot harder to keep the kids involved wherever they are. Older kids, they have other issues where they start playing around with the settings of things, so things like muting the teacher, so those kind of issues that need to be handled.'

– Parent F

The above chapter outlined four key themes and their subthemes in relation to the study's research questions. These are: the Advantages of Online Learning During the Pandemic; the Challenges Related to Online Learning During the Pandemic; Coping Under Pressure; and Factors Influencing Learner Motivation. The subsequent chapter will provide a discussion of these findings in the context of existing research discussed in the literature review.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This chapter will explore the themes and sub-themes derived from the data, highlighting how the current findings align with or differ from existing literature in the field. This study sought to gain insight into South African parents' perceptions and experiences related to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of this study identified four key themes: the advantages of online learning during the pandemic; the challenges related to online learning during the pandemic; coping under pressure; and factors influencing learner motivation. Overall, the findings revealed inequalities in the education system between public and private schools due to resources available and the varying ways in which online learning was navigated.

The first theme highlights how parents experienced online learning during the pandemic as positive and beneficial. With regards to advantages, the data indicated that online learning offered convenience to both parents and learners. During face-to-face schooling, a good amount of time is devoted to getting ready in the morning and sitting in traffic on the way to school, not to mention the expense of petrol. Online learning allowed for these burdens to be alleviated. These findings align with those of Rakhmatullaev's (2023) and Strauss' (2020), whereby both financial and time savings were recognized as being advantages of online learning. Another advantage of online learning, that was identified in the interviews, was that it was viable from a safety perspective while still allowing for the school syllabus to be completed during the pandemic. Cox et al. (2020) also noted that many parents in their study felt reluctant to send their children back to school at the time, suggesting that they felt safe and comfortable having their children learn from home. It was a solution that kept learners, parents as well as teachers safe.

Furthermore, online learning offered learners of all ages, particularly younger ones, the chance to improve their technological skills. They were required to use platforms such as Microsoft

Teams and Google Classroom, in addition to navigating online resources and materials for learning purposes. Learners had hands-on experience, which increases technological proficiency, a skill that is necessary in today's digital driven world. Fitriani and Yanita (2023) discovered similar sentiments shared between mothers in their study as they believed online learning allowed for their young children to become more technologically literate. The study mentioned focused on primary school children, demonstrating that parents saw value in younger children being exposed to digital devices. Similar sentiments were shared by parents in the current study irrespective of their children being in primary or high school.

Shifting focus to the challenges parents experienced regarding online learning, previous research discovered that as a result of learners being at home during the pandemic, parents were required to oversee their children's schoolwork in addition to their usual caregiving duties, which was demanding (Cox et al., 2020). This dual role was extensively reported in the current study as parents commented on the high level of parental involvement that was needed in their children's learning. This was attributed to the perception that teachers' contributions were insufficient, therefore making parents the primary source of guidance and support when it came to academics. These findings are coherent with previous research whereby parents in both South Africa and Australia believed that they did not receive sufficient guidance and support from teachers during the period of online learning, leading to the perception that the responsibilities relating to learning rested primarily on them (Heyworth et al., 2021; Taylor 2020). Parents in the current study also pointed out that due to the nature of online learning, there was not often the opportunity for interaction and comprehensive explanations of topics. Data from the interviews suggested that it was difficult for learners to ask questions during online classes and get a proper understanding of the material, therefore forcing them to turn to their parents for clarity. Even though parents may

be perceived as the more knowledgeable individual to assist their children in Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (1978), some of them found it challenging to understand the content themselves which made it challenging when they had to fill the gaps and provide supplemental explanations of the material to their children.

Furthermore, parents and teachers explain material differently and this caused confusion to the learners. Taylor (2020) explained that the parent-child relationship differs from the teacher-child relationship in that the latter is typically more formal and structured, which may have influenced how learners reacted to their parents' teaching methods. Data from the current study further suggested that learners sometimes trusted their teachers more than their parents regarding schoolwork. This may stem from the learners' differing perceptions of their teachers compared to their parents. Furthermore, inadequate communication with teachers made supporting their children's learning more difficult. Without proper communication, it can lead to inconsistencies in explanations of schoolwork, ultimately affecting academic performance. For online learning to be successful, teachers have to provide appropriate guidance (Suwastini et al., 2023).

Overseeing their children's schoolwork was especially challenging when parents had their own work to do during the day. During the interviews, a number of parents shared how their frustrations may have impacted their children as they took out work-related stress on their children who were in the same space. Circumstances were especially difficult when employers were not understanding of parental commitments and micro-managed their employees, not allowing them adequate time to assist their children. Previous research by Cox et al., (2020) emphasized this challenge, noting that parents faced 40 hours of childcare and teaching responsibilities during the pandemic in addition to their 40-hour work week.

Even though the responsibilities and demands placed on parents increased and posed challenges, there were parents who experienced online learning during lockdown as a time to connect and strengthen their relationship with their children, parallel to findings by Fitriani and Yanita (2023) who discovered that parents used lockdown as an opportunity for bonding. While Fitriana and Yanita (2023) concentrated on mothers in their study, the current study's sample included fathers who also shared a similar bonding experience with their children. Additionally, it was discovered that fathers in this study carried out actions such as establishing a mini soccer team with their children, similar to the approach taken by fathers in a previous study conducted by Ishaque et al. (2022), who utilized sports such as cricket to strengthen their bond with their children during their time at home.

Another challenge faced at the time was parents having to invest in additional devices in order for their children to participate in online learning, highlighting the significance of their socioeconomic status in their children's learning at the time. Isnawan et al. (2023) mentioned how parents in their study struggled to fulfill the demands placed on them regarding technological devices that were necessary for online learning. Furthermore, low-income households may not be able to afford suitable devices and reliable internet connection for a conducive learning environment at home (Marshall et al., 2020; Taylor, 2020). Participants in the current study were fortunately able to afford additional devices for their children, nevertheless, it should be noted that these purchases are difficult even for those in a good financial standing when they are not within one's budget. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many people experienced financial constraints (Pratiwi et al., 2020), and this made buying additional devices challenging – especially when these expenses were not budgeted for.

Additionally, there was the challenge of finding a suitable workspace for both learners and parents. Fortunately for some parents in this study, there were functional workspaces in the home for work and schoolwork to get done efficiently. However, South African parents in a study by Taylor (2020) did not have the same privileges as they claimed they had insufficient workspaces in their homes at the time. Therefore, while there were savings made on specific expenses such as petrol, mentioned earlier, online learning required alternative expenditures. These expenses included setting up a functional workspace in the home as well as purchasing additional devices for learners to utilize for online learning. Therefore, this study revealed that the socio-economic position of a family is a significant factor in ensuring suitable conditions for conducive online learning to take place.

The COVID-19 pandemic also widened the existing educational inequalities between schools who have ample resources and those who do not. Suwastini et al. (2023) highlighted the gap between those in more favourable financial positions compared to those of a lower socio-economic status and discussed that the latter may be at a disadvantage while partaking in online learning due to not being fully capable of utilizing technological devices. This aligns with the interview data, which suggested that private schools were better prepared for online learning since they had already implemented measures for it prior to the pandemic. Learners were familiar with the use of devices and online applications such as Chrome Books.

Moreover, most parents appeared to be satisfied with the support they received from teachers in private schools – both with communication as well as delivery of material across grades. These findings are coherent with a study done by Taylor (2020) whereby South African parents discussed the disparity between the support received by public schools and private schools, as private schools were perceived to be more supportive. The disparity between public and private

schools may be attributed to the lower income of public schools and consequent insufficient training teachers receive on effectively managing online learning (Giorgio-Doherty et al., 2021). There were exceptions in the current study, however, who felt that private school teachers were also unprepared and could have improved their delivery of school material. Similar to this perception, Isnawan et al. (2023) found that parents in their study did not believe that teachers provided a good enough explanation of the material. Additionally, Heyworth's (2021) study showed that very few parents were in constant contact with teachers. Responses regarding communication with teachers varied in the current study, however, a majority of participants concurred that communication was inadequate. The differences in perceptions of school and teacher support may reflect variations in how different schools handle challenging situations. Nonetheless, despite the efforts from teachers, it was perceived that the lack of face-to-face interaction between teachers and learners hindered the learning process, particularly for learners and subjects that require hands-on instruction. This finding aligns with that of Giorgio-Doherty et al. (2021), as teachers in their study observed that learners exhibited less engagement online during certain subjects, such as Mathematics, due to the necessity of hands-on instruction.

Another challenge identified was parents' perception that isolation during the pandemic negatively affected learners' social, emotional and psychological well-being. Multiple parents called children social beings who require social interaction to function optimally. Lockdown regulations and social distancing meant that learners were no longer able to spend time with their peers and engage in social activities (Strauss, 2020). This is significant for children, as they typically spent six to eight hours of their day with peers who constitute a vital support system at school (Clark, 2021). No longer having this support system can lead to anxiety and increased levels of stress, particularly for learners who do not use social media platforms as much as others. The

current study suggested that some children rely on face-to-face interactions to maintain friendships, therefore leading to a loss of friendships during the pandemic. Another issue that was discussed regarding social isolation is the ability to be able to communicate with others in person. Communicating online is different from face-to-face and requires social skills which may be hindered due to a lack of interaction with people. The lack of social activity also leads to more screen time as learners were constrained to their homes, relying on their devices for communication with the outside world. Heyworth (2021) mentioned that parents were not happy with the school's lack of attention to social interaction between peers, however data from the interviews in this study suggested that some schools tried to incorporate social activities into online lessons. Nonetheless, the activities took place behind a screen rather than face-to-face, which decreased its effectiveness. Even though most parents believed that the lack of social activity was a negative, there appeared to be some who perceived it as being advantageous to their children's academic performance as it minimized distractions.

The data further suggested that self-consciousness can significantly affect participation during online classes as learners of various ages may feel nervous about asking questions and putting their cameras on to be seen by the whole class. Some parents believed that learners would hide during online classes due to shyness. This may be due to fear of judgment from classmates if they look a certain way on camera or ask a question that they think is silly. The significance of non-verbal communication was highlighted in this study as it was suggested that children who are having difficulties understanding in class may display a confused expression, prompting the teacher to offer assistance. In contrast, during online learning, facial expressions are not visible, which means that children who are hesitant to ask questions may go unnoticed. This aligns with findings from a study conducted by Dwiyanti et al. (2020), in which it was noted that non-verbal

communication is a crucial aspect of learning in the classroom, but it does not always occur in online settings. The authors further discovered that some high school learners preferred to ask questions outside of online classes, avoiding the spotlight and choosing to seek help from others or the internet instead. Appearances were not the only concern, as the current study found that learners were not happy with the way they sounded in the recording, which led to them remaining quiet and not participating in discussions during online lessons. Moreover, the reluctance to participate in online classes was exacerbated when classes were merged and there were a large number of learners in a single class, amplifying the feeling of discomfort. Sazali et al (2022) also pointed out that group interaction during online classes is beneficial to learners as some learners may have a better understanding of material and be more knowledgeable, allowing them to support their peers - therefore assisting them through the zone of proximal development. Self-consciousness, as discussed by the parents in this study, may have hindered this due to learners' hesitancy to participate.

A few parents discussed how the stress they were experiencing affected their children during the pandemic. Financial challenges were evident, and children picked up on this. It was concluded by Chung et al, (2020) that parental stress has a profound effect on children, which explains why learners may have felt amplified feelings of stress during the pandemic when their parents were experiencing challenges. Additionally, due to the seriousness of the virus, learners were concerned for their parents' safety, which may have affected their learning due to heightened feelings of stress and anxiety. It is important to note that positive relationships are significant in Vygotsky's theory as they are deemed necessary to create an effective zone of proximal development (Levykh, 2008). If the parent-child relationship was stressful at the time, it may have affected learning, as parental stress has an overall impact on children.

Isnawan et al. (2023) conducted a study in which they interviewed parents to gather their perspectives on online learning and discovered a divide: some parents felt their children were not learning effectively in an online setting, while others believed there were no significant barriers to their children's education. The current study revealed similar findings, with parents holding contrasting views on online learning. While some perceived online learning to be more challenging due to factors such as a lack of teacher support, social isolation which affects learners' mental state, self-consciousness online, as well as financial constraints; others perceived it as being positive as it was more flexible and relaxed for their children to learn from home as well as the perception that it allowed for a focus on academics as social activities were not an option. Furthermore, while some parents found the supervision of schoolwork challenging, others saw it as an opportunity to bond with their children.

It is imperative for parents to adopt coping strategies in order to deal with stress in challenging times. It was discovered that parents used a variety of coping strategies to deal with online learning and having their children at home during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although previous studies found that having a support system is crucial during challenging times (Ishaque et al., 2022; Scrimin et al., 2022), few parents in the current study reported seeking support from loved ones. However, it was mentioned that once lockdown restrictions were not as strict, initiatives such as forming a soccer team were taken as a means to stay active and add a social element into children's lives. This is similar to findings from a study by Ishaque et al. (2022) wherein it was found that fathers in particular used lockdown as a time to connect with their children by playing sports. A number of approach strategies were used by parents in the current study. Firstly, organization, planning and implementation of structure was used in order to avoid becoming overwhelmed. The importance of having contingency plans in place was mentioned,

however some parents lacked an initial plan. Planning and organization were also identified as coping mechanisms utilized by parents in previous research studies conducted by Fitriani & Yanita (2023) as well as Epstein (2010). Similar to organization was the delegation of tasks around the household and making sure everyone had something to do. Some parents adopted evasive strategies, which aim to avoid the stressor (Freire, 2020), including alcohol consumption and the pretense that circumstances were okay. Parents also tried to cope with online learning by acquiring as much learning material as possible to support their children. Due to the feeling that online teaching was insufficient, they compensated with learning resources. Additionally, according to Pratiwi et al. (2020) crying was identified as a means of coping during the pandemic, which was in line with findings in this study, although it was not necessarily viewed as a coping strategy per se. Moreover, it was expressed that prayer was valuable in order to navigate the online learning period during the pandemic; a strategy that is employed to this day. Similarly, Radzilani-Makatu (2014) found that the belief in a higher power and spiritual beliefs assisted people through challenging times.

In shifting one's focus to learner motivation during online learning, the results from the study indicated that parents perceived their children of various ages to be less motivated during online learning than they were during face-to-face teaching. Several parents held the belief that age impacts a child's motivation levels while participating in online learning. Parent I mentioned a child's developmental level as being significant, and this may be due to younger children not possessing the same attention span and cognitive ability as older children. It is also believed that older individuals have more intrinsic motivation (Shi et al., 2023), and this might be the explanation as to why parents of younger children doubted their children's motivation when the children themselves were the ones in charge of being responsible. In contrast to these findings, a

study by Martin (2012) concluded that high school learners in higher grades were not as academically motivated as those in lower grades due to factors such as anxiety and disengagement as increasing as they get older. Findings in the current study revealed contrasting views among parents in this regard, as some believed their high school children were motivated, responsible and engaged, while others noted a level of disengagement and procrastination in their children while partaking in online learning.

Teachers were perceived as having a direct influence on how motivated learners were depending on their attitude and approach, an idea that was also noted in previous literature (Hassan et al., 2020). In the current study, there were opposing views as some parents perceived that the way teachers presented themselves motivated the learners to engage and put in the same effort, while others believed that teachers were unconcerned, and this attitude influenced the children negatively in terms of motivation. Motivation levels were also affected by the laid-back nature of online learning and recordings of lessons being accessible at any time. Some learners would simply not attend classes for this reason, which was an issue that was also detected in a study by Marshall et al. (2020). Parents in the current study believed that their children were not motivated during classes as they were aware that they could access the recordings at their own convenience. This can be understood by Shroff et al. (2007) mentioning that challenging activities are what stimulates motivation. If learners perceived online learning as being easy or unstimulating, they may not have been motivated while partaking in it. In the classroom, teachers play a crucial role by supervising and creating a conducive learning environment, whereas online learning does not allow for that. Furthermore, it was found that online learning did not allow for much peer interaction, consistent with findings by Heyworth (2021). According to a parent in this study, this impacted the levels of competitiveness amongst learners and the feeling of accomplishment that is associated with

achieving good results, therefore affecting their motivation to work as hard. Moreover, there was the uncertainty of life that came with the COVID-19 virus. It was challenging for learners to maintain motivation when they did not know what each new day would hold.

Self-discipline was a theme that emerged in multiple parent interviews. In order to benefit from online learning, a certain level of self-discipline is required. Reeve et al. (2003) pointed out that motivation is increased when students are allowed freedom to make choices regarding their learning - particularly in online learning environments as it is more self-directed - however the data from the current study did not support this conclusion. Learners were required to take accountability and responsibility for their learning, and many struggled to do this while being in the comfort of their own home. Unlike the typical classroom, the home has various distractions that had an effect on their focus and productivity. Parents observed that distractions such as the television, eating and napping were inevitable while learners were at home. This is similar to findings from a study by Doll et al. (2021) in which teachers perceived an attitude of laziness from the learners when they were learning from the comfort of their homes. These distractions can pose a challenge for learners and lead to procrastination and decreased motivation to complete school related tasks. From these findings, it is evident that a range of factors have an influence on learner motivation.

This chapter presented a discussion of the current study's findings, integrating insights from previous literature and related studies. The subsequent chapter will address the limitations, recommendations, and implications of this research.

CHAPTER 6: Limitations, Recommendations and Implications

This chapter will commence with an examination of the limitations of the present study, followed by recommendations for future research. Subsequently, the implications of the findings will be addressed, before a conclusion to the research paper is presented.

Limitations and Recommendations

This study focused on a small sample of 12 parents. Furthermore, the demographic characteristics of participants may be a limitation of this study as most of the sample fell within similar socio-economic and racial demographics and were all based in the Johannesburg region. While there may be numerous people who can relate to the findings, there will almost certainly be a number of people in different contexts who do not. Therefore, the first recommendation would be for future studies to diversify their sample in terms of gender, race, and socio-economic status as this may yield different results. In particular, socio-economic status had a notable impact on the results of the study, as the findings were clearly indicative of its multiple effects on the online learning experience. All parents in the sample were employed during the period of online learning which influenced their experiences due to their financial stability. On the contrary, parents who were unemployed at the time may have had a significantly different experience. Therefore, it may be beneficial for future studies to delve into the experiences of parents who were unemployed during online learning.

Another limitation of this study concerns a wider range of schools, both public and private, being investigated with regards to how they handle online learning, as the current study focused on private schools. This is especially relevant in the South African context as those of a

higher socio-economic status would be considered the minority and not representative of the wider South African population.

Implications

The broad implications for this study include supporting training for teachers and parents to shape future online learning ideas, taking all individuals involved into consideration. It is essential for parents to be involved in the design of online learning teaching methods and initiatives as their engagement, as discussed in this study, was significant during the period of online learning. Schools could also be prompted to develop initiatives for better communication with parents, as multiple parents in this study felt as though they did not receive sufficient communication from teachers. Parents additionally hold valuable insights into how online learning could be enhanced due to their firsthand experience with their children's motivation levels as well as their observations of what was effective and what was not. Incorporating input from multiple stakeholders when making these decisions would also coincide with Vygotsky's theory, as both teachers and parents are viewed as persons who possess the knowledge necessary to guide learners through the Zone of Proximal Development (1978).

Insight into parents' perceptions of online learning could guide professional development programs for teachers specifically. Teachers could be involved in a training program focusing on effective online communication and ways to adapt traditional teaching methods to teaching on a digital platform. It is also imperative for teachers to be trained in ways to engage students online as multiple parents alluded to this not being done adequately. Continuous professional development may be beneficial to equip teachers with the skills to navigate online learning and carry it out efficiently. Furthermore, a protocol package could be designed for teachers, learners and parents should the need arise for online learning again. Schools could work on putting a

protocol document together as guidance for those impacted, as this study revealed that parents felt unprepared and perceived that teachers were not adequately trained or prepared either.

Another implication is related to digital device accessibility. The findings in this study highlighted the need for purchasing new or multiple devices when partaking in online learning. Due to the population's differing socio-economic standings, initiatives could be put in place to improve device accessibility for learners in South Africa. Furthermore, courses or workshops could be offered to both teachers and learners in order to enhance their competency when using technology as well as their digital literacy skills and enable them to engage in online learning more effectively.

Conclusion

In conclusion, parents took on the role of the more knowledgeable individual, within the theoretical framework of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (1978), as they guided their children through the learning process during online learning in a manner similar to that of teachers. This study has revealed that parents have both positive as well as negative perceptions and experiences related to online learning. A number of parents perceived online learning to be challenging or not depending on factors influenced by socio-economic status and resources available. This included how well teachers were trained for online learning as well as device access and digital literacy skills. Parents identified challenges such as their dual role as both caregiver and teacher; social isolation; and self-consciousness online. Others perceived online learning as being positive as it was more flexible and relaxed for their children to learn from home, as well as the perception that it allowed for a focus on academics as social activities were unavailable. Moreover, some parents viewed it as an opportunity to bond with their children as everyone was working from home at the time.

Regarding parent coping strategies, the study discovered that some parents employed healthy strategies such as organization, planning and prayer, whereas others either lacked strategies altogether or utilized unhealthy coping mechanisms such as alcohol consumption.

Certain parents perceived learners' motivation during online learning to be a reflection of their teachers' motivation while others believed it was dependent on age. It was found that many learners faced challenges in maintaining motivation due to factors such as a lack of self-discipline, the uncertainties surrounding the pandemic as well as the absence of peer motivation and competition.

These findings have important implications for the professional development of teachers concerning training for online teaching, as well as involving parents in the design of online teaching strategies and methods as they were significantly involved in their children's learning during the period of online learning. Furthermore, establishing robust protocol measures for teachers, learners and parents is important should the need for online learning arise in the future. The findings also highlight the need for ensuring learners have access to digital devices in order to engage effectively in online learning, as well as the necessity of implementing initiatives for parent-teacher collaboration and communication as it was discovered that parent engagement affects how children experience online learning.

While this study provides valuable insights, it is not without limitations. This includes a focus on private schools primarily and a small sample size that does not reflect the broader demographics of the South African population. Future research should aim to include a broader demographic and consider the experiences of not just parents, but also teachers and learners. It would be valuable to gain insight and understand teacher and learner perspectives considering they were the ones most affected by the transition to online learning. Nevertheless, this study

contributes to our understanding of the ways in which private school South African parents experienced and coped with online learning, as well as their perceptions of the motivation levels of learners during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Schedule

1. TOPIC: Transition Experiences

1.1 How did you experience online learning during lockdown?

1.2 What challenges did you face as a consequence of online learning at the beginning of the pandemic?

1.3 How involved were you in your child's schooling during this time?

1.4 What were the advantages of online learning?

1.5 How did the transition affect your child's learning?

1.6 Did you notice a difference in your child's academic achievement before the pandemic verses after it?

2 TOPIC: Motivation

2.1 How motivated do you think your child was while partaking in online learning?

2.2 What do you think your child struggled with the most?

2.3 Do you think your child performs better during face-to-face learning or online learning, and why do you think this?

3 TOPIC: Coping Strategies

3.1 What coping strategies did you use to deal with challenges and stress related to learning?

3.2 Do you think that stressors in your personal life had an effect on your child and their learning?

APPENDIX B

INVITATION LETTER



Project Title: South African parents' perceptions of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic

Researcher: Mikaela Naidoo

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Mikaela Naidoo. I am a master's student at the University of the Witwatersrand. I would like to invite you to participate in my research study which I am carrying out for the completion of my degree. I have selected you to take part in the study as I believe that you hold valuable information that could contribute to my research study related to the experiences of learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

My research focuses on the experiences and perceptions related to the transition to online learning during the pandemic, from parent's perspectives. I will be interviewing parents of children between grades 5 and 10 who attend private schools. The interviews will last roughly 60 minutes, and I would like them to be recorded for transcription purposes.

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you do not wish to participate, or withdraw at any time, you are welcome to do so with no repercussions.

Please be ensured that confidentiality will be maintained, and recordings of interviews will be on a password protected device belonging to me. Only myself and my research supervisor will have access to them at any given time.

Thank you for considering taking part in the research project. If you have any further questions, please feel free to contact me – my details as well as my research supervisor’s details are below.

Yours sincerely,

Mikaela Naidoo

Supervisor: Dr. Hassem

Cell number: 066 234 7372

Cell number: 082 494 9725

Umthombo Building – 2nd Floor, Room U211, Braamfontein East Campus, Private Bag 3, WITS 2050
T +27 11 717 4503/53 | E psych.SHCD@wits.ac.za | www.wits.ac.za/shcd/psychology/

IYUNIVESITHI YASEWITWATERSRAND | YUNIVESITHI YA WITWATERSRAND

APPENDIX C
INFORMED CONSENT FORM



- ☐ I hereby confirm that I have been informed about my involvement in this research.

- ☐ I have also received, read (or had it read to me) and understood the information regarding the study.

- ☐ I understand that what I say will be written down and / or recorded on tape.

- ☐ I also agree that the data collected during this study will be kept on a password protected device owned by the researcher, Mikaela Naidoo.

- ☐ I may at any stage, without prejudice, withdraw my consent and participation. I am not required to give a reason for withdrawal.

- ☐ I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and (of my own free will) declare myself prepared to participate.

SIGNATURES:

☐ I have read this consent form (or had it read and explained to me), and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. My signature below confirms that:

☐ I agree to participate in the study

Signature of participant:

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher Signature: _____

Permission to Audio Record

My signature below confirms that:

☐ I DO NOT give the researcher permission to audio-record my interview

☐ I give the researcher permission to audio-record my interview

Participant Signature:

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Umthombo Building – 2nd Floor, Room U211, Braamfontein East Campus, Private Bag 3, WITS 2050
T +27 11 717 4503/53 | E psych.SHCD@wits.ac.za | www.wits.ac.za/shcd/psychology/

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APPENDIX D

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Age:

YEARS	
-------	--

Gender:

MALE	
FEMALE	
OTHER	

Race:

BLACK	
WHITE	
COLOURED	
INDIAN	
ASIAN	
OTHER	

Location:

--

What is your current highest level of education? (Please tick appropriate box)

PRIMARY SCHOOL	
HIGH SCHOOL	
DIPLOMA	
DEGREE	
HONOURS DEGREE	
MASTERS	
PhD	

What is your current marital status? (Please tick appropriate box)

SINGLE	
MARRIED	
DIVORCED	
WIDOWED	

What grade is your child?

APPENDIX E

ETHICS TRAINING CERTIFICATE



Zertifikat Certificat

Certificado Certificate

Promouvoir les plus hauts standards éthiques dans la protection des participants à la recherche biomédicale
Promoting the highest ethical standards in the protection of biomedical research participants

Certificat de formation - Training Certificate

Ce document atteste que - this document certifies that

mikaela naidoo

a complété avec succès - has successfully completed

Introduction to Research Ethics

du programme de formation TRREE en évaluation éthique de la recherche
of the TRREE training programme in research ethics evaluation

Release Date: 2022/03/18
CID : rOqCLpyLae


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[REV : 2022/02/17]

APPENDIX F

Participant Information Sheet



Study title: South African parents' perceptions of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic

Dear Potential Research Participant,

My name is Mikaela Naidoo and I am currently enrolled as an Educational Psychology Masters student at the University of the Witwatersrand. As part of the requirements for my degree I am required to submit a research report on a particular topic. My research is aimed at gaining insight into the experiences and perceptions of parents with regards to online learning during the pandemic.

I would like to invite you to participate in my research study. In order to participate you will be required to partake in a semi-structured one-on-one online interview with the researcher as well as complete a demographic questionnaire. The broad topic of the interview will be your perceptions of online learning during the pandemic. The interview will be about one hour in length.

The interviews will be recorded on Microsoft teams or zoom and then transcribed by the researcher. The recordings and transcriptions will be kept in locked draws and password protected files that only the researcher will have access to. The only other person besides the researcher who will have access to the transcriptions is my supervisor, Tasneem Hassem. Direct quotes may be used in the final report but will not be personally identifiable. All data will be kept for a period of 2 years (should publication of the results occur) or 5 years (should no publication occur). After this time, all data will be destroyed or deleted. All identifying information will be kept strictly confidential. In the final report (and any subsequent publications) your anonymity will be protected by using a pseudonym such as Participant A, B etc. The identity of all extraneous persons mentioned by you will also be kept anonymous through the use of pseudonyms.

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any stage, for any reason, without any consequence. You are also free to abstain from answering any question in the interview that makes you feel uncomfortable. There will be no risk or reward as a result of participation in this research study.

If you have any concern over the way the study is being conducted, please contact Shaun Schoeman on 011 717 1408 or Charmain Khumalo on 011 717 1788.

If you agree to participate in this research, please complete the consent form attached to this document.

Thank you for reading this Information Sheet.

Yours sincerely,

Mikaela Naidoo

Hassem

Cell number: 066 234 7372

Supervisor: Dr. Tasneem

Cell number: 082 494 9725

May 2022

APPENDIX G

Ethical Clearance Certificate



SCHOOL OF HUMAN AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ETHICS COMMITTEE
CONSTITUTED UNDER THE UNIVERSITY HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE:

PROTOCOL NUMBER: MEDPSYC/22/02

PROJECT TITLE:

South African parents' perceptions of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

INVESTIGATOR

Naidoo Mikaela (1947811)

SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT OF INVESTIGATOR

SHCD/Psychology

DATE CONSIDERED

26 April 2022

DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE

Approved unconditionally

RISK LEVEL

Minimal Risk

EXPIRY DATE

31 December 2024

ISSUE DATE OF CERTIFICATE

14 June 2022

CHAIRPERSON

Z. AMOD

(Prof. Zaytoon Amod)

cc: Dr Tasneem Hassem (Supervisor)

DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR

To be completed in duplicate and **ONE COPY** returned to the Chairperson of the School/Department ethics committee.

I fully understand the conditions under which I am authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure to be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I/we undertake to resubmit the protocol to the Committee.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mikaela Naidoo".

Signature

Date

22 / 06 / 2022

