



PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHERS AND LEARNERS ON THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC LOCKDOWN ON RURAL SECONDARY SCHOOL FEMALE LEARNERS IN MATOBO DISTRICT, ZIMBABWE

Lwazi Sibanda¹ⁱ,

Joyce Mathwasa²

¹Department of Science, Mathematics and Technology Education,
National University of Science and Technology,
Bulawayo, Zimbabwe

²School of General and Continuing Education (SGCE),
University of Fort Hare,
East London, South Africa

Abstract:

The purpose of the study was to examine the perceptions of teachers and learners on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic lockdown on rural secondary school female learners in Matobo District. The study was qualitative in nature, entrenched on interpretivist paradigm and adopted a case study design. Data was collected using open-ended questionnaire and online focus group discussions from six teachers and eighteen learners who formed three focus group discussions. The participants were purposively sampled from three schools. The study found that a few teachers were able to conduct online lessons using WhatsApp platform during COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in the selected schools though there was no consistence as teaching was not programmed and participation of female learners was low. The findings revealed that most of the parents could not afford to provide online learning resources for their children because of economic hardships. The study further established that rural female learners were at risk during COVID-19 pandemic lockdown as some of them were exposed to sexual abuse when they try to have access to smartphones and data bundles from some male adults. It was found that female learners have lost much of their learning time whilst on lockdown and many cases of pregnancy have emerged leading to dropping out of school. The study concluded that most of the rural secondary school female learners were excluded from education during lockdown due to poverty, unavailability of network or poor network coverage, lack of broadcast transmission services to enable them to access online lessons through the radio, lack of electricity, poor attendance due to lack of smartphones and data bundles, performance of all household chores including herding of cattle and lack of cooperation from some parents. The study recommended that the Ministry of Primary

ⁱ Correspondence: email lwazi.sibanda@nust.ac.zw

and Secondary Education should collaborate with stakeholders to provide necessary resources to enable all learners to access online learning despite geographical location.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, rural secondary schools, online learning, female learners

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in massive disruption of education systems around the world. About 1.6 billion learners globally have been affected. The closing of schools and other learning institutions has impacted 94 per cent of the world's learner population, up to 99 per cent in low and lower-middle income countries. (United Nations, 2020). The closure of schools has overwhelmed the operations and outcomes of some education systems which were already stressed in many respects. There is evidence that worldwide, learners are affected by the schools' closure although at different levels depending on various factors such as the country/region where they live, their ages, family backgrounds, and degree of access to some alternative educational opportunities during the pandemic lockdown (García & Weiss, 2020). The schools' shutdown has posed challenges to learners and their teachers. The public education system was not prepared, to cope with the current situation as it lacks the structures to withstand effective teaching and learning during the lockdown. Whereas the exact impacts are not known, it is known that the learners' academic performance is deteriorating during the pandemic, along with their progress on other developmental skills. It is also evident that educational inequalities are growing due to various ways in which the crisis has widened existing socioeconomic disparities which have affected learning and educational outcomes (García & Weiss, 2020).

2. Background

According to the World Bank (2020) the prolonged intermittent education that extricate learners from the learning process has a possibility of reversing achievements in learning results. Teaching and learning programmes have not been completed and scheduling for national examinations has been affected as learners who are due to sit for the examinations cannot prepare adequately without the support of their teachers (UNICEF, 2020). As mitigating measures, the governments globally, introduced remote learning using various modes of communication which included broadcast technology, that is, radio and television, and online learning programmes were availed to assist learners at all levels of education (UNHCR, 2020). Studies conducted in Kosovo and Zimbabwe by Duraku, and Hoxha, (2020) and Nani and Sibanda (2020) respectively, revealed that online learning platforms such as WhatsApp, Ruzivo, Google Classroom, Google Meet, Zoom, YouTube, Viber and Microsoft Teams were used in delivering lessons. Furthermore, the World Bank (2020) acknowledges that countries like Spain are engaging

teachers in the preparation of online content and offering online classes. Similarly, in Uganda, UNHCR worked closely with Secondary Science and Mathematics Teachers Training Programme to train teachers on the use of online learning materials (UNHCR, 2020). The infrastructure and familiarity with the tools seem to be driving successes of delivering instruction online. For instance, China, with strong and reliable connectivity, is offering distance learning successfully (World Bank, 2020).

Despite the efforts made to adopt online learning, numerous challenges were encountered by learners and teachers worldwide. There is evidence of significant gaps in terms of availability of and access to online learning tools, especially in remote and rural areas (OECD, 2020). The World Bank (2020) has indicated that countries like Vietnam, Mongolia and many others, with limited penetration of internet, mobile phone, or television are finding it difficult to reach all learners equally. Research has shown that online learning and teaching are effective only if learners have consistent access to the internet and computers and if teachers have been trained to deliver instruction online. For the reason that these necessities have been mainly absent for several learners, remote education during the pandemic has hindered teaching and learning (García & Weiss, 2020). The World Bank (2020) confirms that the offering of remote learning might work better for those learners in families with better connectivity and higher initial digital skills. As a result, school closures with inappropriate system coping mechanisms, exacerbate inequality in education as those already disadvantaged are further left behind. Hence, the economic effects of the pandemic might extremely affect female learners' drop-out rates which may thwart their likelihood of returning to school. Female learners' educational outcomes in general, possibly will suffer if they are tasked to perform household duties more than male learners at the expense of their home-based learning. Female learners also risk facing lopsided difficulties in accessing technological based learning due to their overall lower levels of digital inclusion (OECD, 2020).

Likewise, in Zimbabwe, 4.56 million learners are affected by the nationwide closure of schools and this has adversely impacted on the gains made in access to education and learning (UNICEF, 2020). Hence, without a well-resourced response, the learners' education might be negatively affected and would result in increasing drop outs (De Cuyper & Pau Sole, 2020). However, as a measure to avert the situation, the Ministry of Primary Secondary Education engaged Ruzivo Digital Learning platform which offers e-learning and is available free to those who can access it via internet. Learners who access Ruzivo through Econet cell phone lines are not charged for data (UNICEF, 2020). UNICEF (2020) further affirms that in view of the resource gap and digital divide in Zimbabwe, there is need to adopt three approaches such as use of radio to disseminate lessons and education programmes, provision of online and digital resources, and dissemination of supplementary learning materials such as readers, workbooks and modules to ensure continuity of learning to as many learners as possible. According to United Nations (2020) the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown has stimulated innovation within the education sector as governments and stakeholders all over the world quickly developed remote learning solutions to support education continuity.

But, for many female learners, the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown has increased the risk of exposure to a lot of stressors, including physical and sexual violence. The current lockdown situation has aggravated gender gaps in education and led to increased risk of sexual exploitation, early and unpremeditated pregnancy, and child, early and forced marriage (UNICEF, 2020). Hence, it is against this backdrop that this study intended to examine how teachers and female learners perceived the impact of COVID-19 pandemic lockdown on rural secondary school female learners in Matobo District. The study sought to respond to the subsequent guiding research question: How does COVID-19 pandemic lockdown impact on rural secondary school female learners in Matobo District?

3. Methods

This study was qualitative in nature, embedded on interpretivist paradigm and adopted a case study design (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The purposively sampled participants included six teachers (two per school) and eighteen female learners from three Matobo District Rural Secondary Schools. Data was collected through emailed open-ended questionnaires and learners were placed into three focus group discussions which were conducted online. The transcribed data were thematically analysed. The issues of credibility and trustworthiness were considered when conducting the study. As for ethical considerations, the researchers adhered to informed consent, protection from harm, privacy and confidentiality, as well as honesty when the study was carried out (Bryman, 2008). Participants' identity was concealed as they were coded as TS1-TS2 (Teachers in school 1), TS3-TS4 (Teachers in school 2), TS5-TS6 (Teachers in school 3) and FGD1-FGD3 (Focus Group Discussion for learners).

4. Results

4.1 Impact of COVID-19 pandemic lockdown on rural secondary school female learners

The teacher participants were asked if they had access to learners to teach them online during COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Some the responses were as follows:

"No, most learners do not have the technological tools to access the internet. Those who have them do not have the money to buy bundles to participate in online lessons. Also, poor network is another barrier to most learners in Matobo and most of rural areas in this part of the country have no electricity." (TS1)

"I do have access to the learners because of the online platforms which allow me to have access, though not all of them as few are reachable." (TS4)

"Yes, I have access to only Ordinary Level learners. I assist the learners to prepare them for the examinations." (TS6)

The learner participants were also asked if they had access to online learning during COVID-19 lock down. Their responses reflect the teacher participants' responses. This is what they said:

"Not as such, I only revise with my friends, the teacher just gave us syllabus and books to read on our own. I do not attend lessons because data is expensive." (FGD1)

"Yes, I do, I am learning Mathematics, Combined Science and English. However, sometimes network is very poor to access online lessons." (FGD2)

"Yes, I am learning Mathematics, Science, English and Agriculture, but it is difficult to understand since the facilitators cannot explain when we meet problems, they just send a question and wait for us to answer." (FGD3)

The responses from the participants indicate that some teachers had access to learners to teach them online during COVID-19 lockdown whilst others did not. It came out that even though some teachers were able to deliver the lessons online it seems it was not all learners who participated because of various reasons mainly poor network. When asked to highlight the online tools the participants used to deliver lessons, both teachers and learners indicated that WhatsApp was used. Those learners who participated in online learning had smartphones. However, it came out that some of the learners were using the parents' phones hence at times they would not participate if parents were using the phones. The teacher participants were further asked to give reasons for the choice of the tools they used. Their responses revealed that most of the learners had access to WhatsApp platform either using their own phones or parents' phones. It came out that WhatsApp is cheap in terms of cost and learners can get the information, easily follow the lesson and can catch up even if they were offline during the lesson. This is evident in the following responses:

"Most learners have smartphones with WhatsApp, I saw it easy to create a WhatsApp group chat where I assist learners and it is less costly compared to other online tools like using Google classroom." (TS5)

"It is the only tool those few learners have to take part in the lessons." (TS6)

The participants were requested to indicate how consistent were online lessons conducted and if the female learners were participating. The responses indicate that there was no consistence in conducting online lessons and participation of female learners was low. Their responses are shown below:

"They are not lessons really lessons, but a platform for discussions. Female attendance is fair." (TS1)

"We do weekly lessons and attendance by female learners is very low. There are a lot of excuses from the female learners leading to low attendance." (TS3)

"Once a week depending on the availability of the learners, the attendance of female learners is low, male learners dominate the platform." (TS4)

However, TS5 attested that online lessons are conducted twice a week and female learners attended more than their male counterparts, and female learners are the ones who stick to the timetable and always respond much more than male learners. In response to the same question, learner participants had varied responses indicating that there was no programmed online learning in the selected schools.

On whether the female learners benefited much from online learning, the teacher participants expressed mixed feelings where a few teachers indicated that female learners did not benefit while the rest said online lessons were beneficial to female learners. It emerged that some female learners do not benefit from online learning because their attention is digressed by online applications such as movies and games, there is no network and some of them do not have smartphones, and others are burdened by household chores. The responses from participants are given below:

"No, it would help if proper lessons were being conducted." (TS1)

"There is no benefit at all because no lessons have been conducted so far." (TS2)

"They do benefit much as they have the access to learning material sent and they always ask questions to seek clarity where they have problems and they get feedback." (TS3)

"To some extent they do benefit but mostly some have attitude towards the online learning and they tend to divert their concentration to some of their chats. Usually, their attention is swayed by the information found online, for example movies and games. This is evident by taking too long to respond but they will be online. Also, some of the learners are from areas where there is no network and others do not have the smartphones to participate so it becomes a challenge to such learners. Besides, female learners are normally burdened by household chores." (TS4)

"Yes, the female learners benefit a lot because when we are done with the topic, I always give them some tasks and most of them perform well. Very few male learners often attend lessons." (TS6)

The learner participants were also requested to shed light on whether they understood all the concepts that were taught online. The data presented suggest that most of the female learners experienced problems with online learning. It came out from the learner participants that some concepts needed face to face explanation, especially, Mathematics concepts, and they could not download the videos because they cannot afford to buy adequate data. Some of the responses are presented below:

"I understand but not all, it depends on the subject, for example in Mathematics, some topics need detailed explanation, but they are not explained in an understandable way. Some need demonstrations and to download videos is expensive. It is also hard for me to understand all of my notes by myself so I will need the teacher to explain them further so that I understand everything taught." (FGD1)

"I do not understand because they do not explain further unlike when I am taught face to face. It is difficult to understand Mathematics it needs more explanation." (FGD2)

"Yes, but it is difficult to understand some concepts because they need to be well explained so it is not easy, even if demonstration videos are sent by the teacher, some of us cannot afford to buy data to download videos because data is expensive." (FGD3)

The teacher participants were asked to enlighten how the COVID-19 lockdown impacted on the rural female learners' access to education. There is evidence from the responses that COVID-19 lockdown has adversely affected the female learners in the selected secondary schools. The information presented revealed that most female learners had no access to learning materials because some learners did not have smartphones or money to buy data to access online lessons, no network in some areas, some learners from poor families have engaged in prostitution to acquire smartphones and data, whilst others have fallen pregnant and no longer have the hope to go back to school. It has been revealed that most of learners would not be present during the lesson slot set, and if they are to attend they do not attend the whole lesson hence there is less participation and interaction. It was also mentioned that some learners come from child-headed families which had no parents, hence, could not afford to buy smartphones and data bundles. Some of the responses are as follows:

"It has negatively affected female learners so much because some of them cannot access learning materials and those from poor families end up engaging in prostitution for them to get smartphones and even money to purchase data bundles." (TS2)

"To a greater extent female learners were disturbed, some of the learners are pregnant now and no longer have the hope to go back to school. More so, some female learners come from child-headed families and cannot afford to buy smartphones and data bundles to access online lessons and materials." (TS3)

“Learners from poor families were negatively affected as they missed some of the lessons due to failure to buy bundles but for other learners where parents had money, they learnt how to research for themselves as they were taught how to use search engines like google, to access videos which assist them. Because of poverty, some of the learners have engaged in unbecoming behaviour, as they try to get the learning materials from boyfriends. Also, rural female learners have no access to education due to network barrier. They have been greatly disadvantaged, as most of them would not be present during the lesson slot set, and if they are to attend, they do not attend the whole lesson hence there is less participation and interaction.” (TS6)

The same question on how COVID-19 lockdown had impacted on learners’ access to education was asked to learner participants. Their responses are in agreement with what was said by teacher participants. This is what came from them:

“COVID-19 lockdown has affected my access to learning because online learning requires a lot of money if you do not have data bundles it means you have missed a lot but if I were at school, I would attend all the lessons. Also studying at home is hard because I cannot concentrate fully as there are a lot of things that can distract me and I am no longer going for study groups or library. Furthermore, the lockdown has made me fail to learn other subjects. I am missing a lot in preparing for examinations.” (FGD1)

“The lockdown has affected me a lot because I am not getting access to all my subjects. It has left behind a lot of learners who do not have online tools, not everyone has access to online learning. Most of us cannot afford to purchase data and some do not have smartphones.” (FGD2)

“Access to education has been difficult during this time of COVID-19 lockdown. Some learners have not accessed lessons since we closed schools. We are failing to prepare for examinations, we will fail. As rural female learners we are greatly affected especially those without smartphones for learning purposes. Some of rural female learners are exposed to sexual abuse due to people who are roaming around without employment, some girls have been disturbed in their learning, and they will drop out of school because of lockdown.” (FGD3)

The role of parents is critical in their children’s learning, teacher participants were asked if the parents were able to provide learning materials for their female children during the COVID-19 lock down. The data presented expose that most of the parents could not afford to provide learning materials for their children because of economic hardships. The presented information indicated that most of the parents in the schools understudy depended on their children who work in neighbouring countries like South Africa and Botswana for their upkeep, however, due to COVID-19 lockdown most parents suffered as children are not working and there is no money which they can send

home to assist their siblings. It also came out that the parents' attitude towards online learning had a negative impact on their children's learning as they believed their children abused online learning platforms to access improper materials like pornography rather than using it for learning and some believe it is waste of money. This is what they said:

"No, most of the learners come from poor homes. Due to the economic situation, parents cannot at all afford learning material for their children." (TS2)

"Most of the parents cannot provide learning material as they are hard hit financially by COVID-19 lockdown." (TS4)

"No, most parents are not providing learning materials for their children because of their attitude towards online learning as they believe that learners abuse these platforms to access improper materials like pornography rather than using it for learning and some believe it is waste of money." (TS5)

"It is a big challenge to parents, most parents depend on their children who work in South Africa and Botswana, due to lockdown most parents are suffering as their children are not working and there is no money which they can send to assist their siblings. Hence, parents are not able to provide enough learning material for female learners." (TS6)

The learner participants were asked whether their parents were able to provide learning materials for online learning during COVID-19 lockdown. The learners' responses confirmed what was said by the teacher participants. Their responses are presented as follows:

"No because my mother is a vendor she relies on that money to feed us and provide essentials for us, so due to this lockdown there is not enough to provide for my learning materials as she is a single mother." (FDG1)

"No, not all, they just borrow me a phone to attend lessons and sometimes I fail to join the class online because I would not have data. They are struggling to get me data bundles because they are also not working." (FDG2)

"My parents are trying but more support was from my brothers who live in South Africa and Botswana, but now they cannot send us money because of lockdown, so my parents cannot longer afford to buy all the learning materials I need." (FDG3)

The teacher participants were requested to provide information on the risks that are there for rural female learners in terms of abuse during COVID-19 lock down. The responses revealed that some female learners are exposed to sexual abuse when they try to have access to smartphones and data bundles from some male adults. Some female

learners would not be able to talk about abuse, as there is no opportunity to meet face to face with their guidance and counselling teachers or interact with their peers. It was mentioned that female learners are exposed to child labour and emotional abuse as they are made to work almost all day long doing household chores without rest. Examples of responses are as follows:

“Those that do not have cellphones may end up putting themselves in situations where they are abused just to get phones and be able to access online assistance from the teachers. Some female learners may be abused when they try to have access to smartphones from some elders.” (TS1)

“The risk is higher than before as most parents are not working and female learners are forced to abusive situations in order to get something to eat. There is also the issue of child labour as female learners work almost all day long without rest.” (TS4)

“Lock down in rural areas is not that strict, female learners can be sexually abused when they move to the bush to fetch some fire wood. They spend most of their time doing nothing and fetching fire wood becomes their hobby. Use of cell phones for studies can also lead to sexual relationships as female learners will need data bundles to attend their lessons since some parents are not able to buy data bundles for their daughters. The risk is high as they are home bound, so they are prone to all sorts of abuse, and they would not be able to talk about it, as they cannot meet face to face with their guidance and counselling teachers or interact with their peers This results in emotional abuse.” (TS5)

It was important to establish how the lockdown has impacted on the quality of learning for rural female learners. The teacher participants indicated that the lockdown has negatively affected the quality of learning because only a few rural female learners have access to online learning. It emerged that some of the female learners in rural secondary schools are not even aware of accessing information online. The responses showed that the quality of education has gone down because of poor instructional delivery of lessons due to less explanation and demonstration, especially in practical lessons. Their responses are given below:

“The quality of learning is very poor, some learners in rural areas are not even aware of accessing information online. It has actually reduced their learning standards since the majority of them do not have online learning gadgets. The quality of learning has greatly dropped.” (TS1)

“It has compromised the quality of education leading to poor delivery of lessons and less explanation and demonstration are made especially in the practical side. It would be difficult for learners to understand some of the content without hands on and this type of learning promotes lecture method which may lead to boredom. There is no learning taking

place unlike in urban areas where learners can do extra lessons. Also, rural female learners cannot access lessons online due to lack of network.” (TS3)

“Lock down has negative impact on quality education as not all the content can be delivered on WhatsApp compared to face to face where demonstration can be used, and the teacher could tell that the concept was understood through facial expressions of the learners. Quality standards are lowered. It hinders access to education for some learners who are poor whose parents cannot afford to buy them cell phones.” (TS6)

The learner participants were also asked to enlighten on how the lockdown has impacted on the quality of their education. They also expressed concern like the teacher participants. Their responses are shown below:

“The quality of education is affected in many ways such that only a few are benefiting from online learning, not everyone has access to internet. At times we are just given notes without explanation and cannot revise other subjects alone, for example, Mathematics. Furthermore, there is not enough time for me to study as I spend most of my time doing house hold chores and taking care of my crippled grandmother as I am the oldest daughter.” (FGD1)

“The quality of education being given does not show the true ability of the learner, as learners we copy from each other and ask google for answers. I have forgotten some of the things I was taught due to lack of online learning yet I am expected to write examinations by end of year.” (FGD2)

“There is no quality education now because we do not understand all what we are supposed to be taught. We have no access to all learning materials. Most rural female learners do not have access to internet and most of them do not have smartphones.” (FGD3)

The teacher participants were asked to shed light on how COVID-19 lockdown has compromised inclusion of rural secondary school female learners in learning. The data presented suggest that most of the rural secondary school female learners were excluded in education during lockdown because they could not access learning materials due to poverty, poor network coverage, and lack of energy sources to enable to study at night, lack of broadcast services, for example, radio to enable them to access online lessons. Female learners have lost much of their learning time whilst on lockdown and many cases of pregnancy have emerged leading to dropping out of school. This is what they said:

“There is no inclusive education for all because rural learners cannot access learning material due to poverty, poor network coverage, lack of energy sources to enable to study at night, lack of broadcast services, for example, radio and television to enable them to access broadcast lessons. It has made female learners lose much of their learning time

whilst on lockdown and many cases of pregnancy have emerged leading to dropouts. COVID-19 lockdown has made education exclusive as there's a saying 'no phone no education'." (TS1)

"To a larger extent it has compromised inclusive education as most of the online platforms do not cater for individual differences. There is no tool that fits all the learners as some are auditory learners while others are visual, and they learn by lip reading so it becomes difficult. It has greatly compromised rural female secondary learners because some individual learners need to be given special attention, especially, those with disabilities." (TS4)

"COVID-19 lock down has divided female learners. Female learners with parents who cannot afford to provide learning material are left behind whereas those who afford were not affected much by lock down as they continued to learn. It has compromised the quality of learning in that some learners do not have cell phones so they are left behind. Some learners are not fully participating in lessons and attending lessons as they would have borrowed the phones from their guardians, the female learners are expected to do house chores hence they cannot attend lessons for prolonged periods, or cannot attend at all due to time slot, their parents are not 100% supportive with the use of phones as they assume that learners will not be in a lesson but on social media, learners fail to source data bundles due to high costs, some live in remote areas where they have limited access to source of power to charge their phones, and also the internet network is a major challenge they have to climb mountains to get signals." (TS5)

It was necessary to find out the views of learner participants on how COVID-19 lockdown has compromised inclusive education for rural secondary school female learners. Their responses revealed that the inclusion of female learners was highly compromised. This is in agreement with the teacher participants' responses. Their responses are presented below:

"Some do not have access to online lessons because they do not have online tools, and others are visual impaired they will just need someone who will help them. Hence, due to lockdown only a few of us are able to learn." (FDG1)

"The economic situation got worse leading to female learners exposed to prostitution, sex work and abuse. This has resulted in most female learners dropping out of school in favour of male learners." (FDG2)

"Lockdown separated us, we are no longer helping each other in learning, and slow learners are left behind. Also, education is now for those with money more learners are left out. There is no inclusive education because more learners in rural areas do not have access to internet and most learners do not have smartphones whilst learners in urban areas have

access to internet and the network conditions are good in urban areas than in rural areas. Thus, education is now for the rich.” (FGD3)

4.2 Challenges that inhibit teachers to assist rural secondary school female learners during COVID-19 pandemic lockdown

The participants were asked to highlight the challenges that inhibit the teachers to assist rural secondary school female learners during COVID-19 lock down. The information presented reveal that there were numerous challenges which include limited online learning resources for both teachers and learners, unavailability of network, lack of electricity in rural areas, lack of cooperation from parents, poor attendance due to lack of smartphones and data bundles, and performance of all household chores including herding of cattle by female learners and lack of motivation due to poor remuneration on the part of teachers. The participants’ responses are presented below:

“Some educators have no online tools due to financial constraints. There is also lack of motivation due to poor remuneration. Some educators were affected directly or indirectly by the pandemic, for example, some educators were in quarantine centres coming back from other countries mostly those teachers who were on leave and returning to Zimbabwe. Economic hardships makes teachers fail to execute their duties.” (TS2)

“Limited resources and network unavailability.” (TS4)

“What inhibits the teacher is that the parents are too traditional they do not fully embrace the use of 21st century tools in learning hence they will not allow their children to own phones as they have the impression that it promotes unfavourable behaviour patterns. They associate phones with mischief. The major challenge is with the female learners, as they think that might be a distraction, and also, they are expected to do their duties like fetching water, firewood, cooking, looking after their siblings and elderly, hence, they cannot attend lessons fully or attend at all. Other major challenges are that the learners come from under privileged homes where they cannot afford suitable phones or money to buy data bundles especially at this time of lockdown where most families are not working and earning money.” (TS6)

“As a girl child all household chores including herding of cattle which is supposed to be done by boys is done by us. This results in us working the whole day without resting. Girls work the whole day and we struggle to multi-task household chores and school work.” (FGD1)

“Some of us do not have smartphones, we use our parents’ phones. I also think it is difficult for teachers because they have become selective in who they want to teach online, teachers only make an effort to teach a few high achievers, hence, leaving out some rural secondary school female learners.” (FGD2)

“Some learners do not have smartphones, and some have no money to buy data, it becomes difficult for teachers to help us.” (FGD3)

4.3 Measures that should be put in place to assist the rural secondary school female learners during COVID-19 pandemic lockdown

The participants were requested to bring forth their views on measures that should be put in place to assist the rural secondary school female learners to access education during COVID-19 lockdown. Several suggestions were forwarded which include provision of electronic devices and free Wi-Fi to access the internet, requesting internet service providers to widen the radius of network coverage, and collaborating with parents/guardians in provision of online learning equipment for learners. Their responses are as follows:

“The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should liaise with mobile network providers to help affected female learners to freely access the internet.” (TS1)

“There should be provision of electronic devices and free Wi-Fi to access the internet. Learners should be allowed to access school computers, provide phone charging systems, Network busters, data bundles, learning tablets or smartphones.” (TS3)

“Rural network should be improved, learners to be provided with learning materials such as smartphones. The schools should also work together with the parents/guardians to allow the female learners to have access to smartphones, data bundles, and power, and allow them to take part fully and attend all lessons. Parents should be added also in these platforms so that they monitor the learning and act as observers. Parents to be urged to supervise the use of smartphones and to budget for learning online as they do for fees. Parents should support their children’s learning.” (TS5)

The same question was asked to learner participants and this is what they said:

“If only the government can donate laptops to schools and we find a way on how we can share them. On the issue of data, the government should control the price of data so that it is affordable even to rural learners. The schools should assist and buy data for those who cannot afford. Also, donation of the latest version of phones would be helpful as those we are using are now outdated and do not have other relevant applications for online learning.” (FGD1)

“The government should provide us with data bundles for online learning. Parents should be encouraged to buy us data to access online lessons and teachers should include all learners in those groups created for learning purposes.” (FGD2)

“The network service providers should improve network conditions in rural areas, and donation of smartphones to rural learners would support our learning.” (FGD3)

5. Discussion

The findings of the study indicated that some teachers had access to learners to teach them online during COVID-19 pandemic lockdown whilst others did not. It came out that even though some teachers were able to deliver the lessons online it was not all learners who participated because of various reasons mainly poor network. It was revealed that WhatsApp was the main platform that was used for learning. However, it came out that some of the learners were using the parents' phones hence at times they would not participate if parents were using the phones. The findings are in line with what was found by Nani and Sibanda (2020) in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province that one of the prohibitive constraints which hindered effective implementation of online home schooling was sharing of online devices by family members. The results showed that teachers chose WhatsApp platform because it was cost effective, and most learners had access to WhatsApp platform either using their own phones or parents' phones. This finding is in agreement with studies conducted in Kosovo and Zimbabwe by Duraku, and Hoxha, (2020) and Nani and Sibanda (2020) respectively, which indicated that WhatsApp was one of the platforms used to teach learns online.

The study established that there was no consistence in conducting online lessons as teaching was not programmed and participation of female learners was low in the selected schools. It emerged that some female learners did not benefit from online learning because their attention would be digressed by online applications such as movies and games, and others were burdened by household chores. The results of study confirm what has been observed by OECD (2020) that the drop-out rates disproportionately affect female learners, as they may take on extra care responsibilities instead of going to school or engaging in home-schooling activities. Female learners' educational outcomes in general may also suffer if they are asked to contribute to household activities more than male learners at the expense of their home-based learning.

The results of the study also revealed that most of the rural secondary school female learners who had access to online lessons did not understand the concepts taught as some concepts were not well explained through WhatsApp, they needed face to face explanation, especially, Mathematics concepts. This finding concurs with García and Weiss' (2020) view that most of the learners who struggle the hardest to learn effectively and thrive in school under normal circumstances are now finding it difficult, even impossible in some cases, to receive effective instruction, and they are experiencing interruptions in their learning that will need to be made up for. It came out that female learners could not download the videos because they could not afford to buy adequate data bundles. There is evidence from the findings that COVID-19 pandemic lockdown adversely affected the female learners' access to education in the selected secondary schools because most of them had no access to online learning materials.

It was found that some female learners from poor families have engaged in prostitution to acquire smartphones and data bundles. It has been revealed that most of the female learners would not be present during the set lesson slot, and if they are to attend they would not attend the whole lesson, hence, there was less participation and interaction. It was also indicated that some female learners come from child-headed families which had no parents and could not afford to buy smartphones and data bundles. This is commensurate with literature documentation that although governments have stepped up their efforts to provide effective remote learning conditions, significant gaps remain in terms of availability of and access to online learning tools, especially, in remote and rural areas. Female learners risk facing lopsided difficulties in accessing Information and Communication Technology based learning due to their overall lower levels of digital inclusion (OECD, 2020).

The results of the study revealed that most of the parents could not afford to provide online learning resources for their children because of economic hardships. It came out that most of the parents in the schools understudy depended on their children who work in neighbouring countries like South Africa and Botswana for their upkeep, however, due to COVID-19 pandemic lockdown most parents suffered as their children are not working and there is no money which they can send home to assist their siblings. It also emerged that the parents' attitude towards online learning had a negative impact on their children's learning as they believed their children abused online learning platforms to access improper materials like pornography rather than using it for learning and some believe it is waste of money. This finding is contrary to the results of the study conducted in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province by Nani and Sibanda (2020) which revealed that most of the selected parents were positive about the participation of their children in online lessons.

The study further established that rural female learners were at risk during COVID-19 pandemic lockdown as some of them were exposed to sexual abuse when they try to have access to smartphones and data bundles from some male adults. The results showed that some female learners would not be able to talk about abuse, as there is no opportunity to meet face to face with their guidance and counselling teachers or interact with their peers. It was also found that female learners are exposed to child labour and emotional abuse as they are made to work almost all day long doing household chores without rest. These findings are consistent with what has been mentioned by UNICEF (2020) that for some female learners, school closures have also increased the risk of exposure to a multitude of stressors, including physical and sexual violence.

The study found that the lockdown has negatively affected the quality of learning because only a few rural female learners have access to online learning and some of them do not even have knowledge on how to access information online. The findings showed that the quality of education has gone down because of poor instructional delivery of lessons due to less explanation and demonstration, especially, in practical lessons. The findings affirm the view that successful online learning requires that learners and teachers be familiar and proficient in their uses of online learning devices (García &

Weiss, 2020). The findings of the current study, however, are in disagreement with what has been stated by UNHCR (2020) that in Uganda, the teachers were trained on the use of online learning materials and those teachers have become champions in teaching since the shutdown of schools.

It also emerged from the study that the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown has compromised inclusion of rural secondary school female learners in learning. The findings indicated that most of the rural secondary school female learners were excluded from education during lockdown because they could not access learning materials due to poverty, poor network coverage, and lack of energy sources to enable them to study at night, lack of broadcast transmission services to enable them to access online lessons through the radio. These results confirm literature revelation that the practice of offering alternative services of remote learning may work better for those learners in households with better connectivity and with higher initial digital skills. This leaves those already disadvantaged further behind, so school closures with the inappropriate system coping mechanisms, might imply an exacerbation in inequality in education (World Bank, 2020). It was further found that female learners have lost much of their learning time whilst on lockdown and many cases of pregnancy have emerged leading to dropping out of school and learners no longer have the hope to go back to school. This finding is in line with UNICEF's (2020) proclamation that the dropping out of school for female learners will intensify gender gaps in education and lead to increased risk of sexual exploitation, early and unintended pregnancy, and child, early and forced marriage.

The study revealed numerous challenges that inhibit the teachers to assist rural secondary school female learners during COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in selected schools. The highlighted challenges included limited online learning resources for both teachers and learners, unavailability of network, lack of electricity in rural areas, lack of cooperation from some parents, poor attendance due to lack of smartphones and data bundles, and performance of all household chores including herding of cattle by female learners and lack of motivation due to poor remuneration on the part of teachers. The results of this study are commensurate with the assertion that research has shown that online learning and teaching are effective only if learners have consistent access to the internet and computers and if teachers have been trained to deliver instruction online. For the reason that these necessities have been mainly absent for several learners, remote education during the pandemic has hindered teaching and learning (García & Weiss, 2020).

The findings indicated that provision of electronic devices and free Wi-Fi to access the internet, requesting internet service providers to widen the radius of network coverage, and collaborating with parents/guardians in provision of online learning equipment for learners are some of the measures that could be put in place to assist the rural secondary school female learners to access education during COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in selected schools. This finding supports the recommendation by García and Weiss (2020) that schools should be given urgent resources so that they can provide effective remote instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown.

6. Conclusion

The study examined the perceptions of teachers and learners on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic lockdown on rural secondary school female learners. The study concluded that despite the efforts made by a few teachers to teach online during COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in selected schools, most of the female learners did not have access to online learning due to several challenges that they experienced. These included unavailability of network or poor network coverage, lack of broadcast transmission services to enable them to access online lessons through the radio, lack of electricity, poor attendance due to lack of smartphones and data bundles, performance of all household chores including herding of cattle and lack of cooperation from some parents. It was found that female learners have lost much of their learning time whilst on lockdown and many cases of pregnancy have emerged leading to dropping out of school and such learners no longer have the hope to go back to school. The study recommends that the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should collaborate with stakeholders to provide necessary resources to enable all learners to access online learning despite geographical location.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

About the Authors

Lwazi Sibanda holds Doctor of Philosophy in Education from University of Fort Hare in South Africa, and is a senior lecturer in the Department of Science, Mathematics and Technology Education, in the Faculty of Science and Technology Education at the National University of Science and Technology (NUST) in Zimbabwe. She is currently the Executive Dean in the Faculty of Science and Technology Education. She specialised in Education Management and is involved in teacher education. She teaches education courses (modules) to undergraduate and postgraduate students. She supervises undergraduate research projects and postgraduate dissertations and theses at Master's and Doctoral Levels. She has vast teaching experience extending from primary to higher education. She worked as a primary school teacher for fifteen years and moved to Secondary Teacher Education College as a Professional Studies lecturer for three years. She joined NUST ten years ago and is involved in conducting qualitative research in education management including science education. Her interest is on improving instructional delivery in all levels of education, that is, primary, secondary and higher education. She has published quite a number of journal articles and book chapters individually and collaboratively. She has reviewed various manuscripts from a number of journals. She is also involved in UNESCO programme for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) which emphasises on inclusion of ESD concepts in teacher education curriculum.

Joyce Mathwasa began her career in education after obtaining a teaching certificate specialising in Infant classes. She taught in the Early Childhood for twenty years rising

through the ranks to headship of primary schools for fifteen years. She furthered her education attaining a Bachelor's degree in Educational Administration, Planning and Policy Studies (University of Zimbabwe); Master in Educational Administration, Planning and Policy Studies (Zimbabwe Open University) and PhD (University of Fort Hare, South Africa). Currently she is a Researcher in the Early Childhood Development School of Excellence in the University of Fort Hare. Dr Mathwasa is also an Adjunct lecturer with Lupane State University in Zimbabwe and supervisor in the UNISA Teaching Practice Unit for SDAC students (Zimbabwe). She has a teaching experience extending from early childhood to tertiary education. She has several journal articles in accredited journals and five book chapters.

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