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COVID 19 death toll trajectory on learner language proficiency

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of this investigation is to explore whether COVID 19 deaths have effects with regards to language proficiency, predominantly reading. Reading levels seem to have deteriorated as difficulties in spelling and pronunciation of simple English words were demonstrated by learners. In this qualitative inquiry, the author used a case study. The researcher perceived it essential for a qualitative approach to be embarked on hence investigating teachers' life experiences in their natural, context-specific settings. Semi-structured interviews were administered to ten conveniently nominated secondary school teachers. A narrative analysis was used to categorize data into themes that were noted as findings of this examination. A major finding of this inquiry was (i) sudden lack of parental involvement emanating from the (ii) drastic shift in socio-relations amongst the members of the communities, this causing reading to become an overwhelming routine. The study concludes that academic attainment for most learners seems to be hindered by the decline in learner reading proficiencies. To curb the situation, it is therefore recommended that language teachers devise approaches to instill a reading culture within a classroom setting, thus limiting tasks to be administered after school hours.

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Introduction

This paper is premised from an argument that reading, as a fundamental skill for successful schooling, needs to be nurtured. Wider community members are expected to play a vital role in assisting learners towards maintaining culture of reading. For this critical skill to be mastered, parents are at the core as primary sustenance persons to support learning (Konoll, 2000; Brophy, 2010).

Learner holistic language development depends on parents to work hand in glove with language teachers, thereby assisting learners towards development on efficient reading in wide varieties of exposures (Borup et al, 2013). When the country got hit by pandemic, the practice transformed (Blignaut, 2020). Teachers in sites studied reported indications of curriculum transformation due to declining reading proficiency, with claims that most learners were affected by family bereavements, this opening gaps of non-parental support towards learning. Dumitraškovi (2014) concurs that language development might be affected if learners do not obtain assistance from diverse angles with regards to reading comprehension.

Thus, research reveals if parents or guardians are placed at the core of learning processes, learners perform better (Jeynes, 2010; Lareau, 2011). However, inquiry on troubles of maternal involvement during this pandemic era is minimally considered, yet most deceased guardians are no longer there to offer assistance to young scholars (Soudien & Harvey, 2020). Causes to this challenge may be lack of support from the surrounding households, as free movement is restricted by protocols currently put in place by the South African government.

Consequently, a major encounter experienced by language teachers is that reading abilities in learners continue to deteriorate. However, as this paper examines language proficiency in relation to parental involvement, an all-inclusive research was made by the author to identify what the underlying causes in relation to the decline in language proficiency were (Borup et al, 2013). Black (2009) concurs that for ensuring academic excellence with regards to improved reading comprehension, a substantial feature worth noting

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is that parents need to actively engage by assisting learners on improved reading skills, nonetheless, some families currently experience loss of members due to varying reasons. This leaves dependants with no one to consult, yet having an ability to read is one fundamental academic skill that learners need to accomplish when studying English language, unfamiliar to them.

Denoting from the debates above, I can ascertain that in the investigated district learners are engulfed with complications in reading texts (Borup et al, 2014). There is a limitation for the list available parents to render assistance to some learners, this matter being complicated by restricted movements to the houses around learner homes (Jansen, 2020). This article's leading objective centres around improved reading proficiency, yet such development being hindered by some deceased family members pending COVID deaths (Boucher, Harrison & Giovanelli, 2020; Chamberlain, Lacina, Bintz, Payne & Zingale, 2020).

Transformed schooling confirms learners can afford independent study, or with assistance of their teachers only. This has become eminent in situations when learners were expected to read written texts posed in English medium while classes were conducted in varying online platforms (Allam et al, 2020; Acevedo et al, 2020; Boucher et al, 2020). In this regard, the least available parents with no proper knowledge of such digital technologies were found to offer no assistance strategies on language development (Wen et al, 2011). Hui et al (2020) concur when arguing that a great deal of learners during pandemic era were only faced with no other alternative besides engaging on online communication technologies. Learning activities in this manner resulted at being accomplished without teachers getting any closer to learners, let alone parents who were denied access visiting schools to encourage their children, as used to be in the previous face-to-face traditional schooling modes.

Accordingly, looking at the current state of affairs around the country, no one can deny that application of digital technologies seems to have become most dominant tools of trade for both teachers and learners, which has indeed proved to be of vitality in enhancing e-learning. Nevertheless, there are underlying properties towards schooling. Implementation of the so-called e-learning models that have been put in place seem to hinder motivation in the course of learning process. Domingue et al (2021) concur that learning loss has been distinguished when the pandemic led to schooling processes being unstable, leading to deterioration in learner reading abilities. In relation to debated demotivation of learners, what then becomes of those who have lost a great deal of learned parents in their households? This situation is made worse as people are no longer free to move around to seek help.

This paper is organized as follows: subsequent to the introduction is literature review as the second part with theoretical and empirical studies indicative of the link between theory and practice. In the third part background information on research and methodology is introduced. Thereafter the author analyses and discusses findings with implications. Finally, this manuscript concludes with key points, recommendations, future research directions and limitations.

Literature Review

The purpose for reviewing literature for this investigation was intended at obtaining understanding of prevailing research coupled with arguments relating to the problem investigated, thereby presenting my findings in this manuscript. Western Sydney University Library (2016) is of the same opinion as they confirm that review of literature allows readers some understanding towards scholarly research with regards to the studied topic, the ultimate goal being to identify gaps in literature.

Theoretical and Conceptual Background

In this section, literature has been categorically reviewed with regards to parents as crucial agents in schooling, tasks assigned during the learning process as well as stake-holder relations towards learning.

Parent as a crucial agent in schooling

Research has identified a number of different components having an effect on reading enactment (Koda, 2005). When parents are actively involved in helping learners in their studies, improved language proficiency has been observed. Acknowledging a similar opinion are Perfetti et al (2004) who maintain comprehension needs to be monitored. Leters (2016, 2018) argues that to further nourish motivation strategies by parents, English teachers need to commit by monitoring and supporting both in and out of school learning. Kendrick and McKay (2004); Kress (1997) and Leters (2018) are of the same view as they contend that instructors are supposed to travel along with those being learning a language they are not familiar with, for the purposes of driving them at being globally competent and successful scholars. For effective schooling, Mpahla et al (2021) debate that to cater for rural setting imbalances, teachers have an obligation to administer best teaching and learning practices that would lead to excellence and improved quality education. In line with that argument, Mukhtar et al (2020) and Nambiar (2020) contend that there was a similar case in Lahore [13] where results of a qualitative case study divulged that changed approaches to learning have brought about some limitations, leading the researchers to recommend learner centred approaches that encouraged interactivity. Of the same view [14], a study administered in Bangalore found out that both teachers and learners had similar perceptions of continued interaction as either pairs or groups, aiming towards improved learner achievement.

Tasks assigned during the learning process

Therefore, the previous arguments imply that English language teachers are faced with a challenge of revising approaches to substitute take home activities they assign to learners, as not a single person had ever predicted that COVID deaths would lead to learners' exposure in finding difficulties to obtain parental assistance. If such approaches could be taken care of, frustrations of

learning an unfamiliar and foreign language without help from parents, could be of vital importance. In line with frustration effects, consistent reports on rising figures of deceased family members has been noted to have some negative consequences with regards to recently implemented approaches inclusive of changes on how learners interact with each other and also distorted motivation leading to anxiety symptoms (Di Pietro, Biagi, Costa, Karpiński, Mazza, 2020).

Stake-holder relations towards learning

In the previous normal schooling situation most community stake holders willingly devoted themselves at participating and actively engaging in varieties of school activities. Such activities were intended at direct interventions between learners, teachers and the wider community. The sudden curve resulting from COVID 19 constraints detoured the entire systems of learning, not only in the South African context, but as a global perspective (Nambiar, 2020). Furthermore, this pandemic era has brought about poverty for most households hence the unemployment factor. Socio-economically, parents are no longer in a position to hire private tutors for their children, such substantial factors seem to affect reading comprehension (Nergis, 2013, Barth et al, 2012). Continued exposure of reading problems among learners has also resulted from limited library use by some communities due to lacking finances (Makena & Mpiti, 2019). I therefore advocate for all youth in the communities to embark on enrolling for reading lessons because a reading community leads to a wealthy socio-economic environment.

Empirical Review

Henceforth, this case is strengthened by Epstein's (1987) framework of parental involvement. This theory expounds that it is an account for parents to have a primary task of making available the basic physiological needs like food, clothing, and shelter, and are also expected to provide their children's academic requirements. Epstein's (1987) theory further aggravates that parents have to play a vital role with regards to supporting learning either administered in a classroom setting, or at home. The gap denoted by me as an author of this article is that little is being said by literature on how best could parents play their usual roles, hence online learning emerged (Beck et al, 2013). The situation in these current years is even made worse by the least available parents to assist in learning, hence the large number of death experiences by many households. Hasler and Leong (2014) 's view is similar as he opines that face-to-face traditional teaching methods could not fully identify academic support when paired with parental engagement.

For the purposes of this paper the author claims that for learners to successfully comprehend with given texts, there has to be collaborative interactions between teachers offering languages and learners themselves. Teachers need to exert more on assisting learners preferably in the classroom setting. Assigning work to be done out-of-school has recently become an overwhelming exercise for those whose parents got deceased amidst the pandemic death toll. I therefore propose that teachers have to reconsider how they assign reading tasks. Rather than giving lots of homework, extensive reading has to be done on daily basis in a classroom environment where language teachers are readily available to support and monitor progress. As Epstein's (1987) theory suggests in closing the gap of insufficient parental guidance, teachers are then faced with a huge task of acting in loco-parentis. Such a strategy would help to strengthen language skills.

Research

For this inquiry a qualitative approach entrenched in a case study design assisted me to accumulate realities about social behaviours when reviewing real-world circumstances that unfolded (Seal, 2015; Mackey & Gass, 2016). An inclusive understanding with regards to the perspectives of teachers pertaining capabilities in learner reading levels during this evolution period stemming from limited parental involvement as most parents have died during COVID times, was pursued by the author. Substantial evidence for the topic under investigation was obtainable from ten conveniently nominated English language teachers obtainable from two Senior Secondary Schools around the Eastern Cape Province. (Neuman, 2014; Boland, 2010).

As permission to conduct this investigation was granted by the participants themselves, the author ensured consideration to keep responses anonymous, as well as not disclosing actual names of the participants when data was presented (Flick, 2014). As such, semi-structured interviews as data collection instrument were administered (Creswell, 2009), creating a huge chance to engage with singular participants (Brinkman, 2013). This instrument led to diverse probabilities for me to obtain chances of penetrating deeper into the critical themes that developed. Interview questions administered had a direct focus on digging more into language development as perceived by respective teachers, with specific concentration on reading proficiency levels. The main objective of taking this route was the currently observed decline in learner reading levels now that there have been noted limitations of parental involvement in the learning processes, yet comprehending texts as an ongoing activity demands continued learner-commitment.

Findings and Discussions

Findings

In line with Flick (2014), this is the unit where I present an argument of judgements as displayed by the themes that emerged when data to this inquiry was analysed. Themes discussed include minimised parental support as most homes are now child-headed due to deceased family members, task overload, as well as cut off community stake-holder relations as learners were no longer granted free movement.

Minimised Parental Support

As participants were examined on their witnessing reading proficiency levels by learners, hence the era of minimized parental support denoted from high death toll of most parents, one participant gave an indication that: *I am really distressed by the problems of reading that seem to continue ravaging my learners. Within my teaching time table, there are some periods that I have scheduled specifically for interrogating texts, nonetheless, these periods do not at all seem enough. Parents have to also play an active role in helping their children improve reading abilities.* Most interviewed teachers seemed to echo similar concerns, another one responded: *I am in a kind of rather difficult situation as learners in my class repeatedly come to school with take home tasks on reading not being done, with more or less the same response that their parents had recently passed on.*

Task Overload

With regards to reading-related activities assigned, there was a finding that a maximum number of learners seem to display some exhaustion, this resulting from many reading activities that learners were expected to engage on, in a classroom environment. In relation to this encounter one teacher relayed: *To my own view, I think there needs to be a revision on the school time table as well as approaches that we use as language teachers. Otherwise if we continue using the previously used approaches prior COVID 19, it seems as if reading abilities continue to be lowered and giving learners homework is tantamount to time wasted.*

Community Stake-Holder Relations

It emanated as a finding that relations within community members were no longer perceived as prior the COVID 19 pandemic era as limitations on free movement restrained learners to move around the nearby homesteads. The finding revealed that most learners had complications accessing assistance in comprehending with texts whilst at their homes.

For this complication, one participant uttered: *As language teachers in the school where I render services, it has recently become a norm for home works not to be adhered to by most learners. There have since been a numerous number of reports by most learners that their parents no longer deny them permission to consult either other children from other houses, or any person considered a guardian. Parents have since become skeptical to welcome any visitor for fears of contaminating covid19.* Another participant concurred as he stated: *We are faced with a situation where we can no longer advise kids, we teach to move around nearby houses seeking for help, further than that that, people around the communities no more willingly accept any stranger, for fear of the fast spreading disease.*

Discussion

A finding centred around parental support pertaining improved reading proficiency in learners was distinguished as a major theme. During COVID 19 pandemic era, parental involvement in teaching and learning activities could no longer be regarded as vibrant. There was an argument by teachers that reading activities have since obtained a sense of demotivation as the school was no longer in a position to timeously invite parents to observe and motivate occasions prepared to display learner reading abilities due to social gathering constraints. This finding concurs with Filho et al (2020) who outlined that for teachers and learners to produce effective and efficient progression as per the intended learning outcomes, personal communication and continued learner motivation strategies should be made a consistent recipe when teaching and learning processes are administered.

Another factor that saddened teachers mostly was the report from learners that most parents who used to actively engage in all learning-related activities, had died during COVID death toll. These highlighted strong points seem to be compromising language proficiency as such limitations on assistance by parents are overwhelming for learners identified to experience difficulties in reading. Language learning with its fundamentals, has reading as one of the key aspects, meaning for learners to be successful scholars there is an urgent need that they be assisted in all forms, yet the ultimate goal of attained reading skills is academic success.

It was also discovered that there was such a huge load of reading-related activities assigned to learners, with limited time frames, as compared to minimal tasks that learners would be expected to engage on, before COVID 19 pandemic triumphed the entire world. In addition to that, it emanated that there is limited access for almost all learners to visit nearby homesteads seeking for assistance from the least available parents, this being a response to the government existing stipulated rules on proximity encounters in relation to COVID19 social distancing restrictions.

As an author of this article, I am of the opinion that learners from the highest grades in this investigated schools could be used as mentors to the little ones. I recommend that language teachers assign momentous reading activities to be adhered to during schooling hours. This could be allocated in-between hours allocated for study time, whereby such recommended mentors could assist learners as groups in the development of reading proficiency under supervision or monitoring by the subject teacher. Further than such, I already believe that reading skills in learners would ultimately be lifted. As a means to motivate the young aspiring mentors, prize-giving could be planned for both the mentors and the mentees, because at the end of the day the required academic reading skills would have been conveyed to learners, leading to improved learner comprehension skills and academic performance. This approach would help to curb the situation of continued reported non-submission of tasks assigned as take home activities.

Community Stake-Holder Relations

It was revealed by the findings that most of the few remaining parents in the learners' homes were retarded with regards to reading and writing proficiencies. Teachers really seemed to be experiencing problems because support from the parent component was no longer effervescent as before. The status quo was aggravated by prevalence of non-conducive relations within community members, compared to the period prior COVID 19 pandemic era. Interactions within community stake holders had to be abruptly lowered as people had become sceptic that any unnecessary visits might lead to the spread of the outrageous disease. This limitation resulted at learners not given permission by their elders to render visits to the surrounding houses.

Subsequently, for improved reading proficiency in learners there is a need for exposure and assistance, such practises conducted in the classroom environment. All interviewees unanimously echoed that they had never encountered such lowered reading abilities among learners in times when parents would actively engage in varying school activities, as such these teachers really felt the ball in their court as they were then faced with the great task of acting in loco-parentis even more than they used to, before the pandemic era hit the world. To curb the situation considering these latest predicaments, there has to be some innovations in relation to teaching and learning a foreign language (Marton, 2015; Tukimin et al, 2018).

Conclusions

Points of view discussed are considered parallel with the theory (Epstein, 1987) underpinning this inquiry. The examination had a main focal point on whether there were any significant relations on language proficiency in learners and COVID 19 family bereavements. To the author's perception, the high death toll that engulfed family members in their maximum numbers has really impacted in most learners as they abruptly found themselves caught up in predicaments of being without guardians to assist, mentor and motivate them towards an enhanced academic attainment. However, a limitation for this investigation was that the outlined findings could not be generalised as it was not feasible for the author to interview all English teachers from the studied district. On evaluating findings, the author suggests that there is an eminent necessity for collaborative learning. Recommendations for language teachers to devise alternative approaches have been highlighted by the author. Moreover, the author concludes by suggesting that for future research directions, alternative approaches need to be identified, then put into functionality. I already believe that if alternative approaches to teaching an enhanced language proficiently, that would indeed be vital trajectory for future research as not even a single individual in the entire world had ever anticipated the kind of pandemic that still continues to eradicate the stake holders around the universe. These findings therefore imply that, concurrently, research has also noticed some need for assistance and diverse motivation strategies towards readability in learners, the end-result being a re-established reading culture coupled with academic improvement.

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