

A Phenomenological Study of Face to Face Teaching and Learning in the Context of Social Distancing Principle in Bulawayo Central District Private Primary Schools during COVID 19 Pandemic

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Abstract: This qualitative study employed hermeneutical phenomenological method with snowball sampling technique, guided by the theoretical framework of Levy Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, to explore the teachers' lived experiences on the face to face teaching and learning in the context of social distancing principle in private primary schools during Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID 19) pandemic. In-depth interviews and open-ended questionnaires in conjunction with participant observations were used to generate data from 16 participants. Thematic data analysis was used to present participants' (primary school teachers and Heads) lived experiences on the phenomenon under the study. The study revealed that primary schools sternly paid attention to physical guides like tape marking on floors or signs on walls, directing young learners to remain at least 2 metres apart from each other during the lesson. It also disclosed that primary school learners fiercely concentrated on maintaining space or distance apart at all times during lessons to avoid the spread of corona virus on the expense of effective teaching and learning. The findings reveals that face to face teaching and learning in the context of social distancing principle during COVID 19 pandemic was not significantly effective due to some difficulties in implementing learner-centred teaching techniques; social distancing settings when teaching young children with varied learning disabilities such as fidgeting, attention deficit and autism spectrum disorders; and challenges in maintaining a safe distance between desks due to large number of learners per class and scarcity of classrooms. The results also revealed that social distancing principle affected primary school learners' morale and relationship; and increased fear and stigma among young children during the lesson due to false information and dangerous myths about corona virus. The study recommended that there is need for educational psychologists to use resilience dynamics during their young children's lessons that can serve as a crucial context where learners can make sense of their real life through narrative thoughts, recognizing and sharing their emotions hence minimizing the risk of long-lasting trauma hence promoting effective learning in the context of social distancing principle during COVID 19 pandemic. There is need for primary school teachers to assist learners to adapt to social distancing principle during the lesson. There is need for primary school teachers to provide opportunities for learners to reconnect socially within the social distancing principle of COVID 19 pandemic learning based environment through speaking up, reading aloud, and use of gestures since the mouth is covered by the face mask.

Key words: Social distancing principle, COVID 19 pandemic, Face to face teaching and learning, Implementation, Challenges, Primary schools.

I. INTRODUCTION

Education sector in Zimbabwe is experiencing the transition from distance education enforced by COVID 19 during lockdown to face to face teaching in the context of social distancing principle. In the wake of COVID 19, many primary school learners found themselves in distance learning, self-guided online learning and studying from home but this was doomed to fail demanding schools to re-open for face to face teaching in the context of social distancing principle (Bergdahl & Nouri, 2020; MacKenzie, 2020; IPS, 2020). In fact, primary school learners had no incentive to keep at their studies without peer pressure, a teacher at hand or a structured face to face learning environment (IPS, 2020). To satisfy the child's right to education, primary schools should make a shift from distance education into face to face tuition (Bergdahl & Nouri, 2020). As schools reopen, it is important that social distancing principle should be observed both inside and outside the classroom to prevent the spread of COVID-19 as well as promoting effective learning (Education Business, 2020; United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund - UNICEF, 2020). Within a school context, social distancing principle is a regulation focusing on reducing physical contact between individual learners and maintaining a physical distancing or keeping safe distance of 2 metres between learners during face to face teaching and learning (Adam, 2020; Education Business, 2020; National Centre for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases-NCIRD, 2020a; Schleicher & Reimers, 2020). Technically, primary school learners need to stay at least 6 feet (about 2 meters' length) from other peers in both indoor and outdoor learning spaces to prevent the spread of COVID 19 through coughs, sneezes, or talks, and droplets from their mouth or nose (Schleicher & Reimers, 2020; Adam, 2020; NCIRD, 2020a). Thus, primary schools need to sit children at desks that are far apart and about 2 meters spaced at all times during the lesson (Adam, 2020; Education Business, 2020). By the end of May 2020, primary schools were the first to reopen after lockdown in

Denmark, France, Netherlands and Norway with additional measures such as reduced class sizes and physical distancing (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization - UNESCO, 2020b; Schleicher & Reimers, 2020). Kenya and Zimbabwe assured all teachers and learners that they would be protected against COVID 19 if strictly observe social distancing principle (Muraya, 2020; Mutsaka, 2020; Chingwere, 2020). However, learning in the context of social distancing principle avoid physical closeness for assistance and group work, exposes young learners to challenges of sharing books, learning objects and stationary due to limited supply (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2020; Phillips, 2014; NCIRD, 2020a; NCIRD, 2020b) hence motivated this study to find out how effective teaching and learning in the context of social distancing principle can be achieved during COVID 19 Pandemic.

Statement of the problem

The government of Zimbabwe assured parents and pupils that it had put in place adequate measures to ensure the physical, psychological and educational safety of returning pupils through the use of face mask, sanitisation and social distancing principles during their learning (Mutsaka, 2020; Chingwere, 2020). However, there is uncertainty on how to plan and implement face to face learning activities for Zimbabwean primary school children to acquire effective teaching and learning in the context of social distancing principle during COVID 19 pandemic hence motivated this study to critically analyse the face to face teaching and learning in the context of social distancing principle in Bulawayo central district private primary schools during COVID 19 pandemic.

Sub-Research Questions

- [1] How is social distancing principle implemented in the primary school face to face teaching and learning during COVID 19 pandemic?
- [2] What are the challenges of social distancing principle in the primary school face to face teaching and learning during COVID 19 pandemic?
- [3] What are the suggested strategies to promote effective face to face teaching and learning in the context of social distancing principle in primary schools during COVID 19 pandemic?

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A phenomenological exploration of teachers' lived experiences on the face to face teaching and learning in the context of social distancing principle in Bulawayo central district private primary schools during COVID 19 pandemic was guided by Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. McLeod (2019) maintained that effective learning in the context of social distancing principle in primary schools' face to face teaching during COVID 19 pandemic needs a frame of reference like Vygotsky's sociocultural theory to guide the generation and interpretation of empirical findings. Vygotsky

believe that Zone of proximal distance (ZPD), social interaction and scaffolding need a teacher to be interactive and adjusted (Ken, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978 in Jarrar, 2014; Moll, 1990) in accordance with the primary school learner's social distancing during the lesson. An essential assumption of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory is to achieve effective and interactive learning in the context of social distancing principle during COVID 19 pandemic (McLeod, 2019; Silver, 2011; Fani & Ghaemi, 2011). Thus, the role of an educational psychologist or teacher is to interactively help the learner to realize the positive changes (effective learning) in him/herself and to accept him/herself as a functional system during the lesson (Chitsa, 2017, Shabani, Khatib & Ebadi, 2010) in the context of social distancing principle of COVID 19 pandemic.

Vygotsky believed that when a young learner is in the zone of proximal development for a particular task, provision of appropriate and interactive assistance empowers her/him to obtain meaningful or effective learning (McLeod, 2019; Roosevelt, 2008). Thus, the closer presence of someone (peer or teacher) with knowledge and skills beyond that of the learner assist a primary school learner to move through Vygotsky's zone of proximal development in the context of social distancing principle (McLeod, 2019; Moll, 1990; Shabani et al, 2010). Thus, the potential for young learner's effective learning depends upon the zone of proximal development (ZPD): a level of development attained when a learner engage in social interaction and assistance (Fani & Ghaemi, 2011; Gindis, 1999; Glozman, 2011) despite the 2 metre social distancing within the classroom. Thus, full development of the primary school learner's ZPD depends upon full social interaction during the lesson.

Social interactions with a skilful teacher or peer allow the young learner to observe and practice their skills hence promotes the effective learning in the context of social distancing principle during COVID 19 pandemic (Fani & Ghaemi, 2011; McLeod, 2019). According to Vygotsky (1978), effective learning by the child occurs through social interaction with a skilful peer or teacher in the classroom. The primary school child seeks to understand the actions or instructions provided by the peer sitting closer, internalizes the information and use it to regulate their own performance hence effective learning. From a Vygotskian perspective, the peer or teacher's role is to physically mediating the child's learning activity as they share knowledge through social interaction (Fani & Ghaemi, 2011; Roosevelt, 2008).

Lev Vygotsky's theory suggests that teachers need to use cooperative learning exercises where less competent children develop through closer help from more skilful peers - within the zone of proximal development (Glozman, 2011; Vygotsky, 1978). Scaffolding, or supportive activities provided by the teacher or skilled peer lead the learner through the ZPD hence effective learning (Ken, 2006; McLeod, 2019; Gindis, 1999; Moll, 1990). For effective learning in the context of social distancing principle during COVID 19 pandemic, Vygotsky suggests that the effective

learners should be active and strategic, skilled in cooperation, dialogue and creating knowledge with each other, and able to monitor their own learning guided by social interaction, ZPD and scaffolding (Silver, 2011; Vygotsky (1978). In brief, Vygotsky's social interaction, ZPD and scaffolding provide teacher with three major dimensions of promoting effective learning in the context of social distancing principle such as active Learning, collaborative Learning and learner-driven learning.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory was relevant to the study because of its usefulness in exploring the value or effectiveness of face to face teaching and learning in the context of social distancing principle in Bulawayo central district private primary schools during COVID 19 pandemic. It assisted the researchers to identify the gaps (challenges in the implementation of social distancing principle during the lesson) used to describe the effectiveness social distancing implementation in the face to face teaching and learning during COVID 19 pandemic. Vygotsky's sociocultural learning principles were meant to act as a yardstick against execution of face to face teaching and learning in the context of social distancing principle in primary schools during COVID 19 pandemic.

Implementation of social distancing principle in the primary school teaching and learning during COVID 19 pandemic

Face to face learning is superior to virtual learning and can be done effectively and safely in classrooms that ensure physical distancing during COVID 19 pandemic (Lederman, 2020). According to NCIRD (2020a), social distancing in classroom situation should be practiced in combination with other everyday preventive actions such as wearing masks, avoiding touching one's face with unwashed hands, and frequently washing hands with soap and water. As prescribed by NCIRD (2020a) and UNICEF (2020), learners need to pay attention to any physical guides such as tape markings on floors or signs on walls, directing them to remain at least 2 meters apart from each other during the lesson. Effective social distancing in educational settings require learners and teachers to be spaced apart at all times (Education Business, 2020; NCIRD, 2020b). Teachers need to increase desk spacing (at least 2 metre between desks) and maintain a distance of at least 1 to 2 metre between everyone during the lesson (UNICEF, 2020; UNESCO, 2020a; NCIRD, 2020b). Thus, primary school learner should allow other peers 2 meters of space during both indoor and outdoor lessons. Other studies present that schools need to face all desks or tables in the same direction with learners sitting on only one side of the table observing the 2 metre spacing (NCIRD, 2020b; Colorado Department of Education, 2020).

A study by Schleicher (2020) presents that the classroom social safety distance depends on the level of containment of the virus achieved by the area or country. For instance, schools in less-affected areas in Japan (Level 1) were required to maintain a distance of 1 metre while those in more affected

ones (Levels 2 or 3) must maintain a distance of 1-2 metres (the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology - MEXT, 2020). Other countries like France and United Kingdom recommended a limit of 15 learners in primary school classes in order to achieve effective learning in the context of social distancing principle of COVID 19 pandemic (Department for Education, 2020). Therefore, effective learning in the context of social distance between learners and teacher need to depend on factors such as intensity of COVID 19 in the area, classroom size, room availability and the number of learners per class.

Based on several literature in developed countries, creation of interactive environment through physical layout of the spaced seating arrangements like row, cluster of four learners, and horseshoe can influence effective teaching and learning in primary schools (Atherton, 2005; Anderson, 2009; Mohammad & Mahmud, 2012; Richards, 2006). Such physical spaced seating arrangement may also enhance the teachers' ability to perform interactive teaching and establish face-to-face contact more easily. In the same vein learners' attentiveness increases when the classroom physical spaced seating arrangement supports the instructional goal (Mohammad & Mahmud, 2012).

Challenges of social distancing principle in the primary school teaching and learning during COVID 19 pandemic

Advocates for active and effective learning worried that their favoured teaching approach would be hard to implement in physically spaced learning environment hence result in teacher centred instruction (Lederman, 2020). Thus, social distancing for settings with primary school learners might be harder to maintain (Education Business, 2020). In Denmark, it was assumed that social distancing would be unreliable with young children during the lesson (Lyst, 2020). The idea of teaching and learning in the context of perfect social distancing with small children is not realistic. Countries such as Chile, Colombia and Japan faced more difficulties in reorganising classes into smaller groups of learners to maintain a safe distance between desks due to large number of learners per class (Schleicher, 2020). Social or physical distancing in class affects primary school learners' morale and relationship (Phillips, 2014). There is no sense of community and effective learning for all (Muraya, 2020). Physical distancing and isolation measures in classroom may contribute to an increase of fear and stigma during the lesson due to false information and dangerous myths about COVID-19 (UNICEF, 2020; NCIRD, 2020b). In North America, learners who were 6 feet apart from each other had challenges of hearing each other due to face mask without raising their voices and any elevated voices could disrupt the group that was in turn 6 or 8 or 10 feet away (Lederman, 2020). Social distancing principle negatively affect learners with learning disabilities who require greater assistance for them to achieve effective learning (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2020; NCIRD, 2020b). Learners with learning disabilities may have difficulty with the social and emotional aspects of

transitioning back into the new social distancing classroom setting and experience. Such learners may suffer from psychological insecurity hence affect their learning due to social distancing in the mainstream class. Therefore, learners' psycho-social closeness in the learning process can empower them, develop community and increase motivation and school retention (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2020).

Suggested strategies to promote effective learning in the context of social distancing principle in primary schools during COVID 19 pandemic

A study by Capurso, Dennis, Salmi, Parrino & Mazzeschi (2020), suggested that there is need for teachers to assist primary school learners to manage and adapt to stressful social distancing environments during the lesson through coping and resilience strategies. Thus, an active process need to be implemented through cognitive, emotional and behavioural strategies (Compas, Jaser, Dunn & Rodriguez, 2012) to assist learners to adapt to social distancing principle and achieve effective learning during COVID 19 pandemic. In relation to COVID 19 social distancing principle, primary school teachers should use resilience dynamics during their lessons that can serve as a crucial context where learners can make sense of their lived reality through narrative thoughts and recognizing and sharing their emotions (Capurso et al, 2020). Teachers need to instigate a sense-making process in learners by building up their resilience and minimize the risk of long-lasting trauma to promote effective learning in the context of social distancing principle during COVID 19 (Capurso et al, 2020). Teachers need to provide opportunities for learners to reconnect socially within the social distancing learning based environment through speaking up, reading aloud, use of gestures since the mouth is covered by the face mask (Education Business, 2020). This promotes social competence and a positive concept of self and others while reinforcing resilience and coping capabilities (Capurso et al, 2020).

III. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design of hermeneutical phenomenological method which allowed the researcher to interpret and describe participated primary school teachers and Heads' lived experiences (Creswell, 2013; Johnson & Christensen, 2014; Padilla-Díaz, 2015; Pathak, 2017) on the face to face teaching and learning in the context of social distancing principle during COVID 19 pandemic. The design also helped the researcher to gain an insight into the lived experiences (Barrow, 2017; Creswell, 2014; Penley, 2018) of primary school teachers on the face to face teaching in the context of Social distancing principle during COVID 19 pandemic. Due to its philosophical and methodological strength, this design allowed the researcher to understand the participants' perceptions and experiences towards the phenomenon under the study (Christensen, Johnson & Turner, 2010; Pathak, 2017).

Sample

The study used a sample of 12 purposively selected primary school teachers who voluntarily responded to the self-administered open-ended questionnaires in conjunction with participant observation technique and 4 Heads, determined by data saturation principle, who also participated in the in-depth interviews. Therefore, the sample size of 16 participants from Bulawayo central district private primary schools was used to generate lived experiences over the phenomenon under the study. The private primary school teachers were used in this study because they experienced the face to face teaching and learning in the context of social distancing principle during COVID 19 pandemic. The primary school heads were directly involved with the close supervision and monitoring of the face to face teaching and learning in the context of social distancing principle during COVID 19 pandemic.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Implementation of social distancing principle in the primary school teaching and learning during COVID 19 pandemic

Results from open-ended questionnaires and interviews in conjunction with participant observation technique revealed that primary schools sternly paid attention to physical guides like tape marking on floors or signs on walls, directing young learners to remain at least 2 metres apart from each other during the lesson. This phenomenological study also disclosed that primary school learners were fiercely concentrating on maintaining space or distance apart at all times during indoor and outdoor lessons to avoid the spread of corona virus hence affected meaningful and effective teaching and learning. The results from the study disclosed that teachers increased desk spacing to 2 metres between desks and maintained a social distance of 2 metres between learners forcing young children to isolate from each other. The study also revealed that primary school classrooms put all desks or tables facing in the same direction with young learners sitting on only one side of the table observing 2 metre spacing hence destroyed their effective interaction during the lesson. The empirical findings concur with then prescriptions by Education Business (2020), NCIRD (2020a), NCIRD (2020b) and UNICEF (2020) that primary school learners need to pay attention to any physical guides such as tape markings on floors or signs on walls, directing them to remain at least 2 meters apart from each other during the lesson. Technically, teachers need to increase desk spacing (at least 2 metre between desks) and maintain a distance of at least 1 to 2 metre between everyone during the lesson (UNICEF, 2020; UNESCO, 2020a; NCIRD, 2020b). this also agree with results from other studies that schools had to face all desks or tables in the same direction with learners sitting on only one side of the table observing the 2 metre spacing (NCIRD, 2020b; Colorado Department of Education, 2020).

Challenges of social distancing principle in the primary school teaching and learning during COVID 19 pandemic

Findings from the study indicated that primary school teacher had some difficulties in implementing learner-centred teaching techniques hence resulted in teacher-centred method. It was tough for teachers to employ child-centred teaching methodologies such as use of play, group discussion and games due to social distancing principle of COVID 19 pandemic. This concur with the results from a study by Lederman (2020) that child-centred teaching approach was not ease to implement in physically spaced learning environment hence resulted in teacher-centred instruction. The study revealed that teachers had some difficulties in maintaining social distancing settings when teaching young children with varied learning disabilities such as fidgeting, attention deficit and autism spectrum disorders, during the lesson. Some international studies reiterated that social distancing principle for settings with primary school learners might be unreliable with young children, not realistic and harder to maintain during the lesson (Education Business, 2020; Lyst, 2020).

Results from the participants disclosed that primary school teachers had some challenges in maintaining a safe distance between desks due to large number of learners per class and scarcity of classrooms. This agree with findings from other countries that their schools had some difficulties in reorganising classes into smaller groups of learners to maintain a safe distance between desks due to large number of learners per class (Schleicher, 2020). Open-ended questionnaires and interviews revealed that social distancing principle in class affected primary school learners' morale and relationship. It created individualism hence destroyed communism and socialism among young learners during the lesson. This concur with results from; studies by Muraya (2020) and Phillips (2014) that social distancing principle in classroom destroyed morale and relationship hence no sense of community and effective learning at all.

Findings from the study also disclosed that social distancing principle of COVID 19 pandemic affected slow learners, learners with physical disabilities such as hearing impairment, visual impairment, and speech impairment, and learners with learning disabilities who need greater assistance from peers for them to achieve effective learning. Some international studies admitted that social distancing principle of COVID 19 pandemic negatively affect young learners with learning disabilities who need more assistance from other peers for them to achieve effective learning (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2020; Lederman, 2020; NCIRD, 2020b). Results from the study revealed that implementation of social distancing principle of COVID 19 pandemic increased fear and stigma among young children during the lesson due to false information and dangerous myths about corona virus. This concur with findings from other studies that physical distancing and isolation measures in classroom may contribute to an increase of fear and stigma during the lesson due to false information and myths about COVID-19 (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2020; UNICEF, 2020; NCIRD, 2020b).

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concluded that Bulawayo Central District primary school learners fiercely concentrated on maintaining social distance apart at all times during indoor and outdoor lessons to avoid the spread of corona virus on the expense of meaningful and effective teaching and learning. The study finally concluded that face to face teaching and learning in the context of social distancing principle during COVID 19 Pandemic was not significantly effective due to some difficulties in implementing learner-centred teaching techniques; in maintaining social distancing settings when teaching young children with varied learning disabilities such as fidgeting, attention deficit and autism spectrum disorders, during the lesson; challenges in maintaining a safe distance between desks because of large number of learners per class and scarcity of classrooms; to its effects to primary school learners' morale and relationship; and due to the increase of fear and stigma among young children during the lesson because of false information and dangerous myths about corona virus.

Therefore, the study recommended that there is need for teachers to assist primary school learners to manage and adapt to stressful social distancing environments during the lesson through coping and resilience strategies like the use of cognitive, emotional and behavioural strategies. There is need for educational psychologist to use resilience dynamics during their young children's lessons that can serve as a crucial context where learners can make sense of their real life through narrative thoughts, recognizing and sharing their emotions hence minimizing the risk of long-lasting trauma to promote effective learning in the context of social distancing principle during COVID 19 pandemic. There is need for primary school teachers to assist learners to adapt to social distancing principle and to improve their attention span in order to achieve effective face to face teaching and learning in the context of social distancing principle during COVID 19 pandemic. There is need for primary school teachers to provide opportunities for learners to reconnect socially within the social distancing principle of COVID 19 pandemic learning based environment through speaking up, reading aloud, use of gestures since the mouth is covered by the face mask.

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