Re-Setting Education Priorities in the Post Covid-19 Era: Towards Equitable Learning Opportunities at ECD Level in Zimbabwe.

Cosmas Muchandiona, Ennie Manyumwa

Lecturer Faculty of Education, Department of Educational Foundations Primary Education and Pedagogy, Midlands State University, Zimbabwe

ABSTRACT

This study sought to explore on how Early Childhood Development (ECD) educational priorities can be re-set towards achieving quality and equitable learning opportunities for ECD learners in the post Covid-19 era in Zimbabwe. The use of virtual learning platforms during the Covid-19 induced lockdown era resulted in both ECD teachers and learners experiencing a lot of challenges which gave rise to inequalities in education provisions and extended them particularly to the already disadvantaged and vulnerable ECD learners. The Social-cultural theory of learning by Barbra Rogoff formed the crux under which this study was carried upon. Interpretivist paradigm, qualitative research approach and document analysis research design were merged to enable the researchers to understand the nature of reality from human experience in the field of education at ECD level. Basing on articles published in reputable journals between 2020 and 2023, the study found out that lack of internet access, unreliable electricity / power, lack of ICT gadgets and knowledge to use virtual learning platforms were some of the challenges which were encountered when internet-based / remote learning was adopted at ECD level. The study recommended that ECD teachers need to re-set education priorities to make up for the time lost and ensure that ECD learners who were disadvantaged catch up with the rest in this post Covid-19 era in Zimbabwe.

Keywords: Re-set, Education, Priorities, ECD, Learners, Teacher

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Education at Early Children Development (ECD) level has always prioritised the provision of equitable learning opportunities for all learners. This is in line with the SDG goal number 4 which advocates for inclusive and equitable quality education and promotion of lifelong opportunities for all (UNICEF, 2019). With the adverse experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic and the extended closure of schools, the need to re-set education priorities is inevitable. Before the Covid-19 outbreak era, ECD area in developing countries was still facing myriad challenges which were hindering equitable and sustainable education programmes. The governments of various countries were still struggling to come up with provisions to realise equitable and quality education at ECD level when the pandemic strike. WHO Africa Press Release (2023) indicated that a number of countries in Africa were still struggling to pave ways to mitigate challenges which were creating and extending inequalities and inequitable learning opportunities at ECD level, when Covid-19 came in disrupting these eminent strides.

Both ECD teachers and learners faced multifaceted challenges during the Covid-19 era which negatively hauled the provision of quality education and brought crisis in the education sector at ECD level. This pandemic could have exacerbated the already existing inequalities in education mostly affecting ECD pupils from the most vulnerable communities and families. UNICEF (2021) indicated that the SADC regional

block does not have coherent regional policies to support ECD education and programmes. With no clear policies to guide ECD programmes, the coming of Covid-19 turned the provision of equality education into a disastrous mode in the region and ECD learners lost a lot during this era.

Covid-19 as a highly contagious respiratory viral disease caused a panic mode to the whole world, forcing most governments to call for extended lockdown periods between 2020 and 2021. During the Covid-19 lockdown era, face-to-face lessons were banned which did not spare the ECD department either. UNICEF (2021) indicated that ECD children are a delicate group which suffered a lot during the Covid-19 lockdown era. With no physical lessons being conducted in schools, ECD learners were greatly affected considering that most of them were kept indoors by their parents who feared that they may contract this pandemic disease if they go outdoors.

The room for exposure, exploration, experimentation, play and manipulating for ECD learners was shut making learners less creative and innovative. The Chronicle, February 2021 alluded that as schools were set to open in 2021 after a long lockdown period, pupils would open in phases with the examination classes opening first, in a phase system and ECD group being the last to re-join the school. This indicated that ECD learners were the group that spent most of their time out of school since it was the first group again to close and leave schools when phased closure of school was adopted due to lockdown in 2020 in Zimbabwe.

Challenges which were brought by lockdown include the absence of the much-needed physical interaction between the ECD learners and their teachers, ECD learners and their peers, the stress associated with the virtual learning system, unavailability of power, limited or no access to ICT gadgets and lack internet access. The gap that was created between ECD learners who could benefit from remote learning and those who could not was widened hence equitable learning opportunities were compromised. UNICEF (2021) supports that pandemics usually puzzle ECD programmes proliferating their vulnerability in societies more than adults. Appropriate intervention strategies to guarantee quality and equitable education in this post Covid-19 era are critical in ECD settings.

It is against this background that this study sought to explore on how education priorities can be re-set in Zimbabwe towards quality and equitable learning opportunities for all learners at ECD level. The desire for both conscious and proactive efforts to re-set education priorities and rebuild education systems that embed resilience into their design and respond to the challenges created is vital, so that the affected ECD group cover up for the lost time and those who are lagging behind catch up with others.

Statement of the problem

Covid-19 pandemic heavily disrupted the education system world over. The frequent closure of school buildings between 2020 and 2021 interrupted learning systems with extended lockdowns across the world, forcing ECD learners out of school for about two years. ECD learners lost the much-needed exposure and opportunity to learn. Remote learning was adopted in education which saw ICTs together with vast e-learning platforms taking precedence as new normal teaching approaches which further exacerbated the already existing inequalities in ECD settings. ECD learners from vulnerable families and communities were the most affected by this move while the elite group benefited. The need to curb these challenges and redress the education system at ECD level is called for. Remote learning has now become a necessity in the education fraternity globally, hence if education priorities are not reset, the affected generation would remain behind while the future generations would fail to co-exist in the digital world they are currently living in. The urge to proffer lasting solutions to current glitches in education which were brought by Covid-19 and the anticipation that similar occurrences which would require remote learning in future might occur, prompted the researchers to delve on how education priorities can be re-set towards equitable learning opportunities at ECD level in Zimbabwe.

Main Research Objective

The study aimed at exploring on how education priorities can be re-set to ensure quality and equitable learning opportunities at ECD level in Zimbabwe.

Sub-Research Objectives

1. To establish challenges faced at ECD level worldwide during the Covid-19 induced lockdown era.

2. To ascertain areas in ECD settings where inequalities were created and exacerbated during this era.

3. To find out how education systems in different countries are addressing issues of quality and equitable learning opportunities at ECD level in the post Covid-19 era.

4. To come up with recommendations which can be used in Zimbabwean ECD settings to address issues of quality and equitable learning opportunities in this post Covid-19 era through blended learning provisions.

Purpose of the study

The study sought to analyse national and international evidence on what is being done to ensure equitable educational opportunities in the post Covid-19 era at ECD level. Challenges faced in ECD setting were noted and proactive measures that were put in place during this era were identified. All this was done in a bid to come up with counter measures in the case of the need to resort to remote learning in future.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Social-cultural theory of learning by Barbra Rogoff formed the base under which this study was carried upon. Rogoff (1990) alluded that learning is a process where social tools are appropriated to initiate thinking, facilitated by social agents who interpret and guide infants through cognitive and cultural apprenticeship. Rogoff`s theory pointed out four main ideas which facilitate learning namely: cognitive apprenticeship, a community of learners, collaboration and scaffolding. She extended her theory from Vygotsky`s work, hence culture was viewed as central in the whole process of education.

Cognitive apprenticeship

According to Rogoff, cognitive apprenticeship refers to a process where a learner gains knowledge under the instruction and guidance of the Master under set conditions. In this study, the researchers viewed this as a critical phase for re-setting education priorities in ECD setting since ECD teachers are the Masters to guide learners in adopting new trends in the teaching and learning process. For Rogoff`s educational ideas, young children are viewed as young explorers with the desire to learn hence ECD educators should avail the necessary conditions to facilitate proper learning. Froebel the father of kindergarten supports that, a school is the children`s garden where the work of the teacher is to provide all the necessities for learning to unfold naturally. The desire is to adopt new approaches to recover lost time in education for ECD learners. ECD teachers therefore should not treat their pupils as *tabula rasas* but as young scientists who can co-discover new ideas to be used in education in this era.

A community of learners

Rogoff (1990) indicated the importance of a community in learning. She said through interaction, learners

are extrinsically motivated by peers to engage in a number of activities. The culture of unity and togetherness is built as ECD pupils work in groups. Rogoff`s educational philosophy and instructional method encouraged group work activities during learning which foster for harmonious intellectual, moral and physical development. Rogoff went on to say that learning of children becomes meaningful and productive when it is done in socio-cultural contexts.

As governments re-set education priorities in ECD settings, they should consider the cultural context for their people if such moves are to be productive in their communities and be accepted without any hick ups. Vygotsky (1978) supports that children should be taught in their socio-cultural context that is their immediate environment before dealing with what is distant from them. By adopting new priorities in ECD settings, ECD pupils should be treated as a community where they are seen in one lance not as individuals from different social groups.

Collaboration

According to Rogoff, collaboration is a strong pillar in achieving educational goals at any institution. Garvis and Pendergast (2015) agree that for the education system to survive, it calls for collaboration where all stakeholders work in unity for a common goal. Collaboration is a broad area where ECD pupils need to unit in doing a number of tasks at school and work together in games, groupwork activities and other areas where collaborative efforts are required. For supporting the need to re-set education priorities in ECD settings, the government, parents, religions, teachers, school administrators and NGOs need to collaborate in all areas for the progress of this initiative. Collaboration helps to make the provision of all the necessities needed in education a priority for all. In this case, every stakeholder would stand at his or her position offering full support to ECD programmes because they would be well-informed of every activity taking place at the school or ECD centre.

Scaffolding

Rogoff indicated that scaffolding is a necessity in ensuring that learners master the concepts they are learning in a relaxed and flexible environment. Brunner (1990) supports that scaffolding refers to step-by-step assistance given to learners for them to grasp the content being taught. Rogoff (1990) indicated that when assisting learners (scaffolding), we have to do it within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Vygotsky (1978) explained that ZPD refers to the zone between what a child can do independently and what he / she can do with the assistance of a more knowledgeable other. As a way of adopting new priorities at ECD level, ECD teachers need to scaffold ECD learners on how to move forward with the new normal trends in education while covering for the lost time during the Covid-19 lockdown era. ECD teachers should also capitalise on fast learners in their ECD classes and make use of them for peer-scaffolding.

METHODOLOGY

The researchers employed an interpretivist research paradigm in the endeavour to address the fervent for re-setting education priorities in the post Covid-19 era, towards equitable learning opportunities at ECD level in Zimbabwe. Shamoo and Resnik (2020) support that interpretivism is applicable when researching on how humans think or behave in societies. Creswell (2017) also purports that interpretivism helps in the study of social actions by humans through fathoming on reasons and meanings behind certain behaviour. Researchers got the flexibility to understand behaviour and actions of individuals and groups. This enabled the researchers to analyse them contextually in relation to the phenomenon under inquiry.

Bak (2020) concurs that qualitative research approach analyses and describes people`s collective and

individual social beliefs, actions, perceptions and thoughts. In this study, the approach allowed the researchers to understand the nature of reality on how ECD teachers are trying to close the equity gap which was created during the Covid-19 lockdown era.

Document analysis was the research resign which was used to generate data, draw conclusions and make recommendations to the study. A total of six research studies were analysed in relation to the problem at hand. These studies were carried out in different countries which included Australia, Canada, Ethiopia, South Africa and Zimbabwe and were published between the years 2020 and 2023. The number of researches studied was determined by the researchers' consideration of having reached saturation. The themes that emerged from the sub-objectives were used to generate data and findings were presented in descriptive form. Bak (2020) argues that document analysis research design involves evaluating electronic and / or physical documents, interpreting them to gain an understanding of the meaning they provide and use them as the base for inference to the topic under inquiry.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Data presented in this section were generated by navigating six online resources from five different nations namely Australia, Canada, Ethiopia, South Africa and Zimbabwe. Meta-narratives were used to categorise the findings of the data which were collected and explain on how to re-set education priorities towards equitable learning opportunities at ECD level in Zimbabwe.

Challenges faced in ECD settings during the Covid-19 pandemic

Schools, ECD teachers, ECD learners and parents faced myriad challenges which negatively affected the provision of equitable learning opportunities. While some schools continued with the teaching and learning using digital technology platforms, others failed to offer remote teaching services and facilitate continuity of learning at ECD level because of challenges which included:

Unavailability of power

Power crisis negatively hindered the use of remote learning platforms through the use of digital learning technologies at ECD in Zimbabwe during the Covid-19 era particularly in rural areas. (Abizanda, 2022, Baldwin, 2009; Liu & Gee, 2017) support that a number of rural schools do not have power to use ICT technologies and the internet in the teaching and learning process. For this reason, during this Covid-19 lockdown era (2020 – 2021) ECD teachers in a number of rural areas were unable to continue teaching their classes, crippling the pursuit to continue with education through digital learning platforms.

Lack of ICT gadgets

Remote schooling posed a stumbling block in the education fraternity during the Covid-19 lockdown era. De Klerk and Palmer (2021) allude that a number of learning institutions were caught unaware and were found unprepared by the Covid-19 pandemic to implement remote learning because of the unavailability of ICT gadgets. ECD learners from vulnerable families could hardly have access to ICT gadgets like cell phones which made the effort for continued learning using digital platforms during this era a nightmare. Remote learning requires both ECD teachers and learners to have efficient technological devices which are reliable for use during lessons (Albirini, 2006; Rachmawati, 2019 & Wang, 2008). Abizanda (2022) supports that in some cases there were families that hardly owned a cell phone, worse still a computer. This made remote learning impracticable during the lockdown era in most primary schools across the world, especially those in the third world community.

Poor internet access

A number of schools had great challenges to internet access (Gracia, 2020; Ghavifekr & Rosdy, 2015 & Rachmawati, 2019). Remote learning requires strong network and internet access for smooth sharing of data among devices used during the teaching and learning process. Zimbabwe was one of the countries where in some areas, access to ordinary network for call-making was a challenge, making remote learning a flop.

Mupfumira (2023) alludes that the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education together with UNICEF introduced radio lessons during the Covid-19 lockdown era in Zimbabwe. This was done to bridge the gap which was by the abandonment of face-to-face lessons during the Covid-19 lockdown era. In some parts of Zimbabwe, radio transmission waves were not accessible for ECD learners to follow these lessons. This further exacerbated inequities in education at ECD level because those who were benefiting from school-based digital learning platforms were the same group which also accessed radio lessons.

Digital illiteracy and techno-phobia

A number of ECD teachers were found wanting when remote learning was introduced through various digital platforms. The fundamental obligation which was placed in the hands of ECD teachers required quality expertise to use digital teaching platform which included zoom, google classrooms and google meet, just to name a few. (De Klerk & Palmer, 2021; Arukaroon & Kraitrit, 2017 & Ghavifekr & Rosdy, 2015) indicate that a number teachers who trained in colleges before the teaching of ICT was compulsory are not competent enough to embrace remote learning due to lack to the technical skills involved in the process.

Covid-19 erupted unexpectedly like a volcano and did not give schools the time to prepare for remote learning through various digital learning platforms. When the lockdown forced schools to close, there was no specific period which was set for the lockdown period and had been extended here and there. For this reason, schools went on to adopt remote learning through various digital learning platforms after seeing that the extension of the lockdown period was no longer favourable for pupils to come back and cover up for all the lost time and learning opportunity. De Klerk and Palmer (2021) further explain that teachers who had no expertise to use digital teaching platforms were not even afforded space and time to learn on how to use such resources and platforms but were caught in a boat where they were required to use them for teaching. By so doing, not all ECD teachers were able to deliver lessons using these digital technologies which made remote learning a failure in most cases.

Other ECD teachers were caught in the crossfire because of techno-phobia. Techno-phobia refers to the fear of using technology in most aspects of life. Timmons, Cooper, Bozek and Braund, (2021) support that a number of teachers, especially those who are in their 50s are afraid of using technologies due to lack of exposure especially those who did not came across such technologies during their training at teachers` colleges. This also did not spare the ECD sector because in Zimbabwe technology is still developing, with a number of most senior teachers still afraid of using technology because they never came across it during their schooling and training period.

Challenges faced by ECD teachers during Covid-19 lockdown era

Adam and Tatnall (2021) explain that during the Covid-19 lockdown era, a number of teachers failed to continue with teaching using digital learning platform in a number of schools. The main challenges which posed hindrances for teachers to utilise remote learning during this era included lack of ICT gadgets, unavailability of power, poor internet access, digital / ICT illiteracy, unavailability of data and high costs of data and stress associated with using virtual learning systems.

(Singleton, 2018; Wang, 2008 & Rachmawati, 2019) indicates that digital infrastructural facilities are in scarcity in most countries hence obstructing the utilisation of digital teaching and learning platforms in schools. As indicated by Singleton (2018), it shows that due to the scarcity / unavailability of digital infrastructures both at national and community level, most ECD teachers did not have the necessary gadgets and supporting devices to use digital teaching platforms during the lockdown era.

Poor internet connectivity was another major challenge obstruction the use of digital learning platforms in schools (Albirini, 2006; Ghavifekr & Rosdy, 2015 & Singleton, 2018). During the Covid-19 lockdown induced-era, nothing improved in terms of network provisions in a number of areas despite the call for remote schooling in ECD settings, making the use of digital teaching platforms a mountain to climb for ECD teachers in most parts of the nation (Zimbabwe).

(Stevens, 2019; Rachmawati, 2019 & Rachmawati & Rahmayanti, 2021) argue that the cost of data bundles is burdensome in a number of developing countries thereby obstructing the use of digital teaching and learning platforms. This was another challenge which crippled the idea of remote learning at ECD level during the Covid-19 lockdown era in Zimbabwe. A number of schools did not avail funds for buying data bundles to their teaching staff members neither did they provide them with the bundles since schools` source of funding was closed, that is levies paid by learners. With teachers in Zimbabwe complaining for underpayment for their services, most ECD teachers could not sacrifice the little they got to purchase data for online teaching for their ECD classes.

Postholm & Moen (2020) carried out a study in the use of internet-based resources in Zimbabwe and noted with concern lack of expertise among the teaching staff who are expected to use these resources in teaching. In this regard the constraints which downplayed the maximisation of remote learning during the Covid-19 lockdown era in Zimbabwe include the lack of skills in the use of ICTs, void defined training plan for teachers and no prioritisation of ICT budget for teachers. (Rachmawati & Rahmayanti, 2021 & Postholm & Moen 2020) further explained that use of digital learning platforms in schools was being derailed by the natural fear of internet and computers and resistance to change and adopt use of technology by a number of teachers in schools.

Challenges faced by parents during Covid-19

Abizanda (2022) indicates that noted challenges faced by parents in trying to assist their children in lessons which were conducted during the Covid-19 era. Noted challenges face by parents included the following: no ICT gadgets, unavailability of electricity / power, lack of professional knowledge to operate some gadgets, busy schedules which did not allow them to attend to their children`s learning, fear and uncertainty of the pandemic which made them unstable and technophobia by a number of parents.

Areas of inequity

Remote learning which was adopted during the Covid-19 lockdown era in Zimbabwe created and further extended inequalities and inequities in the education of ECD learners in Zimbabwe. Such inequalities and inequities were generated and extended in the area of resource distribution, technological use, parental involvement and support, social interaction, academic and home environment.

Adam and Tatnall (2021) postulated that teaching using internet-based resources in schools had generated and extended inequalities among schools in the provision of reading materials and resource kits, access to technology, digital literacy, utilisation of internet for digital learning and professional training in using digital technologies since a few privileged schools offered their teaching staff short courses on remote teaching which was not practicable in vulnerable communities. During the lockdown era when remote

learning was adopted by schools, some parents ended up providing answers for their children during the learning process due to lack of patience to engage them and lack of technical knowhow of approaches to apply when assisting ECD learners on home-based tasks assigned to them.

Studies done in Zimbabwe, South Africa and Ethiopia indicated that schools from rural and vulnerable communities were not functional with no interaction between teachers and the learners and peer to peer interaction was also cut, while those from good and privileged schools utilised online learning. Timmons, et al (2021) argued that inequities and inequalities were created when the sense of community created at school during face-to-face lessons was eroded. Most ECD pupils lost that touch which they used to enjoy at school as they interacted with peers. Barbra Rogoff` social cultural theory of child development emphasised on the importance of a community of learners in child development. The main idea is that, it is the community that shapes the child to fit or be a misfit in the society.

Security at home was also not guaranteed during this era due to fear of the uncertainty of the pandemic. ECD pupils were kept locked indoors in a number of cases and were denied freedom to get assistance on their school work from friends or peers in the neighbourhood. Evidence from studies done in South Africa and Zimbabwe disclosed that at home, ECD pupils failed to proceed with their learning because of the unfavourable environment they were faced with. Most environments in rural settings and in high density locations were not favourable for remote learning during this era which further widened the gap between the haves and the have not. On the other hand, ECD pupils from better remunerated families and better social backgrounds were progressing with remote learning and interacting with teachers and peers online while those from vulnerable families were suffering from loneliness (not learning).

Findings on how different countries are ensuring equitable learning opportunities in ECD settings

UNICEF (2023) indicates that a number of countries are putting in place strong digital learning infrastructures and solarising schools (Canada, Australia and America). This is one of the measures where governments of various nations are working with the assistance of the donor community to avail infrastructural facilities for schools to utilise internet-based resources in the teaching and learning process.

In Zimbabwe the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (2022) indicates that it engaged Black Fibre and Dandemutande companies to install Wi-Fi in rural schools in Mashonaland West, Mashonaland Central, Manicaland and Mashonaland Central in partnership with a donor (name withheld) as a way of enhancing the use of digital teaching and learning platforms. A number of schools in Kariba, Makonde, Sanyati, Zvimba and Hurungwe benefited from this programme and the donor is still paying for the data services on monthly basis since the installation in 2022.

Wi-Fi installation was a great move which was meant to relieve vulnerable communities and bring equitable learning opportunities for all learners, despite of their location in the country. This move aims at reducing resource curse by proving appropriate and reliable infrastructure in schools. In a number of cases, ECD teachers and learners are not fully utilising these resources because of local politics at school level. In a number of cases, school administrators reserve these resources for administration purposes and examination classes with ECD department given very limited or no access to the facilities which calls for re-conscientisation among the staff with such mentality.

Evidence available indicates that in Australia and Canada trainings were done for professional development of teachers and parents on the use of technology for teaching and learning. This would foster continuity in learning from school to home because parents will be well versed with the proper pedagogies necessary for assisting ECD pupils so that the approaches they employ when assisting their children at home would be synonymous with those used at school. Mupfumira (2023) alludes that in a number of developed countries, training teachers on blending of synchronous and asynchronous teaching methods was adopted when

schools reopened after the lockdown era as a way to re-dress the after effects of the pandemic. ECD teachers were also taken to board on this exercise so as to equip them with the necessary skills and utilise them for making up for the lost time.

Australia is one of the countries which went on to evaluate the needs of learners after reopening school so that appropriate resources and support could be targeted. Between May and July 2023, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary of Zimbabwe also embarked on the consultation exercise in schools in a bid to review the contents of the Competency-Based Curriculum which was in use between 2015 and 2022. According to the Permanent of Secretary of Primary and Secondary Education, the exercise was meant to attend to the raising needs from the curriculum in use and realign it with the new demands of the current world of affairs. ECD pupils, teachers and parents were consulted in the process and their views and needs were captured for consideration.

According UNESCO (2023), provision of home packs / workbooks with resources and materials that learners can use to execute homework and activities designed by teachers was also another strategy implemented in some countries after Covid-19 lockdown era. This was part of the dedicated efforts meant to cover up for the time lost and inequities which were generated by remote and hybrid teaching and learning methods which were adopted during this era. This situation is also applicable in Zimbabwe where teachers give their ECD learners take home tasks in different forms as part of their homework to work on at home, getting assistance from other siblings, caregivers and / or parents.

Tikly and Milligan (2017) argues that Rwanda is one of the African nations which had policies in place to support innovative teaching and learning and crafted supporting policies to that effect. When Covid-19 came into full force causing schools to close their doors, some countries were already a step ahead in implementing innovations in their education which were related to the use of technological devices in the teaching and learning process. Such countries are now extending their wings to ensure that they have in place alternatives for use in the event that some pandemics recur in the near future which may call for remote learning again.

Measures taken by various countries to ensure equitable learning opportunities in ECD settings

The provision of in-school and after-school small group tutoring was found to be of paramount importance in ensuring equitable learning opportunities at ECD level. This is inline with Rogoff`s idea of collaboration where she noted that learners should work together for a common goal in learning programmes. This provision facilitates sharing of ideas among peers while the caregiver would act as a mentor through cognitive and cultural apprenticeship.

UNESCO (2023) notes that in the post Covid-19 era, some countries are providing targeted support to meet the social emotional, moral and learning needs of ECD learners as a way of re-dressing the effects caused by the pandemic is inevitable. There are other ECD pupils who lost their parents, friends and / or their loved ones during this era and are traumatised making them live in distress and as a way forward, some ECD settings are offering counselling services for such pupils to meet their social and emotional needs.

UNICEF (2022) believes that governments in developed countries are deliberately making moves and availing additional specialised support to address inequitable learning opportunities experienced by ECD learners from various social groups during the lockdown era. Strategising and levelling the education field for all ECD learners irrespective of their ethnicity, race, gender, socio-economic background, ability and location is take as an urgent requirement in Brazil, Australia, United Kingdom and America. This is helping ECD pupils to have access to a broad and well-balanced curriculum tailored for their learning needs limited hindrances.

Abizanda (2022) eludes that Covid-19 exposed the education sector world wide of not having effective and reliable digital learning infrastructural facilities which made remote learning a dud during the lockdown period. UNICEF (2023) supports the idea for co-designing robust digital learning infrastructural facilities where teachers and other stakeholders are fully involved. Proper digital infrastructural facilities have been designed, which is allowing ECD pupils both in-school and out-of-school learning experiences, cutting across most barriers in every community to reach every pupil (as being done in first world countries).

Individualised tutoring digital systems in ECD settings have been put in place. Such platforms allow ECD teachers and parents to monitor the progress of pupils while pupils themselves can also learn on their own using them and monitor their own progress getting instant feedback. Peer-tutoring becomes easy when supported by digital platforms where ECD pupils can scaffold one another in a free and relaxed environment without an authority figure.

Mupfumira (2023) supports the idea that a number of governments across the globe are harnessing resources to recover the after effects of this deadly pandemic and address inequities it created. Specific needs of ECD pupils from disadvantaged socio-economic background and those exposed to vulnerability by the pandemic such as children at risk like those with special needs conditions, are receiving additional specialised support which adheres to their uniqueness. As a way of re-setting educational priorities, some governments are aligning resources and needs of ECD pupils, reflecting their socio-emotional conditions in a just and transparent manner (America, Canada and Australia).

Multi-stakeholder collaboration is another key recovery strategy in ECD settings where the culture of innovations in education is being cultivated in schools and communities. UNCEF (2023) supported that governments, teachers, school administrators, religions, NGOs, parents and ECD pupils in a number of countries are collaborating and working together with the same vision to address the inequities which were generated and exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. In this era, education priorities at ECD level should guarantee professional autonomy where every stakeholder`s views and ideas are collaboratively weighed for envisioning the recovery paths in ECD education for the benefit of every ECD pupil in the community without any form of discrimination or unjust practice.

In re-setting education priorities in ECD settings, emphasis is on play and inquiry-based learning. Plato one of the greatest ancient philosophers denoted that play and inquiry-based learning are crucial for child development and learning. ECD teachers should guide and direct ECD learners` play at school towards their inclinations and pleasures which pave a way for critical thinking and discovery learning which forms the back born for real life situations. Plato in Mawere & Musiyiwa (2010) argued that arithmetic games were invented in Egypt by playing children, making play pleasurable and amusement in the world of children.

Mawere & Musiyiwa (2010) concurred that play drives ECD pupils to discover, manipulate, dramatise, be creative, innovate, imaginate and invent new ideas or solutions. Some governments together with other stakeholders are re-setting ECD education priorities to be learner-centred and driven by play and inquiry-based pedagogies. Governments and school authorities are securing necessary infrastructural facilities, accessories and equipment needed to facilitate play and inquiry-based learning in ECD settings (Australia and Canada).

Erick Erickson and Sigmund Freud concurred that children`s play is incapsulated in their need for pleasure and desire to be grown ups. These psychoanalysts both agreed that play is therapeutic and cathartic for infants because it gives them room to cope with anxieties and regain self-control over certain situations they encountered in life. This entails that play is the language for ECD pupils which offers them freedom to express their worries, experiences, wishes, desires, fears and memorable events which they cannot express verbally. As education priorities are re-set at ECD level in this era, ECD pupils are being afforded flexibility

and room to capitalise play and use it as the base for venting their emotional distresses they encountered during the Covid-19 lockdown era.

Schools, ECD centres and ECD teachers continue to be the backbone of learning in ECD settings. This therefore entails the importance of teacher capacity development and improved conditions of service for teachers as a recovery plan for quality and equitable education in ECD settings for now and the future. Workplace conditions, professionalism, capacity development and the well-being of the teacher`s family are inextricably bound together and affect the delivery of service by ECD teachers in their classes.

UNESCO (2023) alludes that the pandemic strained school communities paralysing the education system in return. ECD teachers tried to be innovative responding to socio-emotional needs of ECD pupils and new demands of the teaching profession when schools reopened. Though a number of ECD teachers are trying their best in adjusting to meet the new demands of the current system in education, some still lack the expertise expected of them in the new normal trends in education. For this reason, some governments are having unified efforts co-jointly with teacher unions, NGOs, religions and the communities to support teachers in capacitation programmes and review teachers` conditions of service to make them favourable since they are key for the recovery of education in ECD settings.

CONCLUSION OF THE STUDY

The challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic at ECD level as cited in the referred studies were similar across the globe. These include that; schools were caught unaware by this pandemic and were not having sustainable ways to allow learning to continue when face-to-face lessons were rendered inevitable. All other ways of learning which were introduced during the Covid-19 induced lockdown era were not all that viable to benefit all ECD learners as compared to face-to-face learning.

Most countries were not prepared for the crisis (Covid-19 pandemic) hence the measures which were taken in the education fraternity seemed to widen the gap in the provision of equitable learning opportunities among various social groupings in ECD settings. ECD learners from the families which were able managed to access home-based packages and remote learning facilities which benefited them through continued learning, while those from vulnerable families could not continue with education, hence their vulnerability was extended by remote learning provisions.

Efforts are being made by different education sectors in different countries to re-dress the inequities which were worsened by the pandemic and to adequately prepare for future incidents that may require a shift to remote learning again. The current focus in most countries is not only to assist ECD learners to cover up for the lost time during the Covid-19 induced lockdown era, but to embrace blended learning as new normal pathways in education as demanded by the current digital world.

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE STUDY IN ECD CONTEXT

Zimbabwe as a country should put in place mechanism to be prepared in case such pandemics recur in future which re-call for remote learning. Government therefore has to put in place physical infrastructural facilities at national level, which include availing electricity / solarisation and improving the network system for effective implementation of digital learning in ECD settings. With strong facilities availed, remote learning would be effective to implement and sustainability in education in this digital era is guaranteed.

Schools and ECD centres have to prioritise digitalisation and expand connectivity so that education priorities can be re-set at ECD level equitably. Remote learning in this context requires strong network systems which are user-friendly. For this and other reasons, there is need for schools to embrace blended

learning so that ECD learners move with technology as the current world demands.

The government need to empower ECD teachers with ICT knowledge and skills, on how to embrace digital technologies in blended learning at ECD level, through teacher capacitation programmes. This would help ECD educators to be empowered to embrace blended learning for the benefit of ECD learners and to cover up for the lost time due to the Covid-19 induced lockdown era, which disrupted the learning process for about two years.

The management in schools need to budget well and adjust to new teaching and learning trends which blend digital technologies and face-to-face teaching and learning so that ECD learners can work on take home tasks with ease. ECD teachers with availed facilities by the school management can also produce workbooks that breakdown content into simple tasks so that ECD learners can work independently. This element needs full support from the school management for blended learning to be viable.

There is also the need to strengthen teacher-parent relationships so that parents are empowered to assist their children in take-home tasks from school. Remote learning requires working together with unified efforts among the parents, ECD teachers and the school administrators. Collaborative efforts from these key-stakeholders who are to the vicinity of ECD learners are a necessity for blended learning to be a success.

The study further recommends multi-stakeholder collaboration in ECD programmes which would make blended learning a success in the education fraternity in ECD settings. The Government of Zimbabwe, Non-Governmental Organisations, schools, parents, religious groups, community leaders and politicians need to work together in harmony for the success of blended learning in ECD settings. The views and needs of ECD learners in the use of blended learning at ECD level need to be considered for posterity in education.

REFERENCES

1. Abizanda, B. (2022). *How to reboot education post Covid-19 pandemic: Delivering on the promise of a better future for youth.* Doi http://dx.doi.org/10.18235/0004241
2. Albirini, A. (2006). Teachers' attitudes toward information and communication technologies: The case of Syrian EFL teachers. *Computers and Education, 47*(4), 373-398.
3. Arukaroon, B., and Krairit, D. (2017). Impact of ICT usage in primary-school students' learning in The Case of Thailand. *International Journal of Web-Based Learning and Teaching Technologies (IJWLTT), 12*(2), 21-42.
4. Bak, N. (2020). *Completing your thesis: A practical guide*. Pretoria: Van Schaik.
5. Baldwin, R. G. (2009). The climate for undergraduate teaching and learning in STEM fields. *New Directions for Teaching and learning, 2009*(117), 9-17.
6. Blair, C., McKinnon, R. D., Daneri, M. (2018). *Effect of the tools of the mind in Kindergarten program on Children`s Social and emotional development. Early Childhood Research Quarterly.* 2018;43: p.52-61. doi:10.1016/j.ecresq.2018.01.002
7. Brunner, J. (1990). *Acts of meaning*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
8. Chekure, E. (2018). *Zimbabwe-Inception-Report: Physical Education in Basic Education.*
9. Christensen, C. M. (2016). *The innovator's dilemma: When new technologies cause great firms to fail.* Cambridge: Harvard Business Press.
10. Creswell, J. W. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches (6th Ed)*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
11. De Klerk, E. D. & Palmer, J. M. (2021). *Opportunity to re-think and structure education in the world. Perspectives in Education.* Vol. 39(1) 2021. p.12 – 28.
12. Garcia, E. (2020). *The Pandemic Sparked more appreciation for teachers, but will it give them a voice in education and their working conditions?* Working Economic Blog (Economic Policy Institute), May 7, 2020.

13. Garvis, S. & Pendergast, D. (2015). *Thinking different about infants and toddlers: Exploring the reflections of future Australia early childhood teachers in Australia.* Australian Journal of Teacher Education 2015;40 117-31

14. Ghavifekr, S., & Rosdy, W. A. W. (2015). Teaching and learning with technology: Effectiveness of ICT integration in schools. *International Journal of Research in Education and Science, 1*(2), 175-191.

15. Mawere, V. H. & Musiyiwa, J. (2010). *Learning and development through play.* Harare: Zimbabwe Open University.

16. Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (2022). *Digitalisation of rural schools in Zimbabwe.* Harare: Government Printers.

17. Mupfumira, E. B. (2023). *Re-Imaging Education in Zimbabwe – A Collaborative Effort.* Zimbabwe: UNICEF.

18. Nyarambi, A. & Ntuli, E. (2020). *A study of Early Childhood Development Teachers` Experiences in Zimbabwe: Implications to Early Intervention and Special Education.* Open Journal for Educational Research, 2020. 4(1), 49-66. available on https://doi.org/10.32591/coas.ojer.0401.04049n

19. OECD-Education International (2021). *Effective and equitable educational recovery: 10 Principles.* Brussels: Education International.

20. Rachmawati, R. (2019). Utilization and Quality of Information System for Administration Services Based on ICT In Patehan, Kraton, Yogyakarta. *Indonesian Journal of Science and Technology*, *4*(1), 55-63.

21. Rogoff, B. (1990). Apprenticeship in thinking: Cognitive development in social context. New York: Oxford University Press.

22. Timmons, K., Cooper, A., Bozek, E. & Braund, H. (2021). *The impacts of Covid-19 on Early Childhood Education: Capturing the unique challenges associated with remote teaching and learning in K-2.*

23. UNESCO, (2023). *Education: From COVID-19 school closure to recovery.* Available https://www.unesco.org/en/covid-19/education-response

24. UNICEF, (2019). *Country Office Annual Report 2019 Zimbabwe: Update on the context and situation of children.* Harare: Unicef.

25. Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *The mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

26. Wang, Q. (2008). A generic model for guiding the integration of ICT into teaching and learning. *Innovations in education and teaching international, 45*(4), 411-419.

27. WHO Africa Press Release (2023). *Covid-19 Response in Africa bulletin: Situation and response in the WHO AFRO Region. Issue, 12, November 2023*. WHO

28. York, L., Rose, P., Woldehanna, T. & Hailu, B. H. (2020). *Strengthening the education system for equitable learning during Covid-19 in Ethiopia.* Network for international policies and cooperation in education and training.