

## **Experiences of Parents with Senior School Children Engaged in Online Learning During the COVID-19 Related Lockdown in Zimbabwe**

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### **Abstract**

*The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic sparked a considerable shift in commonplace life worldwide. Since the government of Zimbabwe declared a twenty-one day lockdown on the 30<sup>th</sup> March 2020, schools have only been allowed to open intermittently until March 2021. This has resulted in many schools adopting an online curriculum to enable children to continue with their syllabus uninterrupted. This study sought to explore the positive and negative experiences of families with children engaged in online learning, in an effort to equip parents with coping mechanisms for future lockdowns. A qualitative approach was conducted for this study, specifically making use of the document analysis design. Data was collected using interviews carried out over Zoom and WhatsApp social media platforms. Online learning presented challenges as well as opportunities for growth. The prime challenges were the inordinate amount of time children spent on their screens, the lack of social interaction with peers, lack of exercise and a tendency to snack on food throughout the day. The main positive experiences were family bonding time, parents' newfound respect and appreciation for the role of teachers, the opportunity to engage in new hobbies, and learning to appreciate each day. This study highlights the need for practices such as mindfulness, a healthy diet, physical activity and understanding the tenets of resilience and positive psychology to aid with the challenges of online learning during a pandemic.*

### **Introduction**

The emergence and unprecedented spread of COVID-19 as a global pandemic has been posing substantial challenges to the practices of everyday life, including education. The Zimbabwe government announced on March 27, 2020 there was going to be a nationwide total lockdown for 21 days starting on March 30 (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020). Since then, the majority of pupils have only had a few weeks of classes until schools finally opened again, with a phased approach on the 15th March 2021 (Chingwere, 2021). Exploring the capacity of families to manage the emerging situations associated with the challenges of students studying online, can pave the way for developing refined approaches to learning and enhancing the resilience of the education sector in such a crisis (Peimani & Kamalipour,

2021). Learning from lockdown will offer insights and lessons to mitigate the effects of such situations in the future.

## **Research questions**

The research was premised on the following questions:

- 1) What are the negative experiences of parents with children studying online during lockdown?
- 2) What are the positive experiences of parents with children studying online during lockdown?
- 3) How can these lived experiences help mitigate the impact of the pandemic for future lockdowns?

## **Literature review**

The current COVID-19 crisis has obliged most education systems to move activities online, to allow instruction to continue despite school closures. Online learning is flexible and eliminates barriers of time and space (Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2014) and can save time and money by not involving travel (Cantoni et al., 2004). However, some downsides are the difficulties of staying focused and motivated, working through interruptions, and reliance on the Internet and computers to which not everyone has access (Sadeghi, 2019). Furthermore, the physical health of online students in lockdown can be affected by many hours of screen time and the subsequent reduction in outdoor activity (Nazarlou, 2013) coupled with an increased intake of snacking on unwholesome food (Pietrobelli et al., 2020). Mental wellbeing is improved by staying physically active which helps with goal setting, reaching targets and achieving challenges, raising self-esteem and causing chemical changes in the brain to positively affect mood (National Health System, 2019). Eating foods high in fibre supports a robust gut, which has proven to positively impact our mood (Mosley, 2021). Serotonin is known as the ‘happy hormone’ and 80% of it is created in the gut. Higher serotonin levels enable a more emotionally resilient person (Mosley, 2021).

Parents play a crucial role in emotionally supporting their children when they are demotivated and discouraged from learning autonomously, especially without the sustaining effects of their peers (Yates et al., 2020). Many challenges arise, with parents feeling incapable of helping due to a lack of technological skills and struggling to combine children’s

schoolwork with their other obligations (Bol, 2020; Parry et al., 2021). Some mothers have expressed resentment and frustration in the unequal distribution of domestic work in the family home, trying to balance the competing roles of professional, mother, wife and teacher, which previous studies have shown can increase anxiety (Andrew et al., 2020). There is a large body of literature suggesting that parental stress can have adverse effects on adolescent children (Gutman et al., 2005; Oreopoulos et al., 2008). This is potentially heightened during lockdown, as adolescents do not have the protective factors of going to school and their wider social support networks (Andrew et al., 2020). Vygotsky (1978) emphasised the importance of social interaction in children for cognitive development. Students have reported missing the social connections developed both in and out the classrooms and the teachable opportunities, which arise serendipitously from being physically in the classroom together (Hood, 2020).

There is considerable concern surrounding the implications of excessive screen time on adolescent well-being, yet studies should be viewed with caution as most are not cross-national and rely on inaccurate but popular self-report measures of digital-screen engagement (Orben & Przybylski, 2019). Perhaps cause for greater concern is when the increase in screen time comes at the expense of other activities necessary for the promotion of adolescent mental health, such as physical activity and sleep (Zhang et al., 2020).

Internet data packages are costly in comparison to the income of people in developing countries, thus making the divide between those who can continue with their education and those who cannot, even greater. Increased and unsupervised screen time also exposes children to potentially harmful material, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021).

On a positive note, being forced to stay at home has afforded some families time to reflect and be more appreciative of things usually taken for granted and has allowed more time to be spent together on enjoyable activities (Williams et al., 2021). However, discrepancies in the amount of positive change people experienced during lockdown can be dependent on socio-demographic and health variables and these inequalities have been associated with negative experiences (Wright et al., 2020).

Although there is increasing literature worldwide on the COVID-19 pandemic, the author asserts that there is a paucity of research in Zimbabwe concentrating on the experiences of

parents with senior school children studying online. Bridging this gap would highlight the areas in need of intervention to assist in coping with the possibility of schools adopting online learning in the future.

## **Research methodology**

In order to explore the realities of parents with children studying online, the participants needed to describe their perspectives so practical implications can be deduced from the findings (Boeije, 2010). Qualitative methodology deals with sensitive issues and topics such as those related to the COVID-19 pandemic and a 'face-to face' conversation between client and researcher suited this situation best. The 'snowball 'or networking method was used to collect data, whereby an initial number of participants were approached via the WhatsApp platform, who provided additional collaborators willing to be interviewed. Eighteen interviews were carried out on Zoom and two on WhatsApp until data saturation was reached (Guest et al., 2020). Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and was digitally recorded, transcribed in full, and password protected on the researcher's computer. Prompts were prepared in advance but the interviews were largely free flowing, thereby using the semi-structured interview (Weiss, 1994). A focus on the themes which emerged through inductive coding of narrative content enabled the researcher to identify those aspects of the stories which appear to be typical of families' lived experiences during lockdown, to facilitate a theorisation across cases (Riessman, in Ronkainen et al., 2016).

## **Results and discussion**

The discussion of results is based on the research objectives and themes arising from the narrative analysis.

### ***The negative experiences of lockdown***

**Excessive screen time:** The principal concern raised by all parents was the disproportionate amount of screen time invested in online learning and other social networking platforms. Some parents felt this was the result of too large a workload imposed by the teachers coupled with leisure time spent social networking. One parent commented:

They take the whole day to finish the work they are supposed to do. They are on their screens all the time. They are actually not getting time off their screen except to clean their rooms, eat meals and sleep.

Many participants in the current study expressed frustration at constantly having to discipline children regarding screen time and as the Wi-Fi is readily available for education, the rules are being abused for social networking. One parent complained of inappropriate pop up adverts taking children's attention away from studying, as well as encouraging them to subscribe to unsuitable social media accounts at too young an age. Another parent was finding it very difficult to "...find the balance between gadgets and downtime. My son is always online and I'm not sure if it's always educational and he is going to sleep too late." It is a double-edged sword though, as many parents said this screen time also provided them with time to relax, knowing their children were occupied.

Many children and adolescents are spending more time online, allowing social interaction for some but also increasing the risk of exploitation, bullying, and intensified commercial marketing (United Nations Children's Fund, 2020). A critical question that remains largely unanswered is how adolescents' screen time and abundant media use may impact them developmentally in terms of structural brain improvement, functional brain advancement, and related behavior (Crone & Konijn, 2018). The scientific evidence thus far is scarce and results are mixed. A recent study showed that perpetual use is associated with reduced ability to delay gratification (Wilmer, & Chein, 2016). However, positive consequences have been increased ability to flexibly switch between tasks (Wilmer, Sherman, & Chein, 2017) and enabling the users to feel socially connected (Reich et al., 2012). On the one hand, increasing the potential for social interaction and expression appears to be beneficial. On the other hand, extensive usage may divert time away from "real-world" social interaction time and other beneficial lifestyle behaviours such as physical activity and sleep (Firth et al., 2020). Thus it is imperative to find a balance between screen time and other activities.

**Change in physical activity and eating habits:** Overall, the majority of parents complained about the lack of physical exercise in the daily routine of their children, coupled with a change in eating habits. One parent said, "talk about eating! They are chubby now because they can just go to the kitchen and eat whenever they want and most of the time it is all the unhealthy things." Apart from the obvious weight gain, snacking on sugary and processed foods encourage the unhealthy bacteria in the digestive system to grow. These in turn increase levels of inflammation in the blood, which is a major cause of depression and also affects the brain's capacity to cope with stress (Mosley, 2021). Thus it is imperative to encourage a healthy diet to enable optimum mental health. A study has shown lower obesity

evident in children who routinely ate their evening meal as a family, had limited viewing time and obtained adequate sleep (Anderson & Whitaker, 2010). Regarding exercise, one parent said their children “don’t exercise as much as when they are at school and they have missed afternoon sport and playing matches against other schools on the weekend.” In the literature, children reported having mixed emotions in lockdown; whilst they are happy and relaxed with their families, they also felt fear, nervousness, worry, loneliness, sadness, boredom, and anger (Idoiaga et al., 2021). Physically, children noted they missed outdoor exercise as it left them sedentary, and socially, they missed their peers (Idoiaga et al., 2021). The promotion of digital-based physical apps has yielded favourable results in the USA, showing positive associations with exercise apps and overall physical activity during a lockdown (Yang & Koenigstorfer, 2020). Due to the numerous physical and mental benefits of exercise, public health strategies should promote safe physical activity to reduce sedentary behaviour, should other lockdowns occur (Stockwell et al., 2021).

**Discipline, lack of peer interaction and social connection:** Many parents are struggling with having to take on the role of teacher when they are not trained as such. Some children do not listen to their parents as they would their teacher, so corporal punishment is used. “Learning is supposed to be fun but sometimes I am using emotions for them to be able to take their work seriously’ said one of the participants. “At school they have peers and the teacher knows how to motivate them,” said another. Learning online lacks the social nuances of face-to-face interaction and the collaborative group work of students tackling tasks together (Hood, 2020). Peer interaction is key to adolescent development and can suffer when deprived of social stimuli (Orben et al, 2020). Some parents felt guilty for their children’s lack of interaction with peers and compensated for this by organising social gatherings. These events encouraged underage drinking of alcohol and went against the government lockdown regulations. It has been shown that perceived stress in parents and children is associated with negative coping strategies and they might be at risk for negative consequences of the lockdown (Achterberg et al., 2021). Many parents admitted struggling to cope with the added workload of having their children doing online schooling from home. One mother said, “there is no break between school and home. It’s very tiring. This online work is relentless and I can only do so much as I am also juggling home and work and parenting and being a wife.” Another mother said her coping strategy had become a tendency to “wake up at night and start watching television and drink 2-3 bottles of wine, which is not normal. I didn’t used to do that.”

It is therefore imperative to support a non-gendered, less traditional approach to parenting roles in order to lessen the stresses from unrealistic expectations, putting mothers at risk of mental health difficulties (Henderson et al., 2016; Vohra & Taneja, 2020). It is also important to equip parents with healthy coping strategies to ensure as balanced environment in the home as possible, for both children and adults to thrive. Mindfulness based interventions have been particularly helpful in improving depressive symptoms. Training focuses on being present in a non-judgmental way and being aware and accepting of how this unfolds, as opposed to preoccupying oneself with memories of the past or future concerns (Duarte et al., 2019).

**Internet connection:** Some parents complained about the added cost of Wi-Fi needed in order for their children to partake in online lessons. There is also the problem of poor connections for those living outside of Harare, some children having to pack a picnic for the day and “relocate to the paddocks where the signal was clearer.” The inequalities between those able to afford unlimited Wi-Fi and extra lessons for their children, compared to those who do not have access to online learning at all, has highlighted the education gap in Zimbabwe (Matabvu, 2020). For many, going to school is a deterrent against drug and alcohol abuse and early sexual activity (Eghtessadi et al., 2020). Reports have shown that at least 415 girls dropped out of school exam classes in Manicaland Province during the March to October 2020 COVID-19 lockdown period, mainly due to marriage and pregnancy (Tapfumaneyi, 2020). Although schools have been described as obsolete institutions, they provide social protection for children, thus ensuring their well being in childhood as well as socialization opportunities, which the virtual world cannot provide (Cano-Hila & Argemí-Baldich, 2021). In order to make online learning widely available, schools could collaborate with Internet providers to implement subsidized subscriptions as part of their corporate social responsibilities (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). Vodacom in South Africa introduced cheaper Internet data subscription bundles for university students during this COVID-19 pandemic (Joosub, 2020).

**Expectations of teachers:** Parents with children who had learning difficulties at school felt they were worse off with online studies. “If they struggle at school its worse online. Explaining over the computer is not the same for those who struggle. My daughter is taking longer to digest online compared to face to face.” Another parent complained that her child is studying his O Level syllabus where a different teacher instructs each subject. “The volume

of work that comes through is huge. It's as though each teacher thinks they are the only one giving out homework." It is key to empathize with students' feelings and attitudes in this regard when customizing online learning (Priyadarshini & Bhaumik, 2020). In a study by Bozkurt and Sharma (2020), 67.5% of online learners found back to back classes mentally exhausting, with the added bombardment of higher workloads from teachers. Some students preferred the increase in flexibility with online learning, however majority of students felt isolated and lacked a true learning experience (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). Just as teachers are trained in face-to-face methods, they should also be trained in online pedagogy, to become more effective in this area.

### ***Positive experiences of lockdown***

**Family bonding time:** The overriding theme prevalent in all interviews was how lockdown brought an increase in quality time for families. "We've had so much family time together, cycling, jogging...these are the best memories we've ever had." One participant stated this time has "opened our eyes in a positive way on how to improve our parenting." Another participant spoke about how busy they usually are and this unplanned time together has "shown us the different personalities of our children and we understand more about their learning patterns." One participant spoke about the importance of teaching her son manners and courtesy, of which she had become lackadaisical. Lockdown enabled her to improve on this and observe her child's communication with friends online, saying "I can check his phone and see the types of friends he has and the language he is using to communicate with them." These findings on the improvement of bonding between members of the family are consistent with other studies and highlight the importance of resilience when coping in difficult times (Dua et al., 2021; Rajkumar & Sangeetha, 2021;). Resilience can be described as dynamic, the ability to 'bounce back' and successfully adapt to adverse experiences (Masten, 2015). Instead of eliminating the negative, we expand our view to understand it (Ttofa, 2018).

**More time available:** For many, the lockdown has eradicated the daily commute to school and work, freeing up more time in the day. One participant commented on having more flexibility with her child studying from home:

My son is studying for his A levels and has many frees in the day. When he is at school he finds it hard to concentrate with the distraction of his friends around...they would much rather be kicking a ball around than working! But now he can use those frees at home to do his work or his exercise and he finds this much more productive.



This is consistent with another study where students retained 25- 60% more material when learning online compared to only 8-10% in a classroom, because students could learn at their own pace, and repeat or skip concepts as they chose (Li & Lalani, 2020). The online measures for continuing education have equipped students with better skills and confidence and better prepared them for future online engagement (Priyadarshini & Bhaumik, 2020).

Spending more time at home also meant children learnt to be responsible for their share in daily chores around the house. Lockdown measures forced families to rely on themselves, as outside help was unavailable. One participant said, “We managed to teach our children things we usually don’t have the time to do but now have to out of necessity.” Another participant commented her daughter had “matured learning to do the chores around the house.” Many parents spoke about the anxieties they faced as families with the threat of contracting COVID-19, worries about children falling behind in their studies and concerns about parents’ loss of employment. Some of the positive coping mechanisms adopted were the taking up of new hobbies:

We’ve had to invest in unlimited Wi-Fi for the children’s schooling and yoh...with unlimited Wi-Fi you have to make it work for you...you can’t go to sleep with unlimited Wi-Fi! I have learnt how to crochet and appliqué and also sewing.

Learning new skills, completing projects and taking online courses provides a sense of purpose, helping to maintain motivation and provide focus for those working from home (Botella et al., 2016; Kanas, 2015). Positive Psychology concentrates on the positive aspects of an individual during peaceful and happy times and also deals with the interaction of both suffering and growth in order to improve one’s experience of life (Seligman et al., 2005). Roepke and Seligman (2015) propose that we can create our own happiness and learn to be resilient by becoming involved in new possibilities, which can encourage the positive psychological adaptations following difficult experiences. This engagement in novel opportunities may act as a buffer to adversities, unsettling fundamental beliefs and encouraging growth. The tenets surrounding Positive Psychology, the study of human strengths and virtues to promote developmental growth (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) must be understood and promoted within schools, universities, work and home environments, to provide a framework for resilience in times of adversity (Yates et al., 2015).

**Appreciation of teachers:** Many parents reiterated a newfound appreciation of teachers, especially as most parents themselves were not exposed to an online method of learning

growing up. Both children and parents have been “forced to be more comfortable with online tools and different platforms.” One participant said, “We need to step up on how to raise kids in this technology world. We had neglected being there for them besides education and providing.” Other parents commented on having more insight into their children’s work. The same has been identified in other studies, where parents valued greater visibility and closer connection between home and school, even if sometimes they felt out of their depth (Hood, 2020).

**Learning to appreciate each day:** Despite the uncertainty and anxieties surrounding the pandemic, participants had many positive take home messages: “COVID has taught us that nothing is guaranteed. You can have someone today and tomorrow they are gone. Appreciate each other when you are given the chance to do that;” “Retrenchment is imminent anytime so we must celebrate life every day;” “Be more prayerful. We are fighting an invisible enemy.” We can learn from other extreme and overwhelming circumstances, the importance of staying in the present and focusing on the most important, achievable and immediate tasks (in this case being forced to stay at home during lockdown) as opposed to being distracted by the uncertainty of the future (Smith et al., 2017).

COVID-19 is a condition over which we have no control, therefore worrying and concentrating on the negatives will make us weak - physically, mentally, and emotionally (Dua et al., 2021). There is value in spending time with friends and relatives, learning new hobbies and games, using time to explore, and understand our thoughts. This has similarities to meditation and yoga where people often practice nonattachment, by reflecting on the impermanency and malleability of thought. If the lockdown allows us more time to reflect on our thoughts, can we use this opportunity to help us to cope with stress and develop our competences in mindfulness? Could it be that the lockdown is creating space for inward reflection in a way that promotes our psychological well being? Furthermore, can we live physically, emotionally, and socially healthier lives during the lockdown and going forward (Dua et al., 2021)?

## **Limitations**

Participants were primarily recruited from social media and the sample is not nationally representative of the Zimbabwean population. This study did not obtain a true reflection of the digital divide existing in Zimbabwe. The majority of children in this study attended private schools and it would be necessary to include children from government schools to

gain a balanced view. Many of the children attending government schools do not have access to a device or Internet and those that do can be affected by their offline environment, such as unsuitable learning space in the home and minimum support from the family (Hood, 2020). There was also an over representation of female participants, providing skewed results. Nevertheless, this study provides an informed source of the range and nature of challenges and positive experiences of families in similar situations.

## **Conclusion**

As online studying during lockdown has become increasingly central to everyday family life, it is important to understand how we can learn from current experiences, in order to cope better with future lockdowns. The primary pitfalls revealed in this study were the excessive amount of time children spent on their screens, lack of physical exercise, loss of social contact, excessive workload from teachers, unhealthy coping habits of parents and children, and Internet related problems. The beneficial experiences were the increase in family bonding time, extra time to learn new hobbies, appreciation of teachers, and the ability to appreciate each day as it unfolds. Through the promotion of mindfulness techniques, physical exercise, healthy eating habits and Positive Psychology, we can equip ourselves with tools to become more resilient during these adverse situations in the future. Science has explored the interaction between neurological and psychological development, highlighting the importance of education and support for parents in order for them to provide positive childhood experiences, thereby ensuring the health and success of our nation.

## **Recommendations for future research**

A greater representation of fathers' experiences would be necessary to ensure a more balanced viewpoint. In order to gain a wider perspective, studies could also include the attitudes of the students. Studies with the participation of parents and children in government schools as well including those in primary schools would also contribute to the depth of knowledge surrounding this topic.

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