



Foundation phase teachers' experiences in teaching physical education at a primary school in the COVID-19 era in the Motheo district, Free State, South Africa

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Abstract—Foundation phase teachers encountered challenges when teaching physical education and neglected it during the COVID-19 era. They are sometimes unconfident enough to teach it, and its negligence could affect learners' physical, social, and emotional development. This study explores the experiences of the foundation phase teachers in teaching physical education at school. This employed a qualitative approach and phenomenological research design. The results revealed that foundation phase teachers had experiences and challenges teaching physical education at a primary school during COVID-19 in the Motheo district, Free State, South Africa. Furthermore, this study recommends teaching and learning support to help teachers and pre-service teachers improve their practice before they become in-service teachers and advocate for physical education.

Keywords: COVID-19 era, Physical Education, Parental involvement, Social distancing

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I. INTRODUCTION

FOR over 50 years, physical education has been studied, and this is because researchers worldwide have been focusing on the importance of physical education and its inherent value potential of movement is key to making meaning of rich human experiences (Beni et al., 2019, p. 291). Moreover, the active Learning Approach has been used in schools worldwide and has been implemented to increase classroom learning quality (Pardjono, 2016). Stroebel et al. (2016, p. 205) stated that the teaching of Physical Education in South Africa since 1994 has been moved to a mainstream subject taught by a Life Skills teacher instead of a Physical Education specialist, which my problem statement is founded around. Education in South Africa has been founded around Eurocentric ways. Recently, there has been a need for change and an African-centred curriculum (Iruka et al., 2023). Research methodology is a broad aspect that assists in analysing, planning, and developing the research idea, selecting methods and procedures, analysing and interpreting results and reporting them (Kazdin, 2021). Furthermore, research is used to investigate whether what is being studied is true. The problem is that physical education activities come from a single reality and do not accommodate every child with different abilities and backgrounds. Moreover, the learners' experiences are viewed through one lens and assessed by single tools such as rubrics. Stroebel et al. (2016, p. 215) stated that the problem is central to physical education, which is taught as an integrated subject, not a stand-alone subject that a specialist formerly taught before 1994, instead of a life skills or life orientation teacher like it is currently. Also, Physical Education teachers are not equipped enough to be confident in their confidence and fulfill the individual needs of each learner and thus make their experiences of the learners meaningful. Few years ago, we have observed that physical education is not prioritised in some schools in rural communities in Rocklands Bloemfontein.

Physical education's critiques

However, Light (2013) stated that physical education neglects the holistic being in that it does not talk about the spiritual aspects of a being and focuses only on the body. Furthermore, Cleophas (2013) contrasted that physical education is a subject formed from a Western perspective and does not fully reflect the lives of the Eastern or African perspective. The context of the African people is not included. There is only one way of doing physical education, and their assessment tools do not embrace the richness of African physical experiences. Children must carry bean bags over their heads and balance while walking; according to the assessment tool, they have failed if they do not. Generally, black communities are often filled with Indigenous physical games; the learners know them, but this is not included in their learning. Education should not be about other things children do not see in their communities; it should be relatable. Moreover, it must include our lived experiences and bring us growth (O'Connor, 2019).

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social constructivism theory

Firstly, what is constructivism? According to Nurkholida (2018, p. 61), constructivism is an approach whereby teachers are oriented around the learners' learning, individual needs, and central focus in the classroom. I will use this theoretical framework to show the gap in the foundation phase classes. Although teachers have the suitable qualifications to teach physical education, research has shown that teachers are often not confident enough to teach physical education, thus hindering the learning process of learners. Furthermore, the active learning approach is where learners are responsible for learning by fully participating in creating new knowledge (Peterson, 2001, p. 187). Vygotsky (1978) indicated that the foundation of constructivism in classes lies in the dialogue between the agents in teaching and learning. When teachers have a conversation about teaching and learning with the learners and the parents, they have already started laying a good

foundation. He further says that children should be stimulated mentally through the interaction of language and social and cultural environments to create and build knowledge. Lupyán (2012) added that language is essential in building knowledge. There is a gap in classes where the rubrics and checklists are made to be understood only by teachers. In this sense, the theory emphasises mediation. The teacher's task is to mediate in the process of knowledge construction, where the learner is an active participant through interaction. Language, in this matter, becomes an essential tool for communication. Constructivism talks about language being a tool for constructing new knowledge. Vygotsky's (1978) main concept in this study is the zone of proximal development. It is the teachers' task to assist students in moving from the situation where they can do things by themselves to the next level of understanding in which learners are challenged with new activities to get a deeper understanding of the phenomena being learned. Hence, the study intends to explore teachers' experience of mediation and how the learners move from the zone of proximal development to become knowledgeable in the field. The relevance of this theory in the study is that it will enable the researcher to understand and interpret the teachers' teaching experience as knowledgeable others in their practice during the COVID-19 era. Hence, the experience of foundation phase teachers is understood from the context that teachers facilitate the mediation process through interaction with their learners to assist them through the zone of proximal development. Thus, teachers scaffold the knowledge to promote learning or development in education.

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study explores the foundation phase teachers' experiences teaching physical education at a primary school in the COVID-19 era in the Motheo district, Free State, South Africa.

IV. METHODS

Research approach

Qualitative research methodology was used in this study. This approach is founded on social sciences (Khaldi, 2017). Furthermore, this approach is about researching the value of depth of meaning and how the participant defines their own experiences and make meaning of their experiences (Leavy, 2022). It was helpful because it used interviews to collect my data. This study provides an in-depth look at the teachers' experiences and how they make meaning. According to Moen and Middelthon (2015, p. 321), it is a methodology emphasising interviews and participant observation.

Research paradigm

According to Khaldi (2017), a paradigm is an approach that determines the problem for research and the associated research questions, the sampling procedure, the research tools, and the way the collected data is analysed and discussed. This study used the constructivist paradigm, where ontology has many realities and opinions. Furthermore, epistemology is subjective knowledge as there will be no wrong or right answer as people tell me their experiences. Lastly, the axiology has value; therefore, it is value laden.

Research design

This study used the phenomenological research design. This allows the researcher to consider participants' lived experiences as they answer the questions asked in the interviews. Similarly, Bourne (2015) helps the researcher ask more in-depth questions to understand the lived experiences.

Participants

This study uses a non-probability sampling method, explicitly using convenience. The method is a non-probability technique where the researcher uses a sample from the population (Etikan et al., 2016, p. 1). Furthermore, this sampling technique could not generalise the study's findings. These participants were selected based on their interest and consent to partake. Two participants were considered available and considered as the sample in this study. The two participants taught physical education and had bachelor's degrees in the foundation phase.

These teachers were female from the African culture and had over five years of experience teaching in the phase. Their age ranged between 35 to 50 years.

Data collection technique

This study used semi-structured interviews for data collection. This technique requires a researcher to take notes and tape the interviews (Elliott, 2018). Furthermore, it is a question-answer technique where the researcher is asking the questions and not answering the questions that they ask. This technique was relevant to my study because it helped teachers to provide an in-depth look at the experiences. Due to COVID-19 stipulation of social distancing, telephonic interviews were conducted.

Research site

The school is situated in the semi-rural era of Free State in the Motheo district. Most of the school's learners come from families of low economic status. Unemployed family members inhabit the community surrounding the school. Some have low educational status and work as labourers in their workspace. Education in this community is necessary to change the poverty cycle into affluent and prosperous communities. The school is a combined school with foundation and intermediate phase groups. The total number of learners enrolled for the whole school is nine hundred learners taught by the teaching staff of twenty-three teachers. About three-quarters of the teaching staff has bachelor's degrees, while the quarter possesses teaching diploma qualifications.

Data analysis

This study uses thematic analysis to analyse and interpret data. It consisted of transcribing the data by listening to the record and looking at my notes, then moving to having a sense of the data by immersing myself in it. The researchers read code, think about the data, and establish themes from the process. In this process, researchers then made notes about the data and did data reduction, followed by coding. We used the *Nvivo* coding. In *Nvivo* coding, the researcher uses the exact language of the participant to make codes (Leavy, 2022). We maintained the exact language of the participants when creating codes. We further categorised the codes. To interpret my data, we use investigator triangulation to compare my findings with those of other researchers investigating the same topic as mine. Leavy (2022) indicated that it is essential for trustworthiness in qualitative research to be valid. We then use the validation process to ensure trustworthiness. This study checks how creative their art is and shows an element of representation. We ensured that the project was vivid. This lets the reader see the setting and imagine and hear the dialogue. This ensured that the research findings apply to other contexts, not just the two schools we were researching, meaning the findings are transferable.

Ethical considerations

Leavy (2022) stated that a qualitative research project should discuss ethical substructure, which begins with a value system guiding the research, a discussion of ethics praxis, and how we practice reflexivity. We obtained permission from the ethics committee at the University of the Free State to conduct this study. We obtained permission from the principal to interview the teachers in the school. Once we gained entry, foundation phase teachers signed the consent forms to participate in this study. We ensured they had a right to withdraw when they felt uncomfortable continuing the data collection processes. Also, we assure participants that their conversations will be confidential. We further informed them that the final report will not disclose their identity.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Foundation phase teachers' experiences in teaching physical education at a primary school in the COVID-19 era

Experiences

Responses from the teachers during the interview reveal that they were having trouble teaching physical education during this period. This is evident from the following.

"Uuuuuuuuuuu! COVID-19 has changed things. In the past, I would have said the atmosphere was colourful and noisy, and it was noisy in a good way.

We cannot say noisy and colourful due to the regulations we must follow. It is gloomy, but we try not to distract the children from the fun" (Participant 1).

"The atmosphere has also changed from outside because we still must be there, remind them to social distance, and say, please put on your mask. However, by the end of the break, the masks are lost, and the learners do not comply. This is where we need to step in. We need to be strict because when we do not, they lose it, go home, and the outside world comes with COVID-19 and gives it to us. Then this will mean absenteeism will rise because you are sick and cannot come to school, and the children will be behind" (Participant 2).

The excerpt above indicates that teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic had difficulty teaching physical education due to the restrictions on social behaviours that the health department laid (Wood et al., 2022). The atmosphere within the classroom changed to be hostile and not supporting the mediation process, which required interaction between the learners and the teachers. In this manner, moving learners from the zone of proximal development (Xi & Lantolf, 2021) to a deeper understanding of the knowledge was also hindered. When such a situation exists, teaching and learning become challenging. There will be no interaction that leads to the internalisation of the knowledge.

Moreover, teachers indicated limited support from the parents, which adds to their frustration and difficulties in effectively presenting Physical Education subjects. Hence, the teachers alluded that.

"The parents are not doing enough. Why am I saying that? Is it because most infections come from homes where the children live in very small homes? Sometimes, it is a household of 7-9 people in one home, and they do not comply with the measures in homes, which results in children not complying. The parents also bring the children to school even when the child is sick. At times, you see that this child should have been kept at home, but parents say I do not want to stay with a child at home all day because I am going to struggle all day long; I am just going to send her to school. So, I am saying the parents are not doing enough" (Participant 2).

"Parents believe in being called a group and reminded of every little thing. Here at school, we have everything. Children practice what we say, but it is a different world and lifestyle when they get home. You even go to their homes if there is a problem when you get there; there are no sanitisers. The issue is not more about sanitisers but washing hands with clean water and soap, which in most cases is lacking at home" (Participant 1).

"Parents come to drop off learners without masks and say they have forgotten them at home. At times, parents cannot afford to buy a mask, so I might say that poverty in our communities is making things worse when it comes to COVID-19. Another thing is that people in our community are tired of wearing masks. The reasons are unknown, but the running story is that people are tired of wearing masks. The more that happens, the more COVID-19 says to us" (Participant 1).

Research has shown that parental involvement in the learners' academic life improves their performance (Ribeiro et al., 2021; Utami, 2022). During the COVID-19 era education relied heavily on assistance from the parents due to the implementation of distance learning, which, according to Vygotsky's theory, does not promote quality learning as it limits the environment where learners interact with the knowledgeable ones (teachers) to internalise the knowledge and progress through the zone of proximal learning. During this period, learners must learn the rules of social behaviours and academic work. In this regard, parents and primary caregivers of the learners become the critical component in education, as they play the role of knowledgeable others and must create home environments to match that of the school. What learners do at school should be continued at home. In this regard, teachers complain that parents are not performing their expected roles, making schooling, teaching, and learning impossible.

Challenges

Teachers' responses to the semi-structured interview sessions reveal that the lack of resources to comply with keeping distance between individuals was one reason they had trouble teaching Physical Education during the COVID-19 era. They indicated that.

"We improvise, go outside, and change the activities to suit the regulations. It is hard for us. We are taught one thing and told differently, but we must adapt to the changing world. We must do justice to the little ones without

leaving any of them behind. I will also add that if we are going to clap and dance, we will go outside to accommodate those learners who enjoy being in nature and outside. We do this so that the child does not get left behind. Each child must be supported" (Participant 2).

"The children cannot share anymore, and those without food are left behind because they do not play while others eat. They see that. You know children get hurt easily, so it also damages their esteem. Children also cannot socialise, which is needed for their speech and their minds to think and develop. It is a mess because we focus only on the lessons and no longer interact. You also become gloomy as a teacher, making the learners gloomy too" (Participant 1).

"I miss hugging my children and playing with them without fear. I miss the first-day photo shoots and the events we attended as grade R learners and teachers. I miss singing at an assembly. I am just being normal and happy. I miss painting the school. I miss pool parties, too. But I have spoken with my colleagues, and we will ask the SMT to assist in planning something within the rules for the learners even if it is a photo day only" (Participant 2).

In the above excerpt, it is evident that teachers were forced to work under challenging conditions where the abnormal situation had to be treated as normal for the survival of the learners and the teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers had to improvise since there were not enough resources to teach physical education, which involved a lot of contact activities and close interaction and physical contact between learners and their teachers. The rule of social distancing was the norm of the day. Distance learning and blended learning became the new order of the day. This learning environment was not conducive to teaching and learning physical education, especially in the foundation phase. Moreover, the curriculum in the foundation phase is based on play teaching methods (Woodhouse, 2019) and aligns with the learners' developmental stage.

VI. CONCLUSION

Teaching physical education during the COVID-19 era presented many difficulties in providing quality teaching and learning. This resulted from the rule for social distancing, and there were no resources or guidance to offer online lessons for this subject since it is interaction-based. The activity requires close contact between the learners and teachers. The importance of parental involvement in their children's education during this period was very significant. However, parents distanced themselves from education and left all the teaching and learning to the schools. The latter added more challenges to physical education teachers since they tried everything possible to accommodate learners' needs during this period. This study has confirmed the research that says teachers were not prepared to teach in this era. Hence, they were not confident and competent enough to teach physical education. Most schools did not have enough resources to practice physical education. Thus, it was neglected, or the teachers will improvise to continue teaching this subject. The Department of Education often fails these schools by not providing resources or increasing financial support. However, it is recommended that the teacher continue to improvise and collaborate with the community to make their physical education fields and that family members play a more active role in their children's education to improve learners' academic performance in this subject. Education should be context rich and benefit the learners in their real lives. The activities meant for Physical Education can be substituted with African games while resources are being waited for. Physical Education should be taught by a specialist, not just any teacher, because the teacher's abilities are different.

VII. DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data supporting this study's findings are available on request from the corresponding author.

VIII. FUNDING

The authors declared no funding for this study.

IX. CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest.

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