Effective Teaching Strategies in the Context of Social Distancing During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Primary Schools: Lessons from Masvingo District, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The advent of COVID-19 was disruptive to human life, particularly affecting education. Solutions were proposed to keep learners learning, although they were met with reservations given the varying levels of education, —primary, secondary, and tertiary. The measures implemented to contain the virus had a negative impact on primary school learners, as their learning relies heavily on interaction and play, which were completely restricted during this time. This article evaluates the effectiveness of teaching strategies that encouraged social distancing in primary schools during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Masvingo district of Zimbabwe. Guided by a constructivist theoretical framework, the study employed a qualitative research approach situated within the interpretivism paradigm, using an instrumental case study design. Data were collected through individual interviews, focus-group discussions, and observations. The sample included 12 teachers, 2 school heads, 12 learners, and a schools inspector , all selected from the target population through purposive sampling. The data were analysed using a qualitative thematic approach. The findings revealed that the lecture method, individualised instructions, whole-class discussions, and the use of Information Communication Technology were the preferred teaching and learning strategies for facilitating social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, these strategies complemented each other, enhancing learning beyond merely maintaining social distancing. The study recommends that teacher-training curricula in colleges and universities should incorporate initiatives aimed at improving commonly used teaching and learning strategies in the context of social distancing.

Keywords: *COVID-19, teaching strategies, context, social distancing, lecture method, teaching and learning*

1. Introduction and the background to the Study

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted all areas of society, including education. In most countries, schools were closed in a bid to implement social distancing strategies (Jorasch,Farboodi & Shimer, 2020). Researchers found that school closures instigated by the pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities, and that learners already at risk of being excluded from quality education were the most affected (Mahyoob, 2020). The argument is that online learning, which became a strategy to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, benefited a small group of elite learners. This motivates this study to look at the effective teaching strategies in the context of social distancing during the COVID-

19 pandemic in primary schools, considering the behavioural characteristics of learners at this level. Research has demonstrated the importance of social distancing in schools to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic during face-to-face teaching and learning (Aboagye, Yawson & Appiah, 2020) however, documentation on what teachers could do to maintain social distancing during teaching and learning was less sparse. Primary school teachers were uncertain about the effective teaching and learning strategies that could be employed during face-to-face classes to enhance social distancing. Given this context, this study sought to explore effective teaching strategies in the context of social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic in primary schools, drawing lessons from Masvingo District, Zimbabwe. With schools having been apprised of standard operating procedures (SOPs) for social distancing, the study aimed to pose instructive approaches and strategies suitable for the primary school level, considering the learners' attention deficit spans and their natural learning styles. Primary school learners learn through play, and maintaining social distancing in a technology - integrated, resource -constrained primary schools was problematic. Hence, study aims to provide more practical approaches in the face of pandemics.

1.1 The Background to the Study

The new severe respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS CoV-2) was discovered in December 2019 in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China. It spread rapidly within China, and after an extensive laboratory study, the World Health Organization officially named it Coronavirus Disease 2019 due to the structure of the virus (Mahyoob, 2020). The pandemic spreads from person to person through respiratory droplets and direct contact (Aboagye, Yawson & Appiah, 2020). Fortunately, children of school age going were infrequently affected, with no reported deaths; however, the future course of the virus remained uncertain, prompting authorities to exercise cautious in their approaches to containing the disease (Singhal, 2020). This situation necessitated the implementation of physical distancing strategies, such as isolation, quarantine, social distancing, and community containment, which were used globally to curb the spread of COVID-19. Social distancing, also referred to as physical distancing (Suppawittaya, Yiemphat, & Yasri, 2020), involves maintaining a greater than usual physical distance specifically, 6 feet (almost 2 meters) —from other and avoiding direct contact with people or objects in public places during the outbreak to minimise exposure and reduce the transmission of infection (Suppawittaya, Yiemphat, & Yasri, 2020). The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly affected nearly all sectors, with education being no exception. The World Health Organization recommended the implementation of social distancing measures in schools. Both social and physical distancing are crucial measures to control the spreading of the COVID-19 pandemic; students in schools should always maintain the recommended distance from one another.

Several research studies were conducted on how to improve education at the peak of the pandemic to ascertain the best practices under the circumstances (Rasmitadila, et al., 2020). Most of the research concurred that online learning should be embraced as a systematic approach if learning was to continue in the new environment (Rasmitadila, et al., 2020; Silumba & Chibango, 2020). The government of Zimbabwe considered digital and online learning as an alternative and adaptive approach to be implemented throughout the COVID-19 pandemic period. Data from several studies suggested that emergency measures taken by various governments under the direction and persuasion of the World Health Organisation (WHO), —for instance, radio programming and distance learning on television —were effective to some extent (MoPSE, 2020; Gumbo, 2020). These initiatives aimed to allow the continuity of education, particularly at a basic level. However, the solution of online remote learning was unevenly implemented and may have further aggravated the educational gaps that existed before the pandemic (Mohammad, 2020). Measures put in place to maintain distance learning were not necessarily suitable for all age groups, as they did not adequately address the specific needs of certain groups, especially younger learners who require close supervision, which they did not receive at home. Relatively, situation in Zimbabwe was similar to that in Indonesia, as Rasmitadila et al. (2020) concluded that most children did not receive any education during the closures and hoped

to learn only when schools re-opened. At the end of March 2020, 9,500 institutions in Zimbabwe were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, affecting more than 4.6 million children in the country (Gumbo, 2020). When schools were closed due to the pandemic, there was literally no plan from education authorities for accommodating primary school learners during this period. Measures such as technology integration were only introduced later, highlighting the severity of the pandemic due to the massive loss of learning time in most, if not all, parts of the world.

Models of schools re-opening globally enforced physical distancing through reduced class sizes and kept students in defined groups with limited interactions between groups to minimise the potential or wide-scale transmission within schools (Aboagye, Yawson & Appiah, 2020). The effects of social distancing brought unexpected challenges to both teachers and learners. Teachers had to be equipped with teaching strategies suitable for the context. To date, research on which proper teaching strategies should be employed by teachers for learners to benefit under social distancing has not been conducted.

The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education crafted the Standard Operating Procedures for the Safe Reopening of Schools during the COVID-19 Pandemic. In this document, social/physical distancing was emphasised as a means of avoiding the spread of COVID-19. The Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) asserted that teachers and learners should be encouraged to maintain a distance of at least 1 metre between everyone present at school. The seating plan in every classroom would be arranged to ensure a space of 1 metre from one learner to another learner. Each learner at each desk or the school was expected to use the 'desk and chair' approach, and no classroom to accommodate more than 35 learners (MoPSE, 2020).

A global view from Indonesia revealed that the intention to achieve social distancing affected young learners at school, as they had to change their usual and familiarized learning styles to cope with the numerous challenges emerging due to COVID-19 (Rasmitadila et al., 2020). Previous research has established that restricting hallway movement and encouraging solo practice activities could lead to indiscipline, depression, isolation, and feelings of loneliness, which might contradict the school's deliberate efforts to support the social, emotional, physical, and behavioural health of the learners (Rasmitadila et al., 2020). The proposed changes to accommodate learners safely in schools needed to align with appropriate teaching strategies. The government of Zimbabwe's Standard Operating Procedures for the Safe Reopening of Schools during the COVID-19 Pandemic (MoPSE, 2020), and the Strategy for the Equitable Provision of Quality Teaching and Learning at All Times and During Emergencies were silent on suitable teaching strategies which were to be employed in day-to-day schooling while being cautious to avoid the spread of the disease (MoPSE, 2020 ; Sibanda , 2021). These regulatory frameworks did not articulate the teaching and learning strategies that were to be used in schools. The aim was to restore normalcy in schools by reopening; however, not much was specifically done to ensure quality teaching and learning during the peak of COVID-19. In an effort to mitigate the impact of the lost learning time, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education introduced a catch-up strategy for schools to emphasise accelerated learning, and condensing content to complete the syllabi in the shortest possible time (Silumba & Chibango, 2020; MoPSE, 2021). Key elements of the catch-up strategy included accelerated syllabus coverage, blended teaching and learning, alignment of learner assessment with the strategy, and incorporation of clinical remediation support initiatives, among others (MoPSE, 2021). The most concerning aspect was that teachers were expected to work without clear guidance on which appropriate teaching strategies to employ and it was not business as usual. It is against this backdrop that researchers needed to evaluate the relevant teaching and learning strategies used by teachers to maintain and enforce social distancing.

2. Theoretical Perspective

The COVID-19 protocol of social distancing negatively impacts education in several ways. Social distancing greatly limits learners' range of social interactions at school. The traditional and common

way of teaching and learning prior to the pandemic allowed for active social interaction between and among class members of the class. Aligned with social distancing, educators implemented 'constructivism ideas. Constructivists' base their beliefs on the notion that children construct their thoughts and understanding of the world based on their experiences (Wang, 2011). According to Cornu and Peters(2005), constructivism resonates with the principle of individualized learning, which asserts that the learners should build their own learning and knowledge. Cognitive constructivists acknowledge that there is an interaction between a child and the physical environment believing that children cannot learn unless they are constantly interacting with their surroundings, making mistakes, and learning from them, as they recognise children as 'lone scientists' (Jiang & Qiwei, 2020). According to cognitive constructivists, children possess all the cognitive mechanisms to learn independently, and their interaction with the physical environment enables this process. Thus, the implementation of social distancing among learners does not halt learning. The theory promotes 'individualistic' learning that it does not emphasise how other people involved with the learner might assist in assimilating or accommodating information (Wang, 2011). Individual constructivism is sometimes associated with the well-known educational philosopher of the early twentieth century, John Dewey. Mancenido-Bolanos (2016) asserts that Dewey was more interested in what learners could discover on their own than in how other could help to figure it out. To curb the further spread of the pandemic, more recent attention has been focused on providing individualized learning through social distancing. The theoretical underpinning of cognitive constructivists aligns with the expectations of physical distancing, where physical contact is completely discouraged among learners. This theory fits well, considering learning outcomes are still achievable in the context of limited interactions since, as learners can learn individually. It is relevant to argue that although some pedagogical instructive approaches are in support of collaborative learning, during this period, learners could still engage in constructive learning as individuals.

3. Research Methodology

This qualitative study sought to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching and learning strategies used during the COVID-19 pandemic to enhance social distancing in primary schools. The focus of this research was on depth, rather than breadth, aiming to understanding a specific and small number of individuals and settings. A qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate as it facilitated an open and extensive exploration of participants' experiences regarding effective teaching strategies that can be used for maintaining social distancing in primary schools. A case study design was employed in this study because it allowed for the use of multiple methods for data collection and analysis (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Two primary schools were sampled due to their locations, which presented both urban and rural social contexts. This approach provided a balanced perspective on social justice by including learners of differing social statuses in Masvingo District. Additionally, 12 learners, 12 teachers, 2 school heads, and a district schools inspector were purposively sampled, resulting in a total sample of 27 participants. The selection criteria were based on the participants' potential to contribute rich and valuable information to the study.

Table 1: Participants

Category	Research sites	Inclusion criteria	Number (n)	Gender		Percentage	
				M	F	M	F
1. Learners	School	Grade 7- male or female	12	6	6	50	50

2. General teachers	School	Male or female with 5 or more years of teaching experience	12	3	9	25	75
3. School Heads	School	Heads of the selected schools	2	1	1	50	50
4. Schools Inspectors	District	Male or female with more years of experience	1	1	0	100	0

Data were gathered from in-depth individual interviews with the school heads and district schools inspector. Focus group discussions, were conducted in separate groups, with learners and general teachers. Furthermore, some observations were made to supplement information from the interviews and focus group discussions. Central questions to this study were; what are the effective teaching strategies that enhance social distancing during the COVID-19 in primary schools? What, if any, teaching strategies were used during COVID-19 in primary schools and how effective were the teaching strategies that enhanced social distancing during COVID-19 in primary schools. This qualitative approach facilitated the exploration of information-rich cases for practical and feasible insights, as participants were directly involved in the teaching and learning process. Data was analysed using the six phases of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Interview transcripts were read and re-read to align with the first step, allowing for familiarisation with the data. In the second step, data were coded. In this case, and coding schemes were used to simplify the correlations between the data. Kawulich (2017) describes coding as a logical process of consolidating raw data into themes for easier interpretation. In the third instance, patterns and repetitions in the data sets were recorded. In the fourth step the emerging themes were reviewed to check if they work in relation to the coded extracts. Themes were then refined to generate clear names in the fifth step and finally, the recurring patterns were collated into themes. The emerging themes are significant as they uncover hidden and unconsidered insights and also identify areas for guiding future research.

Ethics approval was obtained from the appropriate authority after meeting requirements for privacy, confidentiality, informed consent and assent, and voluntary participation, among others. Before entering research sites, permission was sought from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education in Zimbabwe. The purpose of the study was explained to the participants, including the fact that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. Member checking and prolonged engagement processes contributed to the rigour and trustworthiness of the findings. Prolonged engagement with the participants provided ample time for follow-ups and further inferences (Lune & Berg, 2017). Quality assurance criteria of dependability, conformability, transferability, and credibility were employed.

4. Results and Discussion

Participants responded to questions about the types of teaching strategies used during Covid-19 in primary schools and how effective they were in enhancing social distancing during this period, culminating in the emergence of five broad themes from the data. These themes are: lecture method, individualised instruction, discovery method, class discussion, and use of Information Communication and Technology.

4.1 Use of Lecture method

It was revealed that the lecture method is one of the teaching strategies that was used to enhance social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic. In supporting this view, one of the school heads expressed his sentiments during interviews as follows;

At my school, the lecture method is being employed to reduce unnecessary movement in the class unlike when using the mixed-group work method. Learners all get knowledge while seated in their marked places to enhance social distancing.

Similarly, one Schools Inspector during an interview remarked that;

As a district, we agreed that the lecture method be used in schools because learners are taught by their teachers while seated in their marked places until the end of the lesson hence promoting social distancing.

Almost responding to the same question during focus group discussion, the majority of teachers expressed concerns about employing the lecture method. One of the teachers indicated that;

I employ the lecture method during teaching because learners will be seated on their marked areas hence avoiding contact between and among class members and maintaining Social Distancing.

During focus group discussions with learners, one of the participants averred that;

Each of us utilizes the marked areas maintaining social distancing while listening to the proceedings of the lesson.

We observed that when using the lecture method, learners' engagement is reduced, and they may passively sit in their designated places until the end of the lesson, thereby promoting social distancing. In this sense, it can be concluded that the lecture method was employed as a strategy to enhance social distancing, despite its limited effectiveness for primary school -age which mostly benefits more from collaborative learning. Academically, it can be argued that the lecture method minimised the direct contact with learners, which worked and helped prevent the spread of COVID-19 among learners them. However, a teaching and learning strategy should be assessed based on its effectiveness in ensuring that learning occurs.

All the same, the method was effective for maintaining social distancing at the primary school level, but its contribution to learners remains questionable, considering that the method is teacher - centred. Literature suggests that primary school learners learn more efficiently when they are fully engaged within exciting and meaningful activities, as opposed to being passive listeners during lectures (Mohammadjani & Tonkaboni, 2015). The current approach to the lecture method includes varied activities with the priority of engaging learners from the start of the lesson and maintaining their engagement throughout the period (Mohammadjani & Tonkaboni, 2015). The literature further indicates that the lecture method requires some form of short activity for learners to work on and discuss as a class to maximise interaction with the subject, using questions and quizzes to uphold learner engagement throughout the lesson (Moyo, 2002). The lecture method can be effective at the primary school level if it is complemented by other methods since, as it is inherently teacher -centred. It requires the infusion of techniques that keep learners active and enthusiastic about the ongoing of the lesson.

4.2 Individualised Instruction

One other theme that emerged from the gathered data was individualised instruction. It was established that individualised instruction enhanced social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the interview, one of the School Heads indicated that;

I held several staff development meetings and recommended individualised instruction as one of the teaching strategies to be used to promote social distancing. Since the strategy reduces contact between and among learners.

Responding to almost a similar question, the Schools Inspector as one of the interviewees proposed that;

In our district, we denounce group work methods and encourage individualised instruction which promotes social distancing since each child has to do the work alone.

During a focus group discussion with teachers, one teacher reported that;

> *Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we are strictly considering learners as unique individuals who must be taught individually. This reduces contact among class members.*

In light of the above issue, one learner expressed her sentiments as follows:

> *We are given individual assignments which promote social distancing unlike the usual group discussions which require members to converge.*

It was also observed that an individualised instruction strategy is very effective in reducing contact during face-to-face teaching. Learners were given individual assignments and this, which greatly reduced contact among them. Participants, such as school heads and district schools inspector, concurred that individualised instruction is advocated for since it promotes social distancing. Both teachers' and learners' views on the use of individualised instruction align, considering that individuals have unique needs and, therefore, require individual assignments. The above results corroborate the ideas of Ping and Zhihong (2012), who suggest that individualised instruction is a strategy that allows each learner to progress at his or her own pace and develops the ability to learn independently with reduced contact with classmates. Individualised instruction assists learners in becoming autonomous strategic learners. Ping and Zhihong (2012) establish that the individualised strategy demands the learners' ability to learn independently with minimum supervision. Therefore, individualised instruction is a high-quality instructional practice that meets the unique needs of the learner (Bahçeci & Gürol 2016;Kucirkova, Gerard, & Linn, 2021). Subban (2006) states that individualised instruction is based on the idea that all learners are different and, therefore, have different needs, so; thus, an individualised or personally tailored approach to instruction ought to be more effective, particularly in terms regarding the tasks and activities that learners undertake and the pace at which they make progress through the curriculum. Individualised instruction is associated with Piaget's idea of regarding children as lone scientists (Ojose, 2008). According to Piaget, cognitive development occurs with very much limited or no interaction with the teacher or peers (Ojose, 2008). It can, therefore, be suggested that individualised instruction is one of the teaching strategies advocated for in the context of social distancing though; however, in developing states such as Zimbabwe, it requires a great deal of skill and tenacity from the teachers to achieve this. Typically, individualised educational interventions are the preserve of specialist teachers.

4.3 Use of Discovery method

Over two-thirds of the 27 participants welcomed the opportunity to focus on the discovery method. During the interview one of the School Heads alluded that;

> *At my school, I have noted that through the self-discovery method, each learner manipulates a given set of props. The individualistic set-up promotes social distancing.*

A common view among the Schools Inspector was that;

> *In our district, we greatly applaud sensitive schools which employ non-contact active methods, for instance, self-discovery active teaching method. This method promotes social distancing.*

During a focus group discussion with teachers, one participant commented;

> *In my class, I employed the self-discovery method which promotes autonomy, Responsibility, and independence. These values reduce contact among class members, hence reducing social distancing.*

In addition, another participant noted;

> *This method provides us with an opportunity to seek information that satisfies our individual curiosity, hence promoting social distancing.*

We observed that when teachers employ the self-discovery method, contact among learners is reduced. This was made because each learner was manipulating props in their designated learning environment, thus promoting social distancing. The strategy is effective since it fosters individual curiosity, which is associated with knowledge construction and knowledge-seeking behaviour. It can be argued that discovery learning enable active learner participation, responsibility, and autonomy through experiential learning while also maintaining social distancing as well. The strategy positively influences learning, as learners have a direct interface with props that align with the requirements of teaching primary school students using concrete set-ups.

There is overwhelming agreement between school heads and district schools inspector that the self-discovery strategy promotes the implementation of social distancing during the learning process. Similarly, 63% of teachers and learners also concurred that the self-discovery strategy reduces contact among class members. Discovery learning is also referred to as problem-based learning, experiential learning, and 21st-century learning (MoPSE, 2015). Bruner is renowned in cognitive psychology as the chief advocate of the discovery method of teaching and learning. According to him, the most prepared learner to learn and thrive, according to him is the learner who has received consistent guidance on how to learn, think, and act independently. Bruner posits that the primary task of facilitators of learning is to make pupils as autonomous and self-propelled thinkers as they possible (Jiang & Perkins, 2013).

In general, therefore, it seems that the advantage of the self-discovery method is that it encourages independent learning. The absence of these skills can significantly disrupt the development of independent learners. A possible explanation for this might be that self-sufficient and prepared learners are a joy to have in the classroom because they engage with enthusiasm, initiate actions, follow through and remember without reminders. Hong-mei (2018) asserts that self-discovery learning is a learning situation in which the principal content of what is to be learned is not provided but must be independently discovered by the student. Therefore, the self-discovery strategy is based on the assumption that a person finds it easier to acquire knowledge through their own experience than by being taught how to do so (Hong-mei, 2018). The teacher does not provide the final material; instead, the learner must organise the final material using stimuli given by the teacher. This approach means that learners become individual problem solvers who, after collecting, comparing, and analysing the information, draw conclusions. However, this assertion is contested in view of the Zimbabwean situation, where most of the peri-urban and rural primary school learners are not self-starters due to the way they are socialised in both formal and informal philosophical settings. Consequently, the self-discovery strategy is one of the teaching strategies that promotes social distancing since, as learners engage in learning activities individually.

4.4 The whole class discussion

The study established that the class discussion method is one of the teaching strategies that can be used to enhance social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the school heads, during interviews, expressed his sentiments as follows;

> *At my school, teachers lead or assign a learner to lead the whole class in a Discussion unlike making use of small groups which forces learners to converge in small groups for discussion. Teachers will be standing in front and monitoring to see whether each class member is observing social distancing.*

An important issue that emerged from the interview with the district schools inspector was that of encouraging teachers to use whole -class discussion during the COVID-19 pandemic as a way of enhancing social distancing;

> *In our workshops, we are encouraging teachers to employ the class discussion method because it has the advantage of maximizing the heterogeneity of the groups and maintaining social*

distancing unlike using small groups for discussion which calls for learners to come close to each other.

During a focus group discussion with teachers, one of the teachers remarked;

> *I employed the whole class discussion method to reduce physical contact among learners which can be caused by using small groups for discussion*.

One other teacher said;

> *In my class, I took charge of all conversations that we did regarding concepts. I moderated the pace at which we discussed issues so that these young learners would participate in the lesson.*

Similarly, when responding to the same question, one of the learners concurred by saying

> *In our class, the teacher was leading the discussion while we were all seated at our marked places hence maintaining social distancing.*

Another learner observed that "*my teacher allowed one of the learners to stand in the front of class-leading us to talk about some topics*". Through the foregoing, it was observed that whole class discussions assists in maintaining social distancing, unlike employing other methods such as play-way, drama, and group work, which require learners to come close to each other. The study established that whole class discussion was adopted in teaching and learning at the time during the degraded levels of COVID-19 lockdowns. This was confirmed by Sibanda (2020), who indicated that whole class discussion prevented learners from sitting close to each other as they remained in their demarcated positions. This aligns with the recommendations of the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education in its Standard Operating Procedure, which encouraged a sitting distance of 1 metre from one learner to the other learner (MoPSE, 2020). This strategy allowed learners to work together while observing social distancing, since delivering lessons, permitted the teacher or learner to direct learning activities such as brainstorming and dialoguing. The approach is known as instructional conversations (Murphy,Wilkinson & Soter,2011), which enable diversity opportunities for flexible, collective exchanges of thoughts between teachers and learners or among learners to advance learners' thinking, learning, problem-solving, comprehension, and literary appreciation. This method worked effectively for primary school learners, as teachers maintained control of class conversations, as noted by Wilkinson (2009), who stated that whole class discussion has a strong feature of learners as significant agents in the creation of knowledge, conceptualisation, and interpretation.

Furthermore, whole class discussion was an effective teaching and learning strategy for maintaining social distancing since, as learners faced the same direction to reduce transmission. In this context, the teacher could nominate learners to answer questions or contribute to a discussion. Darise (2018) highlights that discussions could happen amongst participants in a whole class can be either teacher-led or student-led. A cautious judgment is made as to the effect must be exercised regarding the capability of learners into leading discussions productively the discussion, considering that they had a significant lost learning time due to stringent lockdowns, which left most, if not all, primary school children out unable to attend school mood, as evidenced by the enactment of the catch-up strategy by the Ministry of Education. Additionally, the literature reveal that effective whole-class discussion, as a teaching and learning strategy, needs to be made explicit to novices (Reisman, et al., 2018). In this case, the explicit guidance was lacking on the part from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education since, as all regulatory frameworks which were crafted to contain COVID-19 did not clearly articulate the teaching and learning strategies that teachers were expected to employ to maintain social distancing. The issues surrounding novices can be linked to both teachers themselves and learners too since, as this approach was relatively new in the context of primary schooling. Darise (2018) argues that most of the basic teaching and learning strategies at the elementary school level typically include close learner interdependence through small group discussions comprised of four to six learners. This indicates that although participants agreed that whole-class discussion was used

during COVID-19 to minimise and avoid close physical contact, they remained explorers of this strategy as they had become familiar with it in the new teaching environment.

4.5 Use of Information Communication and Technology

The 61% of the participants felt that the use of Information Communication and Technology can be a good strategy to promote social distancing during face-to-face teaching. During the interview, one of the School Heads remarked:

> As a school, we agreed that ICT tools must be secured to enhance social distancing by reducing congestion around the teacher or chalkboard. Mics and speakers produce clear decibels and enlarged prints respectively.

The Ministry of Education promised to provide radios and other gadgets to the underprivileged so that they will not lag during this dangerous period of the pandemic. Responding to a similar question, the Schools Inspector concurred that;

> We are encouraging those schools with ICT tools like computers or projector to utilise them effectively for instance they should beam the textbooks for everyone to read clearly while seated maintaining social distancing. This reduces the chances of converging limited textbooks.

The Government is also encouraging parents to assist learners with ICT devices so that they receive educational materials through such devices. Also, the use of radio and TV lessons forms part of ensuring learning while marinating social distancing both in schools and homes.

During a focus group discussion with teachers, one teacher said:

> In my class learners with hearing impairment who used to sit next to me were dispersed due to social distancing. However, the use of technologies like hearing aids and voice amplifiers makes it possible for every learner to audibly hear from every corner.

Another teacher had this to say;

> The use of ICT was good for maintaining distance but it came at the wrong time since some of us had little knowledge of using computers when teaching and the problem was increased by unclear teaching approaches from the Ministry. A better job of staff developing teachers was necessary.

One of the learners during the focus group discussion shared the same line of thinking with other participants that;

> The inception of social distancing was going to be a challenge without technologies like the use of projectors to beam information with enough light and enlarged prints for the learning of learners with visual impairment.

Given the above assertions, it can be argued that ICT was used to warrant social distancing in primary schools. All participants agreed that the adoption of ICT benefitted every learner except those who were differently abled. Learners with visual and hearing impairments benefited from audio and visual enabling equipment, respectively. It can be observed that the effective use of ICT promoted social distancing in schools.

The study revealed that the use and acceptance of ICT in schools contributed effectively to maintaining social distancing during COVID-19. Reviewed literature supported this notion that ICT immensely contributes to supporting self-regulated active learning (Hennessy, Deaney, & Ruthven, 2005). This implies the promotion of individual active learner involvement, research, and autonomous thinking, which enabled physical distancing as each learner could learn without physical contact. The Zimbabwean government ensured that ICT would be used to minimise contact among learners while enabling learning to continue, as referenced in the Catch-up- Strategy, which outlined content delivery approaches and alternative learning platforms such as radio and television lessons, online learning,

and WhatsApp (MoPSE, 2021). The thrust was to use these learning platforms as a medium of instruction to curb the spread of the disease through physical lessons.

However, the query remains regarding the effectiveness of the ICT strategy beyond social distancing, as most of the schools in the district could not equip all the learners with ICT gadgets, both in hardware and software components. This became a high-tech barrier which is an, indication on the digital divide due to a lack of access and restrictive infrastructure. Nyamadzawo (2011) asserts that the low levels of ICT circulation in Zimbabwe add to limitations in terms of prospective digital solutions in education.

The findings from this study on the use of ICT as a strategy for maintaining social distancing during face-to-face learning are consistent with recommendations made in the Standard Operating Procedures and the Catch-up Strategy. The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education encouraged guardians and teachers to support learners through additional learning by utilising radio and TV programmes, as well as high-tech and low-tech digital learning platforms, which enhanced self-learning (MoPSE, 2021). Resources should be made available in disadvantaged communities so that connectivity and other technology subsidies are prioritised. These research studies confirm that technology and collaborative apps can support socially- distanced group work within a classroom through organised and facilitated peer collaboration (Hennessy, Deaney, & Ruthven, 2005; Ghavifekr et al ,2014). This implies that teachers utilised digital tools to facilitate active learning and maintain social distancing during face-to-face learning when schools reopened at the height of COVID-19. The concern though, remains that the appreciation and diffusion of ICT are not significant in developing states like Zimbabwe as teachers are not well -grounded in integrating ICT into their day -to -day teaching due to poor level of computer skills and knowledge of its use in the teaching and learning process (Nyamadzawo, 2011). There is a need for proactive decisions when confronted with pandemics, such as expediting the allocation of technology resources in schools to enable the use of innovative pedagogical strategies that limit the physical presence of learners.

5. Conclusions

From the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the lecture method was adopted as an effective teaching and learning strategy in the context of social distancing during COVID-19. The method minimised physical contact between the teacher and learners as well as learner–learner since learners were in their marked places until the end of the lesson. In this vein, the lecture method was used as a strategy to enhance social distancing notwithstanding its ineffectiveness in ensuring meaningful learning, considering its disadvantages to primary school learners who mostly benefit through collaborative learning. The method worked to cater for the recommended class of maximums of 35, but at primary school, its contribution is limited, especially when it becomes a principal strategy because of its teacher–-centeredness. Most primary school teachers are not experts in using the lecture method, as they normally incorporate it with dominant learner participation approaches. This method, though very effective in maintaining social distancing, can be augmented by bringing in other approaches such as inquiry-based learning to increase its effectiveness in capturing the attention of learners. The study also found that an individualised instruction strategy was very effective in reducing contact during face-to-face teaching. Teachers had to individualise their teaching to greatly reduce contact among learners. The approach was significant in its role to assist all the learners, besides those who were differently abled. The individualised instruction strategy created one-to-one dialogic learning, which would benefit the learners as they would consult teachers on their weaknesses. The method amplified individual support mechanisms and customised learning preferences, such as sign language used for learners with hearing impairment.

This strategy went beyond physical contact as it was effective with the use of ICT as well. Individual activities were assigned to learners so that they would not mingle with learners as others, to minimise social contact. It can be recommended that individualised instruction be fully integrated with ICT so that other platforms like chatbots, WhatsApp, and Social networking services would contribute more to individual-paced learning. The study further indicated that the whole-class discussion method was one of the teaching strategies that was used to enhance social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic. The method was suitable for primary school learners due to its learner-centredness. The strategy can be made more acceptable to primary school learners where contact is prohibited by complementing it with question-and-answer techniques, which can be both teacher- or learner-led. However, a reservation was made on learners' ability to guide or lead the discussion, considering that they had a significant lost learning time due to hard lockdowns, so allowing learners to lead was a bit compromising on quality learning. The study also concludes that ICT was used to warrant social distancing in primary schools. The thrust of self-paced learning supported by active learning area platforms was quite effective in minimising physical contact within teaching and learning spaces. The undoing part of this strategy had to do with the poor state of teacher and learner preparedness in using all the suggested platforms. The government and other interested parties intervened through the provision of some gadgets to enable teaching and learning to continue in the context of social distancing, but the same gadgets were inadequate compared to the number of users. There is a need for a strong integration of ICT with teaching and learning in primary schools. Teachers require capacity-building initiatives in ICT at school, cluster, and district levels so that they utilise technology to the benefit of learners. ICT, as a cross-cutting learning area, can be merged with other teaching and learning strategies so that social distancing does not hinder meaningful learning in primary schools.

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