



CHAPTER 11

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on learner assessment in primary schools in Sedibeng District

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Abstract

This chapter aimed to explore the effects of COVID-19 on the assessment of learners in primary schools in Sedibeng District in South Africa. Using Vygotsky's social constructivist theory as a lens, this qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews with 12 primary school teachers in Sedibeng District in South Africa. The purposive convenient sampling technique was used to select participants. Data were analysed using thematic data analysis. Among the findings of the study, teachers experienced challenges in administering assessments to learners due to learner absenteeism, lack of interpersonal communication due to social distancing and masking, and lack of resources to connect

to remote learning. In addition, the study has shown that some teachers could not adjust to online learning due to a lack of expertise. It was further noted that teachers had difficulties monitoring online learning and offering education support services to struggling learners. Therefore, it is recommended that the government and district provide continuous support through workshops and training to prepare teachers for the digital world and improve their teaching skills. Assessment types should also be adjusted to meet the requirements of online learning. Finally, nurturing the well-being of teachers and learners should be prioritised.

Keywords: *Assessment, Challenges, Covid-19 pandemic, Learner absenteeism, Online learning, Primary schools, Remote learning*

11.1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a significant toll on all people across the world, with high infections and death rates. As a result, on 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic (WHO, 2020.). Similarly, between March and August 2020, South Africa reported the highest number of cases on the African continent (Moonasar, Pillay, Leonard, Naidoo, Mngemane, Ramkrishna, Jamaloodien, Lebeso, Chetty, Bamford & Tanna, 2021). This resulted in a global shutdown of numerous activities, including schools. To save the schooling and academic year, UNESCO (2020) proposed that schools and other educational institutions worldwide use online learning strategies to reach learners remotely. South Africa, like other countries, resorted to using a lockdown strategy to curb and manage the

number of COVID-19 infections. One such strategy used by South Africa was the temporary closure of schools and other educational institutions. As a result, some schools transitioned from face-to-face teaching and learning to remote learning.

However, some public schools did not have online resources to reach their learners. The transition from face-to-face to remote learning greatly affected teaching and learning, especially assessment in rural primary schools in South Africa. Teachers were confronted with a plethora of challenges that hindered the assessment of learners. Among them are lack of resources, expertise, interpersonal communication due to social distancing and masking, and learner absenteeism. Teachers also experienced challenges in offering support services to learners with barriers to learning. This qualitative study explored the effects of COVID-19 on the assessment of learners in primary schools in the Sedibeng District in South Africa.

11.2 Problem Statement

As a result of the COVID-19 induced shutdown, most schools across the world resorted to remote learning. However, it was observed that the shift to remote learning, as proposed by UNESCO (2020), only benefited learners from high socio-economic backgrounds since they could continue learning through online platforms (Crain, Vijay & Jaqueline, 2022). For instance, most public schools in South Africa did not have the capacity for remote learning. Thus, by August, South African learners lost between 22% and 65% of their school days (Spaull & Van der Berg, 2020). Furthermore, the loss of school days meant that teachers could not administer all assessments and support

learners experiencing barriers to learning. This significantly impacted the assessment and performance of learners since teachers were supposed to teach and assess. Therefore, this chapter seeks to explore the effects of COVID-19 on learner assessment in primary schools in the Sedibeng District.

11.3 Research Aim and Research Questions

11.3.1 Research aim

The current study aims to explore the effects of COVID-19 on the assessment of learners in primary schools in the Sedibeng District.

11.3.2 Research questions

- How did teachers assess learners during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What challenges were experienced by teachers when assessing learners during COVID-19?
- What can be done to close the assessment gap created during the COVID-19 pandemic?

11.4 Literature Review

11.4.1 Assessment during teaching and learning

According to Burgess and Sievertsen (2020), assessments are meant to give information about learners' progress. Notably, educational institutions use both formative and summative assessments. Formative assessment involves classroom

observation and continuous feedback on homework and assignments (Lieberman, Levin & Luna-Bazaldúa, 2020; Engelbrecht & Neethling, 2021). Black and Wiliam (2018) state that interactive dialogue, a vital component of formative assessment practices, leads to effective teaching and learning. In addition, assessments such as summative tests are used to generate feedback to help learners improve their performance and support them (Black & Wiliam, 2018). In addition, Wiliam and Leahy (2016) affirm that it is through assessments that teachers can adjust their teaching strategies to meet the needs of the learners. Furthermore, Leahy, Thompson, and Wiliam (2005) grouped formative assessment into five key strategies:

- Clarifying, sharing, and understanding learning intentions and success criteria.
- Engineering effective classroom discussions, activities and learning tasks that elicit evidence of learning.
- Providing feedback that moves learning forward.
- Activating learners as instructional resources for one another.
- Activating learners as the owners of their own learning.

From the above strategies, it can be argued that assessments are crucial as they help teachers to recognise both high potential and learning difficulties in learners. Black and Wiliam (2018;552) also argue that “any approach to the improvement of classroom practice that is focused on assessment must deal with all aspects of assessment in an integrated way.” This implies that teachers are expected to use both formative and summative assessments to enhance the academic performance of learners. Through these

assessments, teachers can identify learners with barriers to learning and help provide such learners with the necessary support services. However, an assessment gap is created when teachers are not able to carry out all the planned assessments.

According to Wiliam (2013) skipping assessments can disrupt learners' progression, making it challenging for teachers to measure learners' progress and growth accurately. Consequently, in the Sedibeng District efforts to assess learners holistically were thwarted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in the shutdown of services, including educational institutions. This chapter seeks to explore the effects of COVID-19 on the assessments of learners in primary schools and how they affected the academic performance of learners.

11.4.2 The effects of COVID-19 pandemic on learner assessment

COVID-19 resulted in the temporary closure of schools. The temporary closure of schools greatly affected the academic performance of learners at a global level. For example, In the northern hemisphere (Daniel, 2020), the end-of-year examinations were cancelled, and others were suspended by examining bodies, leaving millions of learners despondent. This may have resulted in confusion among children of school-going age since they were uncertain about their academic future.

South Africa was no exception during the pandemic. Moonasar et al. (2021) confirm that between March and August 2020, South Africa had the highest number of COVID-19 cases on the African continent. As a result, by August, South African academic calendar

was significantly affected and this resulted in learners losing between 22% and 65% of their school days (Spaull & Van der Berg, 2020). The loss of learning periods due to the pandemic may result in temporal and permanent damage to the educational system, as learners would be at risk of failure (Kekić & Miladinović, 2016). The loss of school days suggests that teachers could not administer all assessments and support learners experiencing barriers to learning. However, some well-resourced public and independent schools in South Africa resorted to remote teaching and learning using digital learning platforms (Ramrathan, 2021). These well-resourced schools used Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Classrooms as the new modes of teaching and learning during the lockdown. The use of technology tools also meant that teachers should have employed new assessment methods suitable for remote learning. According to Tadesse and Muluye (2020), the shift to remote learning significantly affected the assessment and evaluation of learners as teachers were required to embrace the online mode. However, not all schools in South Africa can afford these technology tools.

Moonasar et al., (2021) affirm that when schools reopened, preventative measures such as the use of masks, physical distancing, and frequent hand washing were put in place. Despite the preventative measures, schools were required to find ways to accommodate all learners. This resulted in schools implementing different strategies, such as daily and weekly rotation, hybrid, and platooning, to ensure that learners attended all classes (Sithole, 2021). The implementation of such measures meant that teachers were not able to administer all scheduled assessments. Ramrathan (2021) argued that removing assessments results in

learners losing opportunities for deep and meaningful learning. This implies that most learners did not benefit from the measures to save the academic year since the curriculum was trimmed (Jansen, 2020). In addition, Ramrathan (2020) argued that proposals to save the academic year included testing only the curriculum content that had been taught. Due to the lockdown measures, learners who experienced barriers to learning may not have received adequate support. According to Mayimele and Makhalemele (2020), the lack of support negatively affects learners. However, there is a dearth of studies on how COVID-19 affected the performance of learners in primary schools. Accordingly, this chapter explores the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on learner assessments in primary schools in the Sedibeng District.

11.4.3 Theoretical framework

This study is embedded in Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism, which emphasises the social and cultural dimensions of child development. In his own words, Vygotsky (1978:89) opined that "the only 'good learning' is that which is in advance of development." Vygotsky also accentuated the value of formal education as a tool of enculturation (Bozkurt, 2017). Learners are regarded as active participants during teaching, as the interaction between the learner and the teacher, peer, or parent is paramount. This can happen when the learner takes part in group activities and dialogue (Pardjono, 2016). However, active learning, such as group work activities and group projects, was significantly affected since learners were expected to maintain social distancing during COVID-19. Teachers experienced

challenges in administering formative assessments because learners were not actively taking part in the classroom community. Likewise, learners could also not learn through play since they were confined in their homes, which temporarily destroyed the culture of the learners since they could not associate with each other. It was also challenging to see how learners were progressing since teachers sent activities to learners via WhatsApp; they would not know how the learner got the answers.

The theory of social constructivism also provides for the tenet of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Vygotsky (1978:86) described the ZPD as the distance between the child's actual development level determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development determined through problem-solving under the guidance of an adult or in collaboration with more capable peers. Thus, Vygotsky acknowledged learners as active agents in the educational process (Moll, 1990). When the learners are within the ZPD, the teacher plays a pivotal role in scaffolding them. According to Taber (2020), scaffolding enables the learner to learn new competencies. However, during COVID-19, teachers experienced challenges in scaffolding learners since they could not monitor the activities that the learners were working on. There was also a possibility that parents would do most of the activities for their children. This study thus seeks to explore the effects of COVID-19 on the assessment of learners in primary schools in Sedibeng District in South Africa.

11.5 Empirical Investigation

This study adopted a qualitative research approach which involves studying the meaning of people's lives under real-world conditions

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(Yin, 2011). The study was interested in primary school teachers' lived experiences during COVID 19. This is in line with Nieuwenhuis (2016), who argues that qualitative research relies on words rather than numerical data. The interpretivist paradigm, which views reality as subjective (Creswell & Poth, 2018), was adopted to establish the effects of COVID-19 on learner assessments in primary schools in the Sedibeng District. In addition, interpretivists recognise that individuals, with their backgrounds and experiences, play a significant role in constructing reality through social interaction (Burnette & Lingam, 2012; Jamar, 2012).

The researcher used purposive sampling to select participants who are likely to give valuable perspectives to the study. Purposeful sampling also demands the researcher to think critically about the population being studied and choose the sample of people with insightful information (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). To achieve this, the researcher used the critical case sampling method to select 12 primary school teachers from the Sedibeng District to establish the effects of COVID-19 on the assessment of learners. Some of these teachers were from schools that are equipped with technology to enhance teaching and learning in their classrooms. In order to collect in-depth data and to gain insight into the teacher's perceptions and experiences of the effects of COVID-19 on the assessment of learners in primary schools, the researcher used semi-structured interviews (Coughlan, Cronin & Ryan, 2013). In addition, thematic data analysis was used in this chapter. This entailed data transcription, data organisation, data segmentation, data coding, and

identification of themes (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:378). These themes are further discussed in the subsequent section.

11.5.1 Trustworthiness

In the research reported in this chapter, the researchers used four methods of measuring trustworthiness (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability) to explore the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on learner assessment in primary schools in the Sedibeng District. To ensure credibility, the study adopted an interpretivist paradigm, a qualitative approach, and Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism as its theoretical framework. Social constructivism is aligned with the aim and research questions of this chapter. The study ensured peer review and debriefing of the data to ensure transferability. The research benefited from colleagues whose research interests are on COVID-19 and the academic performance and holistic well-being of learners. To ensure confirmability, the researchers kept recordings from individual interviews. The recorded data were analysed to ensure dependability.

11.5.2 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval to conduct this study was granted by the Northwest University. The researchers explained the nature of the study to the principals, school governing bodies, and teachers at the selected primary schools. The researchers briefly explained the purpose of the study and assured them that their rights to anonymity would be respected. The researchers also considered ethical standards to protect the rights and well-being of the participants. These include permission, anonymity, confidentiality,

and protection from harm. Pseudonyms were used to guarantee confidentiality and anonymity. The participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the research at any time.

11.6 Findings and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the findings on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on learner assessments in primary schools in the Sedibeng District. The four themes that emerged from the data include challenges in administering assessment activities, challenges in supporting learners with barriers to learning, lack of online resources and strategies to close the assessment gap. These themes are discussed below:

11.6.1 Challenges in administering assessment activities

Participants indicated that when schools reopened in August 2020, they experienced challenges in administering formative and summative assessments to learners due to social distancing, which affected oral presentations, group activities, written classroom activities, and reading. The following excerpts indicate the participants' challenges:

Interpersonal communication was severely affected. We didn't hear clearly when learners were reading because of masks... Sound was affected. Covering the mouth with masks reduced the ability to determine the learner's feelings and emotions. – Kea

Learners were unable to read aloud due to their masks; they could only read for themselves wearing masks which made it difficult for their voices to be heard clearly. – Rethabile

The participants valued oral assessments but had challenges in administering them. They shared, *“We did not hear clearly, covering mouth... Difficult for their voices to be heard....”* This suggests that learners were disadvantaged as they could not express themselves during reading. Other participants mentioned they had challenges in administering groupwork activities during COVID-19. The following excerpts indicate the participants’ challenges:

Group activities didn’t apply because of social distancing... These measures were intended to prevent the spread of this contagious disease by maintaining physical distancing. – Fatso

The group work did not work quite well, so I preferred individual work where they do the activities, and then we discuss their responses. – Petros

These participants were concerned about not being able to use collaborative assessment activities, such as group work, which greatly impacted formative assessments. In addition, the other participants bemoaned their inability to assess learners using group work because of learner absenteeism and lack of parental support. This is evidenced in the vignettes below:

Not all learners were able to write because they were not coming to school. I mean, COVID-19 created a culture of learner absenteeism. – Lilian

Another participant added to the challenge of learner absenteeism and indicated that doing all scheduled assessments was challenging because the curriculum content was trimmed. The participant shared:

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Not all content was covered because the curriculum was trimmed... Learners were not coming to school on a regular basis. We could not do all the assessments... They did not get support from their parents... Everyone was confused. – Portia

From the above vignette, it can be argued that COVID-19 negatively affected assessments, impacting the academic performance of learners. This is line with Ramrathan (2021), who argued that removing some assessments would result in learners losing opportunities for deep and meaningful learning. Moreover, participants mentioned the challenges they experienced in administering tests and examinations because of the changes in the timetable. The following excerpts indicate the participants' challenges:

It was very difficult to give tests and examinations to learners during that time because of the rotational timetable – some of the learners bunked classes and school... Some did not come to school. – Celine

The intermediate and senior phase mid-year and end-of-year examinations were replaced by controlled tests... The content of the controlled tests was based on work stipulated in the recovery annual teaching plan... In principle, the end-of-year controlled test was to cover work for only term 3 and term 4. – Nkosinathi

The above quotations suggest that summative assessments were not effectively administered because of the rotational timetable and curriculum trimming. The implementation of the rotational timetable was also mentioned by Sithole (2021), who confirmed

that to save the year, schools implemented the daily rotational timetable, weekly rotation, and platooning. The challenges in administering tests also affected the academic performance of learners. This resonates with Kekić and Miladinović (2016), who argue that the loss of learning periods due to the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in both temporal and permanent damage to the educational system as learners would be at risk of failure. The inability of learners to become active participants during reading and group activities contradicts Vygotsky (1978), who advocated for social and interactive learning of learners with a teacher in the ZPD.

11.6.2 Challenges in supporting learners with barriers to learning

It is acknowledged in the previous findings that teachers experienced challenges in administering formative and summative assessments during COVID-19. In this finding, teachers were also unable to identify and support learners who experienced barriers to learning, partly because they were no longer receiving food parcels. The following excerpt indicates the participant's challenge:

... It was very difficult to assess learners with barriers; schools were unable to continue with their feeding schemes because of the regulations. Learners were unable to concentrate in classes due to hunger, so some of them slept, and other learners wouldn't attend school because they were sick and couldn't afford proper healthcare. – Larona

Another participant also mentioned that learners with barriers to learning were affected by the rotational timetable, which affected

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the completion of daily tasks. The following excerpt indicates the participant's challenge:

Learners with barriers to learning were not able to finish work... They needed more time... There was no time as other groups of learners would have to write the following day also.... – Kea

The above view suggests that the shortage of support services may have affected the academic performance of learners since learners were always hungry due to a lack of food from the schools' feeding programmes. The inability to afford and access health facilities may affect academic performance since learners no longer focus on learning. Another participant shared her concern about how to identify and assist learners with barriers to learning:

... I couldn't easily figure out the learners having challenges during this period... And I could not help them. – Simon

From the above vignettes, one would argue that COVID-19 greatly destabilised the education system and its processes. Usually, teachers use assessments to assess the progress of learners and to use support programmes such as screening, identification, and assessment and support (SIAS) (Department of Education [DoE], 2014), but this was not possible during COVID-19. The idea of assessing learners resonates with Black and Wiliam (2018) and Wiliam and Leahy (2016), who argue that assessments are used to generate feedback which leads to effective teaching and learning. However, this was not possible during the COVID-19 period. Teachers' inability to assist learners with learning barriers runs contrary to Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism which

advocates for scaffolding which enables learners to learn new competencies (Taber, 2020). This may affect the academic performance of learners since teachers experienced challenges in identifying and helping learners who experienced barriers to learning. The effects of the lack of support by teachers also resonate with Mayimele and Makhalemele (2020), who confirmed that the lack of support negatively affected the performance of learners.

11.6.3 Lack of online resources

Some participants who had technology tools in their schools found it difficult to use synchronous methods, such as online platforms like Zoom or Microsoft Teams, because the learners did not have access to online tools, as evidenced in the vignettes below:

The challenge was that some students did not have data to log in to WhatsApp to get more instructions for the assessment. And those who don't attend did not perform well.

– Petros

This suggests that the lack of resources for synchronous learning affected the academic performance of the learners. Although Celine shares the same sentiments as Petros, she added that she was frustrated as she could not conduct critical assessments because learners could not afford smartphones; hence she sought permission from parents to send them schoolwork for their children. The following excerpt indicates the participants' challenges:

I couldn't provide classwork, physical examinations, and tests because learners and teachers were not allowed on school

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premises. Alternatively, I sent them activities and tests through WhatsApp and emails. However, some learners did not have smartphones, so I had to write letters to the parents asking permission to send them schoolwork for their children via their phones. It was quite a hectic process because some parents didn't understand. – Celine

Another participant experienced challenges in the sudden shift from contact classes to online learning. The following excerpt indicates the participants' challenges:

It was not easy... We were used to contact classes... We could not use the online platforms... We received little training, and some of us are too old to use these gadgets... Quality teaching and assessment were affected. – Rethabile

Another participant complained that unstable internet connectivity was a detriment to the academic performance. Another hurdle was the difficulty to monitor online teaching. Participants confirmed that it was easier to monitor their learners' progress during contact classes than online teaching, which affected the academic performance of learners. The following excerpt indicates the participants' challenges:

The biggest challenge was internet connectivity/ technical issues, which lead to online learning frustration... We all know that learners come from different backgrounds... Although some learners were left behind during online classes, during contact classes, I was able to monitor the learners and adjust their pace to accommodate anyone who needed extra time. However, during online learning, it was difficult to do so.... – Dumisani.

The above views expressed teachers' frustrations when using online platforms to assess learners. A lack of resources and expertise hampered their efforts to use online technology tools. In addition, a lack of resources may lead to disappointments as teachers cannot assist their learners online. WhatsApp as an alternative to Zoom and Microsoft Teams is in line with Engelbrecht and Neethling (2021), who confirmed that under-resourced schools used message applications like WhatsApp to communicate with learners instead of online platforms like Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Furthermore, the challenges experienced during online teaching concur with Tadesse and Muluye (2020), who confirmed that the shift to remote learning immensely affected the assessment and evaluation of learners as teachers struggled to adapt to the online mode.

11.6.4 Strategies to close the assessment gap

Participants confirmed that COVID-19 brought a plethora of challenges, which affected how assessments were done and greatly affected the performance of learners. They also suggested strategies that could be used to close the gap caused by the COVID-19 pandemic on the performance of learners. The participants mentioned catchups, the punctuality of teachers, and the creation of support programmes. The following excerpts indicate the participants' challenges:

There is a need to have enrichment and remedial lessons to support all learners since they missed a lot of curriculum content because of rotational timetable and trimmed curriculum. – Dumisani

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This suggests that more time should be allocated to teaching, learning, and assessments. Teachers may have to commit their extra time to remedial lessons. Another participant added the issue of peer assessment:

Extra time should be given to learners to teach all the skills. Peer assessment with the guidance of the teacher can be used so learners can learn in an amicable and stress-free environment. – Rethabile

Another participant mentioned the involvement of parents and the school management team to close the assessment gap caused by COVID-19:

Formal assessment tasks and activities should be sent to the parents so that they can also help their children. Teachers and the School Management Team should analyse results to determine where learners need extra support. Those areas of support should be incorporated into everyday teaching and learning. – Nkosinathi

From the above responses, it can be argued that stakeholders should team up with the teachers to help close the gap caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This suggests that the academic performance of learners can improve if these strategies are effected.

11.7 Conclusion

This chapter explored the effects of COVID-19 on the assessment of learners in primary schools in the Sedibeng District. The findings show that teachers experienced challenges in assessing learners during COVID-19, which significantly impacted learners'

academic achievement. In addition, trimming the curriculum and the rotational timetable suggests that some content was not taught, and other assessments were not done. This negatively affected the academic performance of learners. The findings of the study underscore the fact that it is vital to train teachers to use online assessment tools to enhance teaching and learning. Thus, it is recommended that different stakeholders, including the DoE, parents and teachers, play a pivotal role in ensuring that schools and teachers are equipped with the necessary online teaching and learning tools to enhance synchronous and asynchronous teaching and learning.

Furthermore, the government and district should offer continuous support through workshops and training of all teachers to prepare teachers for the digital world and to improve their teaching skills. The well-being of teachers and learners should also be prioritised. However, the study findings may not be generalised since the qualitative research on the effects of COVID-19 was limited to primary schools in the Sedibeng District. Therefore, it is recommended that further research should focus on the lessons learned by teachers and educational institutions on the effects of pandemics on the holistic well-being of learners.

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Chapter 12

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