



Counting the costs: Exploring the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic in rural schools in Lesotho

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Abstract

Pandemics leave long-term consequences in their wake. The Covid-19 pandemic reached catastrophic levels in Africa, similar to what it did in the rest of the world. Rural schools in developing countries, already reeling from extreme poverty and economic vulnerability, have borne the most severe brunt of the pandemic. In this study, we explore the effects of Covid-19 on rural schools in Lesotho using data from semi-structured online interviews with 10 rural-based teachers. We address two questions: “What are the effects of Covid-19 on rural schools in Lesotho?” and “What steps have been taken to mitigate the effects of Covid-19-induced school closures in Lesotho?” Findings show that enforced school closures meant to contain the spread of Covid-19 disrupted rural learners’ lives. Innovations to mitigate the effects of the pandemic bridged the gap between the classroom and totally remote settings by introducing online education that, however, remains elusive for most rural learners.

Keywords: Covid-19, Coronavirus, pandemic, school closures, rural schools, online learning

Introduction and background

Disasters induced by protracted crises in the form of armed conflicts, forced displacement, and climate change have disrupted the education of over 75 million children and youth globally (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2020a). The Covid-19 epidemic forced over 1.53 billion learners out of school and enforced country-wide school closures are impacting 87.6% of the world's total enrolled learners in at least 184 countries (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2020a). Coronaviruses range from the common cold to Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) (Jain & Barhate, 2020). Covid-19, the most recent coronavirus, was first detected in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. Since then, alarmingly, it has spread around the world, becoming a truly global phenomenon (Murphy, 2020). As has happened globally, Lesotho's education system has been dealt a severe blow by Covid-19 that has worsened the condition of the affected learners, hence the need to examine its impact on education in rural schools in this country.

The pile-on effect of the global Covid-19 pandemic includes disruptions of education that can have long term implications especially for the most vulnerable children such as learners in rural areas (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2020b). Millions of children, particularly girls and orphans, who have already been struggling to access education, are being further exposed to other social crises by the outbreaks of Covid-19. Therefore, the most pressing need is making learning possible and available to learners while keeping them away from their classrooms to minimize their risk of infection. Although many different approaches have been devised to facilitate the transition from face-to-face to online learning, teachers who are technologically limited require proper professional development and in-service training to allow them to be properly oriented towards what has become the new normal (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). The challenge of responding in this particular way to the Covid-19 pandemic is therefore particularly immense for developing countries such as Lesotho. Compared to other developing countries afflicted by Covid-19, Lesotho has a very poor economy and schools are less developed in terms of modern standards because of their over-reliance on the traditional face-to-face mode of learning (Makiba, 2020).

Literature review

In this section, we discuss the effects of Covid-19 on education, the use of school closures to reduce the spread of the pandemic, and the steps taken to mitigate the effects of these school closures.

Effects of Covid-19 on education

The Covid-19 pandemic is largely responsible for indiscriminately crippling the education sector in most developing countries such as Lesotho. It led to the disruption of education programmes when the country faced a total shutdown of schooling activities and teachers

and learners were forced to stay in their homes (Makiba, 2020). It also exacerbated primary and secondary student drop-out rates (Wodon, 2020). Education has been affected at all levels as institutions cope with closure, social distancing, and challenging decisions about how to continue teaching. Schools were forced to close to abide by World Health Organization (WHO) lockdown regulations. In Lesotho, the lockdown and subsequent school closures marked the end of effective teaching and learning in rural schools. Only 20% of children who were previously attending school, were able to maintain access to some form of education (United Nations International Children's Fund, 2020). The gains made five years after the adoption of the thrust towards universal education for all will be lost if the threats presented by the Covid-19 pandemic are not dealt with in a timely manner (Bakibinga-Gaswaga et al. 2020). This explains why parents and policymakers are worried about the impact of the Covid-19 related school closures on learners' education (Goudeau et al., 2021). Despite the threat of Covid-19, education has to continue albeit under strict social distancing regulations.

Use of school closures to reduce the spread of pandemics

Around the globe, the spread of Covid-19 has led to profound changes in social interaction and organisation, and the education sector has not been immune (Murphy, 2020). There were widespread closures of primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions throughout the world as efforts to stem the spread of Covid-19 through social-distancing and self-isolation gathered momentum (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2020). Previous outbreaks of infectious diseases set the precedent when they prompted widespread school closures around the world, with varying levels of effectiveness. Mathematical modelling has shown that transmission of an outbreak may be delayed by closing schools (Barnum, 2020). However, although Covid-19 exhibits fewer severe symptoms in young people, the continuation of normal schooling practices introduces a great deal of uncertainty. It is in this context of risk mitigation, social distancing, and the particular uncertainty of transmission risk among the school-going age population that the securitisation of face-to-face schooling must be understood (Murphy, 2020). School closures may be effective when enacted promptly. If school closures occur late relative to an outbreak, they are less effective and may not have any impact at all. In some cases, the reopening of schools after a period of closure has resulted in increased infection rates (Barnum, 2020). During the 1918–1919 influenza pandemic in the United States of America, school closures coupled with the banning of public gatherings were associated with lower mortality rates (Saunders-Hastings & Krewski, 2016). The implementation of such interventions earlier in some cities led to greater delays in the attainment of peak mortality rates. School closures were shown to reduce morbidity from the Asian flu by 90% during the 1957–1958 outbreak, and up to 50% in controlling influenza in the US between 2004 and 2008 (Barnum, 2020).

During the 2009 H1N1 flu pandemic, several countries succeeded in slowing the spread of infection through school closures (Mustafa, 2020). Mandatory school closures and other social distancing measures were associated with a reduction in influenza transmission rates. In the United States, early school closures successfully delayed the peak of the

2009 H1N1 Flu pandemic (Allen & Seaman, 2010). During the swine flu outbreak in 2009 in the UK, a group of epidemiologists recommended the closure of schools to interrupt the course of the infection, delay further spread, buy time for research, and produce a vaccine. However, in France, during the same period, cases of flu dropped when schools closed and re-emerged when they re-opened (Mustafa, 2020). Research studies therefore demonstrate the effectiveness of school closures in helping to contain the spread of epidemics and pandemics.

Steps taken to mitigate the effects of Covid-19-induced school closures

Different countries introduced various solutions during the pandemic to continue the education process. Ghana's government used funding from the World Bank to put in place a \$15 million, one-year remote learning system as part of the Covid-19 response to ensure continued learning, recovery, and resilience of basic education (Okertchiri, 2021). Online libraries, guidelines, resources, and video lectures and channels were introduced along with television broadcasts in some developing countries such as South Africa, Ghana, Eswatini, and Lesotho. Online learning can be supported by technologies such as the internet, radio, television, phone messaging, and email communication such as was done during the previous flu crises (Basilaia & Kvakvadze, 2020). In Eswatini, the government teamed up with the country's two major mobile service providers to make study bundles available for students at reasonable rates as an initiative to facilitate learning during lockdown (Pitikoe et al., 2021). In South Africa, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) appeared more vigilant in addressing the impact of Covid-19 on the school system through contingency plans to facilitate the continuation of the school year (Christie, 2021). Efforts were mobilised to provide resources to learners across all grades, including educational broadcasts on television and radio, online learning through platforms such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom, as well as the provision of worksheets and exemplar examination papers. The DBE also trimmed the curriculum to accommodate the revised number of teaching days available (Christie, 2021). The positive effect of eLearning is that it can improve efficiency both in learning and teaching (Pitikoe et al., 2021).

In Lesotho, Covid-19 indicated the level of unpreparedness in the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) on the integration of technology across the curriculum (Makiba, 2020). After the school closures, MoET, in collaboration with the Ministry of Communications Science and Technology resorted to radio and television lessons to enable the teaching and learning process to keep rolling. This intervention proved highly ineffective because the lessons were entirely teacher-centred, and they also benefitted only urban learners (Makiba, 2020). Teachers were found to be unready to teach learners through online media because they are technophobic. Furthermore, the high data costs made it hard for learners to afford the costs of online learning.

Virtual learning has been applauded for being the panacea to the current lockdown crisis and has proven advantages (Bozkurt et. al., 2020). Virtual learning refers to distance learning conducted in a simulated environment with electronic study content designed for self-paced (asynchronous) or live web-conferencing (synchronous) online teaching and tutoring (Kumar, 2020). Through virtual learning the learners engage in asynchronous discussions with their

classmates, and this promotes high cognitive development, confidence, and improved digital skills (Bozkurt et al., 2020). Teachers are increasingly realising that their learners are fascinated by the individual use of technology and are free to express themselves as compared to their unwillingness to do so when they are in class (Kumar, 2020).

The closing of learning institutions as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in uncertainty about how long the closure of educational institutions would last and in the need to rely on the online learning platforms that were availed by public and private sector stakeholders such as The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2020). School closures accelerated the development of the online learning environments in institutions in order to minimise the disruption of learning. However, digital interventions failed to take into account limitations such as the scarcity of gadgets, erratic power supply, the lack of basic ICT skills by users, and low network coverage (Bakibinga-Gaswaga et al., 2020) in the case of rural schools in Lesotho.

This is not the first time that emergency eLearning programs have been considered an appropriate crisis-response measure. A similar strategy was implemented in 2009, when 67% of H1N1 contingency plans involved the substitution of online classes for face-to-face ones (Allen & Seaman, 2010). Face-to-face schooling continues to be regarded as a specific threat from which the communities must be protected, and emergency eLearning is seen to be the security measure proposed to protect the community (Murphy, 2020). E-learning can revolutionise education since it provides, in this case, new opportunities for learning during the Covid-19 pandemic (Singh, 2020). It is becoming the new hope in relation to presenting knowledge to learners and is changing their overall educational experience.

Conceptual framework: Online education

In this study, we used online education as a conceptual framework to inform and guide the discussion of the continuation of education during the Covid-19-induced school closures. The closure of schools following lockdown and the social distancing measures resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic affected education and necessitated a paradigm shift in the way teachers deliver quality education, thereby making them resort to the use of various online platforms (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). Despite the challenges faced by both teachers and learners, online learning has become a panacea for this unprecedented global pandemic in spite of the often-cited digital divide and the lack of access by other sectors of society (Bozkurt et al., 2020). The lack of alternative approaches to ensuring the continuation of education during this ravaging pandemic left teachers with no option but to adopt a system for which they may not have been prepared. The transition from traditional face-to-face learning to online learning can, of course, be an entirely different experience for learners and teachers (Adnan & Anwar, 2020).

Online learning tools have played a crucial role in ensuring the resumption and continuation of education during this pandemic, helping schools and other educational institutions to facilitate the continuation of learning during the resultant closures (Adnan & Anwar, 2020).

Adapting to the changes calls for effective assessment and support for staff and learners to ensure their readiness to embrace the new dispensation. Some teething challenges can be anticipated since there is no one-size-fits-all pedagogy for online learning (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021); different subjects and age groups require different approaches to this.

Online education relies heavily on the suitability and relevance of the pedagogy as well as the exposure and expertise of both the teachers and learners to Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The commonly used platforms include WhatsApp, Google Classroom, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Blackboard, and Canvas with which teachers create educational modules and training and skills development programs. Such platforms include the options of workplace chat, video meeting, and file storage that keep classes organised and easy to manage and they normally facilitate the exchange of a variety of content in formats like Portable Document Format (PDF), Excel file, and Word, thus facilitating the exchange of audio and video learning materials between and among teachers and learners. These platforms also allow the tracking of student learning and assessment by the use of quizzes and the rubric-based assessment of submitted assignments (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). The platforms can, however, present several challenges for rural-based learners given the lack of computing devices, poor internet connectivity, unreliable power supply, the prohibitive cost of data bundles, and their lack of expertise in using technology.

Methodology

In this qualitative phenomenological study, we explored the effects of the Covid-19 scourge in rural schools in Lesotho with participants who were teachers in Lesotho's districts of Maseru, Mohale's Hoek, Quthing, Mokhotlong, Berea, Botha-Bothe, Leribe, Mafeteng, Qacha's Nek, and Thaba-Tseka. Ten teachers, five each from primary and secondary schools, one each from the country's ten districts, were purposively sampled. A link to access Google forms was then sent to participants for them to respond to the semi-structured interview questions online to share their experiences of teaching in Lesotho's rural schools during the Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, one of the limitations of this study is that the urban schools, more amenable to the online interventions put in place to mitigate the effects of Covid-19 induced school closures, were not included in the sample. WhatsApp was then used for follow-up questions to the initial responses. The idea that informed the methodology was that "greater insight into a research topic" can be gained "by studying multiple cases" (Johnson & Christensen 2019, p. 436). Purposive sampling of the cases was used because it "illustrates some feature or process in which we are interested" (Creswell & Poth 2018, p. 148). The study specifically targeted teachers at rural schools in order to obtain relevant data in response to the research questions. The relevant ethical procedures were followed. All participants consented to take part. No one was forced to do so, and they were at liberty to withdraw from the study at any time (see Creswell & Poth, 2018). All participants were advised not to include personal details on the online Google form in order to protect their identity. Pseudonyms were used during data presentation to maintain the anonymity of the participants. Numbers for the teacher participants, ranging from Teacher 1 (T1) to Teacher 10 (T10), were assigned. Trustworthiness of the data was ensured through the gathering of thick,

rich data via open ended questions in the questionnaire. The online questionnaire contained 10 semi-structured questions. Data was thematically analysed in line with the approach recommended by Vaismoradi et al. (2016), that consists of the four distinct phases of initialisation, construction, rectification, and finalisation. The results that were generated from this analysis are presented in the next section and illustrated through the use of extracts from the participants' responses.

Findings and discussion

In order to explore the effects of Covid-19 on rural schools in Lesotho, data from the online interviews is presented and discussed. The findings are discussed under the three broad themes of awareness of Covid-19 among participants, challenges faced by rural learners in Lesotho because of the Covid-19 disruptions, and interventions used to mitigate the effects of Covid-19-induced school closures in Lesotho.

Awareness of Covid-19 among participants

The participants were first asked about their understanding of the Covid-19 pandemic. All 10 teachers showed that they were aware of the Covid-19 pandemic. Their definitions highlighted that Covid-19 is a virus that affects the respiratory system of human beings, that this is a pandemic that is killing many people, and is a disease that attacks human lungs and causes difficulty in breathing, and is a disaster that has affected educational systems negatively throughout the world. T2 offered this elaborate definition:

Covid -19 is a pandemic disease brutally killing millions of people around the world. Covid -19 is transmitted through droplets from sneezing and coughing. Currently there is no cure only preventive measures such as washing hands frequently, wearing masks, observing social distancing and sanitising.

This was reinforced by T3, who said,

It is a new disease that is normally characterised by difficulty in breathing. It multiplies as people come in contact with each other hence some measures like social distancing and washing hands regularly may prevent its spread.

Some definitions also included the symptoms of the disease thereby making it clearer, as T7 pointed out.

Covid-19 pandemic is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered Corona virus which causes serious respiratory problems. Its symptoms include high fever, cough, sore throat, and difficulties in breathing.

The responses from the teachers show that they are fully aware of what Covid-19 is and some even gave very elaborate descriptions of the pandemic. They showed awareness that it is a deadly virus causing the death of many people worldwide and can be easily transmitted. This

shows that the research sample was made up of the ideal participants as shown by their knowledge and understanding of the disease under discussion.

Challenges faced by rural learners in Lesotho because of Covid-19 disruptions

The researcher also asked the participants about the general challenges faced by rural learners as a result of staying at home because of Covid-19. The responses showed a variety of problems as conveyed in the excerpts offered below from the participants. The most common problems identified by the teachers included the disturbance of schooling, the increase in school drop-outs, hunger, learners engaging in bad behaviour, limited access to the internet, child abuse, poverty, early marriage, and unwanted pregnancy as well as the lack of enough knowledge about Covid-19 that led to their risking infection. According to T4,

Learners living in the rural areas are faced with a challenge of not being able to study online like other privileged learners because most areas in the rural places have no electricity.

T6 observed,

In rural areas, use of technology is a serious problem as those learners don't have even the simple cell phones to use in order to continue with their studies while they are still at their homes, so they are not learning now due to this Covid-19.

The participants further revealed that the parents face the burden of feeding their children, a responsibility normally shouldered by schools since most rural schools receive supplementary food handouts from the government and donor agencies to feed their learners. Parents now had to find food to feed their children, and this created problems because many rural parents are poor (see Pitikoe et al., 2021). T4 observed,

Learners face extreme hunger while at home since they no longer have access to food at school. Most of them depend on food provided at school, therefore closing schools means they can no longer get that food and they suffer from hunger and starvation.

This shows that rural learners also faced the challenge of food shortages at home during the school closures as confirmed by Gupta and Goplani's (2020) study in India where such a challenge was also noted after the closure of schools in order to arrest the spread of Covid-19 in 2020.

Evidence from the responses shows that most rural schools were not able to adopt online teaching methods, and, as a result, they had to shut down completely because they had no access to eLearning solutions. Most rural parents do not have television or radio, so learners had only the lesson notes that they were given before schools closed (see Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020). The participants unanimously agreed on the need for teaching and

learning to proceed through the internet via online media (where accessible) along with observing staggered attendance, practising social distancing, and using protective clothing.

Increased workload for teachers and learners

We were also keen to establish from the teachers how the closure of schools because of Covid-19 had affected them as well as the learners in Lesotho's rural schools. The participants were asked to state the changes in teaching and learning that would result from the closure of schools. Quite interesting perspectives were offered by the teachers. The responses showed that they missed their learners and feared the subsequent workload, while some were equally anxious about their job security. Additionally, T1 noted, critically, that

[t]eachers may prioritize certain content or concepts over others which may result in shallow learning. Learners may be drilled to pass examinations and may be forced to memorise content.

It was noted that teachers and learners would have to work extra hours to make up for the lost academic school days.

T10 observed,

Many teachers are not happy as they point out that it will not be easy to recover the time that they have lost whilst parents are depressed by the fact that their children may have to repeat grades.

T3 added,

Contribution made by teachers is determined by good results at the end of the term. So, teachers are psychologically disturbed because they are handicapped by closure of schools and their failure to teach, and the implication is that students are going to fail as they are expected to write their final examinations at the expected time regardless of the Covid-19.

We also asked the participants about the challenges that are likely to confront them and their learners when schools finally re-open fully. The insights from participants confirmed their earlier concerns about an increased workload. They pointed out that teachers and learners would have much pressure to cover the syllabuses with very little time at hand. Some learners would find it very difficult to catch up, resulting in their dropping out of school in some cases, while others would not be able to pay fees as a result of their parents having lost jobs and this would result in increased drop-out. According to T8,

There will be content overload. Teachers will have a lot to teach with little time to make up for lost time. Learners would have forgotten the learning habits. Teaching and learning would be hard.

T2 added,

Most learners will be left behind so teachers would have to work hard. Again, the dropout rate is going to increase.

T7 further elaborated,

Lack of resources and infrastructure that needs to be used at schools such as masks, sanitizers, even the classrooms in order to allow social distancing. Apart from these resources and infrastructure, learners are going to struggle a lot to recover the time they have wasted at home.

The responses show that teachers were empathising with their learners since they were fully aware of the amount of time lost to the Covid-19-induced school closures. Teachers also highlighted their failure to complete the syllabuses, particularly for examination classes as confirmed by EdTech Hub (2020).

Respondents also agreed on the need for parents to help in the education of their children despite the apparent challenges this could cause since most rural parents were not educated. T6 said,

Most of the schools are closed and that forces parents to be teachers of their children while they are still at their homes and some parents are not educated and this is a very serious problem.

The participants also reported that the parents were concerned that their children were missing out, as T7 pointed out,

As for parents, they are concerned that their children are missing out. Parents are divided into two groups in the society. Some believe that schools should reopen while others say it is good for schools to remain closed and the situation contributes to social disunity.

The responses from the teachers all show convergence on the increased workload for both the teachers and their learners when schooling resumes in earnest. The concerns of the parents also appeared to worsen the teachers' anxiety. It is difficult to predict what the educational landscape in rural schools will look like after the Covid-19 pandemic, in part because of the magnitude of the community transmission threat posed by interactions among learners (Weeden & Cornwell, 2020).

Effect on vulnerable learners

We then went on to ask about the extent to which the plight of vulnerable learners like girls and orphans could have been further worsened by the Covid-19 pandemic particularly in view of the problems that these underprivileged rural learners were facing given the closure of schools. T1 pointed out,

Rural girls are at risk of early marriages as well as sexual abuse. Going to school protects these girls against such things.

T7 further elaborated,

Girls end up being raped and abducted while in the villages increasing their chances of contracting HIV/ AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.

The different views of the respondents show that the underprivileged learners are more acutely affected by disruptions in education, poverty, hunger, early marriage, and abuse. Evidence from the responses shows that prolonged school closure can result in increased sexual abuse, early marriage, and teenage pregnancy for girls. The same scenario was experienced by girls during the Ebola epidemic in Liberia (Risso-Gill & Finnegan, 2020). Without urgent action to remove barriers to girls' education, this health crisis could become a children's rights crisis by denying learners their right to learn (UNESCO, 2020). Ensuring that girls can access learning materials online and offline during school closures, and that families remain committed to girls' education, is key (Risso-Gill, & Finnegan, 2020). In Guatemala, the United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF) is working with the government to support communities in remote areas with poor connectivity and lack of electricity by providing printed material, television, and radio messaging via mobile phones that depict both boys and girls helping with domestic chores (United Nations International Children's Fund, 2020). Evidence from a study in Nepal shows that violence against women and girls has increased during Covid-19 lockdowns (Dahal et al., 2020). Governments need to prioritise measures to protect girls from gender-based violence, early marriage, and pregnancy to facilitate their return to school.

Other vulnerable learners such as orphans were also hit hard by Covid-19 since it added more challenges to the ones they already had, as observed by T7, who said,

The orphans on the other hand have no one to feed them, putting them at a very high risk of malnutrition.

T9 concurred,

Orphans do not have money to buy the resources to protect themselves against this disease like masks and sanitisers.

This shows that the pandemic has worsened the plight of orphans since it added more woes to their already pathetic lives.

The pandemic's adverse impacts on children's access and quality of education were most severely felt through the subsequent closure of schools without adequate alternative education services being made accessible to all school-going children in the country. This exacerbated existing inequities in education and worsened existing barriers to access as the urban/rural disparities became more glaring, with children in rural areas, especially the remotest regions, faring the worst.

Interventions to mitigate the effects of Covid-19-induced school closures in Lesotho

Equally important was the question of the interventions put in place by Lesotho's MoET to ensure that teaching and learning continued after the forced closure of schools as a result of Covid-19. The observations by participants showed that the government, through the responsible ministry, demonstrated commendable commitment to addressing the plight of learners during the pandemic. Efforts were made to broadcast lessons over the radio and television, allow the children in the grades writing public examinations to resume classes, encourage alternate attendance by classes, and provide sanitisers and food hampers.

Some respondents observed crucially that learners have no access to the internet, or even radio and television sets to enable them to attend lessons in the comfort of their homes.

T8 noted,

Ministry of Education advised schools to use technology to help learners to continue with their studies while they are still at home due to this Covid-19. Those technologies may be cellphones whereby teachers may form some WhatsApp groups and teach learners while they are still at their different homes.

T10 also noted,

Lessons for different grades were introduced on TV and radio though they are not effective.

There was unanimity among the responses that the Lesotho government was working out ways to mitigate the effects of the pandemic. The responses show that the teachers are aware that online education is the best way forward in dealing with the Covid-19-induced school closures but that it is rather inaccessible for rural learners in Lesotho. Nonetheless, in situations of school closures, the alternative is to move from traditional to online education (Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020). In this case, the key enablers of teaching and learning are the internet coverage, availability of computers or smartphones in the population, and a reliable power supply (Gardiner, 2017). The software for online teaching and learning is practically inaccessible to most teachers and learners in Lesotho's rural schools.

The question related to the interventions put in place by individual schools to ensure that teaching and learning continued was also posed to the participants. Nothing much came from the teachers on this question since most pointed out that their schools were not pursuing any interventions thereby confirming that individual rural schools lack the capacity to effectively confront the Covid-19 pandemic on their own as confirmed by Gourinchas (2020). T6 observed that

[t]he ministry has arranged for learners to be taught on the national radio and television.

T8 revealed that their school was more proactive before they encountered insurmountable setbacks, in saying,

We sat down as staff first and decided what we will do in order to help learners while they are still at their homes and we agreed to form WhatsApp groups but the problem was that most of our learners do not have cell phones and because of that we did not go on with our plan and we are not teaching those learners now since the government decided to shut the schools because of this Covid-19.

T9 confirmed this and said,

They tried WhatsApp group learning but it did not succeed.

Seemingly, some teachers and schools tried to make use of WhatsApp, but this was unsuccessful because of the challenge of most learners not having cellphones. Nonetheless, the use of digital media in education can provide learners with the capability to get additional useful knowledge and to attach themselves to learning groups and other educational systems that make education possible (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2020).

When asked about the effectiveness of steps taken to mitigate the effects of Covid-19 on rural schools in Lesotho, the participants painted a bleak picture of the prevailing situation since there was unanimity in the ineffectiveness of the ministry's interventions. According to T3,

To a very less extent and those radio lessons are inconsistent. Again, the radio stations reach only urban areas and leave out those in remote areas. This means that students in remote areas are not part of online learning. In some areas there is no electricity at all. Some students do not have smartphones or laptops and they are left out.

T4 made a crucial observation in saying,

I am not sure that these interventions (broadcasting lessons) are effective. There is no guarantee that learners are listening. How do you expect a learner to concentrate on an audio for 40 minutes yet they fail to do so in a contact class? They are highly teacher centred! With the current situation of Lesotho, the rural areas are highly disadvantaged development wise so much that many communities still have no access to electricity. This makes it very hard for people living there to buy even an old style television. So, learners over there are highly disadvantaged when it comes to television lessons. All they get is a radio lesson! Imagine doing mathematics on radio!

T10 wrapped up by confirming the established rhetoric.

In my view, those interventions did not improve teaching and learning as they were not effective. The method of approach used was teacher-centred for example in the case of subjects like Science, I think they should have carried out some experiments

instead of just telling learners the results of what they did not see or have proof of. So, the learners were confused as they were told the results without having observed the process.

T7 was however quite positive on the issue of the government's use of radio and television lessons, and said,

Learners have the chance to learn from different teachers from different schools, allowing them to get clarity where their teachers might have failed to teach them.

The responses appear to confirm the view that interventions to mitigate the effects of Covid-19 failed to yield the anticipated outcomes because of the tendency by governments to treat rural schools in the same way as their urban counterparts. Gardiner (2017) critically lamented the one-size-fits-all approach by governments when it comes to policy implementation which makes it possible to overlook and disregard important aspects of the lives and needs of particular contexts like rural areas. However, this is beyond the scope of this study. The unique situation of rural communities needs to be acknowledged as a starting point. Despite the remote learning platforms introduced to provide online education, some learners in remote rural communities still faced a lot of challenges in ensuring equitable access to these services because they did not have access to online learning devices such as television sets, computers, smart phones, and other devices, as well as stable internet connectivity in their homes or close by. The effectiveness of radio and television lessons was therefore thrown into serious doubt since the method was entirely teacher-centred in being the old style of teaching and learning that does not cater for student assessment and caters only for urban learners (Makiba, 2020). Many schools are beginning to rely more and more on remote learning that has been riddled with challenges, especially for rural schools in developing countries such as Lesotho. The countries with limited technologies such as Lesotho have problems in that schools are not ready for the complete implementation of the countrywide online education.

We further asked the participants to put forward suggestions to reduce the effects of Covid-19 in Lesotho's rural schools. Their voices resonated with their unenviable circumstances as they resoundingly called for improvements of their inadequate school environments. They recommended that the government should be more practical in helping rural schools to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic by following proper health care precautions like giving advice about preventing the spread of the pandemic, providing personal protective equipment (PPE) to both teachers and learners, allowing only examination classes to resume learning, prioritizing WHO recommendations in dealing with this pandemic, and teaching learners about it and the preventive measures in line with United Nations International Children's Fund (2020). T3 set the ball rolling by saying,

The government should devise practical ways of making sure that education does not suffer. For instance, distribution of radio sets for learners to access lessons that are broadcasted.

T6 was quite practical in saying,

I would suggest that the government ensure that learners in the villages are given school work manually, at least once a week to keep them busy since they have no electricity to use for social media learning.

T9 added,

Schools should be opened, and learners should be given resources used to fight this disease like sanitisers and masks. In the case where there is high enrolment, the government should hire more teachers so as to maintain social distancing and supply the schools with tents so that the school with large number of learners in one classroom may use those tents.

The participants showed that they want to see education back on its rails once again, especially rural education that, as they all concurred, is lagging behind. The whole ecosystem of education has not only transformed the perception of learners towards learning but has also helped the teachers to enhance delivery in a big way (Singh, 2020).

Conclusion

Based on the participants' views on the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on rural schools in Lesotho, it can be concluded that the Covid-19-induced school closures caused massive disruption of learning in rural schools in the country. This, in turn, led to other problems for the learners such as hunger, engaging in bad behaviour, child abuse, poverty, early marriage, and unwanted pregnancy as well as the lack of enough knowledge about Covid-19 that led them to risk being infected with the disease. The attempts to mitigate the disruptions by resorting to online education were thwarted by glaring challenges including, but not limited to, rural learners' poor access to online learning devices such as television sets, computers, smart phones, and others, the unstable internet connectivity in their homes or close by, and the unreliable power supply. This study is important for the future because it shows the case of a country that has attempted to change the traditional school lessons to the online mode during the pandemic despite the glaring inequalities that exposed the inadequacies of rural schools. When considering a fusion of traditional and online education, Lesotho needs to assess the full spectrum of challenges and opportunities posed by Covid-19 and determine the gaps that can be addressed with the aim of placing rural schools on a firmer footing to cope with teaching and learning in a pandemic. The losses of Covid-19 could, therefore, be turned into opportunities for future teaching and learning.

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