

South African teachers' perceptions of their mediator role during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

The role of teachers in the classroom is crucial for guiding learners towards achieving learning outcomes. With the study reported on here I explored the role of Grade 6 teachers in South Africa as mediators during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically focusing on their ability to facilitate online teaching. The research was grounded in Vygotsky's (1978a) theory of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), with particular emphasis on Valsiner's (1997) interpretation of the ZPD as framework for mediating online teaching. An interpretive paradigm was adopted to understand teachers' perspectives on online teaching and how they facilitated their roles during the COVID-19 pandemic. A qualitative research approach was used, with data collected through semi-structured interviews, field notes, audio recordings, non-participatory observations, and document analysis. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data. The findings from this study contribute to a deeper understanding of teachers' perceptions of their mediator role during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings further reveal that teachers faced challenges due to insufficient training in digital technology, which hindered their ability to mediate online teaching effectively. I recommend that for effective teaching, as experienced during COVID-19, to take place, the Department of Education should prioritise teacher training in digital resources and inclusive teaching practices to optimise information and communication technology.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; curriculum differentiation; full-service schools; mediation; scaffolding; zone of proximal development

Introduction

The global population faced major challenges due to the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) virus, known as the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), which posed serious risks to life and health. The virus spread quickly across the globe, resulting in widespread life-threatening situations and significant mortality affecting all demographic groups. In South Africa alone, the World Health Organisation (WHO) reported 102,595 deaths related to the virus (WHO, 2020, 2023). In response, many countries, including South Africa, adopted stringent measures recommended by the WHO to curb the spread of COVID-19. These measures included travel restrictions, lockdowns, social distancing protocols, stay-at-home orders, and a transition to remote learning and work (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 2023; WHO, 2023). Furthermore, schools worldwide experienced temporary or partial closures to maintain social distancing and protect public health (Haffeejee, Simelane & Mwanda, 2024; Toquero & Toquero, 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on learners, teachers, and schools worldwide (Mailizar, Almanthari, Maulina & Bruce, 2020). Teachers faced challenges as schools transitioned to an online mode of teaching (Ehren, Madrid, Romiti, Armstrong, Fisher & McWhorter, 2021). This shift required teachers to adapt their roles, especially those teaching English as a First Additional Language, who struggled with curriculum differentiation to support diverse learners in inclusive online classrooms.

In South Africa, the roles of teachers are defined by the *Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications* ([MRTEQ] of the Department of Higher Education and Training, Republic of South Africa [DHET, RSA], 2011), which emphasise the teacher's role as a facilitator of learning. This includes mediating learning experiences to accommodate diverse learner needs, especially those with learning difficulties. According to the MRTEQ, a competent teacher must create an engaging, relevant learning environment, communicate effectively, and respect individual differences (DHET, RSA, 2011). The pandemic, however, revealed gaps in teachers' competencies in these areas, particularly in adapting to online teaching methods.

Given these challenges and my observation that many teachers struggled to fulfil their changing roles as learning mediators, I explored teachers' perceptions of their responsibilities in online teaching. I specifically focused on how teachers fostered an interactive and engaging online teaching experience for Grade 6 learners in inclusive classrooms, particularly in English as First Additional Language.

Literature Review

The role of the teacher as a mediator of learning

The role of the teacher as mediator of learning is central to the educational process, as outlined in the MRTEQ policy document (DHET, RSA, 2011). Teachers are expected to organise learning, guide learners, provide pedagogical support, and meet individual learning needs. However, the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated significant changes to these roles. Teachers had to rapidly adjust their teaching strategies and use available technology, such as mobile phones and text messaging apps, to reach learners during school closures. This shift

required of teachers to modify their approaches to ensure that learning continued despite the absence of face-to-face interaction.

According to T Aagaard and Lund (2020), digitalisation allows teachers to expand their teaching methods and challenge traditional educational norms. However, M Langford and Damsa (2020) note that this shift also presented numerous challenges, including the steep learning curve on online teaching and the need for teachers to acquire digital competence quickly. Digital competence involves technical skills and the ability to effectively integrate technology into pedagogy, assess its impact on learning, and engage with digital cultures (Ilomäki, Paavola, Lakkala & Kantosalo, 2016). However, the rapid evolution of technology meant that many teachers struggled to keep pace with these changes, which hindered their ability to fully leverage digital tools in the classroom.

The transition to online teaching required of teachers to manage various tasks, including adapting materials for diverse learners, particularly those with disabilities. This often meant providing differentiated content and support in a digital format, adding another layer of complexity. Esici, Esici, Ayaz, Yetim, Çağlar and Berdir (2021) found that these new demands created feelings of anxiety and frustration among teachers who felt unprepared for the challenges of online education.

The shift to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic forced an abrupt transition from traditional face-to-face teaching to online education, a shift that, while offering opportunities for innovation, also exposed significant challenges. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development ([OECD], 2020a), issues such as unequal access to technology, inadequate teacher training, and poor infrastructure were major barriers to effective online learning. These challenges were especially pronounced in low-income areas, where both teachers and learners struggled to adapt to the digital environment. Jacklin (2020) observed that the rapid shift left many unprepared, exacerbating existing educational inequalities.

The lack of essential resources was particularly stark in regions like sub-Saharan Africa. The UNESCO Teacher Task Force (2020a) reports that 89% of learners in this region lacked access to computers or the internet at home. Parker, Morris and Hofmeyer (2020) further emphasise the absence of suitable learning environments and parental support in disadvantaged households. These barriers, compounded by the digital divide, severely limited learners' ability to engage in online classes or access educational resources. As a result, teachers faced difficulties adapting materials to

accommodate diverse learner needs, especially in inclusive classrooms.

Despite these obstacles, some teachers used available online tools like quizzes, worksheets, and assignments to facilitate learning. However, Newton, Oduori and Kiplagat (2021) and Spaul (2022) highlight that these strategies were insufficient to overcome the systemic barriers, with the digital divide continuing to affect learning outcomes and learner engagement. Teachers had to adjust their strategies to ensure that learning continued during school closures, often relying on mobile phones and text messaging apps to reach learners. This required of teachers to modify their approaches to maintain educational continuity despite the absence of in-person interaction. M Aagaard and Lund (2020) point out that digitalisation opened new opportunities for expanding teaching methods and challenging traditional educational norms.

However, R Langford and Damsa (2020) note that these opportunities came with significant challenges, including the steep learning curve on online teaching and the pressure on teachers to acquire digital competence quickly. Digital competence, which includes both technical skills and the ability to integrate technology effectively into pedagogy, was essential but difficult to attain during such a rapid change (Ilomäki et al., 2016). The transition also posed significant challenges for teachers in adapting content for diverse learners, particularly those with disabilities. Differentiated content and support in digital formats added layers of complexity. Esici et al. (2021) found that these new demands created feelings of anxiety and frustration among teachers, many of whom felt unprepared for the complexities of online education.

The impact of limited teacher training

A major barrier to effective online teaching identified in the literature was insufficient teacher training. As R Langford and Damsa (2020) note, teachers were expected to quickly transition to online education without adequate support or professional development. This lack of preparation was exacerbated by the urgent nature of the transition, which left teachers with limited time to acquire the necessary skills for successful online teaching. Ilomäki et al. (2016) emphasise the importance of continuous professional development to help teachers stay current with evolving digital competencies.

The rapid pace of technological advancements often resulted in teachers' digital skills lagging, making it challenging for them to implement effective online teaching strategies. Furthermore, the varying levels of teachers' digital competence contributed to disparities in the quality of online teaching during the pandemic. Liguori and Winkler (2020) argued that successful digital teaching was

closely tied to teachers' pre-existing digital skills and the instructional goals they set for their learners, highlighting the importance of both technical proficiency and pedagogical clarity in online education.

Theoretical Framework

In this study I explored the role of Grade 6 teachers as mediators of online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, drawing on Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD) theory and Valsiner's interpretation of this concept. Vygotsky's (1978a) ZPD emphasises the gap between a learner's independent abilities and their potential capabilities, which can be achieved with guidance from a more knowledgeable other, such as a teacher or a peer. This framework is essential for understanding how teachers meet the challenges of online teaching, particularly in environments where remote instruction create barriers for learners.

Teachers faced unique challenges in applying the ZPD to online teaching during the pandemic. Valsiner (1997) extends Vygotsky's theory by stressing that development is socially constructed through interactions with the environment and others. In the online classroom, teachers need to adapt their strategies to provide appropriate support that helps learners bridge the gap between their current abilities and their potential achievements. Consequently, this process requires of teachers to use digital tools effectively to scaffold learning,

offering support that gradually decreases as learners gain independence (Vygotsky, 1978a).

As mediators of learning, teachers are responsible for offering temporary scaffolding support, which is reduced as the learner becomes more capable (Vygotsky, 1978b). This responsibility is intensified during online teaching as teachers must balance technological tools with individualised support, ensuring that learners receive the necessary guidance to succeed. It becomes particularly important in inclusive classrooms, where teachers must cater for diverse learning needs, such as those of learners acquiring English as a first additional language. The ZPD framework guides teachers in tailoring instruction to meet learners' specific abilities, ensuring that content is accessible and challenging enough to encourage growth (McLeod, 2019).

As learners expand their knowledge, their ZPD develops, requiring continuous adaptation of scaffolding strategies. The ZPD shifts as learners acquire new knowledge and skills, necessitating teachers to adjust their support to match their shifting development levels (Chauke, 2017). Figure 1 illustrates the dynamic nature of the ZPD, where learners cannot fully comprehend tasks independently but can achieve success with the help of a teacher or a peer. Thus, teachers must personalise instruction based on the learner's developing competencies.

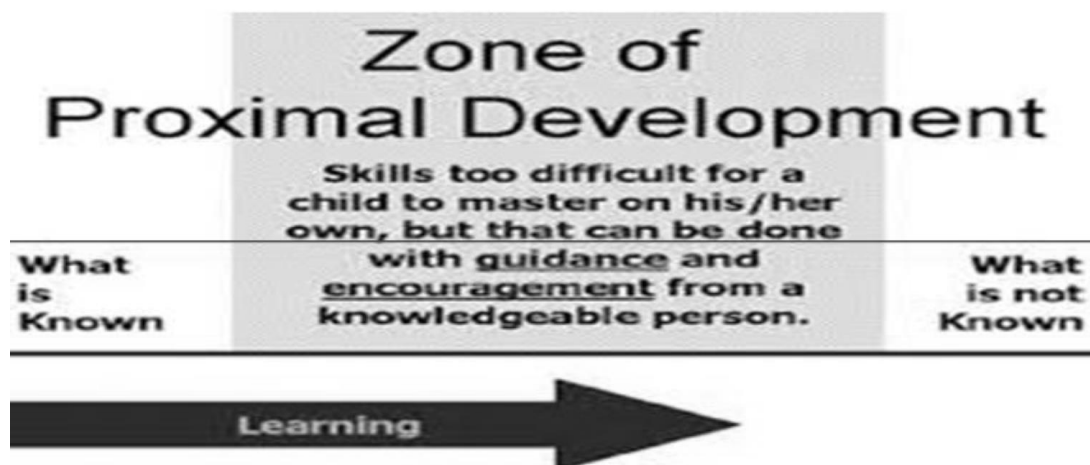


Figure 1 The zone of proximal development

Note. ZPD (Chauke, 2017:7, adapted from Vygotsky, 1978a)

Teachers' lack of adequate digital training significantly challenges mediating online teaching. Without sufficient digital literacy, teachers may struggle to provide effective scaffolding, which is essential for learners' progress in online classrooms (McLeod, 2019). During the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers' ability to leverage online platforms and tools was crucial for supporting learners within their ZPD. Digital literacy, therefore, is a critical skill for

teachers to ensure that they can mediate learning effectively in remote environments.

The role of the teacher as a mediator is crucial for fostering a supportive and engaging learning environment. Valsiner (1997) and Vygotsky (1978a) highlight that mediation occurs when teachers guide learners through tasks beyond their current abilities, helping them progress through their ZPD. Intentional interaction between teacher and learner

is essential for learners to reach their full potential, emphasising the importance of active, purposeful support (Valsiner, 1997).

Curriculum differentiation also plays a critical role in this process. In the context of online teaching, it is essential for teachers to adapt the curriculum to meet the varied needs of learners. Differentiated instruction involves tailoring teaching methods, content, and assessment to accommodate learners' abilities, interests, and learning styles (Nel, Tlale, Engelbrecht & Nel, 2016). This is particularly important in online teaching, where teachers must consider factors such as learners' access to technological means and individual learning preferences (Lavanaia & Nor, 2021). By differentiating instruction, teachers can provide a more personalised learning experience that helps all learners to succeed (Tanjung & Ashadi, 2019).

From a theoretical perspective, Vygotsky's ZPD offers a framework for understanding the teacher's role as a mediator in online teaching. It highlights the importance of social interaction and scaffolding in learning, especially in digital environments. To support learners in overcoming the challenges of online teaching, teachers must enhance their digital literacy and adapt their teaching strategies to meet the needs of diverse learners.

Research Methodology

Research design refers to the procedures and methodological approaches used in the research process, including the aims of the study, data collection methods, data analysis techniques, and the final stages of report writing (Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Maree, 2016). In this study I employed an interpretive research design to explore Grade 6 teachers' perceptions of their role as mediators in online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. The goal was to become familiar with the data, generate initial codes, and identify recurring themes and categories related to the teachers' experiences of facilitating English First Additional Language (FAL) in inclusive classrooms while managing the challenges posed by the pandemic (Merriam, 2014).

A qualitative research approach, consistent with Ningi's (2022) assertion that researchers use qualitative research to understand phenomena in their natural settings, focusing on the meanings that people attach to their experiences, was adopted for this study. This approach enabled me to capture in-depth insight into the lived experiences of Grade 6 teachers, particularly regarding their roles as mediators of online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To understand the research problem comprehensively, I used a combination of data collection methods, including in-depth semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis. These methods were designed to

elicit rich, qualitative data on how teachers facilitated their roles when shifting to online teaching. The semi-structured interviews allowed teachers to share their experiences and perceptions in their own words (Rahman, Pandian & Kaur, 2018). At the same time, observations allowed me to assess how online teaching methods and differentiated curricula were implemented in practice. Document analysis of teaching materials, annual teaching plans, lesson plans, and other resources further contributed to understanding how the curriculum was adapted to meet the needs of diverse learners during the pandemic.

This study was guided by the following primary research question: How did Grade 6 teachers perceive their role as mediators in online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic?

To answer this question, the following sub-questions were formulated:

- How did Grade 6 teachers use online teaching methods to mediate English as First Additional Language (FAL) in inclusive classrooms during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- How did teachers differentiate the curriculum to accommodate learners with diverse educational needs in inclusive online classrooms during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What challenges do Grade 6 teachers face when mediating learning in online classrooms, and how do they overcome these challenges?

Data Collection Procedures

I adopted a qualitative research approach to explore Grade 6 teachers' perceptions of their role as mediators in online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data were collected through multiple methods: in-depth interviews, non-participatory observations, document analysis, and field notes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three Grade 6 teachers and three learning support teachers, allowing for a detailed exploration of their experiences and perceptions regarding their mediator role. The interviews were guided by open-ended questions encouraging participants to share their thoughts and feelings, with audio recordings transcribed verbatim for accurate representation (Creswell & Creswell, 2022).

Non-participatory observations were conducted in the teachers' natural online teaching environments using platforms like Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Google, YouTube, and WhatsApp. Field notes were taken during these observations to capture teachers' actions, interactions, and behaviour in teaching English as a FAL in inclusive Grade 6 online classrooms. Additionally, document analysis was employed to review teaching materials such as the annual teaching plans (ATPs) and online lesson plans (DBE, RSA, 2023). This assisted me to contextualise teachers' experiences and identify any institutional or systemic factors that influenced their teaching practices during the pandemic. These

combined data collection methods provided a comprehensive understanding of how teachers adapted online teaching methods to maintain inclusivity and support learners with diverse educational needs in English FAL classrooms (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis involved the verbatim transcription of interviews and the application of thematic analysis to identify and interpret key themes related to teachers' roles as mediators in online classrooms during the COVID-19 pandemic. Content analysis was used to examine both interview responses and documents, allowing me to identify primary themes emerging from participants' experiences (Kumar, 2019). The thematic analysis focused on understanding patterns in teachers' perceptions, such as how they mediated English FAL instruction, differentiated the curriculum for diverse learners and navigated challenges in online teaching. Following Creswell and Creswell (2022), I examined the data intensely and interpreted the meanings behind the identified themes to describe teachers' experiences. This approach, consistent with Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), ensured a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon within its natural context. It aligns with the qualitative research methodology that prioritises immersion in the participants' environment to gather meaningful and insightful data.

Research Sites and Participants

The study was conducted in three primary schools in the Gauteng province of South Africa. Among these schools, two were in the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality, while one was in the township of Hammanskraal, north of Tshwane. These schools were classified as inclusive "full-service schools" by the Department of Basic Education (DBE), indicating their ability to overcome barriers to learning within an inclusive educational environment. I focused on second-language

teaching, specifically English as a FAL, which was provided to learners with diverse educational needs.

For anonymity purposes, the participating schools are referred to as Schools A, B, and C. School A was situated in the inner city of the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality and had an enrolment of 700 learners ranging from Grade R to 7. The staff comprised a principal, a deputy principal, four heads of department, 28 teachers, two guidance counsellors, one learning support teacher, one resource teacher, and one home/school/community liaison teacher. Most learners were from middle- and working-class families residing in the inner city and various townships.

School B was in the township of Mamelodi East within the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality. The school had 1,235 learners from Grade R to 7. The staff included a principal, two deputy principals, four heads of department, 27 teachers, and three learning support teachers. The learners were predominantly from the informal settlement of Mamelodi East, with many belonging to families dependent on pension grants and/or child support grants from the National Department of Social Development.

School C was situated in a rural community in Hammanskraal and had 972 learners in Grades R to 7. The staff consisted of a principal, two deputy principals, four heads of department, 25 teachers, and one learning support teacher. The learners were primarily from the local community, with a significant number being orphans or vulnerable children and living in child-headed households.

The participants in the study were purposefully selected to ensure representation from each school. Three teachers, specifically those teaching Grade 6 English FAL, were included, alongside three learning support teachers on the school-based support teams. To maintain uniformity in reference, the teachers were denoted as T1, T2, and T3, while the learning support teachers were referred to as LST1, LST2, and LST3 (see Table 1).

Table 1 Description of participants' profiles

Participants	Gender	Age	Qualifications	Teaching experience
T1	Female	45 years old	Secondary Teachers' Diploma	20 years
T2	Female	40 years old	Bachelor of Education (BEd) Honours Degree	12 years
T3	Female	38 years old	BEd Honours Degree	10 years
LST1	Female	35 years old	Post Graduate Diploma in Inclusive Education	8 years
LST2	Female	42 years old	BEd Honours Degree in Inclusive Education	12 years
LST3	Female	48 years old	BEd Honours Degree in Inclusive Education	15 years

Ethical Considerations

I obtained ethical approval for the study from the University of South Africa (2013 OCT/7409346/CSLR). Permission was also granted by the Gauteng Department of Education (D 2014/242 A) to collect data from teachers in three primary schools within the Gauteng province. In this study, both primary data and secondary data were used. Primary data were gathered through various online platforms such as magazines, internet forums, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Google, YouTube, WhatsApp, and the school communicator app of the Gauteng Department of Education D6. Secondary data were collected from online articles and social media sources.

Once the data were collected, it was organised, integrated, and synthesised. Participants provided written informed consent and were informed about the purpose and process of the study. They were assured that their participation was voluntary, and that they could withdraw from the study without facing any penalty or disadvantage. Ethical principles, including confidentiality, anonymity, trust, and protection from harm, were strictly followed throughout the study. The data were coded and securely stored on a password-protected computer, adhering to the guidelines provided by Creswell (2014) and Maree (2016).

Results of the Study

Based on the thematic data analysis, I identified four key themes regarding Grade 6 teachers' experiences as mediators of learning in online classrooms while teaching English FAL during the COVID-19 pandemic. These themes focus on online teaching methods, curriculum differentiation, technological challenges and resource limitations, and the lack of adequate teacher training in online teaching and inclusive teaching practices.

Theme 1: Online Teaching Methods

Several key points were highlighted in this study. Firstly, it was found that functioning internet and digital competencies in schools were essential for successful online teaching and learning. However, this presented challenges, especially in low-income areas where public schools were often under-resourced and offline (Martinez, 2020). Secondly, participants needed to collaborate with parents and closely monitor learners' behaviour to deal with difficulties associated with the adjusted learning methods. Participants emphasised the need to find effective ways to use digital learning techniques and tools for mediating English FAL in Grade 6 inclusive online classrooms. Participants reported spending more time on lesson preparation and less time on interactive learning due to the shift to online teaching. Thirdly, the limited availability of smart mobile phones, laptops, and tablets, and access to data and the internet posed significant

challenges. Using online platforms such as Google, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and WhatsApp, and teaching through the Gauteng Department of Education's D6 school communicator app proved to be challenging (T2, T3).

Learning support teacher participants (LST1 and LST3) noted that while mobile phones could facilitate access to information and foster connections among learners and teachers, many learners residing in townships and informal settlements faced limited mobile network coverage. LST2 supported this observation, stating that the transition to online teaching was not seamless for learners who lacked access to household computers or devices for their learning.

T2, T3, and LST3 stated the following:

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we had to provide online teaching to learners, and preparing online lessons with limited digital resources consumed a significant amount of time. On top of that, we were expected to master technical skills, adding to the pressure since we lacked sufficient training in online teaching applications.

Furthermore, participants highlighted limited training in inclusive education, which compounded their challenges in adapting the curriculum while grappling with new digital technological skills for online teaching. These challenges remained unresolved by their schools, particularly when designing online lessons for English FAL. Participants specifically acknowledged their own limitations in computer proficiency and facilitating online teaching strategies.

Theme 2: Curriculum Differentiation

The study revealed important aspects regarding curriculum differentiation in inclusive online classrooms during the pandemic. Firstly, participating teachers and LSTs demonstrated an understanding of curriculum differentiation as a key strategy for accommodating learners' diverse learning styles and needs. Ledwaba (2017) and Tomlinson (2014) emphasise its significance in providing equal opportunities for all learners to access the curriculum. Curriculum differentiation involves modifying, adapting, and varying teaching methods, resources, assessment, activities, and products to cater for the individual needs of learners, maximising their learning opportunities (DBE, RSA, 2010, 2014; DHET, RSA, 2011). It plays a vital role in inclusive education where teachers are responsible for reducing learning barriers and meeting diverse learners' needs (Skae, Brown & Wilmot, 2020).

Secondly, I found that teachers were expected to adapt the curriculum, lesson plans, and learning activities to suit the individual needs of learners in online teaching. However, this posed challenges due to the lack of face-to-face interaction with learners. According to T1, T2, and T3, classroom interaction is crucial for language learning as it enables learners

to practise speaking, listening, and collaborating with their peers. Online learning environments often lack the same level of engagement, making it difficult for teachers to create opportunities for interactive language practice. Additionally, teachers had to navigate the shift to online teaching, requiring them to rethink lesson plans to fit the new format.

One teacher said: *“We have to adapt the curriculum to teach it online since a significant portion relied on us, even though we received support from learning support teachers who provided intervention strategies for curriculum differentiation to accommodate diverse learning needs”* (T3).

Lastly, I observed that many participants were still adhering to traditional teaching approaches, making it challenging for them to transition to online teaching and adapt the curriculum in a non-traditional manner to support learners with diverse learning needs. This finding aligns with the research conducted by R Langford and Damsa (2020), Liu, Zhao and Su (2022), and Martinez (2020). These studies indicate that participants with limited online teaching experience faced stress and lacked proficiency in digital technologies. This was compounded by insufficient internet facilities and support from their schools during the COVID-19 pandemic, which makes their mediator role ineffective in inclusive classrooms.

Theme 3: Technological Challenges and Resource Limitations

Participating teachers and learners faced significant challenges with technological resources. Limited access to digital devices such as smartphones, laptops and tablets, and unreliable internet connectivity hindered the ability to engage effectively in online teaching and learning. This issue was particularly acute in low-income areas such as townships and informal settlements, where mobile network coverage was insufficient for consistent online learning (Martinez, 2020). The participating teachers noted that these technological barriers created a substantial gap in learners' ability to access the lessons despite using multiple online platforms like Microsoft Teams, Zoom, WhatsApp, and Google (T2, T3).

The lack of sufficient resources and infrastructure left teachers feeling unprepared to provide effective online teaching, a position supported by Liu et al. (2022), who observed that under-resourced schools struggled to adapt to online teaching during the pandemic. The teachers expressed that these challenges were exacerbated by their inability to adequately support learners, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Theme 4: Limited Teacher Training in Online Teaching and Inclusive Education

A recurring theme was the lack of adequate training in both online teaching and inclusive education.

Teachers expressed frustration with their insufficient preparation for the technological demands of online teaching. As noted by the participants, they were expected to quickly adapt to online platforms and teaching methods without receiving sufficient training or support from their schools (T2, T3, LST3). This lack of training was particularly evident in the context of inclusive education, where teachers needed to adapt lessons to cater for learners with diverse educational needs (T1, LST1).

The importance of professional development in online teaching and inclusive teaching is supported by Liu et al. (2022) and Martinez (2020), who emphasise that teacher training is crucial in ensuring effective teaching, particularly in times of crisis. Without proper training teachers struggled to incorporate digital tools and inclusive strategies into their lessons, limiting their effectiveness as mediators in online classrooms. The findings align with the concerns raised by M Langford and Damsa (2020) about the challenges encountered by teachers who lacked digital teaching skills, further highlighting the need for comprehensive professional development in these areas.

Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated an urgent shift to online teaching, fundamentally altering how education was delivered worldwide. In this study I explored the experiences of Grade 6 teachers as mediators of learning in online classrooms, focusing on teaching English First Additional Language. I found several key themes, highlighting challenges related to online teaching methods, curriculum differentiation, technological challenges and resource limitations, limited teacher training in online teaching, and inclusive education.

Theme 1: Online Teaching Methods

One of the primary challenges identified in this study was the need for functioning digital infrastructure and digital competencies among teachers. In many low-income areas, such as townships and informal settlements, limited access to internet connectivity and digital devices was a significant barrier to online learning (Martinez, 2020; UNESCO, 2020a). Without adequate preparation, the rapid shift to online teaching exposed the digital divide, with a severe impact on teachers and learners. This gap was particularly pronounced in resource-poor schools, where many learners lacked the necessary devices, such as smartphones or laptops, and reliable internet access, making engagement with online platforms such as Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams, and Zoom difficult (OECD, 2020b; Spaull, 2022).

Participating teachers also reported increased time spent on lesson preparation, which left less room for interactive learning. The need to prepare

digital content, navigate multiple platforms, and ensure accessibility for diverse learners added to the workload. This aligns with the research by Tondeur, Scherer, Siddiq and Baran (2020). As noted by T2 and T3, this challenge was compounded by the teachers' limited proficiency in the use of digital tools, often resulting in frustration and decreased effectiveness in delivering lessons (Liu et al., 2022). Despite these obstacles, teachers continued to use available platforms to communicate with learners, but the lack of sufficient resources significantly hampered their ability to engage all learners fully.

Theme 2: Curriculum Differentiation

Curriculum differentiation, an essential strategy for inclusive education, was another significant theme that emerged from the study. Differentiation involves modifying teaching strategies and resources to accommodate diverse learners' needs (Tomlinson, 2014). However, in an online classroom, teachers struggle to replicate the level of face-to-face interaction necessary for effective language learning, such as speaking, listening, and peer collaboration (Liu et al., 2022). I found that adapting the curriculum to suit online learning while also catering to individual learners' needs was particularly challenging, especially in the absence of direct interaction.

The difficulties in adapting lessons for online classrooms are well-documented in the literature. According to Hsu and Ching (2020), online teaching often limits real-time collaboration and feedback opportunities, which are critical in language acquisition. Additionally, many teachers in the study relied on traditional pedagogical methods unsuited for the new digital teaching environment (Langford M & Damsa, 2020). The lack of effective teacher training in digital pedagogy further exacerbated these issues, limiting teachers' ability to implement differentiated teaching strategies effectively (Tomlinson, 2014).

Theme 3: Technological Challenges and Resource Limitations

The study highlighted the significant technological barriers that both teachers and learners faced during the pandemic. A major challenge was the lack of access to digital devices and reliable internet connectivity, particularly affecting learners in low-income areas. This issue aligns with the findings of Newton et al. (2021) who identified the digital divide as a primary barrier to effective online education during the pandemic. In addition to limited access to technology, teachers faced difficulties sourcing and adapting digital resources to meet the needs of learners with diverse educational requirements (Liu et al., 2022; Verma, 2020). Adu, Badaru, Duku and Adu (2022) further assert that much of the technological infrastructure in South African schools was not utilised before,

during, or after the COVID-19 pandemic. This lack of utilisation is attributed to teachers feeling inadequately equipped to incorporate technology into teaching and learning.

The technological limitations experienced by schools in resource-poor areas were also noted by UNESCO (2020b), which reports that nearly 89% of learners in sub-Saharan Africa lacked access to household computers or the internet. These challenges were compounded by power outages and inconsistent mobile network coverage, further disrupting online learning (Spaull, 2022). As a result, teachers found it increasingly difficult to effectively mediate learning, particularly for learners who were already at a disadvantage.

Theme 4: Limited Teacher Training in Online Teaching and Inclusive Education

A critical finding from this study was the lack of adequate teacher training in both online education and inclusive education. Teachers expressed frustration with their insufficient preparation for the technological demands of online teaching, particularly in the context of inclusive education, where differentiation is crucial (Liu et al., 2022; Martinez, 2020). The rapid shift to online platforms without sufficient professional development led to increased stress and a sense of inadequacy among teachers (Langford R & Damsa, 2020).

Literature widely emphasises the need for comprehensive professional development in both digital pedagogy and inclusive education. According to the UNESCO Teacher Task Force (2020b), the pandemic highlighted the importance of training teachers to effectively integrate digital tools into their teaching practice, especially in inclusive settings. Similarly, T Aagaard and Lund (2020) argue that teachers' digital competence is vital for adapting their teaching methods to the evolving demands of online learning, highlighting the importance of ongoing professional development.

Recommendations

Based on the study findings, several recommendations can be made to deal with challenges that teachers and learners face during periods of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic:

- 1) Creative teaching strategies: Teachers should explore innovative teaching methods using available technology, such as mobile phones and text messaging apps, to engage learners with diverse needs (UNESCO, 2020b).
- 2) Professional development: Teachers should receive ongoing training in digital tools and inclusive teaching strategies to support learners better in online classrooms (Liu et al., 2022).
- 3) Infrastructure support: Governments should prioritise improving digital infrastructure, including providing reliable internet access and digital devices for all learners, to reduce the digital divide (OECD, 2020b; Spaull, 2022).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study highlights the essential role of South African teachers as mediators of learning in Grade 6 inclusive classrooms during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite their efforts to support diverse learners, teachers faced significant challenges, including limited digital skills, inadequate internet access, and a lack of suitable devices. These barriers hindered their ability to effectively deliver online lessons, highlighting the need for enhanced teacher support and development.

To address these challenges, I emphasise the importance of providing teachers with training in digital tools and technology integration. The DBE should take the lead in organising workshops and initiatives to improve teachers' digital competencies and ensure equitable access to resources. Additionally, improving digital infrastructure in schools is crucial in closing the digital divide. By investing in these areas, teachers will be better equipped to mediate learning effectively in future online teaching situations, fostering a more inclusive and resilient education system.

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- ii. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.
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