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NARRATIVES BY PARENTS OF WHAT EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNERS WERE DOING DURING COVID-19 IN COMMUNITIES IN WESTERN AND EASTERN PROVINCES, ZAMBIA

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Abstract

This paper shares the findings of a study that aimed at finding out what Early Childhood Education (ECE) learners were doing during at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown period. This was a qualitative research study, employing the narrative approach. Snowball sampling technique was used to sample respondents and thus, the participants were not predetermined but determined as the research was being undertaken. Observation guides and interview schedules were used to collect data from both parents and children in the age range of concern in ECE. Data was analysed using thematic and narrative data analysis techniques. Findings point to a protracted contemporary lifestyle of cosmopolitan homes that delegated early childhood learners in homes watching television and playing games. A sizeable number of parents managed to hire teachers to come to their homes and teach their children. Meanwhile, in the typical rural and remote areas of Eastern and Western Provinces, ECE learners accompanied their parents on normal errands, and business trips, followed their peers to play and went about their daily routines as they did before enrolling in school. All parents confirmed being sensitized on government measures of strengthening the once vibrant 'learning on Taonga market', which is an interactive radio learning programme; the introduction of Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation (ZNBC) TV4 channel dedicated to various schooling sessions; and the advertisements by individuals and private companies of pre-packaged and others, recorded, learning materials. Unanimously, parents interviewed shared challenges ranging from power failure, unavailable power sources (from solar or the power supply company Zambia Electricity Supply Corporation) and or unavailable batteries in local stores in their area, to intermittent connectivity challenges. Observations confirm revelations from the narratives of parents that learning was not taking

place during Covid-19 times for ECE learners. This study was undertaken seeing the many complaints parents aired upon seeing the escalating Covid-19 cases in many parts of Zambia. Their worry is justified thus this study calls for a microscopic and binocular lens to ensure measures are put in place to ensure ECE learners have gainful learning practices in place should the pandemic worsen. It was recommended that educational platforms should incorporate interactive elements, such as live teacher-student interactions and hands-on activities, to better engage young learners and maintain their interest.

Keywords: Covid-19, ECE, Learners, Narratives,

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic caused unprecedented disruptions to education systems worldwide, with early childhood education (ECE) being particularly affected. In Zambia, like in many other countries, the government implemented stringent measures to curb the spread of the virus, including the closure of schools. This resulted in a significant shift in the way learning was conducted, especially for young learners who were still in their formative years (UNESCO, 2020).

Early childhood education is crucial for the cognitive, social, and emotional development of children (Heckman, 2011). However, during the pandemic, the usual structured learning environments were replaced by home-based and informal learning activities. The Zambian government, in response, attempted to mitigate these disruptions by introducing alternative learning platforms such as the "Learning on Taonga Market," an interactive radio program, and a dedicated television channel (ZNBC TV4) for educational content (U.S. Agency for International Development, 2008; World Bank (2020). Despite these efforts, the extent to which these initiatives were effective, particularly in rural and remote areas, remains a subject of concern.

Research from other parts of the world has shown that the pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities in access to education, with children from disadvantaged backgrounds being the most affected (Andrew et al., 2020; ADEA & APHRC, 2023; Mpolomoka, Mwaka & Mandyata, 2024). In Zambia, this situation was mirrored in rural areas where access to electricity, reliable internet, and other resources necessary for remote learning was limited (World Bank, 2020; Banda et al., 2017). Consequently, while some children in urban and cosmopolitan areas could continue learning through digital platforms and hired tutors, those in rural communities were often left to engage in non-academic activities, which could negatively impact their educational outcomes in the long term.

This study, therefore, seeks to explore the narratives of parents in Western and Eastern Provinces of Zambia regarding what early childhood learners were doing during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Focusing on both rural and urban contexts, this research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the challenges faced and the coping strategies employed by parents to facilitate learning during this period. Understanding these dynamics is critical for informing future policy and ensuring that all children, regardless of their socio-economic background, have access to quality education even in times of crisis.

1.1 **Objectives**

- a) To establish the role of socio-economic factors in shaping the learning experiences of early childhood learners during the pandemic.
- b) To identify the strategies employed by parents in both urban and rural communities to support their children's education during school closures.
- c) To establish effectiveness of alternative educational platforms in facilitating ECE during the COVID-19 lockdown in rural and urban areas of Zambia.

1.2 Contextual Scenario

The COVID-19 pandemic drastically altered the educational landscape in Zambia, exposing deep-rooted inequalities between urban and rural areas, particularly in the context of early childhood education (ECE). While urban households in more affluent regions had greater access to digital learning tools and resources, those in rural areas faced significant challenges, including limited access to electricity, internet connectivity, and educational materials. This disparity left many young learners in rural communities relying on traditional, non-academic activities or informal learning, which raised concerns about the long-term impact on their educational development. The situation underscored the urgent need for adaptive strategies and policies to bridge the gap between urban and rural education systems, ensuring that all children have equal opportunities to learn, even in times of crisis (Zimba, 2021; ADEA & APHRC, 2023; Mushibwe, Mpolomoka, Mwelwa, Mushima & Kakoma, 2024).

1.3 **Theoretical Framework**

This study is grounded in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), which provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex, multi-layered interactions that influence a child's development. Bronfenbrenner's theory posits that a child's development is affected by different environmental systems, ranging from immediate surroundings such as family and school (microsystem) to broader societal influences like cultural values and government policies (macrosystem). This theory emphasizes the interdependence of these systems, suggesting that changes or disruptions in one area, such as the home environment during the COVID-19 pandemic, can significantly impact a child's development.

The relevance of Bronfenbrenner's theory to this study lies in its ability to explain how the COVID-19 pandemic, as an external shock, disrupted the various systems surrounding early childhood learners. For instance, the closure of schools and the shift to home-based learning environments altered the microsystem, where direct interactions with teachers and peers were replaced by parents and other caregivers. Additionally, the pandemic influenced the exosystem and macrosystem, as government interventions and societal responses, such as the introduction of remote learning platforms and public health measures, shaped the educational experiences of children in different socio-economic contexts.

Applying Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory allows this study to explore how these different environmental systems interacted during the pandemic to affect early childhood education in Zambia. By examining the narratives of parents, the study assesses how the disruptions in these systems, particularly in rural and urban settings, influenced children's learning experiences. This theoretical lens is crucial for understanding the broader implications of the pandemic on child development and education, highlighting the need for policies that consider the diverse environments in which children are raised, especially in times of crisis (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

1.4 **Philosophical Underpinnings**

The philosophical underpinnings of this study are rooted in constructivism, a paradigm that aligns closely with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. Constructivism posits that individuals actively

construct knowledge through their interactions with the environment and the social contexts in which they live. This perspective emphasizes the importance of context, experience, and social interaction in shaping understanding and development. In the context of early childhood education during the COVID-19 pandemic, constructivism provides a lens through which to explore how children, guided by their parents and caregivers, made sense of their disrupted learning environments.

Under constructivism, learning is seen as a dynamic and socially mediated process, where knowledge is co-constructed between the learner and their environment. During the pandemic, the role of parents and the home environment became more prominent in the learning process, especially in the absence of formal educational settings. This shift underscores the constructivist view that learning does not occur in isolation but is deeply influenced by the interactions between the child and their immediate surroundings, as well as the broader societal context. The study's focus on parental narratives reflects this constructivist stance, emphasizing the subjective experiences of families and how these shaped the learning trajectories of early childhood learners.

This study acknowledges the varied and context-dependent nature of learning during the pandemic. It recognizes that the knowledge and skills children developed during this time were heavily influenced by the socio-cultural contexts in which they were embedded, as well as the interactions with caregivers and the broader societal response to the crisis. This philosophical foundation is critical for understanding the diverse ways in which early childhood education was experienced across different communities in Zambia, providing insights into how educational policies and practices can be more responsive to the needs of learners in varying contexts.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The COVID-19 pandemic has sparked a growing body of research exploring its impact on education systems worldwide, with a particular focus on early childhood education (ECE). This literature review examines existing studies that address the challenges and adaptations in ECE during the pandemic, highlighting the disparities between urban and rural settings, the effectiveness of remote learning interventions, and the role of socio-economic factors in shaping educational outcomes (Chanda, 2024). Synthesizing these findings, the review aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the pandemic has influenced early learning experiences, particularly in contexts like Zambia, where access to resources and infrastructure varies significantly across regions.

2.1 Role of Socio-Economic Factors in Shaping the Learning Experiences of Early Childhood Learners during the Pandemic

In a review of various literature, the role of socio-economic factors in shaping the learning experiences of early childhood learners during the COVID-19 pandemic has been a focal point of numerous studies globally. Research has consistently demonstrated that socio-economic status (SES) is a critical determinant of educational access and quality, with children from higher SES backgrounds typically having more resources and support to continue their education during crises (Reimers & Schleicher, 2020; Hapompwe, Kukano & Siwale, 2020; Kabundula & Namushi, 2023; Mwale & Chita, 2020; Banda & Mpolomoka, 2023; ADEA & APHRC, 2023). For example, during the pandemic, these disparities became more pronounced as families with greater financial means could provide digital devices, internet access, and even private tutoring, ensuring that their children's education continued with minimal disruption (Di Pietro et al., 2020). Children from lower SES backgrounds, particularly in rural and underserved areas, faced significant barriers. This includes the lack of access to technology, stable electricity, as well as parental support, leading to a widening educational gap.

In low-income and rural areas, such as those in Zambia, the socio-economic challenges were compounded by pre-existing infrastructural deficiencies, further exacerbating educational inequalities. Studies have shown that in many developing countries, including Zambia, the digital divide characterized by limited internet connectivity and the scarcity of digital devices was a significant obstacle to implementing remote learning (World Bank, 2020; Chikopela et al., 202). For instance, in rural communities where electricity and internet access are unreliable or non-existent, children were unable to participate in online learning initiatives or access educational content provided through digital platforms. This lack of access was often coupled with parents' limited educational backgrounds and inability to support home-based learning, further disadvantaging children from lower socio-economic groups (Chikopela, Mandyata, Ndhlovu & Mpolomoka, 2019; Dube, 2020).

The economic pressures brought on by the pandemic forced many families, particularly those in lowincome brackets, to prioritize survival over education. Studies have reported that in such contexts, children were often required to contribute to household income or assist with domestic chores, leaving little time for academic activities (Save the Children, 2020; Chanda, 2024). This shift in priorities not only disrupted learning but also posed long-term risks to the educational attainment of these children. The socio-economic barriers highlighted by the pandemic underscore the need for targeted interventions that address both the immediate and structural challenges faced by disadvantaged families to ensure that all children have equitable access to quality education, regardless of their socio-economic status.

2.2 Strategies Employed by Parents in Urban and Rural Communities to Support Children's Education during School Closures

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a sudden shift to home-based learning, compelling parents to take on more active roles in their children's education. The strategies employed by parents varied widely between urban and rural communities, largely influenced by available resources, parental education levels, and access to technology. In urban areas, where resources were more readily available, parents often relied on digital platforms and online resources to continue their children's education. Studies indicate that parents in urban settings were more likely to use educational apps, online tutoring services, and digital learning tools to supplement their children's learning during school closures (Garbe et al., 2020). These parents also tended to have higher educational backgrounds, which enabled them to effectively guide their children's learning and adapt to the demands of home-based education (Dong, Cao, & Li, 2020).

In contrast, parents in rural communities faced significant challenges in supporting their children's education due to limited access to technology and other educational resources. Research has shown that in these areas, parents often reverted to more traditional learning support methods, such as reading books, using printed educational materials, and engaging children in educational games or household tasks that promote learning (Dube, 2020). The lack of internet access and digital devices in many rural households meant that parents had to be resourceful in finding ways to keep their children engaged in learning. In some cases, community-based approaches were adopted, where parents would collaborate to share resources or rotate responsibility for teaching small groups of children (Kim & Asbury, 2020).

The socio-economic conditions in rural areas often forced parents to prioritize survival over education, especially in low-income families. In such contexts, the strategies employed by parents to support their children's education were often limited to what was feasible within their means. Some studies have noted that despite the challenges, many parents in rural areas attempted to continue their children's education by integrating learning into everyday activities, such as farming, cooking, and other household chores (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021; Mukuka, Shumba & Mulenga, 2021). While not a substitute for formal schooling, this informal approach to education helped keep children engaged and provided them with

practical skills. The varied strategies employed by parents in both urban and rural settings during the pandemic highlight the adaptive responses to unprecedented circumstances and underscore the importance of context-specific support systems to enhance educational resilience.

2.3 Effectiveness of Alternative Educational Platforms in Facilitating ECE during the COVID-19 Lockdown in Rural and Urban Areas of Zambia

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted a global shift toward alternative educational platforms, particularly in early childhood education (ECE), as traditional in-person learning environments were disrupted. In Zambia, the government introduced several remote learning initiatives, including the "Learning on Taonga Market" radio program and the Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation (ZNBC) TV4 channel, specifically designed to cater to students during the lockdown. The effectiveness of these platforms varied significantly between rural and urban areas, influenced by factors such as accessibility, infrastructure, and the socio-economic status of families (Chanda, 2024). In urban areas, where access to electricity and media was more consistent, these alternative platforms played a crucial role in maintaining educational continuity. Parents and caregivers in these regions were more likely to utilize these resources, supplemented by digital tools and internet-based educational content, which enhanced their children's learning experience during the lockdown (Mukuka, Shumba & Mulenga, 2021).

Conversely, the effectiveness of these alternative educational platforms in rural areas was markedly lower due to several infrastructural and logistical challenges. Studies have shown that in many rural parts of Zambia, access to electricity is unreliable, and internet connectivity is either limited or non-existent, which severely restricts the use of television and online learning platforms (World Bank, 2020). Radio, while more accessible, faced its own challenges, including poor signal reception and the limited availability of radio sets in some households. As a result, the reach and impact of programs like "Learning on Taonga Market" were significantly diminished in these regions. Moreover, the content delivered through these platforms often did not account for the linguistic and cultural diversity present in rural areas, further limiting their effectiveness in engaging young learners (Mukuka & Mweemba, 2020; Moono, Musonda, Mpolomoka, Banda, Sampa & Chalwe, 2024).

Moreover, the lack of parental support in rural areas, often due to low levels of education and literacy, hindered the effectiveness of these alternative platforms. In many cases, parents were unable to guide their children through the educational content provided, leaving the young learners to navigate these resources on their own or with minimal supervision (Mukuka, Shumba & Mulenga, 2021). This gap highlights a critical issue in the design and implementation of remote learning initiatives in Zambia while these platforms were theoretically sound and beneficial in urban settings, their effectiveness in rural areas was undermined by socio-economic and infrastructural disparities (Mpolomoka, Changwe Kasote, Chikopela & Mwinsa, 2024; Mwinsa, Chikopela & Mpolomoka, 2024). Consequently, the uneven impact of these alternative educational platforms underscores the need for more tailored approaches that consider the unique challenges faced by rural communities to ensure equitable access to quality early childhood education during and beyond the pandemic.

3.0 METHODS

This qualitative research study employed a narrative approach to explore the experiences of early childhood learners and their parents during the COVID-19 pandemic in Zambia. The narrative approach is particularly suited for this study as it allows for an in-depth exploration of individual experiences, emphasizing the stories and perspectives of the participants. Through this method, the research aimed to capture the personal and contextualized accounts of how families navigated the educational challenges brought on by the pandemic, providing a rich understanding of the lived experiences in both urban and rural settings.

To identify participants, the study utilized the snowball sampling technique, a method commonly used in qualitative research when the target population is difficult to access or when participants are best identified through referral by others within the community. The process began with a small group of initial respondents who were known to have relevant experiences. These initial participants were then asked to refer other potential respondents who fit the study criteria, such as parents of early childhood learners or caregivers who were directly involved in their children's education during the pandemic. This referral process continued until a sufficient and diverse sample of participants was achieved. The snowball sampling technique was particularly effective in this study as it allowed for the inclusion of a broad range of experiences, especially in rural areas where formal educational networks may be less established.

Data collection was conducted using observation guides and interview schedules, which are standard tools in qualitative research for gathering detailed and context-rich data. The observation guides were used to systematically document the learning environments, behaviors, and interactions of children and their families during the pandemic. This observational data provided a contextual backdrop for understanding the narratives shared by the participants. In parallel, semi-structured interviews were conducted with both parents and children. These interviews were guided by open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed stories about the educational activities, challenges, and strategies employed during the lockdown. The semi-structured format allowed the researchers to probe deeper into specific areas of interest while also giving participants the freedom to share their experiences in their own words.

The collected data was analyzed using thematic and narrative analysis techniques. Thematic analysis involved identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within the data. The researchers carefully reviewed the transcripts of interviews and observation notes to identify recurring themes that reflected the core issues and experiences of the participants. These themes were then organized and interpreted to provide insights into the broader implications of the pandemic on early childhood education in Zambia. Narrative analysis, focused on the structure and content of the stories told by the participants. This approach allowed the researchers to understand how the participants made sense of their experiences and how they constructed their narratives within the socio-cultural context of the pandemic. Together, these analytical techniques provided a comprehensive understanding of the complex and varied experiences of early childhood learners and their families during this unprecedented period.

4.0 **RESULTS**

4.1 Role of Socio-Economic Factors in Shaping the Learning Experiences of Early Childhood Learners during the Pandemic

The study revealed significant differences in the learning experiences of early childhood learners based on socio-economic factors, particularly between urban and rural areas. Parents from cosmopolitan homes, who were generally more affluent, described how their children spent the majority of the lockdown period engaged in passive activities such as watching television and playing video games. One parent from an urban setting stated:

We tried to keep the children busy with educational TV programs, but most of the time, they ended up just watching cartoons or playing video games. There wasn't much else we could do since we were all confined at home.

This reflects the limited educational engagement that many children in higher socio-economic households experienced, despite having access to technology and media.

In contrast, several urban parents took proactive measures to ensure that their children's education continued despite school closures. A number of these parents were able to hire private tutors to provide in-home instruction. As one parent recounted:

We hired a tutor to come in a few times a week to keep the kids on track with their studies. It was expensive, but we felt it was necessary to maintain some level of learning.

This approach, however, was predominantly accessible to families with the financial resources to afford private tuition, highlighting the role of socio-economic status in determining the quality of education that children received during the pandemic.

Meanwhile, in rural and remote areas, the findings indicated a starkly different scenario. ECE learners in these regions largely reverted to traditional roles within their households, accompanying their parents on errands and participating in daily routines instead of engaging in structured educational activities. A parent from a rural area explained:

My children were more involved in helping with the farm and taking care of the livestock. There was no school, and we didn't have access to any of the online learning options, so they just went back to doing what they used to do before school.

This account underscores the profound impact of socio-economic disparities on educational access and the reliance on non-academic activities as a means of passing time during the lockdown, particularly in under-resourced rural communities. These verbatim collectively illustrate how socio-economic factors shaped the divergent educational experiences of early childhood learners across different regions in Zambia during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.2 Strategies Employed by Parents in Urban and Rural Communities to Support Children's Education during School Closures

The narratives were taken into use as mentioned in the methods. To start with, the findings reveal a variety of strategies employed by parents across both urban and rural communities in Zambia to support their children's education during the COVID-19 school closures. A significant number of parents acknowledged being aware of and attempting to utilize government-supported initiatives, such as the:

Learning on Taonga Market" radio program and the Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation (ZNBC) TV4 channel, which were introduced to provide continuous education during the lockdown.

As one urban parent explained:

We tried to follow the Taonga market lessons on the radio and also watched the TV4 channel regularly. It was helpful to have these resources, but the kids quickly lost interest without the interactive element of a classroom.

This statement highlights a common sentiment among urban parents who, while appreciative of the government's efforts, found that maintaining their children's attention and interest in these programs was challenging without the structured environment of a school.

In rural areas, however, parents faced additional challenges that limited their ability to effectively use these alternative educational platforms. Many parents reported difficulties in accessing the radio and television programs due to power failures, lack of electricity, or unavailability of batteries in local stores. One rural parent noted:

We had no power for days, and even when it was available, the radio signal was poor, so my children couldn't follow the lessons consistently.

This situation was compounded by the intermittent connectivity issues that made it difficult for families to rely on these resources consistently, forcing them to seek other ways to engage their children in learning. For instance, some parents turned to local community resources, such as borrowing books from neighbours or gathering children in small groups to teach them using whatever materials were available, emphasizing the communal approach often adopted in rural areas.

Beyond the government-provided programs, parents in both urban and rural settings employed a range of creative strategies to support their children's education during the lockdown. In urban areas, some parents used educational apps and online resources to supplement the television and radio programs, though this was often dependent on the availability of stable internet connections and digital devices. As one parent stated:

We downloaded some educational apps on the tablet and let the kids use them for an hour each day. It wasn't perfect, but it was something to keep them learning.

In contrast, rural parents, who generally lacked access to such technology, relied more on practical, hands-on learning activities. A rural parent shared:

We couldn't use the TV or radio much, so I taught my children basic math and reading using household items, like counting beans or reading old newspapers.

Despite these efforts, all parents interviewed expressed frustration with the limitations they faced, particularly in rural areas, where the infrastructural challenges were most acute. The lack of reliable power sources, coupled with the absence of alternative educational materials, made it difficult for parents to provide continuous educational support. The experiences shared by parents highlight the resilience and resourcefulness required to navigate these challenges, as well as the significant disparities in access to education during the pandemic. These narratives reflect the diverse strategies employed across different socio-economic and geographic contexts, illustrating both the successes and limitations of the approaches taken to support early childhood education during a time of unprecedented disruption.

4.3 Effectiveness of Alternative Educational Platforms in Facilitating ECE during the COVID-19 Lockdown

The study's findings reveal that alternative educational platforms, such as the "Learning on Taonga Market" radio program and the Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation (ZNBC) TV4 channel, were largely ineffective in ensuring continuous learning for early childhood education (ECE) learners during the COVID-19 lockdown in Zambia. Parents from both urban and rural areas consistently reported that despite the availability of these resources, their children did not engage in meaningful learning during this period. One urban parent remarked:

We tried to follow the TV4 lessons, but without a teacher to guide them, my children quickly lost interest and started treating it like any other TV show.

This sentiment was echoed across many households, where the lack of interactive, engaging content and the absence of teacher-student interaction rendered these platforms insufficient in maintaining the educational standards expected in a classroom setting.

In rural areas, the situation was even direr. Many parents noted that the limited access to electricity and poor signal reception made it nearly impossible for their children to participate in these alternative learning programs consistently. As one rural parent explained:

We heard about the radio lessons, but with the power cuts and bad signal, we could hardly catch any of the programs. My children ended up just helping out on the farm instead.

This lack of access, compounded by the already challenging socio-economic conditions in rural regions, meant that most ECE learners in these areas were effectively cut off from any formal education during the lockdown, leading to a complete cessation of structured learning activities. These narratives indicate that the alternative educational platforms implemented during the pandemic were insufficient in bridging the educational gap created by the school closures. The lack of interaction, combined with technical and infrastructural challenges, significantly hindered their effectiveness, leaving many young learners without the necessary support to continue their education.

5.0 **DISCUSSION**

5.1 Role of Socio-Economic Factors in Shaping the Learning Experiences of Early Childhood Learners during the Pandemic

The findings of this study underscore the significant influence of socio-economic factors on the learning experiences of early childhood learners during the COVID-19 pandemic, revealing a stark contrast between urban and rural contexts in Zambia. In urban, cosmopolitan areas, children were primarily engaged in passive activities such as watching television and playing video games. This aligns with the findings of Garbe et al. (2020), who noted that in higher socio-economic households, access to digital devices and media often led to children spending more time on entertainment rather than educational content. Despite the availability of educational television programs, the effectiveness of these resources was limited by the preference of young children for non-educational media, as parents struggled to enforce structured learning routines at home. This situation highlights a critical challenge in urban settings where, despite the availability of resources, the absence of formal school environments led to a decline in educational engagement.

On the other hand, a subset of urban parents took advantage of their financial capacity to hire private tutors, ensuring that their children continued to receive personalized education during the lockdown. This proactive approach is consistent with the observations of Dong et al. (2020), who found that wealthier families were more likely to invest in private tutoring and other educational services to mitigate the impact of school closures. The ability to hire tutors reflects a socio-economic privilege that was not available to families in lower-income brackets, further exacerbating educational inequalities. This trend highlights how socio-economic status can significantly influence the quality and continuity of education during times of crisis, as wealthier families are better positioned to provide alternative educational opportunities (U.S. Agency for International Development, 2008).

In contrast, the situation in rural areas of Zambia was markedly different, with early childhood learners often returning to pre-school routines and contributing to household chores and errands. This finding is supported by the work of Dube (2020), who observed that in rural areas, the lack of access to digital

learning tools and reliable electricity meant that children were largely disconnected from formal education during the pandemic. The reliance on traditional roles and activities reflects the limited educational resources and infrastructure in these regions, where parents were unable to provide the same level of educational support as their urban counterparts. Moreover, as Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021) noted, the socio-economic constraints in rural communities often meant that education took a backseat to more immediate concerns such as food security and economic survival, further widening the educational divide between urban and rural learners.

The contrasting experiences of urban and rural early childhood learners during the pandemic highlight the profound impact of socio-economic disparities on educational outcomes. While urban children, particularly those from affluent families, had some access to educational resources, the overall effectiveness was limited by the nature of the engagement. In contrast, rural children were largely deprived of formal educational opportunities, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions that address the unique challenges faced by rural communities. As this study demonstrates, socio-economic factors play a critical role in shaping educational experiences during crises, necessitating a more equitable approach to educational policy and resource allocation in future emergency responses.

5.2 Strategies Employed by Parents in Urban and Rural Communities to Support Children's Education during School Closures

The strategies employed by parents in both urban and rural communities during the COVID-19 school closures reflect the broader socio-economic and infrastructural disparities in Zambia. Urban parents, with relatively better access to technology and government-supported initiatives, attempted to leverage resources like the "Learning on Taonga Market" radio program and the ZNBC TV4 educational channel. However, as Garbe et al. (2020) noted, even when such resources are available, maintaining children's engagement without the structure of a traditional classroom remains a challenge. For instance, this aligns with the findings from the urban parents in this study, who struggled to keep their children interested in these programs despite their initial enthusiasm (Mukuka, Shumba & Mulenga, 2021; U.S. Agency for International Development, 2008).

In rural areas, the challenges were even more pronounced. The lack of reliable electricity and poor connectivity severely limited the effectiveness of the radio and television programs, a finding supported by Dube (2020), who highlighted similar issues in rural South Africa. The infrastructural barriers faced by rural parents forced them to adopt more localized, community-based strategies, such as teaching children with household items or borrowing educational materials from neighbors. This contrasts sharply with the urban context, where digital resources were more accessible, albeit still underutilized due to engagement issues.

The creative strategies employed by rural parents, while resourceful, underscore the significant inequities in educational access during the pandemic. As Kim and Asbury (2020) observed, in settings where formal educational resources are scarce, parents often resort to practical, hands-on learning activities, which, while valuable, cannot fully substitute for formal education. The disparity between urban and rural strategies highlights the urgent need for more equitable educational policies that address the unique challenges of rural communities, ensuring that all children have the opportunity to continue learning, even in times of crisis.

5.3 Effectiveness of Alternative Educational Platforms in Facilitating ECE during the COVID-19 Lockdown

The findings of this study highlight the significant shortcomings of alternative educational platforms in maintaining early childhood education during the COVID-19 lockdown in Zambia. The effectiveness of

platforms like the "Learning on Taonga Market" radio program and ZNBC TV4 was severely limited by several factors, including the lack of interactive content, insufficient engagement, and technical barriers. This is consistent with the observations of Chanda (2024), who found that while these platforms provided some continuity, they were not a substitute for the interactive and supportive environment of a classroom, especially for young learners who require more guided and hands-on learning experiences.

In urban areas, where these platforms were more accessible, the lack of sustained interest among children underscores the importance of interaction in the learning process. Garbe et al. (2020) emphasize that young children need more than just content delivery; they require active engagement, feedback, and interaction, which these platforms failed to provide. Meanwhile, in rural areas, the infrastructural challenges, such as unreliable electricity and poor signal reception, further diminished the potential impact of these educational interventions. This aligns with the findings of Dube (2020), who reported similar challenges in rural South Africa, where access to remote learning resources was severely hampered by technical limitations. The overall ineffectiveness of these platforms in facilitating continuous learning during the lockdown points to a critical need for more robust and inclusive educational strategies that can cater to the diverse needs of learners in different socio-economic and geographic contexts. The experience during the pandemic has highlighted the importance of developing alternative educational models that are both accessible and engaging, ensuring that all children, regardless of their circumstances, have the opportunity to continue their education in times of crisis.

6.0 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study reveals significant disparities in the effectiveness of alternative educational platforms during the COVID-19 lockdown, particularly in the context of early childhood education in Zambia. While efforts were made to provide continuous learning through radio and television programs, these platforms were largely ineffective due to a combination of lack of interaction, poor engagement, and infrastructural challenges, especially in rural areas. The findings underscore the urgent need for more equitable and interactive educational solutions that can better support learners during crises.

6.1 **Recommendations**

- a) Educational platforms should incorporate interactive elements, such as live teacher-student interactions and hands-on activities, to better engage young learners and maintain their interest.
- b) Investments should be made in improving electricity supply, internet connectivity, and access to digital devices in rural areas.
- c) Initiatives should be introduced to train parents and caregivers, particularly in rural areas, on how to effectively support their children's education at home using available resources.
- d) The educational content should be adapted to reflect the cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic contexts of different regions, ensuring that all children can relate to and benefit from the learning material.

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