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The Impact of Virus Pandemics on Secondary School Principals' Management Practices in the Mkhuhlu Circuit of Mpumalanga, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic suddenly swept through nations, impacting every sector, including basic education. This pandemic, unprecedented in its reach and severity, significantly altered the delivery of basic education. This study aimed to examine the influence of the virus pandemics on secondary school principals' management practices in rural secondary schools in the Mkhuhlu circuit of Mpumalanga, South Africa. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative techniques. Simple random sampling was used to select participants for the quantitative method, while purposive sampling was employed for qualitative data collection. The study discovered that during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, the learning process and the role of school administration shifted dramatically, resulting in a transition to distant learning. The findings highlight the critical role of principals in devising solutions to the challenges posed by the pandemic. Grounded in General Systems Theory (GST), the research underscores the interconnectedness of various school management components and the necessity for adaptive leadership in crisis situations. The study concludes that schools would benefit from a degree of decentralization, granting principals more control over day-to-day activities. This increased autonomy would allow principals to focus more on teaching and effectively manage future crises. The implications of these findings suggest that enhanced training, resource allocation, and support systems are essential for improving the resilience and adaptability of school management practices during pandemics.

Keywords: Management, Outbreak, Pandemic, Principal, Virus, COVID-19.

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 outbreak is by far the major virus pandemic that has threatened human life in history. COVID-19 is an acute respiratory disease caused by a novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), which emerged in China in late 2019. The spread of COVID-19 has had a profound effect on almost all spheres of human life, and education is no exception.[1] To curb the rapid increase of the pandemic, partial and total lockdowns were imposed, resulting in the total closure of schools in approximately 192 countries globally.[2] Within this context, over 1.6 billion learners across the world were compelled to stay out of

[1] Jianan Wang, Normah Binti Mustaffa, and Maizatul Haizan Binti Mahbob, "The Impact of Visual Communication in Packaging Design on Consumer Purchase Behaviour: A Case-Based Analysis," *International Journal of Instructional Cases* 9,no.1(2025):1–24.

[2] Soyhunlo Sebu, "Access to Quality Education, a Basic Right of Every Child," *Journal of Education, Society and Behavioural Science* 36, no. 7 (April 28, 2023): 41–46, https://doi.org/10.9734/jesbs/2023/v36i71234.

schools as social distancing was being enforced locally and regionally to contain the spread of the pandemic. In South Africa, the first COVID-19 case was confirmed on 5 March 2020. The spread of the virus was sporadic and even reached areas that are rural in South Africa. Rural areas can face different health challenges depending on where they are located.[3] These are areas where it could be difficult to manage the virus due to their remoteness and poor health facilities. Managing the schools in the area would be even more challenging considering that a considerable number of these schools lack facilities.[4] Without measures to combat the spread of the virus, it is approximated that 2.4% of the population would require hospitalisation and 216 064 deaths would occur by the end of the pandemic.[5] These conditions would impact on the management of schools.

Despite the fact that the COVID-19 outbreak has accelerated more than any other virus, it should be realised that even before the COVID-19 outbreak there have been many viruses, of which some led to school closures and some did not, for example, the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), which was discovered in 1982 and still exists at present. HIV transmitted via blood while Covid-19 is airborne. Principals have recently been given policies which guide them on how to manage matters regarding the HIV pandemic, while with COVID-19, the only thing they have in place are the instructions from the government, (DoBE). These instructions did not include how principals should manage their schools in order for positive teaching and learning to take place.

There is also the African swine fever pandemic which originates from animals, the first case was in 1926 which was recorded in the Northern part of the country, known as Transvaal.[6] As the virus increasingly spread in 1935 in most South African provinces, the country instituted and gazetted an ASF control area that encompassed the Limpopo province, the Northeast part of Mpumalanga, the northern part of Northwest and the KwaZulu Natal province. The designation area was based on the presence of the outbreak.[7] This virus is maintained and transmitted through different cycles like the sylvatic cycle which shows that it originated from warthogs and tampans (wild pigs) which spilled over to domestic pigs, the endemic cycle, which was an infection of domestic pigs which was reported in east Africa, the domestic cycle, where the virus was transmitted from infected pigs to all vulnerable inhabitants.[8]

In South Africa, the first COVID-19 positive case was confirmed on 5 March 2020.[9] Just ten days later, South Africa had 61 positive cases and President Cyril Ramaphosa put measures in place to combat the spread of the virus and declared a national state of disaster.[10] To reduce the health risk, which was looming, the South African government, through the Corona Virus Command Council announced a countrywide lockdown with effect from midnight of 26 March 2020.[11] This resulted in the closure of 23 076 schools, affecting 12 408 755 learners.[12] In the Mpumalanga province alone, school closure affected 1 795 public and independent schools, and approximately 1 094 941 learners, which translates to 7.2 % of the national learners' population DBE. Thus, the Mpumalanga province, which is predominantly rural, has the 5th highest number of affected learners in the country.[13] This suggests a massive overhaul of the management skills of principals during the pandemic.

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[3] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases (NCIRD)," *Virology, Surveillance, and Diagnosis Branch*, 2020.

[4] Grace Muremela et al., "Retaining Scarce Skills Teachers in a South African Rural Community: An Exploration of Associated Issues," *African Identities* 21, no. 4 (2023): 743–59.

[5] Ihsaan Bassier et al., "South Africa Can–and Should–Top up Child Support Grants to Avoid a Humanitarian Crisis," *The Conversation* 31 (2020).

[6] Carin Boshoff et al., "Genetic Characterisation of African Swine Fever Viruses from Outbreaks in Southern Africa (1973–1999)," *Veterinary Microbiology* 121, no. 1–2 (2007): 45–55.

[7] Boshoff et al., "Genetic Characterisation of African Swine Fever Viruses from Outbreaks in Southern Africa (1973–1999)."

[8] Noluvuyo Ruth Magadla, *The Prevalence of African Swine Fever Determinants along the Control Zone in South Africa* (University of Pretoria (South Africa), 2015).

[9] N.E. Mahaye, "The Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Education: Navigating Forward the Pedagogy of Blended Learning. ," 2020.

[10] Mahaye, "The Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Education: Navigating Forward the Pedagogy of Blended Learning. ."

[11] World Health Organization., " WHO Definition of Health," 2020, https://www.who.int/about/who-we-are/frequently-asked-questions.

[12] Department of Basic Education (DBE), "Annual Report 2016–2017," 2017, https://nationalgovernment.co.za/department_annual/173/2017-department:-basic-education-(dbe)-annual-report.pdf.

[13] Department of Basic Education (DBE), "Annual Report 2016–2017."

While there is existing literature on challenges experienced during virus pandemics worldwide, there is a notable gap in understanding how principals in rural South African schools should manage their institutions to facilitate teaching and learning amidst the pandemic. Specifically, there is a lack of research addressing context-based challenges affecting management priorities in the Mpumalanga Province in the wake of a pandemic. This study aims to fill the gap in the literature by exploring the unique challenges faced by principals in rural schools in Mpumalanga Province in managing their schools during pandemics. It investigates the leadership and managerial skills required to effectively navigate the complexities of pandemic management while ensuring the continuation of quality education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section outlines the literature review, which is centred on an overview which examines rules for managing COVID-19 in schools, the basic education management structure, and the issues faced by principals in managing schools during viral pandemics.

Impact of Pandemic Outbreak on Education System COVID-19

Efforts to curb the spread of COVID-19 pandemic through non-pharmaceutical interventions and preventive measures such as social-distancing and self-isolation prompted the widespread closure of primary, secondary, and tertiary schooling in over 100 countries.[14] Jordan notes that previous outbreaks of infectious diseases have also prompted widespread school closures around the world, with varying levels of effectiveness.[15] It is further highlighted that mathematical modelling has shown that closing schools during an outbreak does effectively reduce transmission rate of an outbreak. However, measures put in place may still not be effective if learners are still in contact outside of school premises more so, school closures may be effective when enacted promptly. UNESCO asserts that in some cases, the reopening of schools after a period of closure has resulted in increased infection rates.[16]

Though the confirmed cases of COVID-19 and related deaths in African countries, have been low compared to other continents, it is envisaged that the education of an African child would be the most affected in the post COVID-19 era due to economic and technological backwardness of most African countries.[17] Over 209 million learners in Africa have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.[18] The African continent is therefore, the second most affected continent in the world after Asia that has over 590 million affected children.[19] Figure 1.1 shows the estimated number of learners affected by school closure due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

[14] Mustafa Cevikbas and Gabriele Kaiser, "Flipped Classroom as a Reform-Oriented Approach to Teaching Mathematics," *ZDM* 52, no. 7 (December 7, 2020): 1291–1305, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11858-020-01191-5.

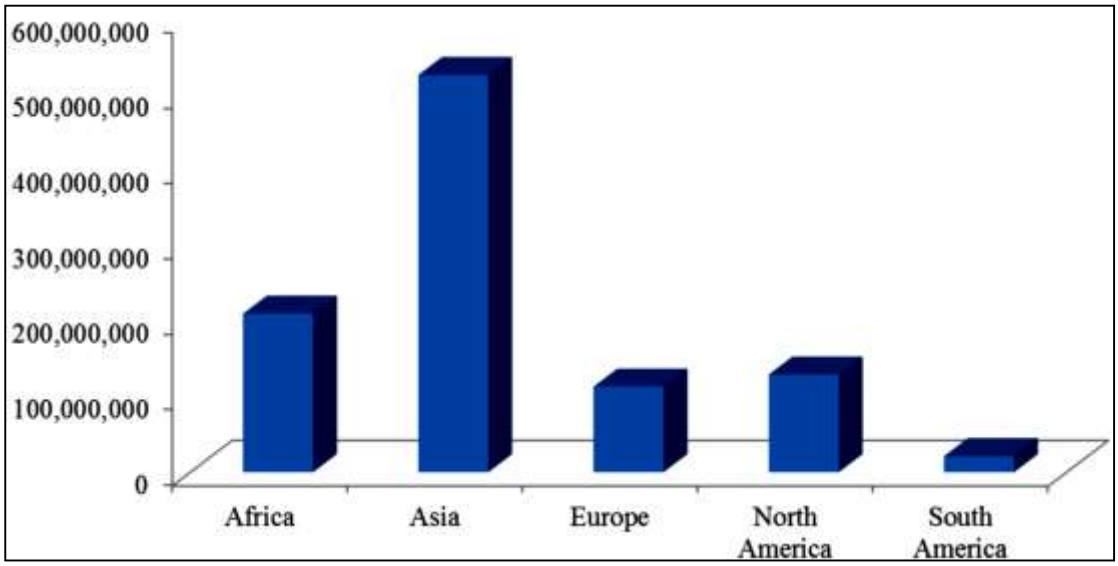
[15] Amber M. Angell et al., "'Starting to Live a Life': Understanding Full Participation for People With Disabilities After Institutionalization," *The American Journal of Occupational Therapy* 74, no. 4 (July 1, 2020): 7404205030p1–11, https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.2020.038489.

[16] Fiona Blaikie, Christine Daigle, and Liette Vasseur, "New Pathways for Teaching and Learning: The Posthumanist Approach," 2020.

[17] UNESCO, *Global Education Monitoring Report* (UNESCO, 2020).

[18] UNESCO, *Global Education Monitoring Report*.

[19] Godwin Attah Obande et al., "Current State of COVID-19 Pandemic in Africa: Lessons for Today and the Future," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 19 (2021): 9968.



Estimated figures of learners affected by COVID-19 (Mahaye, 2020)

In Africa, South Africa has the fourth largest number of learners affected by COVID-19. A country-wide lockdown was implemented in South Africa at midnight of Thursday 26 March 2020, and resulted in over 14 million learners in the country being temporarily out of school. It is reported that over 13 million learners who are enrolled in schools from pre-primary to high school are affected, while over 1.1 million students enrolled in tertiary institutions have been affected.[20]

Mahaye, highlights that at least 14% of annual secondary and primary school curriculum coverage for 2020 have been lost because of COVID-19 pandemic.[21] Due to the uncertainties surrounding the containment of COVID-19 in South Africa and across the world, social distancing will be the norm going into the unforeseeable future. The Department of Education had postulated a gradual reopening of schools, dubbed the 'Phasing in Approach'.[22] The 'Phasing in Approach' was designed to reopen schools in phases. This is meant to minimise the number of learners in school to facilitate social distancing. Previous research on recovery after outbreaks suggests that such practices as social distancing during outbreaks tend to continue even after the outbreak.[23] This will impact teaching and learning even post COVID-19. Therefore, it is critical to understand the impact and challenges brought about by the pandemics to school management. This will inform customised solutions that can aid schools post COVID-19 in South Africa.

1918-1919 influenza pandemic

UNESCO, states that during the 1918-1919 influenza pandemic in the United States, the lower mortality rate was associated with school closures and public gathering bans.[24] The choice to close schools is divisive; supporters claim that closing schools slows the spread of the virus, while opponents argue that the detrimental consequences on children's learning exceed any public health advantages. School closures and absences have a detrimental impact on student success. The situation in 1918 was starkly different from today: first, schools closed for far fewer days on average in 1918; second, the 1918 virus was far deadlier to young adults and children, increasing absenteeism even in schools that remained open; and third, due to a lack of good remote learning platforms in 1918, school closures may have had less of an impact on increasing social disparity.[25]

[20] UNESCO, *Global Education Monitoring Report*.
[21] Mahaye, "The Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Education: Navigating Forward the Pedagogy of Blended Learning. ."
[22] Head of Education Committee, *Framework for a Curriculum Recovery Plan – Post COVID-19* (South Africa: Department of Basic Education, 2020).
[23] D Kekić and S Miladinović, "Functioning of Educational System during an Outbreak of Acute Infectious Diseases," *No. November*, 2016.
[24] UNESCO, "Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage," 2003.
[25] Alan A Ager, Ana M G Barros, and Michelle A Day, "Contrasting Effects of Future Wildfire and Forest Management Scenarios on a Fire Excluded Western US Landscape," *Landscape Ecology* 37, no. 4 (2022): 1091–1112.

H1N1 Flue pandemic

During the 2009 H1N1 Flue pandemic, in multiple countries, closure of schools was one of the measures put in place that contributed to the lowering of the spread of infection. The closure of Schools in the city of Oita, Japan, was found to have decreased the number of infected students at the peak of infection; however, closing schools was not found to have significantly decreased the total number of infected students. In many cases where school closure was declared, including Oita, school managers were not given guidance on how to manage the teaching and learning processes, and how they could effectively play their role. Jackson, et al. state that mandatory school closures and other social distancing measures were associated with a 29% to 37% reduction in influenza rates of transmission or infection, slowed further spread and bought time to research and produce a vaccine.[26] However, the disruptions they caused affected people across communities, but their impact is more severe for disadvantaged children and their families, including interrupted learning, compromised nutrition, childcare problems and consequent economic cost to families who cannot work. I could not establish any guiding measures from this literature on how principals were required to manage their schools during the H1N1 flue pandemic.

School closures also negatively impact student learning outcomes. Worth noting is the fact that the disadvantages are disproportionate for under-privileged learners who tend to have fewer educational opportunities beyond school. For instance, when schools close, parents can struggle to teach their children at home due to limited resources, ability and time.[27] An additional challenge noted by Jackson, et al. is that student drop-out rates tend to increase as an effect of school closures due to the challenge of ensuring all students return to school once school closures end.[28] Further, disadvantaged, at-risk, or homeless children are more likely not to return to school after the closures are ended, which can result in a life-long disadvantage from lost opportunities. When schools are closed, many children and youth miss out on social contact that is essential for their learning and development.[29] Long periods of learning would be lost in cases where closures also lasted for longer periods. Kekić, et al. report that schools losing long periods of learning due to disease outbreak can result in both temporal and permanent damage to the education system.[30] The temporal damage includes disruption of curriculum which could take a long time to recover while the permanent damage includes the fact that some learners may never return to school even when the disease outbreak has ended.[31]

METHODOLOGY

A mixed research approach that comprises qualitative and quantitative methods was followed in this study to complement each other. The study's research design included explorative and descriptive aspects. The quantitative phase holds dominant status in the study. The qualitative phase was used to complement and enrich certain aspects of the quantitative component, and it explored the holistic picture of the influence of the virus pandemic on the management practices of secondary school principals and educators under the Mkhuhlu circuit, which has 241 secondary school educators in the Mpumalanga Province.

The researcher opted to use mixed methods because they would allow him to gather both quantitative and qualitative data, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the research topic. By combining different types of data, the researcher gained insights into both the breadth and depth of the influence of the virus pandemic on secondary school principals' management practices in the rural secondary schools in the Mkhuhlu circuit of Mpumalanga.

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[26] R., Manimekalai, K., Jackson, and P. Olivier, "Marriage and Mental Health during Pregnancy in South Africa," *South African Journal of Sociology* 22, no. 1 (2020): 12–20.

[27] Shelina Bhamani et al., "Home Learning in Times of COVID: Experiences of Parents.," *Journal of Education and Educational Development* 7, no. 1 (2020): 9–26.

[28] Scott Wright, Daniel Jackson, and Todd Graham, "When Journalists Go 'below the Line': Comment Spaces at The Guardian (2006–2017)," *Journalism Studies* 21, no. 1 (2020): 107–26.

[29] Wang, Mustaffa, and Mahbob, "The Impact of Visual Communication in Packaging Design on Consumer Purchase Behaviour: A Case-Based Analysis."

[30] Kekić and Miladinović, "Functioning of Educational System during an Outbreak of Acute Infectious Diseases."

[31] Kekić and Miladinović, "Functioning of Educational System during an Outbreak of Acute Infectious Diseases."

In this study, the purposive sampling technique was used for the qualitative methodology. A semi-structured interview guided the pre-test with five respondents purposively selected from the categories of respondents. This increased the reliability of the data collection instruments. Pre-testing was also done with the questionnaire. Pre-testing was performed to identify delicate issues that respondents would feel uneasy responding and after pre-testing, the questions will be adjusted based on the errors picked. In addition, the investigator looked for questions that go unanswered frequently. The investigator needed to know if the respondents thought the questions were excessively long. This was necessary since most respondents become unwilling to take part in a study if the interview or questionnaire takes a long time to complete. The whole research sample did not participate in the pilot study, which was conducted on students and veteran instructors.

Data Collection Procedure

This study used a primary data collection method. Semi-structured interviews were used for qualitative data collection while questionnaires were used for quantitative data collection.

Semi-structured Interview

A semi-structured interview schedule was used to guide the face-to-face interviews. Qualitative data was generated using personal interviews. This study used a probability sampling method. A sample of 149 respondents was recommended and used, with a marginal error of 5% and a confidence level of 95%. A self-administered questionnaire was used. The questionnaires were distributed to post-level 1 educators at the schools under the study.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for this study was done using different data analysis tools, this was done in line with the mixed method approach. This approach was employed to strengthen results from both qualitative and quantitative methods. The strengths of the other supplement the weaknesses of the other. Data was analysed through Thematic Analysis and Social Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), respectively discussed in the following sections.

Thematic analysis

Qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis. The data was categorised into different themes. Since verbal words were recorded with an audio-tape recorder during data collection from 10 participants interviewed, the tape clips were played several times to become well acquainted with the participants' actual words. The audio voices were transcribed into ordinary text. Once a transcription was ready, categories were then developed from codes. According to Ashmore, transcription is the systematic representation of language in written form.[32]

Using this technique, the researcher read the verbatim transcripts again until distinct codes became apparent. He was able to create themes and categories using the codes. The investigator was able to organize the data using these themes and categories, which led to the emergence of patterns and trends.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The thrust of this section is on the discussion of the items that had to do with management practices utilised by the principals in the management of virus pandemics in the schools. The questionnaire and interview guide contained questions on the management practices that were instituted from the perspectives of the level 1 position.

The impact of a virus pandemic on principals' school management practices

The study sought to understand contextualised policy or plan to action through question 5 in the questionnaire and from the lenses of the participants through seeking to understand if the schools had

[32] Harry S Ashmore, *The Negro and the Schools* (Univ of North Carolina Press, 2010).

policies written or unwritten to ensure that the schools were in a safe manner. The table provides the responses of the participants regarding the aspect of policy making.

Table 1: Awareness of policy on the management of viral pandemic

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent
Strongly agree	15	11.2	11.2
Agree	25	18.7	18.7
Undecided	10	7.5	7.5
Disagree	30	22.5	22.5
Strongly disagree	53	39.8	39.8
Total	133	100.0	100.0

Results show that there is no policy in place because about 39.8 % of the participants indicate that teachers are unaware of the school's policy on managing viral pandemics based on their responses. 22.5% of teachers were not well-informed on the protocols they should follow in the event of a pandemic. This is likely because many schools do not have explicit policies in place to address the issue, or that teachers have not been adequately trained on how to respond to a pandemic. Without clear policies and training, it is difficult for teachers to be prepared for such an event. Furthermore, schools may be reluctant to create and implement such policies due to the significant costs associated with them.

The study interrogates if teachers are aware of the school policy on managing the viral pandemic or understand the awareness of policy on the management of the viral pandemic and if was effective enough. The study found that schools have no awareness of policy on the management of the Viral pandemic they only follow the order from the Department of Education. Most of the participants were not aware of the existence of a policy document on the aspect of managing the pandemic within the specific context of the school and its unique challenges and scenarios. The conclusive position of this study becomes that the pronouncements by the minister and the government became the de-facto policies that guided the way in which individual schools dealt with the boundary.

The study found that schools have no awareness of policy on the management of the viral pandemic. They only follow the order from the Department of Education. Participants indicated they are unaware of the school's policy on managing viral pandemics:

> **Participant 6:** *"Schools did not create their own policies for use within their setups but followed the DBE's pronouncements. For schools to effectively manage a crisis, they need policies and action plans tailored to their needs. Because teachers continued to get the covid-19 despite these DBE policies, they were not effective at all."*

> **Participant 10:** *"It is possible that many teachers might not be aware of pandemic management policies because my schools tend to just follow orders from the top. So, the pronouncements made by the ministers as directives become the de-facto school policies that need to be followed. In my school, these Covid-19 policies were ineffective due to the lack of classrooms, toilets, and water. Due to this, many students were affected by Covid-19.*

Most of the participants were not aware of the existence of a policy document on the aspect of managing the pandemic within the specific context of the school and its unique challenges and scenarios. The lack of awareness could be attributed to the fact that the policy document was not widely disseminated and was not well-publicized. It is also possible that the school did not have the resources or capacity to effectively communicate the policy document to a large audience. The lack of awareness had a significant impact on the school's response to the pandemic, as the policy document provided important guidance and direction. Without its widespread dissemination, the school was unable to properly leverage the document's contents to create a more comprehensive and effective response. These results concur with the results of quantitative that found that the correspondents were not aware of the existence of a policy document on the aspect of managing the pandemic.

Monitoring and support

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent
Strongly agree	7	5.3	5.3
Agree	11	8.3	8.3
Undecided	18	13.5	13.5
Disagree	26	19.5	19.5.
Strongly disagree	71	53.4	53.4
Total	133	100.0	100.0

The study sought to find out from respondents whether the school governing body visits the school for support. 71(53.4%) respondents strongly disagreed and 26 (19.5%) disagreed. In total, 97(73, %) respondents generally agreed that the school management body does not visit the school to offer support. There are 18(13.5%) respondents that remained undecided. The emerging picture is that the school governing body paid visits to the school for visits. (73%) of respondents generally agreed that the school management body does not visit the school to offer support. The survey results showed that most respondents believed that the school management body does not visit the school on a regular basis to provide guidance and answer questions from teachers and students. This indicates that the school governing body is not doing a good job of engaging with the school community. It suggests that the school-governing body should be well trained and made to understand the important role which they have to play in schools. Additionally, the survey also found that respondents felt negatively towards the school's management body, suggesting that the trust between the two parties is weak.

These findings of the quantitative study were supported by the qualitative findings where participants were asked if the school governing body and department officials visit the school for monitoring and providing management support during virus pandemic guidelines. The participants of the study were of the view that monitoring and providing support were critical management aspects of managing a pandemic in schools. Participants had this to say:

> **Participant 7***: "Monitoring is an important tool and very critical to be undertaken especially by the departmental officials to understand the impact the policy announcements had on the ground". But not a single official visited the schools they were working in their homes. By not undertaking any on-site monitoring, the officials failed to accurately gauge the effects of their policy decisions, impacting the efficacy of their work that resulted in teachers and learners affected by COVID-19.*

Continuous monitoring and support ensure that the system remains motivated and in line with the set goals and targets. The participants were of the view that monitoring and support were not convincing as the teachers and schools were left to shoulder the burden with appropriate support coming from the department. A lot of policy pronouncements were not conducive for several schools that are not well-resourced.

Table 2: Role of the principal in managing the spread of COVID-19

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent
Strongly agree	80	60.1	60.1
Agree	21	15.8	15.8
Undecided	15	11.3	11.3
Disagree	7	5.3	5.3
Strongly disagree	10	7.5	7.5
Total	133	100.0	100.0

This table shows the responses of respondents regarding the need for principals to monitor to ensure that the virus pandemic is not spread. 80 (60.1%) of respondents strongly agreed that there is a need for principals to monitor to ensure that the virus pandemic is not spread and 21 (15.8%) agreed that there is a need for principals to monitor to ensure that the virus pandemic is not spread. Of those

who were undecided 15 (11.3%) there is a need for principals to monitor to ensure that the virus pandemic is not spread. On the other hand, 7 (5.3%) respondents disagreed that there is a need for principals to monitor to ensure that the virus pandemic is not spread and 10 (7.5%) respondents strongly disagreed that there is a need for principals to monitor to ensure that the virus pandemic is not spread. This added up to 17 (12.8%) respondents who refused to accept that principals should monitor practices to avoid the spread of the virus pandemic.

In response to the virus pandemic, 76% of correspondents say principals need to monitor practices. In contrast, 24% of respondents refused to accept that principals should monitor practices to avoid the virus pandemic spreading. The results of the survey suggest that most people feel that it is important for principals to take proactive steps to reduce the spread of the virus.

However, there is still a minority of respondents that are not in favour of such measures. There is still a debate over the best way to mitigate the spread of the virus. Despite the majority favoring principals taking proactive steps to reduce the spread of the virus, there is still a minority of respondents who are reluctant to accept this approach, indicating that further discussion is still needed on the best way to mitigate the virus pandemic.

The findings suggest that principals used school management practices effectively during a virus pandemic in rural secondary schools in the Mkhuhlu circuit. As a result, principals are now expected to manage complex responsibilities and personnel issues in addition to ensuring the safety and well-being of students and staff. This has put a great deal of pressure on principals, who have had to become more adaptive and resourceful in their roles.

Awareness of policy on the management of viral pandemic

The outbreak of COVID-19 entailed that the DBE had issued policy pronouncements guided by the input from the Department of Health on the measures that were supposed to be instituted in the schools.[33] It was the prerogative of the principals to activate and implement the measures and contextualise them in their own conditions. The role of the principals was to ensure that such policy measures cascade down to the teachers and subsequently the learners. To effectively manage a crisis, institutions need to have policies and action plans that are supposed to be implemented and activated if the scenario happens. Policymaking is the prerogative of principals within schools with technical guidance from departmental specialists.[34] Schools are supposed to come up with policies that ensure that the safety and well-being of learners are ensured and that the school takes an intentional approach. Most of the participants were not aware of the existence of a policy document on the aspect of managing the pandemic within the specific context of the school and its unique challenges and scenarios. The conclusive position on this study becomes that the pronouncements by the minister and the government become the de-facto policies that guided the way in which individual schools dealt with the boundary.

Principals' school management practices during a virus pandemic

The study sought to know the principals' school management practices during a virus pandemic that were fundamentally important to enable schools to deal with the scourge of the pandemic. Key to this study was the issue of monitoring and support which was identified as one key aspect that ensure smooth flow, effectiveness, and efficiency. Monitoring entails the consistent and periodic check done by the responsible leadership upon the person delegated with the tasks and duties.[35] This helps to ensure that the tasks and duties are being carried out accurately and in a timely manner. It also serves to provide feedback to the responsible leadership about the progress or lack thereof to make necessary adjustments.

[33] Nicholas Spaull, Elizabeth Pretorius, and Nompumelelo Mohohlwane, "Investigating the Comprehension Iceberg: Developing Empirical Benchmarks for Early-Grade Reading in Agglutinating African Languages," *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 10, no. 1 (2020): 1–14.

[34] Miranda N Mgijima, "Perceptions of Communities about a Persistent Problem," *Constitution*, 2014.

[35] Mthokozisi Masombuka et al., "Seroprevalence and Risk Factors of Toxoplasma Gondii in Sheep and Goats of North West Province, South Africa," *BMC Veterinary Research* 20, no. 1 (2024): 120.

Monitoring and Support

The findings revealed that school governing bodies (SGBs) were not effectively supporting schools during the pandemic. Most respondents felt that SGBs did not visit regularly to provide the necessary guidance and support. This lack of engagement led to a disconnect and eroded trust between school management and governing bodies. Continuous monitoring and support are critical for maintaining motivation and alignment with set goals, yet the study indicates that teachers and schools were left to shoulder the burden without sufficient backing from the department. This situation underscores the need for more proactive and consistent involvement from SGBs to support schools in crisis situations.

To support the idea and concept of monitoring and support, the study sought the views of the participants regarding the role of the principal in the context of managing the spread of the pandemic in the school environment. Monitoring is done to learn from experiences to improve practices and activities in the future, have internal and external accountability of the resources used and the results obtained; make informed decisions on the future of the initiative, and promote empowerment of beneficiaries of the initiative.[36] Monitoring enables documentation of findings, procedures, and experiences, which may then be utilised to guide decision-making and learning processes. During a pandemic, it is imperative for the management to monitor progress at the grassroots level, and this includes the principals and the entire leadership structure of the DBE.

Role of principal in managing the virus

A methodical approach was needed to prepare for the reopening, including having enough Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) facilities, carefully thought-out physical social-distance measures, a classroom environment, campus management, knowledge and skills on infection prevention and control. The government created a thorough and organized structure to get schools ready to reopen.[37] Schools were putting a lot of effort into checking and upgrading WASH facilities as they got ready for reopening.[38] For safe-school operations, sanitizing, handwashing practices and habits were equally as important as the facilities.[39] To manage the virus at school and to limit the negative impacts of the virus, several measures were adopted by school principals. Some schools opened their gates to learners and organised them to sit in open spaces.[40]

The finding of this study was that monitoring and providing support were critical management aspects of managing a pandemic in schools. Continuous monitoring and support ensure that the system remains motivated and in line with the set goals and targets. The participants were of the view that monitoring and support were not convincing as the teachers and schools were left to shoulder the burden with appropriate support coming from the department. A lot of policy pronouncements were not conducive for several schools that are not well-resourced.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- It is recommended for the principals to put measures in place to ensure that learners are always safe in schools during emergency crisis
- It is recommended that the Department of Basic Education must equip principals on how to deal with crisis in their schools.
- It is recommended that principals must work as a team with all stakeholders to keep stability in relation to learner safety in schools. Hence consultation hours are suggested to equip both parties. There is a habit sometimes that some SMT members neglect their duties with the hope

[36] Beth Porter and Burcin Bozkaya, *Assessing the Effectiveness of Using Live Interactions and Feedback to Increase Engagement in Online Learning*, 2020, https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2008.08241.

[37] Zhe Wang et al., "The Longitudinal Role of Mathematics Anxiety in Mathematics Development: Issues of Gender Differences and Domain-specificity," *Journal of Adolescence* 80, no. 1 (April 18, 2020): 220–32, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2020.03.003.

[38] Lishuai Jia and Marina Santi, "Inclusive Education for Students with Disabilities in the Global COVID-19 Outbreak Emergency: Some Facts and Thoughts from China," *Disability & Society* 36, no. 7 (2021): 1186–91.

[39] Jia and Santi, "Inclusive Education for Students with Disabilities in the Global COVID-19 Outbreak Emergency: Some Facts and Thoughts from China."

[40] Mary-Anne Gontsana, "Lockdown: School Feeding Scheme Reopens in Western Cape to Assist 'Desperate Communities,'" News24, April 9, 2020, https://www.news24.com/southafrica/news/lockdown-school-feeding-scheme-reopens-in-western-cape-to-assist-desperate-communities-20200409.

that the principal would do them, which is wrong, all must be hands on active in their work to enhance safety during crisis in schools.

- It is recommended that the principals must make symposiums where they discuss ways of encouraging the school communities to report all the symptoms of diseases towards their children that happen outside the school premises as an effort of support. There is no way to encourage people to disclose information except that you build a rapport with them. If the principals can bring people closer to them, it would be very much easier for the communities to disclose information no matter how critical it is.
- Provide opportunities for professional learning with a focus on adaptive leadership practises to equip principals with the skills and knowledge necessary to deal with unforeseen changes to the instructional leadership responsibilities they are responsible for.
- Make available to principals the resources and training that will enable them to better facilitate positive interactions and the development of improved relationships among all members of the school community.
- Make sure that schools and communities have sufficient access to the internet and other forms of technology so that they can make the most of the digital learning opportunities available to students and teachers.

CONCLUSION

The study guarantees this data as the most informative data to the sampled population of the research such as principals. This information made the stakeholders aware of the role of working together during crisis. The findings of this study denoted an urgent need for intervention programs and turnaround strategies that should be run by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and other stakeholders that are relevant to school functionality during crisis. The intervention of the DBE would encourage the school stakeholders to work collectively and collaboratively towards the direction that shows impetus of the school governance and management. However, from what I can see, the principals overcame their challenges and found success. The part gave a research overview, draws conclusions from the findings report, and made recommendations based on the study's findings. Finally, based on the findings and conclusion, this paper makes recommendations for further research.

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