



Leading through inequality: School Principals' perspectives on rural education during COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the perspectives of school principals on educational equity and inclusion in rural South African schools, with a particular focus on the Mopani West District of Limpopo Province. Using a qualitative research design, the study employed semi-structured interviews with school leaders to examine how they navigated systemic inequalities and resource disparities while striving to sustain education during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings reveal that while principals demonstrate a strong conceptual understanding of equity and inclusion, they face persistent challenges, including limited access to digital infrastructure, inadequate professional development opportunities, and insufficient psychosocial support for both staff and learners. By foregrounding the lived experiences and adaptive strategies of rural school leaders, this research contributes empirical insight into the enduring issues of resource inequity, digital exclusion, and psychosocial vulnerability in marginalized educational contexts. The analysis highlights context-responsive leadership practices and identifies systemic gaps that hinder the realization of equity in practice. In doing so, the study advances scholarly perspectives on educational equity, underscores the critical role of school leaders in crisis management, and proposes recommendations for bridging the divide between policy and practice in disadvantaged settings. Ultimately, the research concludes that achieving equity in education, particularly during times of crisis, remains a complex and evolving goal, requiring leadership that is both contextually responsive and supported by institutional reform.

Keywords: COVID-19, educational leadership, education equity, rural schools, school principals, quality education

INTRODUCTION

Education constitutes an essential right, serving as the cornerstone for both individual and societal advancement. However, it is evident that not all learners are afforded equal opportunities for success, owing to systemic disparities in access, resources, and support. Educational equity remains the main problem confronting the education system worldwide, with disparities in educational access, retention rates, and, most importantly, learning outcomes, which play a crucial role in assessing educational equity.¹ These disparities perpetuate cycles of poverty and inequality, further exacerbating societal divisions. The educational disparities are intricately connected to the differing levels of socio-economic development present across various nations and regions. Areas characterised by lower income and

¹ UNESCO, "COVID-19 Educational Disruption and Response," 2020, <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>.

underdevelopment encounter significant obstacles in their efforts to ensure equitable access to quality education.²

In the context of South Africa, Education has been made a constitutional right since the transition to democracy in 1994, yet the right to education is not rightfully enjoyed by many learners, with the education system still facing challenges of equity. The pursuit of educational equity is firmly established within both constitutional and policy frameworks, with specific provisions aimed at addressing historical disparities. However, South Africa's education system remains one of the most unequal in the world, with statistics showing significant disparities as a consequence of the enduring legacy of apartheid policies, persistent socio-economic disparities and geographical divides.³ In the decades following the end of apartheid, one still observes the continued existence of profound disparities in the education system, especially evident in the contrast between urban and rural educational schools, as well as between those that are affluent and those that are impoverished.

The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these disparities, revealing inherent vulnerabilities and intensifying pre-existing inequities, particularly in rural and under-resourced schools.⁴ In order to mitigate the spread of the virus, the South African government had to implement a strict lockdown, resulting in closures of physical access to schooling for an extended period of time. This prompted an urgent shift to remote learning. School principals found themselves at the forefront of this crisis, charged with the critical responsibility of enacting emergency measures, providing support to their staff, and safeguarding the academic continuity of learners, frequently in the face of scant guidance and resources. This study explores the role of rural school principals in enhancing equity in education. It seeks to understand the practical challenges they faced and the strategies they employed while navigating the COVID-19 crisis. The study is driven by the following objectives:

1. To assess the pre-pandemic state of educational equity in rural South African schools.
2. To analyse responses from principal/ educational leaders regarding the challenges and strategies implemented during the pandemic.
3. To provide recommendations for policy reforms and practice interventions to bridge the educational equity gap in rural settings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Educational Equity: Definitions and Dimensions

Educational equity is often conflated with educational equality, yet the two concepts are fundamentally distinct. While equality implies uniform treatment of all learners, equity recognises the need for differentiated support to ensure that each learner can succeed.⁵ The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines educational equity as a condition in which “personal or social factors such as gender, ethnic origin or family background are not obstacles to achieving educational potential.”⁶ Similarly, the National Equity Project frames equity as the establishment of systems that guarantee every child an equal opportunity for success.

Equity acknowledges both historical and contemporary disparities and seeks to redress them through targeted interventions. It begins with equal access to high-quality learning environments, qualified educators, relevant resources, and technological tools, elements essential for effective teaching and learning.⁷ However, schools in economically disadvantaged areas often lack the foundational infrastructure required for pedagogical effectiveness. Darling-Hammond underscores this point, noting

² UNESCO, *Education for All 2000–2015: Achievements and Challenges* (Paris: UNESCO, 15AD); OECD, “Perspectives on Global Development 2012: Social Cohesion in a Shifting World” (Paris, 2012); World Bank, “The COVID-19 Pandemic: Shocks to Education and Policy Responses,” *World Bank*, 2020.

³ Nic Spaull and Servaas Van der Berg, “Counting the Cost: COVID-19 School Closures in South Africa and Its Impact on Children,” *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 10, no. 1 (2020): 1–13; Servaas van der Berg et al., “Identifying Binding Constraints in Education,” *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2906945>.

⁴ Bekithemba Dube, “Rural Online Learning in the Context of COVID 19 in South Africa: Evoking an Inclusive Education Approach,” *REMIE: Multidisciplinary Journal of Educational Research* 10, no. 2 (2020): 135–57.

⁵ Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking Recognition: Overcoming Displacement and Reification in Cultural,” *Recognition Struggles and Social Movements: Contested Identities, Agency and Power* 21 (2003).

⁶ OECD, “Perspectives on Global Development 2012: Social Cohesion in a Shifting World,” 9.

⁷ UNESCO, *Global Education Monitoring Report 2020: Inclusion and Education* (Paris: UNESCO, 2020).

persistent inequities in access to early childhood education, experienced teachers, and rigorous curricula.⁸ Ladson-Billings similarly highlights that learners from low-income backgrounds and communities of colour frequently encounter low expectations and limited access to university-preparatory curricula, thereby constraining their academic trajectories.⁹

Reardon documents a widening achievement gap between learners from affluent and underprivileged backgrounds, reinforcing the urgency of systemic reform to ensure equitable access to quality education. Beyond material resources, equity also encompasses cultural and curricular inclusion.¹⁰ Banks argues that diverse representation within the curriculum fosters educational fairness by promoting belonging and dismantling stereotypes.¹¹ Multicultural education enables learners to see their identities reflected in the learning environment, thereby enhancing engagement, validation, and academic success.

True educational equity is not solely measured by resource allocation but by outcomes, namely, improved learning achievements and reduced disparities across diverse learner populations.¹² While addressing structural barriers is essential, equity also requires attention to individual factors such as learner motivation, personal circumstances, and access to enrichment opportunities. A comprehensive approach that integrates systemic reform with personalised support is therefore critical to realising genuine equity in education.

Legal Framework for Equity in Education in South Africa

Legal and Policy Foundations for Educational Equity in South Africa

The principle of educational equity is a cornerstone of South Africa's democratic transformation. In the post-apartheid era, substantial efforts have been made to reform the education system to redress historical injustices and promote fair access to quality education. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) provides the foundational legal framework for equity in education. Section 29(1) guarantees the right to basic education, including adult basic education as an immediately realisable right, not subject to progressive implementation.¹³ Complementing this, Section 9, the Equality Clause, prohibits unfair discrimination and affirms the right to equality, thereby legitimising measures aimed at correcting past inequities.

Despite this constitutional commitment, Fiske and Ladd, as cited in Motala, observe that South African policy documents lack a clear definition of what constitutes "basic education," both in terms of quality inputs and expected outcomes.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the constitutional framework remains pivotal in ensuring that all learners, regardless of race, gender, socio-economic status, or geographic location, have equal access to education.

Key Legislative Instruments Advancing Equity

- National Education Policy Act No. 27 of 1996: This act guides the development and implementation of inclusive and equitable education policies, reflecting the diversity of post-apartheid South Africa.
- South African Schools Act (SASA) No. 84 of 1996: SASA mandates equitable funding of public schools and promotes participatory governance through the establishment of democratic school

⁸ Linda Darling-Hammond, *The Flat World and Education: How America's Commitment to Equity Will Determine Our Future* (Teachers College Press, 2015).

⁹ Gloria Ladson-Billings, "From the Achievement Gap to the Education Debt: Understanding Achievement in U.S. Schools," *Educational Researcher* 35, no. 7 (October 1, 2006): 3–12, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X035007003>.

¹⁰ S. F. Reardon, "The Widening Academic Achievement Gap between the Rich and the Poor: New Evidence and Possible Explanations." (, 1, 91-116.: Whither Opportunity, 2011).

¹¹ Sunhee Kim, "Exploring the Endogenous Governance Model for Alleviating Food Insecurity: Comparative Analysis of Food Bank Systems in Korea and the USA," *International Journal of Social Welfare* 24, no. 2 (April 21, 2015): 145–58, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijsw.12114>.

¹² OECD, "Perspectives on Global Development 2012: Social Cohesion in a Shifting World."

¹³ South Africa, *The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act, Act No 108 of 1996* (Pretoria: Government Printers, 1996).

¹⁴ Edward B Fiske and Helen F Ladd, "Financing Schools in Post Apartheid South Africa: Initial Steps Toward Fiscal Equity," *Education and Decentralisation African Experiences and Analyses*, 2002, 157; S. Motala, "Meaningful Access to Education in South Africa," in *Risk and Opportunity*. , ed. J. Hofmeyer (Cape Town: . : Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, 2008), 46–53.

governing bodies (SGBs). It also introduced the National Norms and Standards for School Funding, which allocate resources based on the socio-economic needs of schools.¹⁵

- Employment of Educators Act No. 76 of 1998: This act regulates teacher employment, promoting equity through fair labour practices and prioritising the deployment of qualified educators to underserved areas.¹⁶
- Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (PEPUDA) No. 4 of 2000: PEPUDA reinforces constitutional equality by explicitly prohibiting discrimination and establishing mechanisms to address systemic inequities.

Strategic Policy Frameworks Supporting Equity

- White Paper on Education and Training: This foundational policy document articulates the government's commitment to equity, quality, and lifelong learning. It emphasises redistributive justice by prioritising historically disadvantaged communities.¹⁷
- Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education: Focused on inclusive education, this paper advocates for the integration of learners with disabilities and learning barriers into mainstream schools, promoting a responsive and supportive learning environment.¹⁸
- National Development Plan (NDP) 2030: Although not legally binding, the NDP outlines a strategic vision for transforming education. It emphasises early childhood development, infrastructure improvement, and teacher capacity-building in under-resourced communities to ensure learners are equipped for participation in a modern economy.

South Africa's legal and policy architecture reflects a comprehensive and progressive approach to educational equity. It seeks to dismantle the legacy of apartheid and foster inclusive, high-quality learning opportunities for all. However, persistent challenges, including uneven implementation, resource disparities, and systemic inefficiencies, continue to hinder the full realisation of equity in education.

Historical Context and Education Inequity in Rural South Africa

Education in rural South Africa has long been shaped by systemic inequality rooted in apartheid-era policies. Under apartheid, Black South Africans were subjected to inferior schooling designed to reinforce racial hierarchies and limit upward mobility. Instruction was delivered in English and Afrikaans, often by underqualified teachers in overcrowded classrooms, with curricula tailored to prepare Black learners for menial labour.¹⁹ Structural discrimination was embedded in the education system, with funding disparities starkly evident: in 1993, the state allocated R4,772 per white learner compared to R1,524 per Black learner, despite white learners comprising only 17% of the school population.²⁰ This underinvestment entrenched poor infrastructure, low teacher quality, and weak learning outcomes.²¹

Post-apartheid reforms have expanded access through no-fee schooling and increased funding for disadvantaged schools. However, deep inequalities persist, now stratified by class and geography.²²

¹⁵ Republic of South Africa, *South African Schools Act No. 84 of 1996* (Pretoria: Government Printers, 1996).

¹⁶ Republic of South Africa (RSA), "Employment of Educators Act." (Act 76 of 1998., 1998).

¹⁷ Department of Education (DoE), *White Paper on Education and Training in a Democratic South Africa: First Steps to Develop a New System*. (Notice 195 of 1995, 15 March Government Gazette, 357(16312), 1995).

¹⁸ Department of Education, *The Education White Paper 6 on Inclusive Education*. (Pretoria: South Africa: Government Printers., 2001).

¹⁹ Crain Soudien, "The Quest for Educational Equity in Schools in South Africa," *Daedalus* 153, no. 4 (November 1, 2024): 146–64, https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_02109; Joyce West and Corinne Meier, "Overcrowded Classrooms – The Achilles Heel of South African Education?," *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 10, no. 1 (April 30, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v10i1.617>.

²⁰ Edward B Fiske and Helen F Ladd, *Elusive Equity: Education Reform in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2004).

²¹ Nicholas Spaull, "South Africa's Education Crisis: The Quality of Education in South Africa 1994-2011," *Johannesburg: Centre for Development and Enterprise* 21, no. 1 (2013): 1–65.

²² Crain Soudien, "The Quest for Educational Equity in Schools in South Africa," *Daedalus* 153, no. 4 (2024): 146–64.

Rural schools continue to lag behind urban counterparts across key indicators, such as teacher quality, infrastructure, learner performance, and access to libraries and technology.²³ These disparities perpetuate cycles of poverty and limit rural learners' ability to compete academically and economically.

TIMSS 2015 data illustrate this divide: 70% of Grade 9 learners in no-fee schools scored below 400 points, while 60% of learners in affluent schools scored above 475.²⁴ The OECD reports that 71% of South African teachers work in schools where over 30% of learners face socio-economic hardship, three times the OECD average.²⁵ In Limpopo and the Eastern Cape, over 85% of nine-year-olds cannot read for meaning. Nationally, only 50–60% of learners reach Matric, 40–50% pass, and just 14% enter university. Language barriers further compound inequities, with 60% of teachers instructing learners whose home language differs from the language of learning and teaching.

Infrastructure deficits remain acute. As of 2019, 4,000 schools used pit latrines, 20,071 lacked laboratories, and 18,019 had no libraries.²⁶ Class sizes among the poorest 60% grew from 41 to 48 between 2011 and 2016, compared to a modest increase from 33 to 35 among the wealthiest. These conditions reflect enduring legacies of apartheid-era decisions that continue to shape educational outcomes.²⁷

Geographic isolation, poverty, and historical exclusion render rural learners vulnerable to marginalisation across social, political, and economic spheres.²⁸ Addressing these disparities is essential for realising Sustainable Development Goal 4: ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education by 2030. Yet, progress remains hindered by corruption, infrastructural deficits, and political instability. Without targeted, context-responsive interventions, rural education will remain a site of persistent inequality.

Impact of COVID-19 on Global Education

The COVID-19 pandemic, declared in early 2020, triggered global public health interventions, lockdowns, mask mandates, and social distancing that underscored the importance of international cooperation. The World Health Organization (WHO) coordinated vaccine distribution to low-income countries and facilitated cross-border research and data sharing.

Education systems were profoundly disrupted, affecting over 1.6 billion learners across 190 countries.²⁹ School closures necessitated a rapid shift to remote learning, which exposed and deepened pre-existing educational inequalities. Learners from low-income and rural communities faced disproportionate challenges due to limited access to digital devices, reliable internet, and conducive learning environments.³⁰ The digital divide became a critical barrier to learning continuity, with educators and learners struggling to adapt to virtual platforms and pedagogies.

The OECD emphasised the need for inclusive digital policies, including subsidies for connectivity and devices, and teacher training in technology integration.³¹ However, many schools lacked the infrastructure to implement these reforms effectively, particularly in under-resourced settings. Mental health emerged as a parallel crisis. Rajkumar reported increased stress, isolation, and reduced physical activity among children and adolescents, highlighting the need for psychosocial support in educational settings.³² UNESCO's school reopening framework prioritised safety, equity, and

²³ Nicholas Spaull and Stephen Taylor, "Access to What? Creating a Composite Measure of Educational Quantity and Educational Quality for 11 African Countries," *Comparative Education Review* 59, no. 1 (February 2015): 133–65, <https://doi.org/10.1086/679295>.

²⁴ Ina V S Mullis, Michael O Martin, and Martin Hooper, "Measuring Changing Educational Contexts in a Changing World: Evolution of the TIMSS and PIRLS Questionnaires," in *Cognitive Abilities and Educational Outcomes: A Festschrift in Honour of Jan-Eric Gustafsson* (Springer, 2016), 207–22.

²⁵ *Education at a Glance 2018* (OECD Publishing, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1787/eag-2018-en>.

²⁶ Amnesty International, "Broken and Unequal: The State of Education in South Africa" (Amnesty International London, 2020).

²⁷ Edwin Darrell De Klerk and June Monica Palmer, "Resetting Education Priorities during COVID-19: Towards Equitable Learning Opportunities through Inclusion and Equity," *Perspectives in Education* 39, no. 1 (2021): 12–28.

²⁸ Inclusive Education South Africa., *Annual Report*, 2020.

²⁹ UNESCO, *Global Education Monitoring Report* (UNESCO, 2020).

³⁰ World Bank, "The COVID-19 Pandemic: Shocks to Education and Policy Responses." (World Bank, 2020).

³¹ Andreas Schleicher, "The Impact of COVID-19 on Education: Insights from" *Education at a Glance 2020*, OECD Publishing, 2020.

³² Ravi Philip Rajkumar, "COVID-19 and Mental Health: A Review of the Existing Literature," *Asian Journal of Psychiatry* 52 (2020): 102066.

technology, while UNICEF, WHO, and IFRC issued joint guidelines for managing COVID-19 in schools. The World Bank called for strategic investment to mitigate learning losses and strengthen system resilience.

Despite these efforts, resource constraints continue to hinder the provision of adequate mental health and academic support, especially for vulnerable populations. The pandemic has thus catalysed a re-evaluation of educational priorities, reinforcing the urgency of building resilient, equitable systems that integrate digital access, mental health support, and inclusive pedagogies.

COVID-19 and School-Level Inequities in South Africa

On 27 March 2020, South Africa entered a hard lockdown, prompting the closure of all physical learning institutions. Like many countries, the education system transitioned to remote learning. However, this shift exposed and intensified pre-existing disparities in access to technology, infrastructure, and educational support. Rural schools, already under-resourced, struggled to implement online learning due to limited internet connectivity and inadequate digital infrastructure, while urban schools were comparatively better equipped to adapt.³³

The pandemic widened the achievement gap between urban and rural learners, reinforcing systemic inequities. Angrist et al. define learning loss as both the "opportunity cost" of missed instruction and the "deterioration" of previously acquired knowledge.³⁴ In South Africa, these losses were disproportionately concentrated in poorer schools, where learners faced compounded challenges of digital exclusion and socio-economic vulnerability.³⁵

Despite ongoing reforms aimed at redressing historical imbalances, rural schools remain significantly disadvantaged. School closures occurred within a broader context of entrenched educational inequality characterised by poor infrastructure, underqualified teachers, low learner attainment, and high dropout rates. The pandemic imposed a dual burden on rural schools: navigating emergency remote learning while contending with longstanding structural deficits.

The legacy of apartheid-era resource allocation continues to shape educational outcomes, with rural communities bearing the brunt of systemic neglect. School closures further restricted access to quality education, deepening the cycle of disadvantage. In this context, school leadership in rural areas faced immense pressure to devise context-responsive strategies to bridge the digital divide and maintain learning continuity. Moving forward, targeted support for rural schools, including infrastructure investment, digital access, and leadership development, is essential to prevent further widening of educational gaps and to promote equitable learning outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

Research Paradigm

This study was conducted within the framework of a constructivist paradigm. Constructivism posits that individuals actively construct meaning through reflection on lived experiences and by integrating new knowledge into existing cognitive frameworks.³⁶ This paradigm was particularly suited to the study's aim of exploring school leaders' contextual experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Approach and Design

A qualitative research methodology was employed, using a case study design to investigate the phenomenon in depth. The qualitative approach was selected for its emphasis on responsiveness, openness, and contextual sensitivity, qualities essential for capturing the nuanced realities of educational.

³³ Department of Basic Education (DBE), "Learning Recovery Programme: School Management Teams (SMT) Guidelines." (DBE, 2023); Spaull and Van der Berg, "Counting the Cost: COVID-19 School Closures in South Africa and Its Impact on Children."

³⁴ Noam Angrist et al., "Building Back Better to Avert a Learning Catastrophe: Estimating Learning Loss from COVID-19 School Shutdowns in Africa and Facilitating Short-Term and Long-Term Learning Recovery," *International Journal of Educational Development* 84 (2021): 102397.

³⁵ Spaull and Van der Berg, "Counting the Cost: COVID-19 School Closures in South Africa and Its Impact on Children."

³⁶ Marilyn Lichtman, *Qualitative Research for the Social Sciences* (London: SAGE Publications, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781544307756>.

leadership in rural South Africa.³⁷ The case study design enabled a focused exploration of leadership practices within specific institutional settings.

Sampling

The study was conducted across five secondary schools located in the Mopani District of Limpopo Province. These institutions were classified as low-quintile schools, reflecting their socio-economic disadvantage. A phenomenological lens was applied to examine the lived experiences of school leaders navigating the challenges of the COVID-19 crisis. Participants included three principals, one deputy principal, and one head of department acting in a deputy principal capacity. Their teaching experience ranged from 5 to 27 years, and all held postgraduate qualifications, demonstrating professional expertise and leadership capacity.

Data Collection

Due to pandemic-related restrictions on physical access to schools, data collection was conducted using semi-structured interview schedules. These were distributed electronically via email, with printed copies provided where necessary to accommodate participant preferences. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data, enabling the identification of recurring patterns, themes, and insights across participant responses.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from both the Higher Degrees Committee and the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education at the University of Johannesburg. Institutional consent was also secured from participating school principals and the Limpopo Department of Education. Participants were fully informed about the purpose and scope of the study and provided voluntary consent. Their rights, interests, and welfare were safeguarded throughout the research process, including the right to withdraw at any stage. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings revealed that while there was a general awareness of the need for equitable education, systemic barriers, including inadequate access to digital resources, insufficient professional development, and a lack of psychosocial support, continue to hinder the realisation of equitable education in rural areas. The key findings are discussed below.

Understanding of the right, equity, and inclusion in education

The Right to Education

The right to education emerged as a foundational theme interwoven with both equity and inclusion. All participants emphasized that education is not a privilege but a basic human right. Participant 1 declared, *“Every child has a right to free, fair education,”* while Participant 5 insisted that *“Every learner must have quality education.”* These responses are reinforced by Section 29(1) of the South African Constitution, which guarantees the right to basic and further education.

The findings suggest that participants perceive the right to education not only in legal terms but also as a moral imperative, particularly in marginalized and underserved communities. This aligns with the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), which asserts that education should foster dignity, human development, and social participation.

Participants unanimously view the state as the primary duty-bearer in ensuring access, reducing inequalities, and fulfilling constitutional obligations. Their responses reinforce the principle that education should be a transformative force, equipping learners with the capacity to exercise civil, political, and social rights.

³⁷ Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 5th ed. (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2018).

The concept of equity in education

The analysis of participants' responses indicates a shared and coherent understanding of educational equity. All participants acknowledged that equity goes beyond mere equality; it involves tailored support to meet learners' diverse needs. As emphasized by Participant 1, equity means "every child has the right to a free, fair education," with the state being responsible for ensuring the provision of adequate classroom resources. Participant 2 reinforced this notion by asserting that "*education should be equal to all learners,*" regardless of background.

These views are consistent with international literature. According to the OECD, educational equity ensures that learners are equipped with the essential tools to perform at an acceptable level.³⁸ Participants collectively acknowledged the inequities between rural and urban schools, highlighting a disparity in resource allocation. As stated by Participant 3, equitable education should include "a fair, balanced education with equal resources as town schools."

Brayboy, Castano & Maughan support this argument by suggesting that equity involves the redistribution of resources to enable all learners, especially the marginalized, to thrive academically and socially.³⁹ The participant responses suggest that despite awareness and understanding of equity, practical challenges remain, especially in rural schooling contexts.

Inclusion in Education

Participants displayed a comprehensive understanding of inclusive education, viewing it as a mechanism to eliminate barriers to learning. Participant 4 expressed that "learners' backgrounds should not be a barrier to accessing quality education," emphasizing the need for resource accessibility and non-discriminatory practices. Similarly, Participant 2 emphasized that "no child should be denied in terms of discrimination and other forms of exclusion."

These perspectives reflect the definition offered by Dalton, who describes inclusion as the proactive removal of barriers that hinder learning.⁴⁰ Ainscow, Booth & Dyson add that inclusion is a continuous, evolving process rather than a fixed goal.⁴¹ Participants' responses suggest an aspirational vision for inclusive education, one that aligns with national policy but is often hindered by systemic and structural inequalities.

The alignment between participant views and key South African educational policies, including the Constitution (1996), National Education Policy Act (1996), and White Paper 6 (2001), indicates a high level of conceptual understanding, though practical implementation remains inconsistent.

Educational equity is well understood among school leaders but remains imperfectly implemented, especially in rural schools. Inclusion is viewed as essential to equitable education, and participants recognize the need for proactive policy implementation and resourcing. There is a strong consensus that education is a fundamental right, and the state has a duty to fulfil this right by removing systemic barriers and promoting access for all. Participants show a deep awareness of national policies and international frameworks but identify ongoing disparities in practice, particularly linked to geography and resource distribution.

Principals' commitment to equity and inclusion

The findings indicate that school principals played a critical role in mitigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on learning and inclusion. Participants described a range of leadership strategies that addressed both instructional and emotional needs of learners, particularly those at risk of marginalisation. These strategies included tailored academic support, increased communication with parents, and creative use of limited resources.

³⁸ OECD, *Education at a Glance 2018*.

³⁹ Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy, Angelina E Castagno, and Emma Maughan, "Chapter 6 Equality and Justice for All? Examining Race in Education Scholarship," *Review of Research in Education* 31, no. 1 (2007): 159–94.

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Dalton, "Teaching and Learning for All Learners' Instruction and Technology: RI-ASCO," *Journal of Research Development: The Leading Edge*, 2012.

⁴¹ Mel Ainscow, Tony Booth, and Alan Dyson, *Improving Schools, Developing Inclusion* (Routledge, 2006).

Participant 1 noted, *“We used visual teaching through video cards. Enrichment classes for slow learners and high flyers.”* This highlights an effort to differentiate instruction and ensure that all learners have access to content, regardless of ability level. Similarly, Participant 2 reported using the Department of Education’s class recovery plan to introduce structured extra lessons and Saturday classes, particularly targeting Grade 12 learners.

Participant 4 emphasized engaging parents through printed materials and WhatsApp, aligning with Chatmon and Watson’s principle of commitment, which requires school leaders to understand and respond to learner inequalities.⁴² This proactive stance is reflective of inclusive leadership that prioritizes both accessibility and accountability.

Participants also described how they managed limited instructional time by identifying struggling learners through continuous assessments and offering one-on-one consultations (Participant 3). These efforts suggest that inclusive leadership extends beyond policy compliance to actively fostering equity through innovative pedagogy and resourceful planning.

Despite infrastructural and digital access limitations, school leaders demonstrated resilience.

As Participant 2 explained, *“We managed to create opportunities for learners to be included... learners were tasked to complete certain tasks at home,”* reflecting an adaptive and inclusive approach. This commitment to learning continuity despite adversity underscores principals’ role as mediators of complex educational challenges.⁴³

Moreover, participants acknowledged the emotional toll on learners and staff but also noted positive developments in school culture. Participant 3 remarked, *“Relationships at our school have improved... we are all in this together to fight the injustices that the pandemic made more obvious.”* This reflects a shift toward collective responsibility and social justice leadership.

These findings resonate with Mohohlwane, Taylor & Shepherd, who assert that the national school recovery plan aimed to support teachers and minimize curriculum loss.⁴⁴ However, participants noted that shortened instructional time and varying learner needs placed strain on the system.

The analysis of interview responses further revealed a consistent concern across participants regarding the lack of empowerment, training, and resources necessary for equitable and inclusive education, especially in rural schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. The following key sub-themes emerged, which will be discussed below: Leadership for Equity, Equitable access to educational resources, capacity building and professional development, and support for continuity of teaching and learning, all of which are central to equity in education.

Leadership for Equity

The role of school principals and educators in fostering inclusion and maintaining learning continuity during the pandemic was significant. Participants described efforts to build strong connections with learners’ families, enabling targeted support for vulnerable learners.

Participant 5 noted: *“We are still making baby step improvements... Our school doesn’t have a social worker or psychologist on site. Poor communities will remain poor... especially as leaders turn a blind eye to equity and inclusive learning.”* Participant 2 added the need for *“socio-psychological support such as social workers in school or therapists.”*

The findings highlight the pivotal role of school leaders in managing the transition to emergency remote learning and supporting vulnerable learners. However, many principals reported feeling under-resourced and overextended. The pandemic called for adaptive leadership that fosters collaboration,

⁴² Christopher P Chatmon and Vajra M Watson, “Decolonizing School Systems: Racial Justice, Radical Healing, and Educational Equity inside Oakland Unified School District,” *Voices in Urban Education* 48 (2018): 7–12.

⁴³ Jennifer Lambrecht et al., “The Effect of School Leadership on Implementing Inclusive Education: How Transformational and Instructional Leadership Practices Affect Individualised Education Planning,” *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 26, no. 9 (2022): 943–57.

⁴⁴ N. Mohohlwane, S Taylor, and D Shepherd, “COVID-19 and Basic Education: Evaluating the Initial Impact of the Return to Schooling. NIDS-CRAM (National Income Dynamics–Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey) Report Wave 2, July,” 2020.

shared decision-making, and responsiveness to localized challenges.⁴⁵ As Participant 5 emphasized, *"We need to have a school-based support team... our school doesn't have a social worker or psychologist on site,"* underscoring the multidimensional nature of learner support during crises.

Furthermore, Sheninger argues that a directive approach to leadership does not support innovation.⁴⁶ Innovation and change happen when there is "shared decision making, consensus, and collaboration."⁴⁷ Sheninger also adds that people cannot just be told to do things without getting them involved. In addition, educators need to be in a flexible environment that gives them the freedom to take risks and be innovative without fear of repercussions. This will promote equity and inclusivity in our schools.

The study affirms that educational leadership during times of uncertainty must transcend traditional, hierarchical approaches. As emphasized in the OECD, leadership during crises demands flexibility, collaboration, and innovation to ensure no learner is left behind. As literature suggests, equity-focused leadership must prioritize inclusive strategies that consider learners' holistic needs.⁴⁸

Participants' responses suggest that school leaders who were able to foster collaboration, mobilize community support, and advocate for resource provision were more effective in managing the crisis. Leadership that is attuned to contextual realities and inclusive of teacher voices was perceived as more equitable and impactful. The findings also underscore that leadership must be future-oriented. Participants emphasized the need for systemic planning and budget allocations that prioritize education resilience, including preparation for future pandemics or disruptions. This includes investment in teacher training, digital infrastructure, and learner support services, particularly in rural and underserved communities. School leaders should be empowered to participate in policy dialogues and decision-making processes that affect their schools and communities. Principals should be empowered to lead collaboratively, encouraging shared decision-making and fostering partnerships with parents, SGBs, and community organizations. This enhances inclusive planning and the collective ownership of education equity goals. Moreover, the leadership development programmes must promote adaptive, context-inclusive, and collaborative leadership approaches, because school leadership is context-sensitive.

Equitable Access to Resources

The unequal access to digital devices and connectivity between urban and rural schools emerged as a stark concern. All participants reported that significant disparities remain in terms of access to learning devices and internet connectivity, particularly in rural schools. These inequities hindered the ability of learners to benefit from remote education during the pandemic.

Participant 3 expressed concern about unequal access, stating: *"City public schools have access... their learners were supplied with learning devices."* In agreement, Participant 5 added, *"It is very crucial that the government supply devices to the less privileged learners in rural schools."* Participant 2 reinforced this sentiment, arguing that *"the government has the capacity to assist... as long as the principle of equity is followed."*

Participant 3 emphasized:

"Equal access to learning resources. City schools' public schools have access, and their learners were supplied with learning devices to facilitate online teaching and learning."

Participant 5 added:

"It is very crucial that the government supply devices to the less privileged learners in rural schools... like what is happening with other learners in city schools."

Echoing these frustrations,

⁴⁵ E. C. Sheninger, *Digital Leadership: Changing Paradigms for Changing Times* Corwin., 2nd Ed., 2019.

⁴⁶ Sheninger, *Digital Leadership: Changing Paradigms for Changing Times* Corwin.

⁴⁷ Sheninger, *Digital Leadership: Changing Paradigms for Changing Times* Corwin, 71.

⁴⁸ Valeria E Guzmán et al., "Characteristics and Skills of Leadership in the Context of Industry 4.0," *Procedia Manufacturing* 43 (2020): 543–50, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.promfg.2020.02.167>; Marty Linsky and Ghaleb Darabya, "Leadership in the Fourth Industrial Revolution," *Dubai Policy Review* 1, no. 1 (2019): 16–23.

Participant 2 argued:

"The government has the capacity to assist... Once we get resources and cheap data, we can at least try to learn like the city learners."

The findings echo earlier reports that rural schools were disproportionately affected by the lack of access to remote learning tools. While the government demonstrated the ability to deliver support in some areas, implementation was uneven across provinces. The sentiment also aligns with Dube, who highlighted the urgent need for devices and data access in under-resourced communities. As noted by the participants, digital exclusion threatens to entrench historical inequalities unless targeted interventions are implemented.

Although some government initiatives provided devices and internet support to schools in better-resourced provinces, participants reported that many rural schools were neglected.

This inconsistency underscores a failure to fully operationalize the principle of equity, despite policy commitments to inclusive education. The findings echo the OECD's assertion that while many governments rapidly developed emergency responses, implementation gaps exacerbated existing inequalities. The implications are profound: without targeted investments in rural education infrastructure and affordable access to technology, learners in underprivileged communities remain structurally excluded from quality education during crises.

The Department of Basic Education should prioritise the provision of digital devices, affordable internet access, and learning management platforms for rural schools, ensuring parity with urban schools. National and provincial budgets must include dedicated allocations for the technological development of under-resourced schools. Government and relevant stakeholders must prioritize the equitable provision of digital devices, internet connectivity, and low-cost data packages for rural schools. Policies should mandate resource allocation that bridges the urban-rural divide.

Supporting the continuance of teaching and learning during COVID-19

South Africa has made progress in keeping learners safe in schools since the pandemic outbreak. The risk-adjusted strategy and the care and support for the teaching-learning programmes are concrete examples of measures to lead and provide comprehensive support to both learners and educators during such a difficult period.

When asked about the experience gained during the pandemic and what they are taking from that to manage future pandemics and ensure that there is equity in education,

Participant 3 highlighted the following:

"Technology equipment must be provided to schools so that no learner can be excluded from education."

Participant 5 expressed his frustrations about equity in his school:

"We need to have a school-based support team involving teachers as well, and training of this team for easy support to learners. Parents' involvement and communities at large to support learners on this. In our community, we have already started mobilising parents and the community through the assistance of the SGB (School Governing Body) to be involved in school activities. As far as equity is concerned, we are still making baby steps and improvements in that regard. Our school doesn't have a social worker or psychologist on site; this is also affecting other rural schools in our district. To support continuity in learning, learners need emotional and psychological assistance too; as principals, we can only do up to a certain level. Poor communities will remain poor as the classy people in our country, especially our leaders, are turning a blind eye to the issue of equity and inclusive learning in our rural communities."

Participant 2 said the following in agreement with participants 5 and 3:

"We must work with our districts to ensure provision of enough resources, such as classrooms and access to the internet, in rural schools' quintiles 1, 2, and 3 precisely. Availability of socio-psychological support, such as social workers in school or therapists."

Participant 1 also supported the other participants' ideas of learning continuity by mentioning that:

“Education needs to be a priority in terms of resources. The budget must provide for future pandemics. Resources must be directed to education improvement in our rural areas.”

All participants acknowledged the pandemic as both a challenge and a catalyst for educational innovation. They stressed the importance of capturing lessons learned to inform future contingency strategies. Echoing the OECD, the COVID-19 crisis is viewed as a transformative challenge requiring adaptive leadership and equitable policy design.⁴⁹ Globally, the pandemic revealed the importance of strong institutional capacity, peer collaboration, and parental involvement in sustaining learning during disruptions.⁵⁰ In the South African context, the crisis has catalysed new forms of community-school partnerships and highlighted the necessity for systemic investment in educational resilience and digital transformation.

The need to ensure continuity in teaching and learning emerged as a critical concern. Participants identified a range of enablers for continuity, including access to technology, psychosocial support for learners, and the active involvement of parents and communities. These findings align with global experiences during the pandemic, where the home environment became an extension of the classroom and parental engagement was vital.⁵¹

Moreover, the absence of psychosocial support services, such as on-site counsellors or social workers, further compounded the vulnerabilities experienced by learners in rural contexts. Without such support structures, the responsibility of emotional care often fell to educators and principals, placing additional strain on an already burdened system. These conditions affirm the argument that equity in education extends beyond academic provision to include holistic learner support.

School-based support teams (SBSTs) in all rural schools should be established, which involves trained personnel, including social workers, psychologists, and learning support specialists. The SBT will enhance collaboration between schools and community organisations and also provide holistic support for learners' academic, emotional, and social needs.

Capacity building and professional development

Educators are critical agents of inclusive education, particularly in contexts where inequality is deeply entrenched. The pandemic magnified the essential role they play not only in instructional delivery but also in learner support, community engagement, and crisis navigation. Participants reported varying levels of support from the Department of Basic Education, with some referencing workshops and circulars, while others highlighted the absence of structured and meaningful training in remote and blended learning strategies.

The participants' responses were the following in reference to the question about the kind of support and development they are providing/getting from the department to assist in managing equity during COVID-19.

Participant 1 mentioned that:

“We need time to become familiar with remote learning strategies; our educators need training on blended learning. It is crucial and needed for these times we are living in. Learners cannot afford to lose learning again over a pandemic like this one.”

Participant 5, in support of participant 1, suggested that:

“Support could be provided by the departments; at the moment, we are getting circulars on how to manage learning, and workshops are also planned for the coming months. In terms of managing the changes that teachers would have to adopt, most of the teachers would still need very clear directions and training.”

Participants further stressed that teacher empowerment was essential not only for adapting to new learning environments but also for reaching vulnerable learners effectively.

⁴⁹ Schleicher, “The Impact of COVID-19 on Education: Insights from” Education at a Glance 2020.”

⁵⁰ Schleicher, “The Impact of COVID-19 on Education: Insights from” Education at a Glance 2020.”

⁵¹ Schleicher, “The Impact of COVID-19 on Education: Insights from” Education at a Glance 2020.”

As Participant 2 mentioned:

“Support and training will enable us as teachers to be better prepared and better prepare our learners for the use of technology as an adjustment to the new norm, and teachers will also be equipped.”

Participant 4 mentioned that:

“Our department needs to urgently look at providing support to better equip our educators with better skills so that they can be more comfortable conveying lessons and making use of virtual material and IT.”

Participant 4 also emphasised the importance of ongoing training and professional development for teachers in order to adapt to the new norm.

More than any other time in recent history, the challenges faced during the COVID-19 crisis of 2020 showcased just how important partnerships and professional development are for teachers.⁵² The transition from conventional face-to-face teaching and learning to the use of blended digital tools such as computers, learning through television, smartphones, and worksheets was not easy for educators. Educators had to quickly adapt and find creative ways to continue teaching and learning. Educators need ongoing professional development for professional independence. Mudaly et al. support the call for continuous teacher development, particularly in the use of blended learning and technology integration.⁵³

Continuous, context-sensitive professional development programmes should be implemented to equip educators with skills in blended learning, online pedagogy, and digital literacy. Professional development initiatives must be decentralised and tailored to the specific challenges of rural teaching environments. The Department of Basic Education should institutionalize continuous, context-responsive professional development, particularly in digital pedagogy, blended learning, and inclusive education practices. Training should be practical, sustained, and tailored to the needs of rural educators.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite robust and progressive legal and policy frameworks for educational equity, anchored in constitutional guarantees and supported by strategic legislation and policy instruments, their implementation has not consistently led to equitable outcomes across all contexts. The lasting impact of apartheid, along with systemic inefficiencies and resource disparities, persistently hinders the full realization of educational equity, especially in rural and historically disadvantaged communities.

This section presents focused recommendations to enhance the implementation of equity in education. The recommendations aim to bridge the gap between legislative intent and lived educational realities by addressing the identified gaps in policy execution, school-level governance, and resource allocation. These recommendations are shaped by both national priorities and global equity discourses, emphasizing the enhancement of inclusivity, accountability, and context-responsive leadership within South Africa’s schooling system.

- **Government and Policy Action:** The state must ensure the equitable and sustained allocation of resources to rural schools, including digital devices, reliable internet connectivity, and accessible learning platforms. Policy reforms should explicitly address the urban–rural divide in resource distribution and establish enforceable, measurable, and time-bound guidelines for inclusive education to enhance accountability. This is in line with UNESCO’s Education 2030 Framework for Action and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which emphasizes the importance of equity and inclusion in providing quality education.

⁵² Schleicher, “The Impact of COVID-19 on Education: Insights from” Education at a Glance 2020.”

⁵³ V. Mudaly, R. Mudaly, and M. Scholes, *Education Sector [Interim Draft] -South Africa Covid-19 Country Report* (Pretoria: Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME), Government Technical Advisory Centre (GTAC), & National Research Foundation (NRF), 2021).

- **Systematic Capacity Building:** Professional development for rural educators should be continuous, context-sensitive, and practice-oriented. Training must prioritise digital pedagogy, blended learning, and inclusive teaching strategies, supported by ongoing workshops, mentorship, and locally relevant resources. Such initiatives should be embedded within provincial and district development frameworks to ensure sustainability.
- **School-Based Support Teams (SBSTs):** The establishment of SBSTs in rural schools is critical. These teams, comprising social workers, psychologists, and learning support specialists, should provide integrated academic and psychosocial support, thereby promoting holistic learner development and addressing barriers to learning.
- **Leadership Development:** Leadership programmes must emphasise adaptive, context-responsive, and collaborative practices. Principals and school leaders should be empowered to engage in policy dialogue, exercise shared decision-making, and cultivate partnerships with teachers, parents, and communities. Leadership development should be framed not only as administrative training but also as transformative capacity-building for equity-driven change.
- **Community and Parental Engagement:** Strengthening school–community partnerships is essential. Schools should actively mobilise parental involvement in educational activities and leverage local knowledge, skills, and resources to support teaching and learning continuity, particularly during crises such as pandemics or natural disasters.
- **Resourcing for Resilience:** Education budgets should explicitly prioritise resilience-building measures. This includes investment in technological infrastructure, teacher training, and learner support services, ensuring that rural schools are prepared for future disruptions and can sustain learning continuity under adverse conditions.
- **Intentional and Inclusive Practice:** Make equity a consistent and intentional principle in leadership, policy, and teaching practices, reflecting the global aim of inclusivity in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

CONCLUSION

This study has illuminated the enduring and complex challenges faced by rural school leaders in South Africa in their pursuit of equity and inclusion during the COVID-19 pandemic. While teachers and principals were crucial in maintaining learning continuity, they were frequently unprepared due to a lack of training and inadequate support from educational systems. The digital divide, inconsistent access to resources, and limited professional development collectively undermined the promise of equitable education. Yet, the pandemic also revealed the resilience and ingenuity of school communities. Principals and educators mobilised local resources, forged new partnerships, and demonstrated adaptive leadership in the face of adversity.

Despite these commendable efforts, systemic reinforcement is essential. A more coordinated, equity-driven response from education departments and government agencies is required to ensure that rural learners are not marginalised during crises or in their aftermath. Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms must be embedded within provincial and district education systems to assess the implementation and impact of equity-focused interventions.

The evidence confirms that educational equity cannot be achieved passively; it requires intentional, inclusive, and sustained action. Equity must be embedded in policy, leadership, and pedagogy. As South Africa's education system recovers and reimagines itself in a post-pandemic context, a transformative shift in mindset, investment, and leadership is imperative. National policies on inclusive education must be revisited and revised to ensure they are not merely aspirational but actionable and measurable at the school level.

A key insight from this study is the urgent need for a paradigm shift towards an education system that is contextually responsive, particularly to the realities of rural schools, and committed to building systemic capacity for future disruptions. While the COVID-19 pandemic has been profoundly disruptive, it has also served as a critical lens through which to examine entrenched inequities. The path forward requires bold, collective action centred on equity, grounded in local capacity, including

community involvement and support, and driven by innovation. Only through such a commitment can the vision of inclusive, high-quality education for all be truly realised.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Authors' Contributions

N.S undertook the research for the master's degree in educational leadership and management at the University of Johannesburg. N.S., T.N., and R.L.C contributed to the composition of the article, and both reviewed the final manuscript.

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