

**FEMALE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IN RURAL SCHOOLS DURING THE COVID-19
PANDEMIC**

by

NGWEDZENI MICHAEL RAVELE

920211675

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ABSTRACT

This study focused on female school principals, as a gender that has been marginalised in society, on challenges they face in navigating leadership in rural schools before and during the COVID-19 pandemic and the possible strategies to overcome these challenges. Six schools from Limpopo province were purposively selected as research sites. Participants were female school principals. Individual in-depth interviews and overt observation were used to collect qualitative data. The research findings revealed that female school principals face many challenges that include gender stereotypes, a lack of support and respect from staff, and the schools' inferior infrastructures. The outbreak of COVID-19 has exacerbated the alluded challenges that hamper female school principals in managing their rural schools well. COVID-19 has unpredictably and intensely changed the female school principals' role of leading their schools. This unprecedented nature of the situation means there should be a nurturing of a positive attitude toward female school principals, with female school principals being empowered for their role as school leaders in response to crises. They need a strong support system that promotes equity and equality in schools geared towards the fourth industrial revolution (4IR) with all stakeholders contributing towards strategies and solutions.

Key words: educational leadership; female school principal; gender stereotype; rural schools; COVID-19 pandemic; equality and equity

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
ABSTRACT	iv
LIST OF TABLES	viii
LIST OF FIGURES	viii
LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS	ix
1. BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM	1
2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS	2
3. AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH	3
3.1 AIM OF THE STUDY	3
3.2 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY	3
4. CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS	3
4.1 SCHOOL LEADERSHIP	3
4.2 COVID-19 PANDEMIC	3
5. LITERATURE REVIEW	4
5.1 INTRODUCTION	4
5.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	4
5.3 CHALLENGES FACED BY FEMALE SCHOOL LEADERS.....	6
5.3.1 Underrepresentation of Females in School Leadership.....	6
5.3.2 Barriers Hindering Females from Accessing Principalship	6
5.2.3 School Contextual Problems	7
5.2.4 Socio-Economic Problems.....	8
5.2.5 Community Context	8
5.4 SOUTH AFRICAN RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC	9
5.4.1 Department of Basic Education Response to COVID-19.....	9
5.4.2 The Effects of COVID-19 in South African Schools	10
5.4.3 COVID-19 Exposes South Africa’s Unequal Schooling System	11
5.5 FEMALE SCHOOL LEADERS PERCEIVED LEADERSHIP ROLE DURING COVID-19	12
5.5.1 Female School Leadership as Social Justice Leader	12
5.5.2 Female School Leadership as Community Leader	12
5.5.3 The Concept of Female School Leadership as Spiritual Leader.....	13
5.5.4 Female School Leadership as Transformative Leader	13

5.6 STRATEGIES FEMALE SCHOOL LEADERS CAN ADOPT TO NAVIGATE LEADERSHIP DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.....	14
5.6.1 Gurr and Drysdale’s Model on Female Leadership	14
5.6.2 Leaders Embrace New Opportunities in a Crisis	16
5.6.2.1 Connecting with individuals to establish mutual trust.....	16
5.6.2.2 Distributive leadership during a crisis.....	16
5.6.2.3 Communicating clearly as a feminist leadership strategy	17
5.6.3 Female School Leaders Leading with Care and Empathy	17
5.7 SUMMARY OF THE SECTION.....	19
6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHODS	19
6.1 RESEARCH PARADIGM.....	19
6.2 RESEARCH APPROACH AND DESIGN.....	21
6.3 SAMPLING	22
6.4 CONTEXT OF STUDY.....	22
6.5 DATA COLLECTION METHODS.....	24
6.5.1 Semi-structured Interview	24
6.5.2 Observation Method for Data Generation	26
6.6 DATA ANALYSIS.....	27
6.7. ENSURING TRUSTWORTHINESS.....	30
6.8 ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER	31
6.9 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS.....	32
6.9.1 Informed Consent and Voluntary Participation	33
6.9.2 Maintaining Anonymity and Confidentiality	33
6.9.3 Safeguarding Participants against Potential for Harm	34
6.9.4 Data Analysis and Dissemination of the Findings.....	34
6.9.5 Ethical Approval and Access to Participants.....	35
6.10 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY	35
6.10 SUMMARY OF THE SECTION.....	36
7. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY AND INTERPRETATION	36
7.1 INTRODUCTION	36
7.2 DISCOVERED THEMES AND SUBTHEMES.....	36
7.3 DISCUSSING CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY FEMALE SCHOOL PRINCIPALS.....	38
7.3.1 Non-acceptance by Colleagues.....	38
7.3.2 Educators’ Resistance to Change	40

7.3.3 Oppressive and Unpromising Surroundings	42
7.4 STRATEGIES TO COUNTER CHALLENGES.....	43
7.4.1 Empowering Female School Principals	44
7.4.2 School Governing Body and Community Support	45
7.4.3 Educational Policies and Circuit Manager Support.....	46
7.5 CHALLENGES IN NAVIGATING LEADERSHIP DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC	48
7.5.1 COVID-19 Underscored Inequity and Inequalities	48
7.5.2 Rotational Modelling	51
7.5.3 Post Provisioning Model	53
7.5.4 Withdrawal of Educators and General Assistants.....	55
7.6 SUPPORT SYSTEMS FOR FEMALE SCHOOL PRINCIPALS	57
7.6.1 School Leadership in Disruptive Times.....	58
7.6.2 The Department of Basic Education in Supporting Female Leadership	59
7.6.3 Fourth Industrial Revolution in the Context of Education	61
7.7 SUMMARY OF THE SECTION.....	62
8. SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	63
8.1 INTRODUCTION	63
8.2 SUMMARY OF THE STUDY	63
8.3 RECOMMENDATIONS.....	68
8.4 RECOMMENDATION FOR FURTHER RESEARCH.....	69
8.5 CONCLUSION	70
REFERENCES.....	71
APPENDICES	91
Appendix 1: Ethical Clearance	91
Appendix 2: Permission Letters from Department.....	93
Appendix 3: Research Instruments	98
Appendix 4: Consent Forms	104
Appendix 5: Interview Transcripts	106
Appendix 6: Turnitin Report	113
Appendix 7: Editor’s Letter	114

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Biographical data of the participants..... 24

Table 2: Excerpt of analysis of data..... 29

Table 3: Research themes and subthemes 37

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Leadership in uncertain times domains and capabilities framework..... 15

LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ATP	Annual Teaching Plan
BED HONS	Bachelor of Education Honours
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DoE	Department of Education
EA	Educator Assistance
GA	General Assistance
HOD	Head of Department
ICT	Information Communication Technology
LPRC	Limpopo Provincial Research Committees
LPREC	Limpopo Provincial Research Ethic Committees
MEC	Member of Executive Council
NCOP	National Council of Provinces
PGD	Post Graduate Diploma
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
PPM	Post Provisioning Model
RSA	Republic of South Africa
SABC	South African Broadcasting Cooperation
SGB	School Governing Body
SP	Senior Phase
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
WHO	World Health Organisation

1. BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM

Some debates have substantiated how women are disadvantaged in leadership positions. Mwale and Dodo's (2017) study maintained that the same trend has been noted in school leadership where women have not had equal opportunities in leading schools as compared to men, hence many schools in South Africa are led by male principals (Davis, 2020). Many studies in Africa and across the globe have alluded to a variety of challenges that women in educational leadership positions face stemming from cultural and traditional stereotyping, dictated gender roles, resistance to women leadership, and branding of women as less competent (Mestry & Schmidt, 2012; Zikhali & Perumal, 2012; 2016). Barriers to sexism – “social, ethnic, and cultural stereotyping and glass ceilings and glass walls – still exist in the education sector” (Naidoo & Perumal, 2014, p. 808). Underrepresentation of females as principals, barriers to accessing principalships, school contextual problems, socio-economic and community contexts are some of the causes of the challenges (Al-Jaradat, 2014; Msila, 2013; Naidoo & Perumal, 2014).

While female school leaders were still grappling with the challenges, the world was struck by a pandemic. The first confirmed case of COVID-19 in South Africa was recorded on the 5th of March 2020 (Mhlanga & Moloji, 2020) and thereafter schools were closed. The phased method of re-opening of schools resulted in staff and learners learning in an unfamiliar environment. The preventative measures to mitigate the spread of the pandemic like social distancing, hand sanitising, observing social distancing during school hours and many others, presented a lot of challenges for all education stakeholders (Lancker & Parolin, 2020; Mhlanga & Moloji, 2020; Myende & Heystek, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic crisis exacerbated the challenges faced by female school principals (Lancker & Parolin, 2020; Myende & Heystek, 2020; Mhlanga & Moloji, 2020) and created yet another layer of challenges on top of the stigmas of masculinity, discrimination, aggression, and harassment concerning female leadership in education (Lumby & Azaola, 2011).

The pandemic has profoundly changed the way many schools were operating over the past year (Harris & Jones, 2020; Mhlanga & Moloji, 2020; Myende & Heystek, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic painfully exposed the inequalities and inequities that exist within the education sector especially in disadvantaged rural areas. Some studies have focused on leadership strategies in times of crisis (Smith & Riley, 2012; Mestry, 2017; Myende & Heystek, 2020). However, there has not been enough attention given to the way female principals are navigating through this COVID-19 storm in rural schools. Zhao (2020) asserted that female principals are obliged to deal with the negative effects of this pandemic in addition to many other challenges they face – the outbreak of COVID-19 has been an enormous test for their leadership.

It is against this background that this research aimed to find out how female school leaders practise their leadership in schools during this pandemic. This research investigated how female principals perceive their role in school leadership, and to determine challenges and opportunities they experience as well as to explore the strategies they have adopted to make sure the curriculum is enacted during the pandemic.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How did female school principals navigate leadership during the COVID-19 crisis in rural schools?

Sub-questions:

1. How did female school principals understand their role in school leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What challenges and opportunities did female school principals experience during the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. What mechanisms did female school principals adopt to influence the way the curriculum is enacted during the pandemic?

3. AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

3.1 AIM OF THE STUDY

The research aimed to discover how female school principals navigated school leadership during the COVID-19 crisis in rural schools.

3.2 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. Examine how female school principals perceived their role of school leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Determine challenges and opportunities female school principals experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. Investigate strategies that female school principals have been applying during the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure the enactment of the curriculum.

4. CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS

4.1 SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

School leadership involves putting together and directing the talents and capabilities of educators, school children, parents, and other education stakeholders to reach the desired academic goals – the term carries the same meaning as the terms, education leadership and education management. In this research, during the COVID-19 pandemic, school leadership no longer functions within known bounds, with clear arrangements and rhythms to a school year (Harris & Jones, 2020). Leading in disruptive times means that school leaders must be able to navigate different courses, to create new paths through the disruption. School leaders are defined “by their determination, their hope, and their unshakable belief that whatever happens, whatever the cost, whatever the scale of the challenge, they will continue to do everything in their power to safe guard the learning of all young people” (Harris & Jones, 2020, p. 246).

4.2 COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic, also known as the Coronavirus pandemic, is an ongoing global pandemic of the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), which is caused by

severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-2). The virus was first identified in December 2019 in Wuhan, China (World Health Organisation, 2021). The WHO declared a Public Health Emergency of international concern on the 30th of January 2020. The severity of COVID-19 symptoms is highly variable, ranging from unnoticeable to life-threatening. COVID-19 transmits when people breathe in air contaminated by droplets and small airborne aerosols. Recommended preventive measures include social distancing, wearing face masks in public, ventilation and air-filtering, hand washing, covering one's mouth when sneezing or coughing, disinfecting surfaces, and monitoring and self-isolation for people exposed or symptomatic.

5. LITERATURE REVIEW

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous section referred to the plethora of challenges faced by female school leadership in rural schools that are exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. This exploratory research sought to discover how female school principals navigate school leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis in rural areas. The relevant literature was reviewed, detailing how South Africa and its schools are responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, and how female principals perceive their roles in school leadership during the rampant escalation in infections. In addition, literature was searched to determine the challenges and opportunities female principals experienced. Lastly, the literature review examined the strategies female principals can adopt to influence the way curriculum is enacted during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher draws on some concepts of social justice theory in an attempt to close the gender gap in the position of the leadership in rural schools during the crisis. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2014), reviewed literature creates a link between current knowledge on the topic and the research problem, supporting a researcher to act from a position of prior knowledge.

5.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For this literature review, social justice was carefully chosen as a framework as its conceptual viewpoints are suitable to examine comprehensive social contexts concerning how the female school principal navigates school leadership during the

COVID-19 pandemic. Gewirtz (1998) describe social justice as a response to disrupting and undermining provisions that promote marginalisation and exclusionary processes. North (2006) defined social justice as a construct with conflicting, overlapping units, redistribution, recognition, and sameness difference. Theoharis (2007) defined social justice leaders in education as those principals who advocate, lead, and keep at the centre of their practice and vision issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalising conditions. With the variety of definitions of social justice, it is not easy to agree as to what it looks like for all school leaders, due to its difficulties, complexities, and contradictions (Skrla, McKenzie, & Scheurich, 2007). As Bogotch (2002) asserted, social justice has no fixed or predictable meaning. Dantley and Tillman (2010) and Marshall and Oliva (2010) identified common threads and the understanding of social justice to include creating equitable schooling and education.

In real terms, the five principles of social justice education in schools which are inclusion and equity, high expectations, reciprocal community relationships, system-wide approach, and direct social justice education and intervention (Carlisle, Jackson, & George, 2006) need to be relevant in our schooling systems to combat social injustice and navigate schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic. Three dimensions of social justice: redistribution, recognition, and representation as described by Fraser (2016) are considered relevant because this research focused on rural schools that have historically been considered disadvantaged and marginalised. According to Fraser (2008), overcoming injustices means dismantling institutionalised obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others as full partners in social interaction. Social justice is a deliberate intervention that challenges fundamental inequities that arise when one group uses power inappropriately over another (Furman & Shields, 2005). Social justice was considered a useful framework as its principles aim to eliminate inequality, promote inclusiveness, and establish environments that are supportive of all (Moyo, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and shone on injustices and enduring inequalities in our education system, which have been ignored for decades. The South African education system is structurally fragile – its fragility arises out of the injustices

of the apartheid system which disadvantaged schools and learners (Soudien, Reddy, & Harvey, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the glaring inequality levels in our schools.

5.3 CHALLENGES FACED BY FEMALE SCHOOL LEADERS

International and local research showed that women face a myriad of problems in leading schools. Some of the problems come from the underrepresentation of females as principals, stumbling blocks to attaining principalships, socio-economic and social contexts.

5.3.1 Underrepresentation of Females in School Leadership

The Constitution of South Africa, which is the supreme law of the country, provides for equality and non-discrimination on the basis of race, gender, social background, and creed. Chapter 2 of the Constitution (RSA, 1996(a) Sections 9(2) and 9(3)) state that the state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on the grounds of race, gender or sexual orientation. Despite the convincing reasons for the equal representation of women in leadership, women are largely underrepresented in schools' leadership (Bowen, 2005; Lumby, Azaola, De Wet, Skervin, Walsh, & Williamson, 2010). Female teachers make up about 68% of the country's teaching force, but only 36% of women are principals (Lumby & Azaola, 2011; Moorosi, 2007). The low percentage of women in educational leadership positions indicates that gender equity is still far from being achieved, and the rate of advancement is slow and uneven (Williams, 2011). Despite clear policies on gender equity, some socio-cultural stereotypes undermine women's ability to manage schools (Coleman, 2006, Mestry & Schmidt, 2012; Zikhali & Perumal, 2012). This implies that women fight a constant battle against social and organisational discrimination (Moorosi, 2007). Embarrassingly, women are often underappreciated, whereas they represent a powerful and untapped natural resource, and are a stabilising force in any organisation.

5.3.2 Barriers Hindering Females from Accessing Principalship

Lumby et al., (2010) and Kaparou and Bush (2007) suggested that one of the reasons women are underrepresented in school leadership is due to sex-role stereotyping and

socialisation. Women have long been associated with child-rearing and household chores, and men with earning money (Cubillo & Brown, 2003). Barriers to accessing leadership also occur where there is discrimination. Gender discrimination occurs when there is unequal treatment or favouritism based on sex (Coleman, 2001). Family responsibilities and workloads have become increasingly problematic for school principals, and women principals struggle to find a balance between their careers and expected roles as mothers and wives (Funk & Polnick, 2005). Many literatures indicated that mistrust in women's leadership is caused by various factors including tradition and culture (Lumby, 2003; Mestry & Schmidt, 2012).

5.2.3 School Contextual Problems

Female school leaders are confronted with problems associated with rural schools. Rural schools are found in rural areas which are generally remote and relatively underdeveloped (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). Rural people still lag far behind in education and are often particularly hard hit by poverty and hunger (Sauvageot & da Graça, 2007). Many schools in South Africa, just like all over the world, are situated in rural areas, which place learners at a disadvantage (Hlalele, 2012). Rural occupation in South Africa is not by choice but directly linked to apartheid and the colonial policies of dispossession, resettlement, and systematic exclusion from opportunities (Department of Education [DoE], 2005). Hlalele (2012) concluded that this means that each rural area possesses a different make-up in terms of needs and resources. Key features of rural areas in South Africa include long distances to towns; the poor conditions of roads; lack of or limited access to Information Communication Technologies (ICTs); lack of services such as running water, electricity, sanitation, health and education facilities; low economic status; and little access to lifelong learning opportunities (DoE, 2005). The problem of rurality is further exacerbated by the continued under-resourcing of schools relative to needs. The government finds it more difficult to supply quality education services in rural areas (DoE, 2005), and various factors weaken the quality of learning and teaching in South Africa's rural areas.

5.2.4 Socio-Economic Problems

Du Plessis and Mestry (2019) included, amongst other contributing factors, lack of parental interest in children's education, insufficient funding from the state, lack of resources, underqualified educators, multi-grade teaching, unreasonable teacher-learner ratios, irrelevant curricula, and many more as barriers to effective education. This observation is supported by the Parliamentary Monitoring Group (2015), which explained that rural education formed a large part of South Africa's history. While acknowledging the progress the country has made, not enough attention has been given to rural education, which necessitates redress. Gardiner (2008) argued that the achievement of real quality in education in rural areas will be possible when there is significant social and economic development.

5.2.5 Community Context

According to Msila (2013), men are always perceived as superior by society irrespective of circumstances. Grant (2005) found that women in some communities have little or no credibility as leaders because, according to De Beauvoir (2009), women are perceived by society as inferior, and they, therefore, lack freedom and mobility. Lumby (2003) contended that communities do not trust women to be appointed school managers. Communities viewed school management as an important title that demands the seriousness they think only men can provide (Msila, 2013). Some of the barriers that women have historically faced from the community are perceptions like women cannot discipline older learners, particularly males; females are too emotional; too weak physically; they are submissive; and males resent working with female leaders (Davis, 2018; Naidoo & Perumal, 2014; Schmidt & Mestry, 2015). Women are also expected to overcome the glass ceiling barriers before they can ascend to a leadership position (Cotter, 2005; Ndebele, 2018; Wiley, 2012). A review of female principals leading at disadvantaged schools in Johannesburg, South Africa by Naidoo and Perumal (2014) and female principals' experiences in the governance of rural schools by Duma (2015), indicated that female principals experience problems such as sexism, discipline, and high absenteeism among teachers and learners. According to Msila (2013), this is perpetuated by gender stereotypes, which characterise men by high needs for dominance, autonomy,

aggression, and high achievement, whereas women were characterised by high needs for defence, nurturance, and affiliation (Powell & Graves, 2007). A male prejudice stereotype says that men lead better than women (Cheng & Shum, 2001).

5.4 SOUTH AFRICAN RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

In South Africa, the first confirmed case of COVID-19 was recorded on 5 March 2020 (Mhlanga & Moloji, 2020). The South African Government, fearing the predicted rate at which the disease could infect people, on 15 March 2020 declared the pandemic a national disaster in terms of the Disaster Management Act (Mhlanga & Moloji, 2020). On 23 March, President Ramaphosa instituted a national lockdown for 21 days from 26 March to 16 April 2020.

South Africa's bold response to the COVID-19 outbreak has been a standout in the region. President Ramaphosa has been an effective communicator, speaking frankly about the challenges ahead. The South African government moved to close the borders and restrict movement (levels 5-3). South Africa also promoted a science-based approach, based policies on scientific evidence, adjusting restrictions in consultation with professionals, tapping into religious and non-traditional leaders' opinions, and unifying the political classes (SSIS, 2020).

5.4.1 Department of Basic Education Response to COVID-19

On 19 March 2020, classrooms and learning environments across South African schools were summarily closed to keep the Coronavirus disease at bay (DBE, 2020). The Department of Basic Education (DBE) initially planned that schooling would resume on 18 April 2020, but as the virus proved to be more difficult than anticipated, the closure continued. The uncertainty led to speculations, suggestions, proposals, and tentative plans for a school recovery plan to save the integrity of the academic year (Mhlanga & Moloji, 2020; Ramrathan, 2020; Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). After many deliberations, a phased approach to learners returning to schools seemed a viable option. The DBE in their *Covid-19 Development Plan Draft* realised on 29 April 2020, agreed to address challenges faced by schools. Common challenges that have emerged from many studies of South African schools include: overcrowding; a lack of resources (connectivity, water and sanitation); discipline; nutrition; and safety (Hlalele,

2012; Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Dube, 2020). Before an effective schooling system could be re-implemented, the DBE tried to mitigate existential challenges faced by schools, for example, a total of 3,475 schools in South Africa required an adequate water supply in the form of boreholes, water tanks, and plumbing (DBE, 2020b).

To facilitate the continuation of the school year, the DBE provided resources to learners across all grades, including educational broadcasting on television and radio, online learning through meeting platforms such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom as well as providing worksheets and exemplar examination papers and memoranda (DBE, 2020b). May /June examinations were postponed, and the annual teaching plan (ATP) was trimmed, and final stage examinations were aimed to be concluded by 15 December 2020. The suggested start date for the 2021 academic year was 25 January 2021 (DBE, 2020a). The DBE delivered Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) to all learners across the country, and R600 million was spent on water and sanitation (DBE, 2020c). Various options have been provided for schools to return in a manner that ensures social distancing and sanitising (Ramrathan, 2020). Substitute teachers are being enlisted to address the shortage of teachers who have co-morbidities, and education assistants are employed working in tandem with teachers. The DBE is also providing food to learners through the nutritional programme during COVID-19.

5.4.2 The Effects of COVID-19 in South African Schools

On 18 March 2020, the United Nations' Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) estimated that 107 countries had implemented national school closures related to COVID-19. In line with the World Health Organization (WHO) declaration, the President of South Africa, Mr Cyril Ramaphosa declared a national state of disaster and announced the closure of schools on 18 March 2020 (Mhlanga & Moloji, 2020). From the beginning, there was the general view that the closure of schools was going to have a tremendous impact on schools, educators, and students (Almanthari, Maulina, & Bruce, 2020). Lancker and Parolin (2020) predicted numerous challenges for school leaders and managers. The closure and then the phased method of re-opening schools presented numerous challenges for schools' leaders, managers, and governors (Lancker & Parolin, 2020; Mhlanga & Moloji, 2020; Myende & Heystek, 2020). Some of the challenges include social distancing, intensive cleaning, the careful

orchestration of all movement around school premises, and many others (Harris & Jones, 2020).

The pandemic has caused significant disruption to normal long-term plans in schools. School leaders are obliged to deal with the negative impact of this pandemic (Zhao, 2020). They are also expected to play an inspiring and positive role in managing the anxieties related to the social and economic impacts that this pandemic has brought about, such as the closure of schools, and then the challenges related to their re-opening.

5.4.3 COVID-19 Exposes South Africa's Unequal Schooling System

The COVID-19 pandemic has unearthed South Africa's glaring social and economic differences between rich and poor, the inequality between White and Black, and disparities between rural and urban schools, which still persist in our education system a quarter of a century after the end of minority White rule (Harris & Jones, 2020). Many schools in South Africa, particularly the government schools compared to former model C and urban schools, are in poor shape, particularly in rural areas (Hlalele, 2012; Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Dube, 2020). Independent schools and public schools have good infrastructure and financial resources, and equally so, their learners are from higher socio-economic backgrounds. According to Ramrathan (2020), this has an added advantage of digital learning platforms, like Google classroom, Microsoft Teams, and Zoom, as well as parent support in teaching and learning. While learners are adjusting to the new normal of schooling during the lockdown and closure of schools, the situation strengthens the two-world school system (Spaull, 2013) that exists within the South African context. Digital learning further perpetuates inequalities, because the majority of learners do not have access to the internet or experience weak internet access due to geographical locations and no computers or handheld electronic devices, like smartphones (Ramrathan, 2020). Many learners in rural contexts are now excluded from schooling and unable to access online resources due to the lack of infrastructure; the unavailability of electricity and electronic gadgets; and lack of qualified teachers (McDonald, 2020). Rural learners, from being previously disadvantaged and marginalised, are now facing unprecedented challenges in adjusting to a new mode of life and learning (Dube, 2020).

5.5 FEMALE SCHOOL LEADERS PERCEIVED LEADERSHIP ROLE DURING COVID-19

5.5.1 Female School Leadership as Social Justice Leader

A social justice agenda in schools is about leaders achieving equity and excellence in education for all children regardless of their racial, cultural, linguistic, gender, or sexual orientation background (Furnam & Shields, 2005, Brooks, Jean-Maria, Normore, & Hodgins, 2007). As Evans (2007) observed, the scholarship of social justice supports the notion that educational leaders have a social and moral obligation to foster equitable school practices, processes, and outcomes for leaders of different racial and socio-economic backgrounds, gender, cultural diversity, and sexual orientation. Hlalele (2012) asserted that justice in schools aims to achieve the maximum development of all students, shared values, attitudes, and norms that promote the inclusion and learning of everyone, avoiding all forms of exclusion, marginalisation, and discrimination because COVID-19 affects all irrespective of social status.

5.5.2 Female School Leadership as Community Leader

Dependence and relationships can be established when female principals move beyond the school doors to include community leadership (Khalifa, 2012). Real community building has been described as listening to the voices of parents and the community's people, and developing new practices and approaches (Nakagawa, Stafford, Fisher, & Matthews (2002). The concept of community focuses on a foundation of caring and understanding. Collaboration and community building take place when school personnel make attempts to build caring relationships with the families in their schools (Gray, 2014). A principal interested in creating a school environment that meets the needs of students and families must have a clear understanding of the school community. In addition, the principal must have an understanding of the history of the neighbourhood, including its needs and assets. Theoharis (2007) found that many school leaders are taking the initiative to "break the silence" in their communities by sharing the stories and experiences of marginalised groups in their schools. By listening to their stories, being present in their communities and conducting community inspections, principals can provide the necessary resources to their families, parents, and students, thus adding community leaders to

their role of instructional leader (Khalifa, 2012). Female school leaders can play a critical role in ensuring that school-community connections continue to be strengthened to support student learning during this unprecedented era of COVID-19 (Harris & Jones, 2020).

5.5.3 The Concept of Female School Leadership as Spiritual Leader

Frequently, during a crisis at schools, school leaders are called on to make decisions or to initiate and complete assignments that conflict with their principles, values, predispositions, or personal belief system (Dantley, 2010). This need to grapple with moral responsibility and social justice has been coined “critical spirituality” by Dantley (2010). Principals who seek to transform their schools and communities during a crisis, allow their spiritual selves to assist them in the execution of their leadership responsibilities. (Dantley, 2010; Gray, 2014). Leaders who incorporate spirituality in their leadership styles use it as a source of motivation to serve as “civil rights activists or public, organic intellectuals who not only articulate an agenda for the radical reconstruction of schools but who then implement a social justice agenda” (Dantley, 2010, p. 215). Edwards and Perumal (2017) pronounce that spiritual leadership is a means through which equity and social justice can be enacted in our schools. The Coronavirus has brought a flood of fear and uncertainty, and everyone needs support.

5.5.4 Female School Leadership as Transformative Leader

During a crisis like COVID-19, female school leaders can adopt a transformative leadership style. In this instance, a transformative leader can focus on the work of Freire (1970; 1973; 1992; 1998). In particular, Freire (1970) conceptualise dialogue as a means for transformation through education and social action. Freire’s (1970) concept of “dialogue of love”, is characterised by humility, faith in the people, hope, critical thinking, and ultimately solidarity (Miller, Brown, & Hopson, 2011, p. 1082). In the wake of COVID-19, we can use these attributes to build resilience in our institutions. Freire (1970) claimed that years of disregard for oppressed people’s humanity have influenced the creation and maintenance of social and institutional structures that limit and degrade (Miller et al., 2011). Freire’s (1998) work is applicable during these unprecedented times of COVID-19. His work states that leaders who seek

change must openly approach people and communities, being prepared to listen to their ideas. Leaders should leave arrogance and conceit behind and approach others with openness and “faith in the people” (Freire, 1998, pp. 90-91). This ideology believes that with humility, faith and dialogue, people can become active advocates for social change in disruptive times. According to Miller et al., (2011) the leader and the people have a shared fate. Transformative educational leadership involves the leaders’ transforming schools by engaging in self-reflection, systematically analysing their school, and then confronting inequities regarding race, class, gender, language, ability, and/or sexual orientation (Cooper, 2009). With the marginalisation of many rural, disadvantaged schools, transformative leadership supports the basic ideals of democratic education for all students, especial during the COVID-19 crisis. Schools and communities can be transformed by developing inclusive collaborations for students, teachers, staff, and families (Gray, 2014).

5.6 STRATEGIES FEMALE SCHOOL LEADERS CAN ADOPT TO NAVIGATE LEADERSHIP DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Although female school principals continue to face barriers that limit their success as school leaders (Greyling & Steyn, 2015; Mestry & Schmidt, 2012; Zikhali & Perumal, 2012), women in principalship positions provide strong leadership in their schools. A study conducted by Krumm and Gates (2002) established that female principals appear to possess superiority in leadership adaptability compared to male principals. Servais (2003) also emphasises the power of female principals, noting that such women are in a position to impact school reform, school culture, and school partnership. Duma (2015) recommend that it will be essential for female principals to be given necessary training so that they can have a working knowledge of school governance activities which will be beneficial during the COVID-19 crisis.

5.6.1 Gurr and Drysdale’s Model on Female Leadership

There have been crises that leaders have faced in the past, but the level of uncertainty and unfamiliarity that COVID-19 brought with it is unique in its own way. Dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, Lawrie Drysdale and David Gurr recommend their model of leadership to fully prepare educational leaders to navigate uncertain times (Drysdale & Gurr, 2017). Figure 1 shows Gurr and Drydale ‘s leadership model which helps

educational leaders to locate their strengths and develop other areas which may improve their practices (Gurr & Drysdale, 2020).

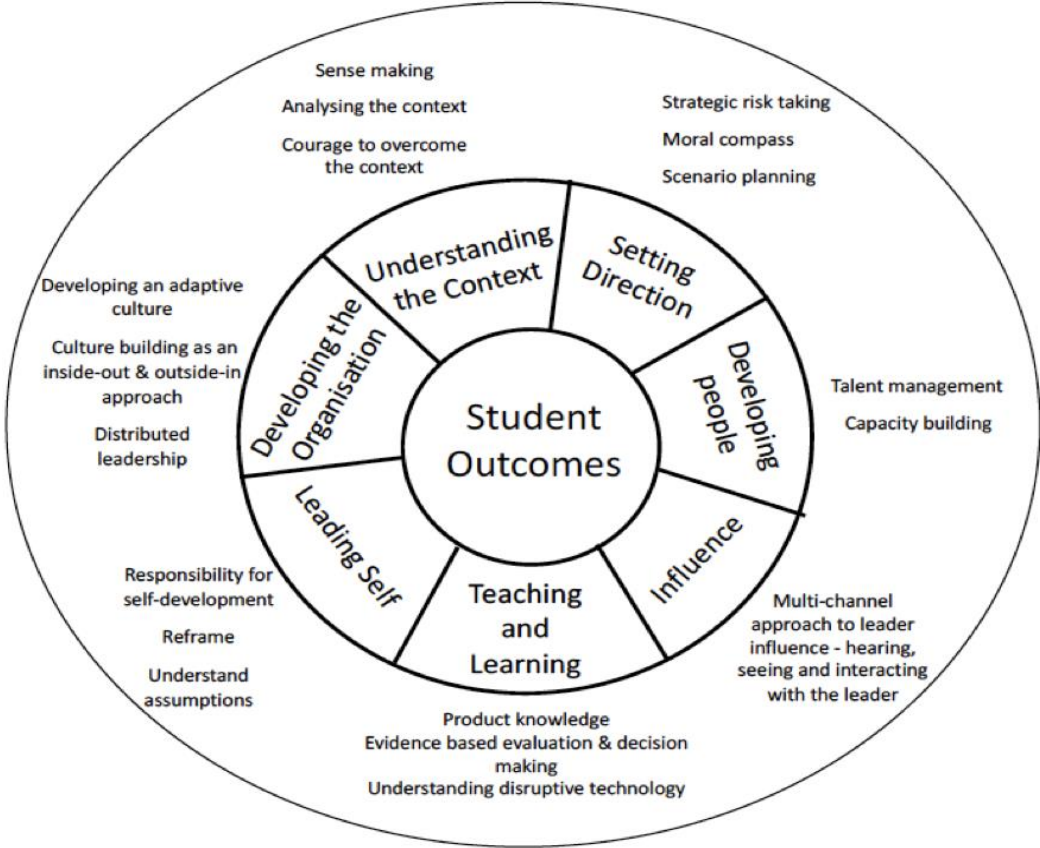


Figure 1: Leadership in uncertain times domains and capabilities framework

Source: Drysdale and Gurr (2017)

The model focuses on student outcomes in the centre, and this will include academic, extra and co-curricular, and personal outcomes (Gurr, 2014). Surrounding this are seven leadership domains. Four of these are setting direction, developing people, developing the organisation, and improving teaching and learning, thus reflecting transformational, instructional, and successful leadership research (Day & Leithwood, 2007; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2020; Leithwood & Sun, 2012; Ylimaki & Jacobson, 2011). For the other three domains, influencing acknowledges that leadership is a deliberate action to influence the behaviour of others (Leithwood &

Riehl, 2003), leadership is enacted within multiple contexts (Hallinger, 2018), and developing oneself is important for sustaining leadership success (Day & Gurr, 2014). Drysdale and Gurr (2017) argue that the seven leadership domains are enduring features of leadership that seem to be important in most contexts. Within these domains, leaders need to consider the capabilities that they need for their own context. Examples of times characterised by turbulence and uncertainty are offered in the outer circle.

5.6.2 Leaders Embrace New Opportunities in a Crisis

Leading a school in a crisis is stressful, given that the role and the influence of the leader are magnified in times of change. Fernandez and Shaw (2020) offer three leadership best practices that female school leadership can consider in navigating crises. These best practices are:

5.6.2.1 Connecting with individuals to establish mutual trust

Fernandez and Shaw (2020) describe accountability, trustworthiness, and integrity as characteristics of an effective academic leader facing adaptive challenges. Yet, in crises, the most important attributes are emotional intelligence and emotional stability, which will allow female school leaders to place the interests of others above their own in servant leadership (Doraiswamy, 2012). In a time of uncertainty, stress levels are high, and as such, female school leaders must act with deliberate calm courage, and humility to strengthen relationships with individuals within and outside of the institution (Garcia, 2006; Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). Establishing mutual trust and building relationships in a crisis requires that leaders be authentic and engage in active listening without judgement, accept advice and criticism, and communicate views transparently while promoting psychological safety (Kazer, Fries-Britt, Kurban, McGuire, & Wheaton, 2018). Relationships forged in a crisis by meaningful engagement can become long term, significant, and beneficial when the crisis diminishes (Kazer et al., 2018).

5.6.2.2 Distributive leadership during a crisis

Distributed leadership has become the default leadership response in this current crisis requiring more school leaders, at all levels, to connect, share, learn, and network their way through issues (Azorin, Harris, & Jones, 2020). Heifetz and Laurie (2001) argued

that in a complex adaptive challenge such as that posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which is so unpredictable and complex in nature, a charismatic academic leader cannot successfully navigate leadership acting alone. According to Kezar and Holcombe (2017), educational leaders should be initially responsible for identifying the imminent crisis and setting institutional priorities before leveraging the collective knowledge of the school community, and then a leader can delegate responsibilities to a network of task forces that will significantly implement crisis management strategies. Team members, ideally, should be appointed based on character traits like conscientiousness, agreeableness, openness, honesty, and diversity. (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). Distributing leadership responsibilities is more significant in crises because it improves the quality of the decisions made since numerous viewpoints can be obtained, particularly if each team is independent, self-managed, and empowered to make decisions (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017).

5.6.2.3 Communicating clearly as a feminist leadership strategy

In a crisis, leaders should communicate clearly and frequently to all stakeholders (Edmondson, 2020). More than one communication channel should be used. The integrity and credibility of the leader are important in a crisis (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). Leaders should be able to communicate a compelling and thoughtful shared vision for the institution that is realistic and attainable. The phrase “connect to learn, learn to connect” describes the daily realities of students, parents, and teachers trying to work together in this pandemic, and school leaders thus also need to be technologically savvy and well informed (Harris & Jones, 2020).

5.6.3 Female School Leaders Leading with Care and Empathy

Female school leaders need to ensure a caring, safe, and non-discriminatory school environment that leans towards empathy and decisiveness in times of any crisis (Mahabeer, 2008). Caring is the foundation of morality, a universal human attribute and ethically basic to humans (Noddings, 2013). According to Sirleaf (2020), women leaders are better placed to draw on informal networks to mobilise rapid responses and community support. Sirleaf (2020), further states that they are used to finding

alternative resources and building ingenious problem-solving partnerships that any female school leader can adopt in their schools.

Followers are reliant on their leaders for leadership (Felfe & Schyns, 2010). When disasters, like the COVID-19 pandemic, arise, the learners, staff and the community expect female school leadership to mitigate all threats even at the expense of their personal well-being. The response of people during a crisis is often to look to leaders to do something (Boin & Hart, 2003). Female school leaders are often the face of pandemics, crises, and periods of hardship for many (Felfe and Schyns, 2010). Pont (2020) state that schools, their teachers, and community leaders require those in female leadership positions around them to provide clarity and vision in terms of learning and curriculum requirements, health and safety guidelines, training, and resources to be able to define learning solutions that will allow their schools to flourish in times of uncertainty. Pont (2020) further emphasised that if these are available and well communicated, schools can be trusted to shape their responses, and get on with learning and teaching in their schools during any crisis.

Female school principals need to respond during pandemics in ways that still maintain their status but allow them to adjust and be flexible. Discrepancies between expectations and performance have been explored by Boin and Hart (2003) and they seem relevant to the COVID-19 pandemic. One expectation is that leaders should put public safety first; however, self-care and consideration must be the main priority and prime concern for all school leaders (Harris & Jones, 2020). In doing that female school principals can manage the emotional responses of others including anxiety, frustration, loss, and anger. Research has found that leaders often have to consider the economic and political losses of regulating and enforcing maximum safety. During a crisis, there is also an expectation that leaders should strategise to take charge and provide directions for crisis management, apparently operating alone as the symbolic head of crisis operations (Boin & Hart, 2003).

Female school leadership should bear the responsibility of ensuring the well-being of their personnel and students. Similar to Maslow's theory of needs satisfaction, female school leadership must make sure that basic needs like food, health, and emotional well-being are met first – before Bloom's taxonomy (Siddiqi & Wuori, 2020).

5.7 SUMMARY OF THE SECTION

In conclusion, school leadership in disruptive times will surpass and dominate what has historically been written about the subject. School leadership used to operate in a different context and time, within known limits; it followed strict prescriptions and clear lines of accountability. COVID-19 has changed all that. School leaders are now confronted with unpredictability and uncertainty in leading their schools. In these disruptive times, female school leadership cannot emulate the leadership practices they envisaged in a period of stability and relative calm. Leading in turbulent times means being able to navigate a different course to create new trails through disruption (Harris & Jones, 2020). School leaders are the frontline of defence in our educational institutions. They are defined by their willpower, their courage, and their resolute belief that whatever happens, whatever the cost, whatever the scale of the challenge, they will continue to do everything in their power to protect the learning of all young people. Leading in uncertain times, female school leaders can learn to embrace vulnerability, demonstrate empathy, exhibit courage, be great listeners, consider health and safety first, model the way, ask questions, provide support, relentlessly communicate, and learn from the past (Fullan, 2020). The ability to learn and evolve from facing significant ordeals is an essential component of effective leadership.

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

This section provides a detailed picture of how the study was conducted. It provides a rationale for the choice of methodology and the methods adopted for this research project. The following aspects are covered in this section: research paradigm, research approach and design, sampling, contexts of the study (including biographical details of the participants). Interview data collection methods, data analysis, trustworthiness, the role of the researcher in data collection, ethical considerations, limitations of the study and the summary section.

6.1 RESEARCH PARADIGM

Based on the exploratory nature of my research, the interpretive paradigm was well suited. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), a research paradigm is a basic set of beliefs that guide actions, dealing with first principles, or the researcher's worldviews.

Interpretivism was chosen because it emphasises that social reality is viewed and interpreted by the individual according to the ideological positions that they hold (Kamal, 2019). Therefore, knowledge is personally experienced rather than acquired or imposed from outside. The interpretivist paradigm was chosen because it believes that reality is multi-layered and complex and a single phenomenon can have multiple interpretations; interpretivists believe in socially constructed multiple realities (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). This means that truth and reality are created, not discovered. The importance of interpretivism, is that it pays attention to and values what people say, do, and feel, and how they make meaning of the phenomena being researched. The ultimate aim of interpretivist research is to offer a perspective of a situation and to analyse how a particular group of people make sense of their situation or the phenomena they encounter.

The paradigm consists of four primary philosophical assumptions or basic belief systems: ontology, epistemology, methodology, and methods. In other words, it is our way of understanding the reality of the world and studying it (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). Ontology is concerned with the nature of our beliefs about reality (Richards, 2003). Realism assumes that the world contains truths and that knowledge can be tested in objective reality (Creswell, 2009) that leads a researcher to inquire what kind of reality exists (Patton, 2002). Epistemology refers to the division of thinking that studies the nature of knowledge and the process by which knowledge is developed and confirmed (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003), as well as how this knowledge can be acquired and how it can be communicated to others (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). Epistemology is grounded on the belief that knowledge-making is possible through subjective experience and insight (Kafle, 2011). The methodology is the strategy, plan of action, process, or design that can be used to conduct investigations (Antwi & Hamza, 2015). Though there is no fixed set of methods, it guides the researcher in deciding what type of data is required for a study and an appropriate data collection tool (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). Methods are a specific means of collecting and analysing data, such as open-ended interviews and observation.

6.2 RESEARCH APPROACH AND DESIGN

This study was qualitative in nature. Creswell (2016) interpreted qualitative research as an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) acknowledged that qualitative research aims to disclose the meaning of an occurrence for people who are involved in it. In conducting a study qualitatively, the researcher wanted to produce rich data and to enable a deeper understanding of human experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative researchers are concerned with exploring and/or explaining phenomena as they occur in the natural setting. This means that qualitative researchers “study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014, p. 3). The researcher used this approach because he wanted to understand the experiences of female school principals in navigating school leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. The advantage of the qualitative method is that it can generate rich descriptions of the participants’ thought processes, and tends to focus on reasons why a phenomenon has occurred (Creswell, 2003).

The phenomenological design was used in this study. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2014), exploratory studies examine new or little-understood phenomena, to discover themes of participants’ meanings, and give direction for future research. Phenomenological research design allows the researcher to describe the lived experiences of participants about a phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), to understand the meaning participants’ ascribed to that event (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). Phenomenology is a method of qualitative research that focuses on the study of an individual’s lived experiences within the world (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019). It usually involves long in-depth interviews with subjects and also provides a very rich and detailed description of the human experience (Wilson & Mclean, 2011). Through the exploratory approach, the researcher was able to describe and explore the experience of female school principals in navigating school leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

6.3 SAMPLING

Sampling is “the process of selecting or searching for situations, context, and/or participants who provide rich data of the phenomenon of interest” (Korstjens & Moser, 2018, p. 10). A purposive sampling technique was adopted for this study. Purposive sampling is the intentional selection of informants based on their ability to elucidate a specific theme, concept, or phenomenon (Robison, 2014). In this method, a sample was drawn for this purpose. The researcher selected this non-probability sample technique based on his judgement and the purpose of the research, looking for those who have had experience, but who are variable in characteristics and their individual experience, relating to the phenomenon to be researched (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

The research was conducted in the Vhembe East District of Limpopo Province of South Africa. The study focused on one circuit because it is closer to the researcher. Financial limitations and time constraints hindered the researcher from targeting high schools led by women which were far away from the researcher. Based on the aims, objectives and questions of the study, consequently, six primary schools led by female school principals from the circuit were purposively selected. The six school female principals were the subjects of the investigation as they correspond with the particular characteristics of a population that was of interest to the researcher and which could provide the researcher with the justification to make interpretations and generalisations from the sample being studied. Purposive participants were used as they were deemed the relevant participants to provide the experience of the phenomenon being researched (Merriam, 1998, Patton, 2002). All participants identified and selected were knowledgeable individuals and experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Plano, 2011). The number of chosen participants fell within the accepted number of participants for a study and represented an acceptable number to be able to obtain rich and detailed data in respect of the research questions.

6.4 CONTEXT OF STUDY

This research was undertaken with six female principals from six mainstream rural public primary schools from Grade R to Grade 7, from Vhembe East District, Limpopo Department of Education (LDoE). The participants in the study were all females and their experience as principals ranged from three to 21 years. Female principals were

given a participant information sheet (Appendix 5, interview transcripts) and consent sheet (Appendix 4) and were asked to read and sign both before the interviews took place.

When the six female participants became school principals, they were between the ages of 38 and 47. The composition of the staff bodies of the female school principal participants were mainly older female educators with a few males, blended with new Funza-Lushaka bursary recipients. The work associated with the responsibilities of the female school principals was for all purposes the same. They worked with many educators who have good experience in teaching and a few less experienced educators. They mostly interacted with uneducated parents or guardians, who provide less support to their children's progress at school. Learners were mostly from deep rural, disadvantaged communities and the majority were social grant recipients. The female school principal participants were confronted with different activities that made the school functional. Female school principal participants must balance an ever-decreasing school budget, making sure educators and learners have what they need to maintain an effective teaching and learning environment.

The female school principal participants received daily visits from different people for different reasons. Educators, support staff, and learners also visited the female school principals' offices to discuss school-related issues and/or personal problems. There were different meetings that the school principals had to attend regularly, such as school principals' meetings, school governing body (SGB) meetings, staff meetings, parents' meetings, circuit or district meetings, and many others. As is the case in all schools, the participant school principals had to monitor all activities at school and duly report to the Department of Education regularly. It is obvious that in order to manage as effectually as possible, all female school principal participants need all the backing, acceptance, reassurance, and enthusiasm they can get from the different stakeholders, to put out all the daily fires that figuratively manifest in the school environment.

The biographical data showed that all the female principals were either single, married, or divorced, well educated (qualified), experienced in the teaching fraternity, and their current positions. The six female school principals' work experience as educators

ranged from four to 17 years. All these female school principals gained their teaching experience at different schools; three of them came to their present schools as head of department (HOD), and the other three as permanent principals. Five participants gained their experience under male leadership and only one under female leadership. The biographical data served as the basis underlying the data that was collected, analysed, and interpreted as findings.

Table 1: Biographical data of the participants

Participant	Age	Marital status	Highest qualification	Years of experience as an educator	Years of experience as a HOD or Deputy principal	Years of experience as a principal
SP1	50	Married	BEd Hons	15	8	03
SP2	54	Single	PTD	4	7	11
SP3	58	Single	MEd	15	15	04
SP4	59	Divorced	MEd	11	6	21
SP5	54	Married	BEd Hons	17	10	03
SP6	54	Married	BEd	12	13	8

6.5 DATA COLLECTION METHODS

Data for qualitative studies can be collected from different sources of evidence, including “archival records, documents, structured or open interviews” and many more (Yin, 2016, p. 366). In this study, the researcher collected data using in-depth, individual semi-structured interviews and augmented by observations. The use of multiple methods to study a phenomenon is projected to produce results that are more robust and compelling than single method studies (Davis, Golicic, & Boerstler, 2011).

6.5.1 Semi-structured Interview

The researcher wanted to collect data that offered rich, detailed, firsthand female school principals’ accounts of their experiences in navigating school leadership during

the COVID-19 pandemic. Semi-structured interviews were the primary method of data collection. At the root, the intent is to understand the phenomena on their own terms, which is to describe the human experience as it is experienced by the person themselves, allowing the crux to appear (Cameron, Schaffer, & Hyeon-Ace, 2001). According to McMillan and Schumacher (2014), semi-structured interview questions entrust the researcher to choose questions in advance, while remaining flexible in the sequencing and phrasing of the questions. The main task in interviewing is to understand the meaning of what participants say about a phenomenon under study (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

The researcher's questions were directed at the participants' experiences, feelings, beliefs, and convictions about the theme in question. The qualitative interview is seen as a conversation with purpose, where precise topics are deliberated but to allow participants to tell their own stories in their own words (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). To enhance the validity of the interviews, a pilot study was conducted before the main study. One female school principal from another circuit, at a school with similar characteristics, was chosen to test the interview schedule. The piloted interview schedule that was used was on the final schedule, with no additional changes effected.

Each interviewee was assigned a code, for example, school principal one (SP1). Interviews lasted for approximately one hour, which was believed to be appropriate to gather the richness of data required, but not too long to make it hostile or strenuous for the participants. The interviews were held outside normal schoolworking hours. Each participant was interviewed individually, face ~~to~~ face at their school. All of the schools are quintile 1 and had between seven to 25 educators, two to three non-teaching support staff and 200 to 830 learners from mostly previously disadvantaged backgrounds and the majority were on child support grants. This was possible as South Africa moved from level 3 to level 1 risk-adjusted lockdown on 28 February 2021, as announced by the president. All interviews were conducted in English and were recorded with the permission of the interviewees. Open-ended questions were used to encourage the participants to respond in detail. Follow-up questions were asked (probing), when necessary, to help participants to articulate their experiences and to clarify any vague answers.

The individual interview strategy was opted for because face to face interviews have the advantage that the researcher can establish an understanding with the interviewees. This is important as the researcher is likely to get their cooperation, trust, and informative responses, as an interview is a special way of knowledge-producing conversation. Christensen and Larry (2011) point out that an interview is when an interviewer asks the interviewee a series of questions, often with prompting for additional information. A face to face interview allows the interviewer to clarify and rephrase the questions when necessary. This helps in yielding valid and reliable responses from the interviewees. Further probing also enhances the content and quality of views and experiences expressed. Unlike with questionnaires where some participants may fail to return them, oral interviews ensure a hundred per cent mining of responses from participants, and it provides a quick and easy way of obtaining data as well as being an economical use of the interviewer's time (Dyer, 1995). An individual interview's main asset is providing volumes of information about the interviewee (Greeff, 2011). An interview schedule was developed as a guide to refer to during the interviews to ensure that all-important aspects were dealt with during individual interviews. As soon as possible after each interview, the researcher listened to the recording and made notes. The researcher transcribed keywords, phrases, and statements to allow the voices of research participants to speak (Groenewald, 2004).

6.5.2 Observation Method for Data Generation

Observation in this study supplemented data collected during interviews. Observation is a way of gathering data by watching behaviour, events, or noting physical characteristics in their natural settings (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). Observations can be overt or covert. In this study, the researcher conducted overt and focused observation (overt, meaning everyone knows they are being observed, and focused means that one observes certain situations for some time, with some areas becoming more prominent) because of the ethical problems related to concealing his observation (Kawulich, 2012). The researcher as a complete observer indirectly observed the physical hygiene, physical distancing, ventilation, personal protective equipment, supply of water and any activities (Appendix 3) as stipulated in the Standard Operating Procedure for the containment of COVID-19 for schools and school communities

during interviews (DBE, 2020d). This observation allowed the researcher to study people in their natural settings without their behaviour being influenced.

6.6 DATA ANALYSIS

According to Kawulich (2012), data analysis is the process of ordering, categorising, manipulating, and summarising data to obtain answers to research questions. Qualitative data analysis, according to Nieuwenhuis (2007), is inclined to be an ongoing and reiterative process, inferring that data collection, processing, analysis, and reporting are tangled and not necessarily a sequential procedure. Data analysis is the first step taken towards data interpretation. It is obvious that the interpretation of data is very important, and as such needs to be done accurately.

Hence in this study, the researcher used a thematic analysis approach to data analysis. According to Joffe (2012), thematic analysis is a method of analysing patterns of meaning in a dataset. It is usually applied to a set of texts such as interview transcripts. The researcher closely examines the data to identify common themes, topics, ideas, and patterns of meaning that come up. Thematic analysis was chosen because it allowed the researcher to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The reason for using thematic analysis was based on its accessibility and its flexibility, and it teaches the mechanics of coding and analysing qualitative data systematically, which can then be linked to broader theoretical or conceptual issues (Nowell, Norris, & White, 2017). Braun and Clarke (2012) and King (2004) reason that thematic analysis is a useful method for examining the different research participants, highlighting similarities and differences, and generating unexpected perceptions.

All the records were secured through the use of passwords to protect the files. The transcripts were sent to the supervisor through emails protected by passwords. Passwords were used to protect information and data in my personal laptop and hard disks. Both written and electronic data from this study will be stored for five years. However, the interview recordings will be disposed of once they are no longer needed. I was aware that any unexpected adverse event which could be caused by this study should be reported to my supervisor and external moderator.

The thematic analysis describes an iterative process as to how to go from messy data to a map of the most important themes in data. Braun and Clarke (2012) outlined and illustrated six steps to conduct thematic analysis: Step 1: Familiarisation: reading and rereading all the collected data (Appendix 6). Reading the data ensured that the researcher was familiar with the data, thus making the process of analysis much easier and more manageable; Step 2: Generating initial codes: The researcher assigned codes to the data, a code being a brief description of what is being said in the interview. (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Neuman (2006) referred to the process as organising raw data into conceptual categories in order to create themes that were used to analyse the data. Subsequently, the data were categorised into themes: Step 3: Generating or searching for themes: data must be studied several times to verify that the interpretations are correct and valid. The data were read several times to confirm the themes; Step 4: Reviewing themes: the researcher then wrote themes next to the quotations and notes while examining the data; Step 5: Defining and naming themes: the structuration theory was then applied to give credence to the phenomenon of female school leadership as seen through the eyes and minds of female school principals. Step 6: Writing up: here, finally the analysis of data is written up. Thematic analysis requires an introduction to establish research questions, aims, and approaches. Included should be the methodology section, describing how semi-structured interviews are used to collect data. The results or findings address each theme, and the conclusion will explain the main takeaways, and shows how the analysis will answer the research question.

Table 2: Excerpt of analysis of data

Name	Question:	Codes	Themes
Researcher	Describe the challenges you have experienced as a principal before the COVID-19 pandemic.		
SP 1	<p>I have attitude from my colleagues, they, did not accept me as I'm from another school</p> <p>Educators did not want to change from the culture they used to like late coming</p> <p>They were not cooperative at all. It was very difficult to work with them at the beginning</p>	<p>Non-acceptance</p> <p>Resistance to change</p>	Challenges before COVID-19
	Describe the challenges you are experiencing in navigating leadership during this time?		
SP5	<p>The resources are not sufficient, infrastructure and the financial muscles are very weak because all allocations depend on the enrolment of the learners. Problem of accessibility to the school. The geographical features of the school are bad, we have a very low enrolment.</p>	<p>Equity and inequalities</p> <p>Infrastructure</p> <p>Rotational model</p> <p>Post provincial model</p>	Challenges during COVID-19
SP 6	<p>The challenge that we 1st experienced was when we start the rotational teaching, we did not have enough educators to accommodate all these learners, we didn't have enough furniture, it was a challenge to us.</p>		
SP 3	<p>We lack infrastructure like classrooms, we don't have enough water, we also use the rotational model, which gives learners problems, and this results in ineffective learning and teaching.</p>		

6.7. ENSURING TRUSTWORTHINESS

The trustworthiness or rigour of a study, as per Polit and Beck (2014), refers to the level of confidence in data, interpretation, and methods used to ensure the quality of a study. Trustworthiness is one way researchers can persuade themselves and readers that their research findings are worthy of attention (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure trustworthiness, the researcher used four criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) namely: criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, which can be said to be the pillars of a rigorous qualitative study.

1. **Credibility** – According to Polit and Beck, 2014, credibility implies that the researcher tries as much as possible to convey to the reader the original subject matter reported by the research participants, the context, and the social issues raised. Strategies to ensure credibility will include persistent observation, and identification of the characteristics and elements that are most relevant to the problem or issue under study; triangulation, a means of using multiple methods of data collection, different data sources, investigators, and methods of data collection; and member checks, meaning all transcripts of the interviews will be sent to the participants for feedback (Polit & Beck, 2014; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Credibility can also be operationalised through the process of member checking to test the findings and interpretations with the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
2. **Transferability** – It concerns the aspect of applicability (Lincoln & Guba; 1985). Transferability refers to the degree to which the research can be transferred to other contexts (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Even though the researcher may not know the site that may wish to transfer the findings, the duty as a researcher is to provide a thick description of the participants and the research process, to allow the reader to assess whether one's conclusions are transferable to their own situation; and this implies that the reader makes the transferability judgement (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Lincoln & Guba; 1985).
3. **Dependability** – To achieve dependability, researchers can ensure the research process is rational, noticeable, and evidently documented (Tobin & Begley, 2004).

Dependability includes the aspect of consistency (Lincoln & Guba; 1985). Dependability implies the extent to which a reader can depend on/trust the findings of a qualitative study (Creswell, 2013). It establishes the research study's findings as consistent and repeatable. To demonstrate dependability, the research study will be subjected to an inquiry audit that involves an outside reviewer, who is the supervisor of the researcher, of the data collection, data analysis, and the results of the study. Dependability was ensured by making sure that the data collection was systematic, well planned, and logical (Nowell et al., 2017).

4. **Confirmability** – According to Shenton (2004, p. 22) confirmability is the “degree of neutrality ... the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the respondents and not the researcher's bias, motivation or interest”. According to Korstjens and Moser (2018), it is concerned with making sure that data and interpretations of the findings are not creations of the researcher's imagination but clearly derived from the data. Strategies to achieve dependability and confirmability will be an audit trail and reflective journal. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), confirmability is established when credibility, transferability, and dependability are all accomplished.

6.8 ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER

The researcher's principal responsibility as a primary instrument of data collection and analysis is to safeguard the study participants and their data. The researcher was aware of bias and engaged in reflexivity. According to Berger (2015), reflexivity refers to the ability of the researcher to be self-aware and critical of all actions that will be taken during the research process. A detailed journal was used to record all daily logistics of the research, and included were the researcher's personal reflections, values, interests, and insights (the human instruments), as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985). The researcher was aware of his position as a district official and made a concerted effort during the interviews to ensure that the questions did not lead the participants or make them feel intimidated (an intention clearly revealed on the consent form).

According to Arifin (2018), the interviewer is exclusively accountable for the interview methods employed; their ethics act as the benchmark. Each interview was conducted individually in a private venue. The researcher is the only one who can match the identity of the participants and voice recordings. Participant codes were used to label data, for example, SP1 to SP6, for the six principals. When doing the interviews, participants' pseudonyms were used when recording or publishing data. The researcher avoided publishing any information from which the participants could be identified. The researcher declared possible bias emanating from his position as a district official. The researcher was aware of his influence and how it could introduce bias into the research.

The researcher offered the research results to the participants as a means of demonstrating greater respect for their participation and to recognise their central role in the completion of this research study, not treating them solely as a means to an end (Fernandez, Kodish, & Weijer, 2003). The results of the study will also be reported to the Limpopo Provincial Research Committee (LPRC) and Limpopo Provincial Ethics Committee (LPEC) and disseminated through a peer-reviewed journal.

6.9 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical considerations are important in every research area, but it is more significant in qualitative research, in particular, due to the in-depth nature of the study process (Arifin, 2018). According to McMillan and Schumacher (2014), the privacy of the research participants must always be protected, meaning all participants' characteristics, responses, behaviours, and other information were controlled by the researcher. The researcher safeguarded participants' privacy by practising anonymity, confidentiality, and suitable data storage

Anybody involved in research needs to be aware of the general agreement about what is appropriate and inappropriate in research. Ethical guidelines serve as an ideal and basis on which each researcher must assess their own conduct throughout all the stages of a qualitative study, to keep the balance between the potential risks of the research and the likely benefits of the research (Arifin, 2018).

The following eight ethical considerations were observed in this study: informed consent and voluntary participation; anonymity and confidentiality; potential to harm; interview session; data analysis and dissemination of the findings; and ethical approval and access to research participants.

6.9.1 Informed Consent and Voluntary Participation

The process of obtaining consent consists of the following: consent should be given freely (voluntarily). Subjects should understand what is being asked of them, and involved persons must be competent to consent. This means, to participate in a research study, participants need to be adequately informed about the research, comprehend the information, and have the power of freedom of choice to allow them to decide whether to participate or decline (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). The researcher contacted the respondents in advance and explained to them the goal of the study. All possible or adequate information on the goal of the investigations, the procedures that would be followed during the investigation/interview, the dangers and, advantages which female school principals could be exposed to, as well as the credibility of the researcher, was given to the participants (Bell & Bryman, 2007; Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2012). The researcher informed the participants about every aspect concerning the study, to help them make informed decisions. Institutional Reviews Boards (IRBs) or an Independent Ethics Committee require a protocol for informed consent to be signed by each participant. All potential participants were informed that it was within their rights to withdraw from the study at any given moment even after signing the consent letter. They were asked for their permission before the interviews were recorded.

6.9.2 Maintaining Anonymity and Confidentiality

According to McMillan and Schumacher (2014), anonymity means that the researcher identifies the participants from the information collected and confidentiality means that the participants are known by the researcher, but their identity is not revealed in any way in the reporting of results. Researchers have a responsibility to protect informants from the general reading public (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). The anonymity and confidentiality of the participants were kept by not revealing their names and identity in

the data collection, analysis, and reporting of the study findings. Privacy and confidentiality of the interview environment were managed carefully during interview sessions, data analysis, and dissemination of the findings. Furthermore, participants were assured that no information would be disclosed without their knowledge and consent.

6.9.3 Safeguarding Participants against Potential for Harm

Although according to McMillan and Schumacher (2014), physical harm to participants seldom occurs in qualitative research, participants can be harmed in many ways, for example, psychological harm, emotional harm, embarrassment (i.e. social harm) and so on. Participants were given a guarantee that they would be protected from any harm (Wellman, 2005). The researcher identified that some participants might suffer emotional distress when explaining difficulties of managing their schools and learners during COVID-19. As such, participants were informed of the potential harm as well as being assured that participation was voluntary and making sure they understood that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any given time. The fear that a participant might get infected with COVID-19 while participating was also addressed. The researcher looked out for any signs of extreme emotional reactions during the interviews, but there were no cases of distress or emergency.

6.9.4 Data Analysis and Dissemination of the Findings

All interviews were recorded by cell phone. The identities of the participants were removed during data transcription, including their names or any significant aspect of identity. In presenting the findings of the study, the participants will be referred to by their pseudonyms in the verbatim quotes, for example, SP1. Written consent or any document which contained the participants' details was kept in a locked cabinet with no access to anyone other than the researcher. This personal information will be destroyed in accordance with the University of Johannesburg's research procedures. Participants were, however, notified that their actual age would be used to report the data from the interviews. Data was shared with the researcher's supervisor to reach an agreement in the interpretation, without exposing the participants' details at any

stage (Arifin, 2018). No participants' identifying information will be included in reports or publications arising from this project.

6.9.5 Ethical Approval and Access to Participants

The researcher applied for study approval from the University of Johannesburg Research Ethics Committee to obtain permission to conduct this research. Thereafter, the researcher secured permission from the Limpopo Provincial Research Committee and Limpopo Provincial Ethics Committee. Upon getting permission from these respected authorities, the Vhembe East District was informed through the researcher's Circuit Manager of the researcher's intention to interview the sampled six female school principals. Thereafter, the actual interviews and observations took place. The researcher stressed that participation was voluntary and that participants had the right to withdraw at any time. The researcher also requested that the participants review the results of the study. Interactions between the researcher and the participants were recorded in a reflective journal for reference and disclosure purposes.

6.10 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

There are limitations to this study on the challenges female school principals are facing in navigating leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first limitation relates to the limitedness of the research sample. Only six female school principals from a single circuit in Vhembe East District, Limpopo Province were designated as participants for this qualitative study on female school principal challenges in navigating leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, the results cannot be generalised but can be transferred to other similar contexts. A wider study with more female school principals representing different provinces with different geographical locations in terms of rural and urban areas would have shed more light on the heart of the challenges female school principals face in accomplishing their leadership tasks.

Another limitation is that data was collected via individual interviews using only nine questions. A deeper understanding of the phenomenon of female leadership could have been gained with additional data collecting methods such as observation of how female school principals execute their daily duties and by conducting interviews with the teaching and non-teaching staff, learners, parents, and circuit managers.

6.10 SUMMARY OF THE SECTION

Section six offered the reader the methodological aspects of the study. In this exploratory research, the qualitative research method was employed with a phenomenology research design. Purposive sampling was considered as the most important kind of non-probability in selecting study participants based on their ability to explain a specific theme, concepts, or phenomenon. Data collection took place through semi-structured interviews and observations. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. To ensure trustworthiness, participants confirmed the accuracy of the transcripts and filed notes were maintained to ensure dependability and transferability. Ethical considerations were maintained during this research. Finally, the results of the study will be shared with interested stakeholders.

7. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY AND INTERPRETATION

7.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous section discussed the research design and methodology used in this study. The research was driven by the following question: How did female school principals navigate leadership during the COVID-19 crisis in rural schools? This section presents and interprets data findings from this study. Data were obtained through in-depth interviews and observations. During the thematic analysis of the data, themes and subthemes were acknowledged, which are now presented and discussed. The researcher has purposefully used the female principals' words precisely to retain the voice of the participants.

7.2 DISCOVERED THEMES AND SUBTHEMES

As the researcher interacted with the female school principals about their experiences, they identified issues that challenged their leadership. As a screening to what will be discussed, it was clear that female school principals in rural schools still come across challenges that disturb them when they ascend to leadership positions to execute their duties. As was pointed to by Coleman (2007), Mestry and Schmidt (2012), and Zikhali and Perumal (2012), there are still barriers and difficulties for female school principals who are occupying roles or seeking to occupy roles as leaders.

Caught in the eye of this storm, the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated challenges that need to be faced. The most significant findings by Kaul, Van Groningen, and Simon (2020) are that female school principals are been responsible for leading their schools throughout this crisis. Thus, with particular reference to rural schools, there is a need to emancipate female school principals and promote social and learning conditions so that values such as social justice and the rights of rural learners should not be foregone in the fight for leadership positions amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Thematical analysis of the data resulted in the identification of themes and subthemes which are summarised in Table 3 and described in detail in this section. SP1, SP2, SP3, SP4, SP5 and SP6 were pseudonyms used to represent school principals. Reference to quotes directly from the transcript will be in italics.

Table 3: Summary of discovered themes and sub-themes from the study

Themes	Sub-themes
1. Challenges experienced by female school principals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) Non-acceptance by colleagues (b) Educators' resistance to change (c) Oppressive and unpromising surroundings
2. Strategies to encounter challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) Empowering female school principals (b) Stakeholders' supporting female school principal (c) Educational policies and circuit manager support
3. Challenges in navigating leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) COVID-19 underscore equity and inequalities (b) Rotational modelling (c) Effects of post provisioning model (d) Withdrawal of assistants
4. Support systems for female school principals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) Leadership in disruptive times (b) Department of Education in supporting female leadership (c) Fourth Industrial Revolution in an educational context

7.3 DISCUSSING CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY FEMALE SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

When the six study participants were asked to explain the major challenges they met when ascending leadership positions in their respective schools, independently they pointed out, amongst others, non-acceptance by both male and female colleagues, educators' resistance to change, and the oppressive and unpromising surroundings that include illiterate parents, as some of the main obstacles. The researcher discovered the main theme to cover these sub-themes was challenges experienced by female school principals.

7.3.1 Non-acceptance by Colleagues

The most significant findings were that all the six female school principals interviewed agreed that when they were hired or promoted to leadership positions, they all faced non-acceptance by both male and female colleagues. There was overwhelming evidence that all participants were subjected to non-acceptance by their colleagues when they climbed to the principalship positions.

Some of the challenges emanated from being new in the school. This sentiment is confirmed by SP1: *"Coming from another school and some of the teachers were expecting to get the post, they did not accept me as I am from another school"*.

This was confirmed by SP2: *"Coming to an institution as a newly appointed principal, it was a big challenge, people became angry and negative and made my life very difficult"*.

Resentfulness also resulted in the non-acceptance of the newly promoted principal. Participant SP5 elaborated that while she was the HOD, there were no aggravations. Unexpectedly, after she was promoted to the principalship position, her colleagues moved the goalposts. In her own words: *"They did not accept me"*. A study conducted by Preston, Jakubiec, and Kooymans (2013) highlighted that many rural principal candidates face a hiring disadvantage if they do not have a historical connection with the institution". This was reinforced by SP5:

Coming to an institution as a newly appointed principal in 2010, there were people who felt they qualify to become a principal. They become angry, they were so negative and made my life very difficult. They were not cooperative at all. It was very difficult to work with them in the beginning. Those were my colleagues, both females and males, but especially females. With males, there was one male who was very negative and arrogant and not prepared to listen to whatever I said, whatever I wanted to discuss with him for the progress of the school. But with females, it was very difficult, there were four out of 18 women, and they were very strong, powerful and by then I was very young. They were like my sisters to me because they were older than me. The main problem was that I was young and they were older. Some even said that she come and found us here and we are not going to listen to that girl, she come and found us here being a teacher in this institution. Who the hell does she think she is? We are not going to listen and follow her instructions. Mostly was it being about age, and about the fact, I found them there. Others have never worked in other schools. It was their first employment and I think they felt they own the school. They are the bosses and no one cannot come from outside and be their senior or supervisor.

From the quote above, sentences that show that people feel entitled to become principals, are non-cooperative, and an older female harassing a newly appointed principal, it becomes obvious, as noted by Lumby and Azaola (2011), that newly appointed female school principals typically experienced a combination of discrimination, aggression, or harassment regarding their gender when attempting to obtain leadership positions in education.

This was confirmed by SP6: *"I came and found that there was a person who was acting at the school as principal and that person was a male, so it was not easy for that person to accept that a woman can come and take his position"*.

Other findings were that all these female school principals have male educators on their staff. Male educators raise totally different challenges to female principals. SP3 remarked that she was rejected because it was the first time in the history of the school that it was led by a female. She said they had bad attitudes towards her, and they

disorganised the running of the school. She said: *“It was not easy for all the people to accept that they will be led by a woman”*.

The above responses from the participants showed that immediately new female principals are appointed, it does not augur well with the existing staff. This indicated that stereotypes concerning females as leaders persist. Mestry and Schmidt (2012) comment that, discrimination, prejudice, and stereotyping continued to perpetuate the myth of female submissiveness – clouding their performance and potential. As such, most of the interview participants reported tensions and a feeling of displacement – a sense of non-belonging and uncertainty – in their new positions and their relationships with both male and female colleagues. According to Moorosi (2007), female school principals fight constant battles against internal organisational discrimination.

7.3.2 Educators’ Resistance to Change

The findings showed that six participants experienced some form of resistance from their colleagues. The degree of resistance varied from open defiance to subtle non-compliance by both male and female colleagues. Resistance to change is the act of opposing or struggling with modifications or transformations that alter the status quo (Heathfield, 2021). From the interviews and observations, I found that most of the educators resisted change as a result of what Kotter and Schlesinger (1979) labelled parochial self-interest, fear, and misunderstandings, low tolerance to change, and different assessments of the situation.

Educators resist because they prefer things the way they are, they do not like change. One of the participants, SP1, had the following to say: *“Educators did not want to change from the culture they were used to like late coming, going to class late after breaks. They felt monitoring their work was a threat to them”*.

This was confirmed by SP6 when she elaborated that: *“Educators were used to the leadership style that was used in the institutions, like they were used to doing things their own ways”*.

Sometimes resistance originates from self-interest, people are afraid the changes will affect them personally. Participant SP3 elaborated: *“There are those that are known for gossiping, you will see groups organised to fight against me”*.

Participant SP2 reported that, when she brought changes because she was young and the colleagues were older, she was told: *“We are not going to listen to that girl, she came and found us here”*.

It was clear from the interviews with the participant school principals that their promotion to the position of school principal which was meant to be a positive and constructive event was incapacitating and traumatic.

The picture depicted by SP3 is worrisome; it was fine for her and everyone at the same school when she was a deputy principal but once promoted to the principalship, *“they were reluctant to support me”*.

She further lamented that: *“They were reluctant to change and wanted to stay there where they belong before”* and *“try to pull you down”*.

It became clear from the interviews with female school principals that discrimination against female leadership is still relevant and that this discrimination stems from the proverbial glass ceiling for female leadership in schools, with women only being good enough to be HODs or deputy principals, but not principals.

The same sentiment was voiced by SP5, who grieved and sounded dejected when saying that: *“I was a HOD in the school and when promoted, they started to drag everything so that I find it very much impossible for me to carry on with this job”*.

This prolonged stereotyping which developed from the past is sustained even though all female school principals interviewed are educationally well-equipped and diligently serving the school as either head of department or deputies, which is perceived as a pre-requisite or some kind of scaffolding to the principalship. According to Lumby, (2003) and Mestry and Schmidt (2012), this can be attributed to a lack of trust in female leadership caused by traditional and cultural roles. These sentiments settled with Lumby (2003), who contended that communities do not trust women to be appointed as school managers. This was reinforced by a review in South Africa by Naidoo and

Perumal (2014) and Duma (2015), who quantified that female principals experienced problems such as sexism, indiscipline, and high absenteeism among teachers and learners.

7.3.3 Oppressive and Unpromising Surroundings

All interviewed principals when they ascended to a leadership role were confronted with the persistent inequality in education and a long-standing education crisis, where most learners attend underresourced schools with poor infrastructure, ill-equipped teachers, low attainment, and high dropout rates (Vally, 2020).

Participant SP4 noted:

As a female principal, truly speaking, leading and managing a small school is very challenging because of the GBE system. As a small school, we have problems with the resources. The resources are not sufficient, for example, human resources/ personnel infrastructure and the financial muscles are very weak because all allocations depend on the enrolment of the learners. That is where we have a problem. We also have the problem of accessibility to the school. The geographical features of the school are so bad in such a way parents opt not to send their children to the school. Then we end up having a very low enrolment. The road is very bad and there is no public transport that can bring children to the school. During rainy days the DBE officials fail us. They do not render monitoring and support to the school because they could not reach the place the road is so slippery and crooked.

We also have the problem of NSNP service providers. They don't come to school and bring us the food on time and most of the time they will tell us that no, things are not going according to their plans due to the weather and the road and for me, as a school principal it hits back because learners need to eat and the parents, they want to see the kids eating, even the department. Even though I will try to explain to them that we have a problem with the service provider and it is making the service or the work for me to be more difficult instead of solving the problem of curriculum delivery now I'm solving the other things. I feel it is too heavy for me.

In her own words, participant SP5 noted: *“We had a challenge with our ablution blocks, they are still using pit toilets”*.

This was supported by participant SP1, who noted: *“The school’s surrounding was dirty, lacked infrastructure, and had not enough classrooms”*.

Participant SP2 said that when she became a principal, *“the problem was the furniture and lack of toilets for grade R”*.

All female school principals I questioned found and reported that many learners are from disadvantaged communities with participant SP2 declaring that, *“community parents are illiterate and unemployed”*.

This finding was similar to the findings by the Nelson Mandela Foundation (2005) which stated that the challenges faced by rural communities are inadequate physical infrastructure, deep-rooted and depleted school buildings, worn-out and shambolic conditions toilet facilities, and lack of adequate transport provision. The South African rural communities pose a serious challenge in the delivery of education because of the educational and economic status of the community (DoE, 2005). The areas are “generally remote and relatively underdeveloped” (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019, p. 2). Rural people still lag far behind in education and are particularly hard hit by poverty and hunger (Sauvageot & Da Graça, 2007). This concurs with the study by Hlalele (2012), who concluded that rural areas possess a different make-up in terms of needs and resources.

7.4 STRATEGIES TO COUNTER CHALLENGES

All six researched female school principals overcame challenges differently. The developed strategies they employed included: boosting empowerment by developing self-efficacy; usage of educational policies; reliance on the SGBs and community support; and circuit manager interpositions to “be able to nimbly mediate relations within the local community and larger school system” (Preston et al., 2013, p. 7).

7.4.1 Empowering Female School Principals

Female school principals interviewed navigate their leadership unconsciously by boosting the performance of their staff by raising their self-efficacy. Albert Bandura (1977) defined self-efficacy as a person's belief in their capability to successfully perform a particular task. These actions include coaching, participation, demonstrating mentoring, stimulating, and "providing rewards" (Heslin, 1999, p. 52). Self-efficacy is more readily developed than self-confidence and self-esteem and a much better predictor of how effectively people will perform a given task (Bandura, 1997).

Female school leaders consider leadership as a shared process in which all work together towards synergy. As participant SP1 elaborated: *"I motivate and praise them, I emphasise teamwork and team spirit"*.

The greatest strength female leadership possesses is the ability to read and identify emotions and emotional intelligence. Females are holistic problem solvers, weigh more variables, and consider contextual perspectives when faced with issues. According to, participant SP6: *"I become their friend, I did not want to be alone, so I make sure that I am next to them and try to engage them, try to build teamwork"*.

A school principal is a primary leader in a school building. A good leader always leads by example. Participant SP1, who experienced challenges from four male educators and two HODs, overcame that by making sure that the policies were implemented and she became a good role model through mentoring. She said:

I came up with strategies to make educators understand. I worked with them as a team. I include myself in every work that they are assigned to do. I helped every educator to do lesson planning, moderation, and even teaching. I was the first to submit my work to the HOD, I set an example that makes them follow.

High self-efficacy improves staff members' ability to take appropriate action (Cervone & Wood, 1995). When participants were asked about staff participation, participant SP4 noted:

100 per cent, these educators are committed and the way they are doing their work they are so supportive they even pop up their money so that the school must run smoothly of which it is so difficult to find an educator using his/her own money for the benefit of the DBE. Thus, where I say they are so supportive and 100 per cent committed.

The above quote about educators committed and supportive towards the smooth running of the school is what Fernandez and Shaw (2020, p. 5), called “self-efficacy”. It is defined as “accountability, trustworthiness, integrity and all as characteristics of an effective academic leader facing adaptive challenges”. Yet, in crises, the most important attributes are “emotional intelligence and emotional stability, which will allow female school leaders to place the interest of others above their own” (Doraiswamy, 2012, p. 179). In a time of great uncertainty, stress levels are high and female school leaders must act with deliberate calm (Garcia, 2006), courage, and humility to strengthen relationships with individuals within and outside of the institution (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020).

7.4.2 School Governing Body and Community Support

Concerning the reaction of the SGB and communities toward female school principals, it was unanimously clear from all the interviews that the SGB and the communities were behind and supportive of female leadership. SP1 had this to say: *“The community accepted me very well because I was new and young to the community because the school for those years, principals were old and when I come here, they expect new things from me”*.

The above feelings were supported by SP2, in her own words: *“I did not have any problems with the community since 2010 when I became a principal. The SGB accepted me and introduced me to the first parents’ meeting. At any meetings, they were very much supportive”*.

It was evident from the interviews with participant female school principals that the communities value education for their children. This was supported by participant SP3 who noted that *“with the community, it was better. Most of them welcomed me very*

easy because the chairperson explained to them that I am qualified and I was the deputy principal in the same school” – meaning the transition was smooth.

Education as “one of the public goods, must not only be valued by the community and the people but must be advanced and protected or preserved” (Mkhabela, 2019, p. 1).

Participant SP5 had this to say:

The community around was very accepting of me. They accepted me because I have been here as a HOD for more than 10 years. I was working with them very positively and when they need classes, maybe for stokvels they used to come here and do their things so they share that ownership of the school with me. If I am not in, they used to call me if there is something that they are doubting they are calling me and the community and tell me that this and this they are doubting, if I knew I would tell them that no I know that. They come here to support me, there is no problem with the community.

It became clear from the interviews with female school principals the significant role played by the SGB in promoting the best interests of the school and ensuring its development. According to Section 27 of School Governance, the SGB is responsible for the everyday management of the school and promoting the well-being and effectiveness of the school community and thereby enhancing learning and teaching, which lessens the burden of the already overloaded female school principals. Female school leaders can play a critical role in ensuring that the school-community connection continues to be strengthened to support student learning during the unprecedented challenge of COVID-19 (Harris & Jones, 2020).

7.4.3 Educational Policies and Circuit Manager Support

Related to the lack of support from their staff, some female school principals tried and overcame the maliciousness and lack of support created by some school management teams (SMTs) and educators by demonstrating caring acts and enlightening the staff about the policies, acts, and practices of the public school.

In this regard participant SP5 explained as follows:

For me to carry on with this job, I navigated using policies. I used to tell them more about the policies that affect what they are doing. Those who come to school late I used to sit with them and tell them the way to do things correctly.

These acts developed and promoted emotional growth for the staff members and it created a positive school climate conducive to learning and teaching. Some educators maliciously decided to take the opposite direction than what is expected of them, such as not submitting work. Participant SP1 explained that: *“I sometimes use policies and legislation where necessary. Where I quote the acts and section so that they must understand it is a policy, not from my head”*.

A policy is a course or principle of action adopted or processed by an organisation or individual. It is fundamentally important to have implementable policies, as it forms a linchpin between the school management, educators, learners, parents, and the rule of law.

Even after explaining policies, educators were nonetheless slow to change since they were used to the laissez-faire leadership of the previous principal, as indicated by SP 5: *“Most of them try to find me as principal, the leader in front of them and they started to take everything I gave them”*. She additionally said: *“Just one or two still dragging and I am still currently showing them the right thing to do. Most importantly, I have to use the policy in order to explain to them”*.

Using a policy to solve problems and to control anarchy, is better because an organisation without policy is an organisation without control.

Circuit managers are the “direct supervisors of the principals in their circuits, and it is therefore expected of them to be responsible for their principals’ professional development” (Personnel Administration Measures [PAM], RSA, 1998b). According to the DBE, Gazette no. 36324(3) of 2013, the circuit managers’ play a pivotal role in school development and support. According to Mafuwane and Pitsoe (2014), the circuit manager has a strong role to play in forming school cultures that encourage change. This was demonstrated by participant SP2 who solicited the wisdom and insight of the circuit manager, as a female principal, in cooling the tension in her school. She said: *“When the circuit manager come for support, I share with her my problems, and then*

she understood that and she spoke to the two HODs who helped me a lot in convincing the other teachers who accepted me as their principal".

In conclusion, women principals are generally associated with communal qualities like affection, helpfulness, friendliness, kindness, sympathy, sensitivity and gentleness. Generally, what I observed is that all participant female school principals interviewed are defusing the tensions daily in their school setting so that the vision and the mission statement of their schools are achieved.

7.5 CHALLENGES IN NAVIGATING LEADERSHIP DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

As was pointed out by Coleman (2003), there are barriers and difficulties for women occupying or seeking to occupy roles as leaders. It was clear that the six female school principal participants encountered challenges that disturbed them when they executed their duties. While grappling with those obstacles, COVID-19 slammed the door firmly shut on all aspects of everyday life, and disrupted schooling globally (Harris & Jones, 2020). COVID-19 has exacerbated the challenges that already exist in the schools. It was clear from the interviews with female school principals that, when schooling resumed, several COVID-19 related challenges emerged when taking up leadership again. COVID-19 has underscored existing inequalities and made rotational modelling, the post provisional model, and the termination of educators and general assistants major stumbling blocks when navigating leadership during the COVID-19. "In response to these challenges, context-appropriate improvisations arose" (Mukute, Francis, Burt, & De Souza, 2020, p. 4).

7.5.1 COVID-19 Underscored Inequity and Inequalities

The UN, UNDP, and UNESCO IESALC identified widening of inequalities and increase in marginalisation as COVID-19's most significant impacts on education (UN, 2020; UNDP, 2020; UNESCO IESALC, 2020). In South Africa, Dube (2020), Mhlanga and Moloi (2020) and Omodan (2020) found that such differences have also been exacerbated by the inadequate educational resources and increased vulnerabilities that are extant in rural communities. From the interviews with the six participant female school principals, in pre-COVID-19 schooling, the realities of inequalities were

eminent. As pointed out by Graham (2020), the pandemic has shined a very bright light on these realities.

The six female school principals highlighted the inequalities in the living circumstances of the rural communities where their schools are. Rural areas lack access to a consistent supply of clean water and adequate sanitation.

Participant SP1, when asked how she navigated leadership during COVID-19, complained that: *"We don't have enough water"*.

She was supported by participant SP5, who is still mystified why *"we are still using pit toilets?"*

Participant SP6 approved with the following statement: *"When it comes to the ablution block, we are using pit toilets that are at the back of the classrooms"*.

Without a water supply, regular hand washing will be difficult. The shortage of classrooms makes social distancing or quarantining near impossible.

Inequalities in education were evident when private and former Model C schools were able to switch to technology-supported learning effortlessly. Learning did not stop but took place online. As participant SP4 remarked: *"When we come to electronics, we are still very far"*.

This same sentiment was expressed by participant SP2:

We cannot use other means of communication like virtual meetings or ICT as our school is in rural areas where parents are not educated and learners stay with their grannies who are illiterate and know nothing about computers

The World Bank's learning indicator estimated that the percentage of children who cannot read and write at the age of 10 stood at 53% in low- and middle-income countries before the epidemic started, and as Saavedra (2020) predicted, the pandemic has the potential to exacerbate this deficit. This was evident when Participant SP3 expanded:

The damage cannot be remedied in only one year. It will take some time. We are only praying that please let COVID-19 come to an end so that learners can come back normally and we can teach them normally and they can pick up.

Parental involvement can have a significant impact on the learning of the children during the pandemic. Parents and guardians who are more educated may be more efficient in assisting their children with schoolwork.

As participant SP4 detailed:

We have a problem because when we give learners homework, some of them, don't have people that can help them because they are single parents and some are just roaming around because our community has a poor social economy.

From all interviewed female school principals, it is abundantly clear that in our schools, the pandemic has exhumed the already obvious social and economic differences between the underprivileged and privileged learners from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to access relevant digital learning resources such as computers and the internet connections. While the move to online learning has become the new normal for many learners, all the principals questioned indicated that learners and parents do not have the requisite technology, and this lack of devices has caused disadvantaged, marginalised learners from those rural, poor, and vulnerable backgrounds to lose access to all learning (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Dube, 2020; Hlalele, 2012). Private and former Model C schools have good infrastructure and financial backing. According to Ramrathan (2020, p. 12), “this provides an added advantage of access to digital learning platforms, like Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams, and Zoom and parental support in teaching and learning”. While learners were adjusting to the new normal of schooling during the frequent lockdown and closure of schools, the situation strengthens the two world school systems that exist within the South African context. Digital learning further continues inequalities, because the majority of South African learners do not have access to the internet, or weak internet access due to geographical locations and no computers or handheld electronic devices, like smartphones (Ramrathan, 2020). “Rural learners, from being previously

disadvantaged (and marginalized), are now facing unprecedented challenges in adjusting to a new mode of life and learning” (Dube, 2020, p. 136).

7.5.2 Rotational Modelling

In the wake of the re-opening of schools, the DBE proposed reworking the school timetable, “that can give a clear vision and comprehensive picture of school activities” (DBE, 2020a, p. 2) and allow learners to complete their grades. Three models were proposed: platooning, alternating days, and bi-weekly rotational attendance. The purpose of all methods was to provide a welcoming, respectful, inclusive, and supportive environment to all while preventing the spread of COVID-19 (DBE, 2020a).

With all six female school principals interviewed, their schools have adopted the alternating days per week (rotational system). “Alternating days per week implies that groups/grades of learners’ alternate classes/ lessons on different days of the week” (DBE, 2020a, p. 8). This model was favoured because it was perceived to be possible to adhere to COVID-19 protocols like physical distancing. Ironically, all female school principals highlighted a blank future for their learners due to the model. For these schools, the system only serves to complicate their problems rather than move them into the radical new normal.

As participant SP6 pronounced:

The challenge we first experienced was when we start the rotational way. As a small school, we did not have enough classrooms to accommodate all these learners, we don't have enough furniture.

The point was highlighted by participant SP5: “*We have no classes and no extra teachers*”.

Learners’ continuity and momentum are lost during non-attending days. As participant SP1 remarked: “*This results in ineffective learning and teaching. Learners forget what they were taught and absenteeism becomes worse*”.

Curriculum coverage is being compromised by the rotational model. Participant SP3 had this to say regarding curriculum deliverance during COVID-19: “*It resulted in a*

content that we could not finish. Learners were made to proceed the grades to other grades but with nothing. They were not ready for the next classes”.

This sentiment is confirmed by participant SP2: *“It was difficult to cover or finish the syllabus. Time is too limited to focus on slow learners who need more time for individual teaching”.*

Even though the curriculum was trimmed, educators were not able to complete the curriculum, leaving gaps in learners’ education. The alternating schooling approach resulted in poor learners not having a decent meal during non-attending days. Participant SP3 explained: *“Few are coming to receive food and go”.*

This was confirmed by participant SP2: *“It is also a challenge for learners who rely on feeding scheme when they are not taught. It means there will be no food for them to eat”.*

The rotational model becomes a burden on illiterate parents who cannot assist their children with schoolwork. Participant SP4 pronounced: *“Parents are willing to assist their children, but their level of education is too low for them to understand. Some of the things are too difficult”.*

These sentiments were confirmed by participant SP5:

You give them homework to go home so that their parents can help them. You will find out that more than half of them did not do their homework which means that they didn’t go even a step ahead they are still constant on the same work that you did maybe last week. We are unable to move faster with those learners because parents also are not with us. They don’t want to do their part because these days we need to have a triangle where a learner is there, the educator, and parents are there. We have to move together. Parents and teachers together in order to help those learners in order to move forward so parents don’t want to do their part which is the worst part of it. They come on Monday they come on Wednesday they forget the work of Monday you have to do a little revising in order to go there but because we want to move the topics so that maybe we can

cover all the topics we have to move more learners behind and go ahead with very few learners.

Splitting learners into smaller groups results in overloading for educators and all grades will lose additional contact time due to the shortage of classrooms. Participant SP2 particularised:

There are more classes now than before since each class can accommodate 20–23 learners only. Previously an educator would teach 78 learners in two classes. Now because of COVID-19, learners should occupy three classrooms. That means extra classes for educators. Teachers must teach the extra class and teachers are getting tired of the extra class.

“The pandemic has significantly caused disruption to normal long-term plans in schools. School leaders are obliged to deal with the negative impact of this pandemic” (Zhao, 2020, p. 1). Minister of Basic Education, Ms Angie Motshekga (2020, p. 4), admitted that “COVID-19 is a major threat to the well-being of children and their future”. She further warned that “experts have said that it may take 10 years to recover because the pandemic is a major blow. Most people have been encouraging the country to have thirteen years of basic education. Instead, this generation, if nothing changes, is going to have a basic education that is even less than the expected twelve years”. She said that “this is a very difficult, stressful and painful situation when you think about the future of our children. Unless something big and drastic happens, this generation will be a disadvantaged generation academically”.

7.5.3 Post Provisioning Model

South Africa is facing an education crisis and one of the factors contributing to the crisis is the shortage of educators especially in rural schools due to incorrect allocation of educators to schools. As a result, some schools end up with fewer educators than needed. “The Post-Provisioning model (PPM) is a Resource Allocation Model (RAM) used by the Department of Education to optimise the distribution of available educator resources to public schools” (Ntuli, 2012, p. 1). The Department of Education adopted the PPM as regulated in terms of the Employment of Educators Act, 76 of 1998 to “distribute the total available posts to all public schools in an equitable, transparent and

resource-efficient manner” (Ntuli, 2012, p. 16). The PPM is a formula-driven model that allocates educators, as human capital, to public schools based on learner enrolment numbers. The outcome of the PPM is called the Post Provisioning Norm (PPN).

The implementation of the PPM presents various challenges in the management of public schools. The interviews with the female school principals revealed a gap between the ideals of the PPM and its implementation in rural schools during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This was evident when participant SP4 said:

As a female principal truly speaking leading and managing a small school is very challenging. It is challenging because of the GBE system. As a small school, we have a problem with the resources. The resources are not sufficient e.g. human resources/personal infrastructure and the financial muscles are very weak because all allocations depend on the enrolment of the learners.

Other findings during the interviews revealed, amongst others, the inability of the PPM to provide for and promote the needs of rural schools during the pandemic. Participant SP2 had this to say: *“The department told us to put aside 45% of the norms and standards to buy any needed resources for COVID-19 equipment’s like stands for sanitisers and wipers for hands”* – robbing Peter to pay Paul.

This was confirmed by another participant, SP6: *“It affected the budget because we had to buy this COVID-19 equipment”*.

PMM created imbalances in curriculum implementation which, according to Buthelezi and Makhoba (2020), made it necessary to revise or rethink PPM to rectify the unjust practice to previously disadvantaged schools and to invest in human resources development and educational infrastructures to reduce educator ratios.

When asked about the necessary resources to assist in “navigating leadership” during the COVID-19 pandemic, participant SP4 frankly said:

The best resources are additional educators. If we can get more educators and kill this issue of multi grading that would be better because now, I am also an

educator, and if I get to the class at 7h00, I will knock off at 14h00 and I still have to run administrative work.

She further lamented that:

There should be a paradigm shift of how they are doing when we come to the teacher ratio. They must consider the small school so that the curriculum should be delivered effectively and efficiently.

The pandemic has highlighted critical inadequacies across the system. Elements such as “adequate infrastructure and teacher provisioning are key in determining improvement, but also determine the quality of those improvements. Basic infrastructure and adequate teacher provisioning were inextricably linked to the ability of schools to reopen or implement alternative strategies for learning (e.g., physical distancing, virtual learning)” (Leveraging off covid, 2021, para. 6). A study by Buthelezi and Makhoba (2020, p. 2) revealed that “school principals experience gender imbalances, poor specialisation and learner performance, overcrowding, high duty loads, loss on instructional time, mismatch of educator qualifications, poor promotion of new learning areas, and lack of qualified educators in special needs education”. The quality of teaching and learning has also been compromised because of PPM. This was supplemented by Naicker (2005), who found out that, in practice, the department has limited engagement with many schools which are located in deep rural contexts and educators are not always willing to take up posts in those remote schools.

7.5.4 Withdrawal of Educators and General Assistants

All interviewed female school principals unanimously agreed that the withdrawal of educator and general assistants (EA's and GA's) was the biggest blow to their efforts to navigate and mitigate leadership during the uncertainty and unprecedented times of the COVID-19 pandemic. Education and general assistants were employed as part of the Presidential Employment Stimuli Programme initiated by President Ramaphosa. The aim was to mitigate job losses as a result of the pandemic. An education assistant played an important role in the lives of the learners, educators as well as parents. This involved preparing learning materials for learners, supervising in-class activities, and assisting learners with their assignments, among other essential tasks.

These points were highlighted by participant SP2 in her own words:

The department tried to assist the school by providing us with eight educator assistants and six general assistants from December 2020 to April 2021. During that period, there were enough resources. I mean, they provided us with people who can maintain safety and security in the school. Some were assisting in the classrooms and others doing general work, cleaning the toilets, cutting bushes and so on. It was safe in the school.

When their contracts ended in April, participant SP1 painfully commented: *“I wish they appointed them on a full-time basis, they were helpful. EAs control learners, sometimes even teaching, marking books, and so because some are unemployed qualified teachers”*.

This sentiment was confirmed by the participant SP6: *“We thank the department that they provide us with the EAs. They came here and they helped us. They were able to teach”*.

This was confirmed by another participant SP4: *“Even the bringing of the EAs and GAs at least when we come to the whole school development all areas, we tried to deal with them”*.

When asked about any future resources to mitigate the challenges, one participant SP1 specified: *“I think the department must support us by supplying us with those EAs and GAs. They were useful and helpful. The department must employ them”*.

According to Basic Education Minister Angie Motshekga, EAs between the ages of 24 to 35 would be given a stipend of R3500 to work as janitors, cleaners, and caretakers in preparation for the 2021 school year (Bolowana, 2020). Ironically, that lasted for four months. Participant SP1 commented: *“I think the department made mistakes by terminating them while we are facing the third waves”*.

Female school principals reported more positive effects of EAs and GAs as they helped to reduce stress, workloads, and disruption in classes.

According to Isingoma (2014), educators in South Africa are at a disadvantage because they need to manage and maintain difficult environments and tolerate ill-disciplined learners who do not listen to instructions and are rowdy during lessons. Sadler (2007) stated that most of these problems arise when learners feel inadequate and unable to adapt to learning tasks. Maintaining classroom discipline takes a considerable amount of time, which leaves the educators overwhelmed and with little time to present lessons effectively and efficiently (Cassim & Moen, 2020; Isingoma, 2014).

Isingoma (2014, p. 50) reported that educators not only have to “deal with varying levels of stronger and weaker learners and be able to give individualised attention to those learners that need it, at the same time, but they also have to attend to additional administrative chores such as keeping attendance registers, copying and printing worksheets, and collecting funds”.

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, educators are struggling to provide a sense of normalcy for themselves and the learners. The classroom management challenges have increased enormously and teaching and learning have become grim. There is no more interaction among learners to facilitate class discussion or group work and the direct face to face intervention is gone. The DBE appointed educators and general assistants to replace educators with comorbidities. By withdrawing their services when needed most in our rural schools, while independent and private schools have good infrastructure and financial resources to employ extra hands, the equalisation of inequality in our schooling system appears to be nothing more than the rhetoric of policy makers and politicians.

7.6 SUPPORT SYSTEMS FOR FEMALE SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

The emergence of COVID-19 prompted unprecedented closures of schools across the world. As the crisis continued, educational leaders from all areas of education had to pivot their practice overnight to develop distance learning and provide support to their teams (Hudson, Mahendrarajah, Walton, Pascaris, Melim, & Ruttenberg-Rozen, 2020). This pivot required a shift from all other demands to a hyper-focus on technology implementation. Technology-based learning takes time to develop and implement, and the imminent need for distance learning was challenging for those who previously did

not use technology at the point of instruction (Dube, 2020; Fawns, Jones, & Aitken, 2020).

Leaders in education needed to support this implementation by assisting their teams of people with various abilities and readiness for technology (Naidu & Laxman, 2019; Yuen & Ma, 2008). Concerning support, Participant SP 1 said:

The DBE supported us by monitoring what was happening in the school, they provide us with PPE for COVID but not enough. Department also provided us with norms and standards. They employed the screeners. They also provide us with EAs and GSA for five months; EAs and GSA were very helpful; EAs were helpful in the classes because some are qualified teachers.

Leadership is “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2019, p. 5), with a focus on group processes and personality perceptions including traits and behaviours (Bass, 2008). During the COVID-19 pandemic, female school principals required a lot of support, as their school leadership is informed by the particulars of the school community and its geographical setting (De Matthews & Mawhinney, 2014).

7.6.1 School Leadership in Disruptive Times

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to the rise of new practices and partnerships. For this reason, distributive and collaborative leadership is very important in school management during the pandemic (Harris & Jones, 2020). According to Harris (2014, p. 4), “distributed leadership means mobilising leadership expertise at all levels in the school to generate more opportunities for change and to build the capacity for improvement”. School leaders and educators had to adjust to new circumstances overnight (Azorin et al., 2020). Participant SP5 highlighted that:

We are managing the curriculum together with the SMT though now the time is not on our side, we come up with the curriculum management plan in such a way that we check the curriculum coverage weekly in order to check the topics which are covered in line with the revised ATPs. And we also talk to the educators if they are slow not moving with the revised ATP so that they can pick up, most of

them used to tell us the reason that is because my learners are not with me most of them are behind, thus why I am behind, and we encouraged them to do the remedial work of those learners who are slow so that they can catch up but they must start by teaching the whole class so that they can go with those learners who are gifted because we can drag them waiting for those others. We have to teach everyday topics according to the revised ATP so that they can move with all the learners; they will do the remedial work with those who are behind. That is how we manage the curriculum.

“Distributed leadership has become the default leadership style in this current crisis. It equates with shared, collective and extended leadership practice that builds the capacity for change and improvement” (Harris, 2020, p. 6).

Strategies include bringing diverse voices to the table, building trust through transparency, and mutual respect in communication and action. Hallinger and Heck (2009), Leithwood and Mascall (2008), and Hargreaves, Harris, Boyle, Ghent, Goodall, & Gurn (2010) identified the importance of distributive leadership as a potential contributor to positive change and school improvement. As such, when supporting teachers in the liminal context of a crisis, education leaders may use distributional leadership (Spillane, Harris, Jones, & Mertz, 2015).

7.6.2 The Department of Basic Education in Supporting Female Leadership

While COVID-19 has and continues to have overwhelming effects on every domain of life, the interviewed female school principals have borne the brunt of the pandemic as the virus has exacerbated already existing gender inequalities, reduced employment opportunities, and highlighted the marginalised in society. The virus has massively disrupted the female school principals’ lives as they were beginning to unravel women’s rights and gender equity. SP6 had this to say about the ignorance of the parents:

At first, they were not supportive because I remember when we came back from the pandemic if you remember only the grade 7 were allowed to come to school. Learners were not coming to school because parents were afraid they said their learners will get sick and when it comes to this other grades when we were

reopening stage by stage, it was very bad because learners were not coming to school even though we can talk to the parents they didn't have enough knowledge about the pandemic. So, what they knew was that this pandemic can kill and they made sure that their learners don't come to school. It was a very big challenge for parents to bring their children back to school. The attendance was very bad.

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to the learner population being out of school with massive learning losses. While the move to online teaching and learning is inevitable and has become the new normal for many children, the non-availability of educational infrastructure has caused the disadvantaged, poor, marginalised, and vulnerable rural learners to lose access to all learning. The pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities that need urgent attention.

Policymakers must invest in inclusive and equitable education as well as educational infrastructure for all, especially in rural and poor environments. African women are mostly unseen in or missing from decision making, policy, and governance circles. The picture is worrisome in South Africa, where at an administration level, only two out of nine provinces have female heads of department (North West and Limpopo). There has been no female director at the DBE since the beginning of democracy, with the number of members of the executive council (MEC) at three (Western Cape, North West, and Limpopo).

From the interviews, where women have a higher level of leadership (my previous and current circuit managers both females), they responded better to crises (mentioned by participants SP1 and SP5) in ways that supported gender equality. Promoting women's meaningful engagement in governance and leadership not only has ripple effects on all spheres of life but also makes economic sense. SP1 was grateful for the positive support from her circuit manager:

When COVID-19 started, I was affected by COVID-19, I tested positive and I was rejected by colleagues, you know because of lack of knowledge it was new, July 2020. Educators were afraid and did not want to enter my office in my absence until the staff was addressed by the circuit manager.

She was supported by SP3, who noted that: *“Our circuit called a meeting workshop for SMTs that where these people went there and attended when they came back, they were sharing to say this is what we must do”*.

From the transcripts, it shows that the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in human beings not caring for each other. “Caring is the foundation of morality, a universal human attribute and ethically basic to humans” (Noddings, 2013, p. 1). According to Sirleaf (2020, p. 3), “women leaders are better placed to draw on informal networks to mobilize rapid responses and community support”.

7.6.3 Fourth Industrial Revolution in the Context of Education

It is widely recognised that the world is in the early stages of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, or 4IR. This is supported by several technologies such as universal high-speed internet, artificial intelligence, big data, and cloud computing. The 4IR is a significant change and exodus from old systems of industry. There is a shift in the way we interact with the world around us, as such, we need to change and realign our education system – that is the design and implementation of a fundamentally new model. Many educationists, including the DBE, have toyed with ideas of increased reliance on technology to bridge gaps created by COVID-19.

This is in contrast with my findings. All female school principals interviewed complained bitterly about the non-availability of basic technologies. There should not be such a chasm between the real world and the educational world, and the longer the curriculum takes to align to the 4IR reality, the greater that chasm is going to become in South Africa, especially in the rural schools (Leveraging off Covid, 2021, para. 12). Participant SP2 irritably said:

Covid-19 has made it very difficult to navigate leadership in the sense that it has limited time for contact meetings where sensitive issues and ways forward are discussed. We cannot just hold meetings since our school is in a rural area where most parents are not educated and that most learners stay with their grannies who are also illiterate and know nothing about computers and other stuff.

Female school principals are aware that their schools are not in a position to meet these demands with the current resources at their disposal. This presents us with a challenge on all fronts that could provide the motivation and energy for doing things entirely differently. This is the critical opportunity COVID-19 has presented us with. While the world is moving towards the 4IR, consequently, “the government of South Africa should propose mechanisms of fiscal expansion to try to provide funding for moving of some aspects of education online and promoting the adoption of the 4IR” (Mhlanga & Moloji, 2020, p. 9).

7.7 SUMMARY OF THE SECTION

The research findings throughout this section reported all the information received from the six female principals of the selected schools that served as research sites. Various themes and subthemes emerged which were analysed and interpreted with the support of literature. The first theme – challenges experienced by female school principals – revealed that the female school principals still face non-acceptance and disturbing resistance in the form of insubordination and sabotage from both male and female colleagues mostly perpetrated by stereotyping, prejudices, and discrimination as well as being confronted by oppressive and unpromising surroundings when ascending to a leadership role. The second theme was strategies to counter challenges. While the female school principals were still grappling with challenges that hindered them in navigating leadership effectively and efficiently in their schools, the world was struck by the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the third theme that emerged was the challenges of navigating leadership during a pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has truly highlighted and exposed the disparities and inequities of our imbalanced and unsustainable social systems. The impact of the pandemic has been devastating on South Africa’s already failing education system, with the poorest of the poor once again bearing the brunt of historical inequality and ongoing exclusion. It was important to find out how female school leadership navigated leadership during the pandemic. The fourth theme focused on support systems for female school principals and the ability of the female school principals to be responsively relevant.

In the next section, a summary of findings will be provided in which recommendations will be made based on a better understanding of the situation of female school

principals pre and during the COVID-19 pandemic and the silver linings of the COVID-19 crises point to educational improvisations that may need to be explored and expanded further.

8. SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 INTRODUCTION

In this study, the specific challenges were determined that oppose female school principals as they endeavour to navigate leadership in their rural schools efficiently and effectively during the COVID-19 pandemic. Various problems were identified that female school principals still have to face when they ascend to leadership roles and it was clear that many of these challenges still pertain to deep-rooted gender bias, non-acceptance by colleagues, and educational access and equity issues. While these female school principals were handling these deep-seated disparities reinforced by myths and prejudicial arrogances about female competencies as school leaders, the world was struck by the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic has presented an unprecedented crisis for schools around the world. The impact of the pandemic has been devastating on South Africa's already failing education system, with the poorest of the poor once again bearing the brunt of historical inequality and ongoing exclusion. The pandemic has accurately painted and exposed the disproportions and injustices of our unfair and unjustifiable social systems. Numerous COVID-19 connected challenges appeared from the interviews that necessitate significant adaptation by all educators, learners, and their parents. These include "adapting to online learning and learning via radio and television programmes, the continuity of education from home, facilitated community-based learning as well as the new costs of learning" (Mukute et al., 2021, p. 4). It is critical that government must provide support to female school principals to perform their roles of navigating leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic.

8.2 SUMMARY OF THE STUDY

The study aimed to discover how female school principals navigate school leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic in rural schools. To have a better picture and understanding of the challenges faced by female school principals in navigating

leadership during COVID-19 in rural schools, it was imperative to gain a narrative opinion of the challenges female school principals encountered when they ascended to leadership roles in their respective rural schools and what strategies they used to counter such unreceptive situations. Through literature and empirical study, the specific challenges confronting female school principals and ways of counteracting these challenges have been revealed. As exposed by Naidoo and Perumal (2014) and Duma (2015), female school principals faced many challenges in their schools, that include bad attitudes towards them by their colleagues. These attitudinal obstacles arise the moment female educators ascend to leadership positions and their colleagues disapprove of them as their new supervisors. Some of the female school principals encountered the opposition of colleagues who were initially supportive and collegial team workers but, who became hostile once their female colleagues were promoted to the school principalship position. This non-acceptance stemmed from gender stereotyping about female leaders that remain persistent in our schools and is still being used to “discriminate against women and to deny them the opportunities to occupy” leadership “positions or to enjoy being executive leaders of their schools” (Mnisi, 2015, p. 96). This happens in South Africa even though Chapter Two of the Constitution (RSA, 1996) sections 9(2) and (9(3) “as the supreme law of the country, provides for equality and non-discrimination on the basis of, amongst other aspects such as race” (Mnisi, 2015, p. 96), gender, or sex.

Female leaders’ experiences regarding the reality of being a school principal were explored via individual interviews. Concerning resistance to change obstacles, the study revealed that female principals face distressing resistance in the form of defiance and interference from colleagues. These traumatic experiences female school principals encounter with their leadership appointments relate to the “primitive cultural beliefs that women are in general subservient to men and that leadership is, therefore, an exclusively male competence” (Mnisi, 2015, p. 34). In many instances, this opposition is the result of staff not feeling comfortable being led by a woman. Female leaders, therefore, have to cope with colleagues, mainly, but not exclusively men, who oppose their leadership position right from the start based on the deep-rooted perception of women being followers rather than capable of leadership. Male

colleagues feel inferior when they have to accept instructions from a female school principal.

When focusing on the effectiveness of leadership in rural schools, rural principals generally face definite socio-cultural and economic challenges associated with the school community. Female school principals have to function in a hostile rural environment, whose key features include poor conditions of roads, lack of or limited access to Information Communication Technologies (ICTs), a lack of basic necessities such as running water, electricity, sanitation, health and education facilities, low economic status, and little access to lifelong learning opportunities (DoE, 2005). Leadership in rural schools cannot be detached from the historical and social practices of the immediate community and, as such, “rural principals must be able to nimbly navigate relations within the local community and the larger school system” (Preston et al., 2013, p. 1).

Notwithstanding the overwhelming challenges and pressures associated with female leadership, female school principals developed strategies to counter the challenges they experience and responded to maintain the effectiveness of their school system. Concerning a change of attitude towards female leadership, female leaders can boost the performance of their staff by raising self-efficacy. Female leaders can create a conducive atmosphere in their school based on self-efficacy by utilising relational traits that pertain to humility, approachability, being caring and compassionate, and having tolerance for the inputs of others. Female leaders can gradually convince stakeholders of their sincerity with leadership and effective school functioning. This can result in good relationships between the staff and the female school principal, which is improved by the female principals being accessible and making contemporaries realise that they are concerned about their personal problems and well-being. Respectable relations can inspire subordinates to support and be responsive to female school principals and this can prove to everybody that women can lead as efficiently as men do.

Apart from debunking the long-held stereotypes about female leadership and focusing on developing and maintaining good relationships with all stakeholders, female school principals must ensure that they gain superior professional knowledge on policy interpretation and curriculum implementation.

The emergence and rapid spread of the novel Coronavirus disease in 2019 (COVID-19) truly highlighted and exposed the disparities and inequities of our imbalanced and unsustainable social systems. The pandemic has disrupted education systems and exacerbated educational access and equity issues that existed before. Despite the enormity of the challenges faced by female school principals in navigating leadership, as the 2021 school year unfolds and school leaders' roles have been unexpectedly and dramatically changed by the COVID-19 pandemic, principals have still continued to lead their school communities through the ongoing crisis. The main focus of the study was to discover how female school principals are navigating leadership during the COVID-19 crisis and was supplemented by determining strategies to overcome the identified challenges.

The significant findings of the study revealed that the pandemic has been devastating to South African's already failing education system, with the rural poor and marginalised learners once again bearing the brunt of past inequalities and ongoing exclusion. The four mitigation practices to allow the opening of the schools, physical distancing, hand hygiene, cleaning and disinfection, and respiratory etiquette to prevent the spread of the viruses presented many unprecedented and unabated challenges in our schools.

Physical distancing has resulted in rotational modelling in our schools. Hand hygiene has exposed school contextual problems, while cleaning and disinfection exposed socio-economic problems, which Du Plessis and Mestry (2019) attributed to, amongst others, insufficient funding from the state, lack of resources, unreasonable teacher-learner ratio, and many others.

Sadly, COVID-19 has undoubtedly forced us to interrogate many of our long-established structures and, in particular, has raised questions regarding the way we teach and learn. Nevertheless, while some schools and training institutions have migrated to online learning, many learners simply do not have access to the electronic and data resources required to participate, once again highlighting the enormous digital divide that still exists. Darder (2020) remarked that renowned educator Paulo Freire would have questioned how we are schooling our kids in the age of COVID-19. Nicholls (2020) commented that we are teaching pedagogy of the oppressed and its

methods. We are teaching our learners in the context where they are more oppressed, while Freire viewed the purpose of education as the liberation of the oppressed in elite classrooms. The challenges for a liberator pedagogy are to teach empathy and solidarity with the oppressed who, in many cases, are not in the room (Freire, 1970). The past year has confirmed that technology can no longer be regarded as a luxury but is now a vital element in the field of education. However, the cost of data in South Africa ranks amongst the highest in Africa and in addition, the cost per megabyte is highest for the poor who cannot afford bulk data packages. This makes it difficult for learners to access information, even on a mobile phone.

The significant finding is that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to the emergence of new practices and collaborations. The crisis has shifted school leadership dramatically towards distributive, collaborative, and networked leadership actions (Stone-Johnson & Weiner, 2020; Harris, 2020). As emphasised by Stone-Johnson and Weiner (2020), the professionalism that the female school principals exhibited during the pandemic suggests that understanding how to cultivate this important leadership quality could contribute to principal retention during these challenging circumstances. By nurturing a collaborative culture and ensuring that female principals have needed resources and support, district, circuit officials and circuit managers should play an essential role in the success of female school principals, the learners, staff, and families in their school communities.

All in all, the study established that women are underrepresented in school leadership, despite significant shifts towards gender equity over the past two decades. The key barrier to women taking over and retaining leadership in education remains the entrenched system of patriarchy that undermines women's ability to manage schools. Stumbling blocks for women to attain principalships is the lack of trust in female leadership caused by many factors including traditional and cultural roles. Rural schools have not yet achieved real quality education because the issue of equity still persists as noted by Gardiner (2008). Equity demands that every learner is supported with the necessary resources to successfully access what is needed to learn and thrive in an educational setting. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed South African's unequal schooling system, the inequality between White and Black, and disparities between

rural and urban schools (Harris & Jones, 2020). Most of the management challenges female school principals experienced originate from the fact that they are women and also that they are managing schools from rural communities which are characterised by the poor educational and economic status of the communities, inadequate physical and infrastructure conditions of school buildings especially toilet facilities, a shortage of classrooms, no running water, and many others.

COVID-19 exposed the injustice and inequities that plague many rural schools. Female school principals are struggling with the challenges of an uncontrolled pandemic, while at the same time navigating decades of disinvestment and disrepair. Female school principals' efforts to make rural schools COVID-19 safe clash with the backlog of inequalities in their schools. The mitigating measures to combat the spread of COVID-19 encounter many problems. For example, the rotational attendance of learners – a potentially viable option for space and physical distancing – has a significant consequence for learners. So too, distance online teaching and learning for learners who do not even have food to eat is impossible. The withdrawal of the assistant educators who have been vital in supporting schools amid the COVID-19 pandemic has adversely impacted the female school principals in navigating leadership. Among the assistants' duties were to scan pupils' temperature at school entrances, sanitise, and offer additional support in classrooms.

8.3 RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are made based on the above findings and conclusions.

1. We need more women in educational leadership positions. The past year has demanded that leaders “embrace traits not always associated with male leadership in high offices and boardrooms such as empathy, listening, creative collaboration, and authentic engagement with employees. These qualities are overwhelmingly associated with women” (Katz, 2021, para. 1). Data shows that learners are in good hands when females are at the helm of the schools. We need more female school leaders and the underrepresentation of women in school leadership needs to be tackled head-on. It is important to have female school principals because they bring different skills and perspectives, and structural and cultural differences to drive effective solutions. Female school principals have demonstrated that they bring to our schools a more

complete range of the qualities modern leaders need, including, amongst others, self-awareness, emotional attunement, humbleness, and many others.

2. Female school principals must undergo compulsory crisis management and leadership courses. This is recommended as the possible place to start the process of change and transformation of educational leadership. All school principals must urgently undergo compulsory crisis management and leadership courses.
3. The Department of Basic Education must appoint women at the centre of the post-COVID-19 recovery because the pandemic provides us with opportunities to rebuild in a caring, humane, and sustainable manner.
4. Leave no child behind. South Africa's education system is complex with historical inequalities. Most of the country's learners come from disadvantaged backgrounds. The COVID-19 crisis has exposed an immense digital divide. The onslaught of the virus necessitated a move to e-learning. Theoretically, this is the best step towards a fairer education system but practically it is very miscellaneous. Educators have varying digital skills and many families do not have devices. To provide technology as an obligation the South African government must consider a wide range of factors including all learners' access to computers and make a concerted national programme available to ensure that all educators are skilled in digital teaching and technology and that data is hugely subsidised. This will result in leaving no child behind.
5. The education system supported the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). South African education should start adjusting for future work if it wants to address growing youth unemployment and a demographic time bomb due to poor education and skills training. The digital revolution, the fourth industrial revolution, otherwise known as the 4IR is the way to go. Schools have an important role in preparing learners for the 4IR with the key skills and values being creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving.

8.4 RECOMMENDATION FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

It has to be noted that this research dealt with problems faced by female principals in remote rural areas in South Africa. Further studies are suggested on female challenges in other provinces with more urban-oriented schools to determine whether there are differences in female leadership challenges regarding rural-oriented and urban-oriented environments.

It is highly recommended to compare and determine how severe the bias against female leadership still is. Further studies are suggested where male school principals and the challenges they are experiencing are the main focus. Challenges experienced by male school principals have to be compared to those experienced by female school principals.

8.5 CONCLUSION

The female school principals who participated in this research were faced with problems as newly appointed officials affected by traditional bias against female principalship and the persistent inequalities in our education system. South Africa has a broken and unequal education system that perpetuates poverty and inequality. The research findings highlight that the education system in rural schools is overwhelmed by crumbling infrastructures, overcrowded classrooms, and relatively poor educational outcomes. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the challenges that already existed. It pushed inequality in schools to cripple new levels, exposing how the country's education system continues to be shaped by the legacy of apartheid. The research highlights the impact of COVID-19 on learners from poorer communities as they were cut off from education during extended school closures and learners who rely on the feeding scheme – or as it is officially called: the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP), did not benefit from alleviating short-term hunger. When schools finally reopened, historical underinvestment and our present government's failure to address existing inequalities, resulted in many schools being unable to provide a safe learning environment amid the pandemic. To mitigate the impact of the virus or any future pandemic, drastic measures need to be employed. In light of the economic and social challenges in South Africa, progression has found that a blended learning approach (which combines online and face-to-face methods) is the most suitable solution. The government needs to make available the necessary resources to support our female school principals so that they can navigate leadership at their schools with ease. All stakeholders, including policymakers, must invest in comprehensive and equitable education as well as educational infrastructure for all, but particularly for vulnerable learners in rural and poor surroundings.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Ethical Clearance

NHREC Registration Number REC-110613-036



ETHICS CLEARANCE

Dear Ngwedzeni Michael Ravele,

Ethical Clearance Number: Sem 1-2021-023

Topic: Female school leadership in rural schools during the COVID-19 pandemic

Ethical clearance for this study is granted subject to the following conditions:

- If there are major revisions to the research proposal based on recommendations from the Faculty Higher Degrees Committee, a new application for ethical clearance must be submitted.
- If the research question changes significantly so as to alter the nature of the study, it remains the duty of the student/researcher to submit a new application.
- It remains the student's/researcher's responsibility to ensure that all ethical forms and documents related to the research are kept in a safe and secure facility and are available on demand.
- Please quote the reference number above in all future communications and documents.

The Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee has decided to Approved

- Grant ethical clearance for the proposed research.
- Provisionally grant ethical clearance for the proposed research
- Recommend revision and resubmission of the ethical clearance documents

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mdu Ndlovu".

Prof Mdu Ndlovu
Chair: FACULTY OF EDUCATION RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE
19 February 2021

The Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee comments:

The candidate makes claims about poor performance of the education system, as if poor performance affects all subjects.

I have gone through the application. I approve 023.

Appendix 2: Permission Letters from Department

CONFIDENTIAL



TO: DR MC MAKOLA

FROM: DR T MABILA

ACTING CHAIRPERSON: LIMPOPO PROVINCIAL RESEARCH COMMITTEE (LPRC)

DATE: APRIL 2021

SUBJECT: FEMALE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IN RURAL SCHOOLS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

RESEARCHER: RAVELE NM

Dear Colleague

The above researcher's research proposal served at the Limpopo Provincial Research Committee (LPRC). The committee is satisfied with the methodological soundness of the proposed study.

Decision: The research proposal is granted full research approval.

Regards

Acting Chairperson: Dr T Mabila

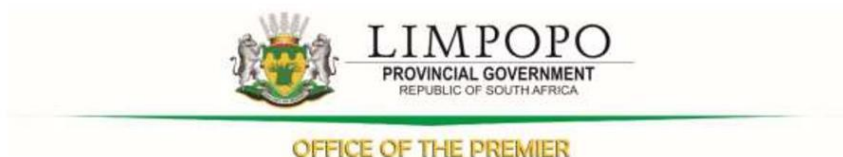


Secretariat: Ms J Mokobi



Date: 28/04/2021

CONFIDENTIAL



Office of the Premier

Research and Development Directorate

Private Bag X9483, Polokwane, 0700, South Africa

Tel: (015) 230 9910, Email: mokobij@premier.limpopo.gov.za

**LIMPOPO PROVINCIAL RESEARCH ETHICS
COMMITTEE CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE**

Meeting: April 2021

Project Number: LPREC/25/2021: PG

Subject: Female School Leadership in Rural Schools During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Researcher: Ravele NM

Dr Thembinkosi Mabila

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Thembinkosi Mabila".

Chairperson: Limpopo Provincial Research Ethics Committee

The Limpopo Provincial Research Ethics Committee (LPREC) is registered with National Health Research Council (NHREC) Registration Number **REC-111513-038**.

Note:

- i. **This study is categorized as a Low Risk Level in accordance with risk level descriptors as enshrined in LPREC Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)**
- ii. **Should there be any amendment to the approved research proposal; the researcher(s) must re-submit the proposal to the ethics committee for review prior data collection.**
- iii. **The researcher(s) must provide annual reporting to the committee as well as the relevant department and also provide the department with the final report/thesis.**
- iv. **The ethical clearance certificate is valid for 12 months. Should the need to extend the period for data collection arise then the researcher should renew the certificate through LPREC secretariat. PLEASE QUOTE THE PROJECT NUMBER IN ALL ENQUIRIES.**

CONFIDENTIAL



LIMPOPO
PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

OFFICE OF THE PREMIER

TO: DR MC MAKOLA

FROM: DR T MABILA

CHAIRPERSON: LIMPOPO PROVINCIAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (LPREC)

DATE: APRIL 2021

SUBJECT: FEMALE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IN RURAL SCHOOLS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

RESEARCHER: RAVELE NM

Dear Colleague

The above researcher's research proposal served at the Limpopo Provincial Research Ethics Committee (LPREC). The ethics committee is satisfied with the ethical soundness of the proposal.

Decision: The research proposal is granted full approval and ethical clearance.

Regards

Chairperson: Dr T Mabila

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'T Mabila'.

Secretariat: Ms J Mokobi

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'J Mokobi'.

Date: 28/04/2021

Appendix 3: Request Letters

LETTER TO EDUCATION OFFICE REQUESTING PERMISSION TO CONDUCT A RESEARCH

House no. 528 Shayandima Zone 5B

Thulamela municipality

Limpopo Province

Ref: 082610 3266/082 563 7116

To: Circuit Manager

Mrs. T.S. Ramurunzi

Dzindi Circuit

Private Bag x 1406

Lwamondo

0985

Dear Madam

SUBJECT: REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT A RESEARCH IN DZINDI CIRCUIT, VHEMBE EAST DISTRICT

I trust this letter finds you well.

I am currently enrolled with the University of Johannesburg doing **Masters' degree in Education management and Leadership**. As part of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education, I am required to conduct a research. My research project titled, **"Female school leadership in rural schools during the COVID-19 pandemic"** and I am expected to interview female school principals on the experiences they encountered when navigating leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic.

I humbly request to conduct a research in six primary schools in your circuit.

The proposed schools are:

1. Dzwerani primary school
2. Dzindi primary school
3. Thivhulawi Rudzani primary school
4. Mutende primary school
5. Ratshiedana primary school and
6. Mabuduga primary school

Stand by schools are:

7. Lurenzheni primary
8. Mathithivhale primary and
9. Tshivhambe primary school

Context of the research: The study will focus on female school principals as a gender that has been marginalized in society. This research aims to discover how female school principals navigate school leadership during the COVID-19 crisis in rural schools. The research will investigate how female principals perceive their role in school leadership, and to determine challenges and opportunities they experience as well explore the strategies they have adopted to influence the way curriculum is enacted during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The research targets are six female school principals. There will be an individual interview which will last for 40 to 60 minutes. Interviews session will be recorded and certainly, the process will not disrupt the teaching and learning. The process will be conducted outside working hours.

My supervisor: Dr. Zvisinei Moyo 078 562 7722 /zvisnei.moyo@gmail.com

Thank you very much in advance, I look forward to a positive outcome

Warm regard

Ngwedzeni Michael Ravele

Date : 02 May 2021.

Appendix 3: Research Instruments

Observation Protocols – Female school leadership in rural school

Date _____ Time _____ School _____

Location _____ Duration of observation _____

1. FACILITIES

1.1 Is the school cleaned?

Yes

No

Comments _____

1.2 Are the cleaners visible of the school premises?

Yes

No

Comments _____

1.3 Is the school vandalized?

Yes

No

Comments _____

—

1.4 Is there class demarcated as per the required physical distance?

o Yes

No

Comments _____

—

2. WATER AND SANITATION

2.1 Does the school have water and if not, is water tank filled with water?

Yes

No

Comments _____

—

2.2 Does the school have proper sanitation?

Yes

No

Comments _____

—

3. SANITATION AND HYGIENE

3.1 Are all educators wearing their PPEs?

Yes

NO

Commnets _____

—

3.2 Are all learners wearing their PPEs for all learners?

Yes

No

Comments _____

—

3.3 Did the school have and use sanitizers and disinfectants upon entering the gate?

Yes

No

Comments _____

—

3.4 Did the school use digital thermometers upon entering the gate?

Yes

No

Comments _____

—

3.5 Did the screeners complete a visitor's log sheet?

Yes

No

Comments

4. General remarks and recommendations

Interview schedule – Female school leadership in rural school

- **Introduction:** Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed

1. Please, can we complete the following table about your biographical details

Age	Marital status	Highest qualification	Years of experience as an educator	Years of experience as a principal	How many numbers of children do you have?
------------	-----------------------	------------------------------	---	---	--

--	--	--	--	--	--

2. Please describe the challenges you have experienced as a principal before the COVID-19 pandemic. If possible, please provide some details.
3. How did those challenges affect you in “navigating leadership” ? If possible, please provide some details.
4. Please describe the challenges you are experiencing in “navigating leadership” during the COVID-19 pandemic. If possible, please provide some details.
5. How did these challenges affect you in “navigating leadership” ? If possible, please provide some details.
6. How are you handling the situation? Please detail the issue and evaluate your solutions from your current perspective.
7. What is the response of the Department of Education in this situation?
8. Were there any people or resources that supported or supporting you in this situation?
9. What school procedures and processes do you have to assess potential risks and define responses in the event of a crisis?
10. How have your school crisis management team managed the curriculum during the COVID-19 pandemic?
11. If you encounter similar challenges in the future, what could be some potential resources for your school to overcome the adversity?

• **Conclusion:** Before we conclude is there anything else that you would like to add?

Appendix 4: Consent Forms

INFORMED CONSENT

RE: LEADERSHIP OF FEMALE SCHOOL PRINCIPAL DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS IN RURAL PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Researcher: I, **Ngwedzeni Michael Ravele**, am a Masters student at the **University of Johannesburg**. I am involved in a research project entitled:

LEADERSHIP OF FEMALE SCHOOL PRINCIPAL DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS IN RURAL PRIMARY SCHOOLS

I am conducting this study under the supervision of **Dr. Z Moyo**

The purpose of the study is to investigate **how female school principals are navigating leadership during the COVID-19 crisis in rural schools?**

Your cooperation in conducting an interview with you will be highly valued. The interview will be conducted within 50-60 minutes. The interview will be audio recorded for verification of the findings by my supervisor.

Your participation in this study will benefit Vhembe East District, Limpopo Department of Education and Basic Department of Education.

In view of the above, you are requested to participate in this research project.

Participant: I _____

give my consent to be interviewed by **Ngwedzeni Michael Ravele**. It has been explained to me that my name and dignity as a respondent is preserved by me by observing ethical standards during the research process.

As a respondent in this research project, I am required to observe the following ethical standards:

- You name and that of your colleagues will not be mentioned during discussions;
- Participation is **voluntary** and there is freedom to **withdraw without any penalty**;
- Raw materials will be kept under lock to ensure confidentiality;
- Information with regard to the interviews will only be accessible to my supervisor and an external moderator;
- Field notes and audio tapes will be destroyed as soon as the project is completed;
- A summary of the research project will be available to the participants, if requested.

Respondent's signature.....Date:.....

Researcher's signature.....Date:.....

THANKS FOR YOUR COOPERATION.

Appendix 5: Interview Transcripts

SCHOOL PRINCIPAL ONE (SP 4)

Interview Transcripts

Date: 14 May 2021

Time: 12:00

Place: Principal's office at the school

Interviewer: Good afternoon

Respondent: Afternoon Sir

Interviewer: How are you

Respondent: I'm good and you

Interviewer: Ok. Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed by me, my name is Michael Ravele I am a student at UJ doing masters I'm here to have some few interview with you regardingin rural school, are you comfortable with that?

Respondent: Ya, I am comfortable

Interviewer: Ok. Let's go to question 2. Can you please describe the challenges you have experienced as a principal before the COVID-19 pandemic, if possible, please provide some details?

Respondent: As a female principal truly speaking leading and managing a small school is very challenging is challenging because of the GBE system. As a small school we have a problem with the resources. The resources are not sufficient, e.g., human resources/ personal infrastructure and the financial muscles Is very weak because all allocations depend on the enrolment of the learners. That is where we have problem.

We also have the problem of accessibility to the school. The geographical features of the school are so bad in such a way parents opt not to send their children to the school. Then we end up having a very low enrolment.

The road is very bad and there is no public transport that can bring children to the school. During rainy days the DBE officials fails us they do not render monitoring and support to the school because they could not reach the place the road is so slippery and croquet.

We also have the problem of NSNP service providers they don't come to school and bring us the food on time and most of the time they will tell us that no, things are not going according to their plans during to the weather and the road and for me as a school principal it hits back because learners need to eat and the parents, they want to see the kids eating, even the department. Even though I will try to explain to them that we have a problem with the service provider and it making the service or the work for me to be more difficult instead of solving the problem of curriculum delivery now I'm solving the other things. I feel it is too heavy to me.

Interviewer: Ok

Respondent: the school also has a multi-grade classes this has negative impacts to the delivery of the curriculum. Educators are not trained to can teach effectively in this situation and they are compelled to teach subjects which they are not good at. As a key factor within the school, I make sure that all educators come up with the strategies on how they can quality assure their work

Interviewer: So, what about the community, how is the community supporting?

Respondent: Parents are willing to assist their children but the level of education is too low for them to understand some of the things is too difficult most learners are from single families and unemployed. This social aspect has detrimental impact to the performance of our learners. 90% of families depend on social grant.

Interviewer: How about the educators within the school, are they supportive, negative or reluctant

Respondent: 100 percent, these educators are committed and the way they are doing their work they are so supportive they even pop up their money so that the school must run smoothly of which it is so difficult to find an educator using his/her own money for the benefit of the DBE, thus where I say they are so supportive and 100 percent committed.

Interviewer: Ok. Let's move to question no:4, basically you have answered question 2 and 3 at a go. Last year around February there was a COVID-19 pandemic what challenges have you experienced in your leadership up until now with the Covid.

Respondent: The challenges that we faced depend on the DBE system because they knew very well that this pandemic is so dangerous and we were forced to deliver the curriculum in a very awkward situation because as you can see the infrastructures are not enough even the personnel human resources are not enough. We were forced to teach these learners at least 6 days within 14 days, but we tried by all means to use the strategy for platooning and it failed and we moved to rotational and again back to platooning but for now we are on rotational.

We changed these methods due to contact gap curriculum delivery, we found that when we do platoon learners are not benefiting if we say the grade 4 must come in the morning and after 10 it should be grade 5 when check at the work that we have done it was not satisfactory but for now when we do grade 5 the whole day and the grade 3 the whole day and the following they will be doing their homework and we have the other learners that was fine, but to me as a school principal truly speaking it is not good because I can see that the content gap is too much. They are going to move to another grade without being taught. Even though the department has trimmed some of the content in each and every subject but we still have a problem because when we give learners to go with the work at home some of them, they don't have people that they can help them because they are single parents and some they are just rooming around because our community has poor socio-economy.

Interviewer: And what about giving them homework are they managing to do them at home, how are you giving them homework's in a form of printed papers or electronically

Respondent: The printed papers, when we come to the electronic, we are still very far, maybe it can even take us 2 years to reach to that level. So, we give them printed papers and refer them to the text book and some learners they do their homework's and some they don't and if you go deeper, you can find that the child has got the problem at home so we don't have to put more pressure on them, so that is why right now we came up with the strategy of calling parents per grade and address them so that they must know what they are expected to do

Interviewer: You mentioned issues of food delivery which was not coming well, is it still happening at this point.

Respondent: We also do some arrangements with them so that when they bring food, they might bring that food and deliver to the next house not at school because they can reach here during the night, even though that household is in danger as well because most of the time these people they can see that the food has been delivered and come and try to attempt to open the doors and steal.

Interviewer: What was the department of Education respond towards the challenges that was mentioned, how did they respond.

Respondent: My main problem was the content gap and we couldn't cover the curriculum but what the department did for trimming the subject content I think they have assisted us a lot and even the bringing of the ES and GSA at least when we come to the whole school development all areas we tried to deal with them.

Interviewer: So are they still around those

Respondent: Now we have those 3 the screener and the cleaner on the issues of using norms and standard or asking donation from the parents at least we are no longer doing that of it was wrong to ask donation from the parents the department was not allowing them

Interviewer: So, which means that the Department are resources those learners?

Respondent: Those screeners and cleaners they are the one who are going to pay them

Interviewer: Are there any other people who was supporting except the department

Respondent: No,

Interviewer: what school processes and procedures do you have to assess potential risks and define responses in the event of a crisis?

Respondent: We have this risk management team we let the person not to come to school even though it has not happened but we said if someone has been diagnosed with that virus the best thing is to stay at home not coming to school

Interviewer: Here at school how do you do from the gate

Respondent: We sanitize them all procedures of sanitizing and taking the temperature is conducted by the screeners and is dotted down so that we can know who came here, what was the temperature we collect data from each and every one who's coming to the gate

Interviewer: Do your school have management team have a plan for curriculum coverage during the COVID-19

Respondent: Yes, we have,

Interviewer: What are those if you can name one or two

Respondent: We have action plan, management for home work and school base assessment

Interviewer: Are there plan working or are just there on the paper

Respondent: I didn't even mention the year plan, we also have the year plan they are working because time and again we check and the school development plan we have and which one are we supposed to start with and which one are they urgent and important and which are important but not urgent, we used to visit the document so that we could be in pare with what we have written down

Interviewer: Do your school have all the resources like water sanitation in place

Respondent: Water we have but when it comes to sanitation, we have poor infrastructures that is why the department has given us 4 toilets

Interviewer: New toilets?

Respondent: yes, the mobile toilets.

Interviewer: Then if you encounter similar challenges like the one that you are facing of COVID-19 what do you think will be the best resources for the school?

Respondent: For now, the best resources is additional educators if we can get more educators and kill this issue of multi-grading that would be better, because for now I'm also an educator if you get to the class at 07:30 until I knock off around 14:00 pm and I still have to run administrative work and even now when you look at my age I am tired I can't take it anymore I have been in these industry for long

Interviewer: Principal, maybe before we end is there anything that you would like us to add maybe somewhere

Respondent: My main wish is for these data to be utilized in future maybe it can help the department, the education system to change the way, there should be a paradigm shift of how they are doing when we come to the teacher ratio. They must also consider the small school so that the curriculum should be delivered effectively and efficiency

Interviewer: In which way?

Respondent: Maybe if the small school is recognized in such a way if we have 8 grades let it be 8 educators so that each and every educator will be in class maybe the 9th teacher will be the principal so that the principal will be able to teach and be able to deliver the area of leadership and management

Interviewer: And maybe to add to avoid multi-grading them in a one class

Respondent: And the other thing that the department must look at if the teacher is teaching English that teacher must have qualify to teach English not just because is a teacher, the teacher must just teach that's where we go wrong, I am saying this because our teachers some are teaching technology, they don't even know about

technology they just sit down and read and research and go to the class and deliver. Yes, I understand that there will be poor learning but how can we use time like this for these poor learners, you can see that the teacher is struggling but you have no choice the teacher must just go there and teach and we expect to teach quality things

Interviewer: Is that all?

Respondent: Yes, for now I think that's all

Interviewer: Thank you for allowing me to interview you hopefully the message, the information given will reach the destiny thank you.

Respondent: Thank you very much for your time.

Appendix 6: Turnitin Report



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Appendix 7: Editor's Letter

Nikki Watkins
Editing/proofreading services

Cell: 072 060 2354

E-mail: nikki.watkins.pe@gmail.com

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To whom it may concern

This letter serves to inform you that I have done language editing, proofreading and reference formatting on the master's thesis

**FEMALE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IN RURAL SCHOOLS DURING THE COVID-19
PANDEMIC**

by

NGWEDZENI MICHAEL RAVELE

Student No: 920211675



Professional
EDITORS
Guild

Nikki Watkins
Associate Member

Membership number: WAT003
Membership year: March 2021 to February 2022

072 060 2354
nikki.watkins.pe@gmail.com

www.editors.org.za

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