Women Navigating Leadership in Rural Schools During the COVID-19 Pandemic.

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ABSTRACT

The obstacles female school principals encounter while leading in rural schools both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic were the focus of this qualitative study since they represent a gender that has historically been excluded in society. Six female school principals from the province of Limpopo were purposefully chosen for the study, which was exploratory in nature. Semi-structured interviews and observations were used to collect the information, and then they were thematically examined to provide results. The results showed that female school principals encountered a variety of difficulties due to preconceptions of gender, absence of respect and support from personnel, and inadequate facilities in the schools. The issues mentioned above have been made worse because of the COVID-19 epidemic. The COVID-19 drastically and unexpectedly altered the leadership positions of female school principals. This unprecedented nature calls for a powerful network of supporters to encourage equity and equality in schools, as well as the empowerment of females leading schools to lead in a crisis. The harms and injustices that beset many rural schools were made public by COVID-19. Female school leaders had to contend with an unchecked pandemic while also negotiating decades of underfunding and neglect. Women in educational leadership need to embrace qualities like empathy, listening, creative cooperation, and genuine engagement with staff members—qualities that are not typically associated with high offices and boardrooms.

Keywords: Female School Principals; COVID-19; Equality; Gender Stereotypes; Rural

INTRODUCTION

The disadvantages faced by women in positions of leadership have been supported by academic discussions. The same pattern has been observed in school leadership, according to Mwale and Dodo (2017), where males have traditionally had more possibilities than women to lead schools. As a result, several South African schools have male principals (Davis, 2020). Numerous studies conducted in Africa and elsewhere have hinted at a range of difficulties for women in educational leadership that are caused by stereotypes based on culture and custom, rigid gender roles, opposition to women in leadership positions, and the perception that women are less capable (Netshitangani, 2018;

Schmidt & Mestry, 2021; Tarbutton, 2019). The sexism hurdles of social, racial, and cultural stereotypes, as well as glass ceilings and glass walls, have been called out as still existing in the educational field (Shepard, 2017).

The underrepresentation of female principals, access hurdles, issues with the environment of the school, socioeconomic contexts, and community contexts are some of the concerns (Al-Jaradat, 2014; Moyo, Perumal & Hallinger, 2020; Msila, 2013). The COVID-19 pandemic hit the world as female school leaders were still coping with their difficulties. On March 5, 2020, after the first COVID-19 case was reported, schools were closed (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020). The gradual reopening of schools

caused staff members and students to learn in an unfamiliar setting. For school leaders, managers, and governors, the precautionary measures to slow the spreading of the pandemic - such as social withdrawal, hand sanitising, carefully coordinating all movement around schools, among other things - presented several difficulties (Mhlanga (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020; Omodan, 2020). The mentioned difficulties faced by female school principals were made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic problem (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020). In terms of female leadership positions in schools, the pandemic has added yet another layer of difficulties in addition to stigmas of discrimination, harassment, and violence (Lumby & Azaola, 2011).

Numerous schools' operations over the past year have undergone significant alteration caused by the pandemic (Harris & Jones, 2020; Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020; Omodan, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic cruelly revealed the disparities in the school system, particularly in under resourced, rural areas. Studies on leadership tactics during crises have been done (Smith & Riley, 2012; Mestry, 2017; Omodan, 2020), however, the leadership difficulties that female school principals encounter in remote schools during the COVID-19 crisis have not received enough attention. The harmful effects of this pandemic must be addressed by female school principals (Zhao, 2020). In addition to other difficulties faced by female principals in schools, the COVID-19 pandemic has been a major leadership issue.

Given this context, the goal of this study was to learn how female school leaders handled school leadership in the time of COVID-19 in rural schools. The study investigated how female principals handled the COVID-19 pandemic.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Academic discussions have supported the difficulties experienced by women leading schools while carrying out their professional roles. The same pattern has been seen in school leadership, where men have had more opportunity than women to manage schools, leaving women underrepresented in South Africa. Most studies (Greyling & Steyn, 2015; Mestry & Schmidt, 2011; Moyo, 2022) focused more on broad issues that contribute to the disparities and challenges experienced by female school principals. Other research (Smith & Riley, 2012; Mestry, 2017) have concentrated on crisis management strategies for leaders. The COVID-19 issue presented female school principals in remote schools with unique leadership challenges, which have not gotten enough attention. Academic discussions have supported the difficulties that women in leadership roles confront. The same pattern has been noticed in school leadership, where men have had more opportunities to head schools than women, which explains why women are underrepresented in South Africa. It is obvious that most studies focused more on broader issues that contribute to the disparities and challenges experienced by female school principals (Greyling & Steyn, 2015; Mestry & Schmidt, 2011; Moyo, 2022). Other studies have concentrated on leadership tactics during crises (Mestry, 2017; Smith & Riley, 2012). Although they were present throughout the COVID-19 crisis, the leadership difficulties experienced by female school principals in rural settings have not gotten enough attention.

The COVID-19 epidemic has been a significant leadership concern, in addition to other challenges experienced by female principals in schools. Many gender inequalities and health issues, according to some experts, have been made worse by the most recent pandemic (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020). The pandemic has added even another layer of challenges on top of gender norms, racism, assault, and harassment against women seeking leadership posts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To analyse comprehensive societal settings related to how a female principals manage school leadership in COVID-19 pandemic, social justice was chosen as the study's conceptual framework. Social justice, according to Fraser (2008), is a reaction to undermining and dismantling policies that support marginalisation and exclusionary practises. Creating fair schooling and education was one of the common threads and conceptions of social justice that Marshall and Oliva (2010) uncovered. Our educational systems must be pertinent to the guiding principles of social justice, including inclusion and equity, high expectations, reciprocal community relationships, system-wide approach, and direct social justice education and intervention, to combat social injustice while managing schools during the COVID-19 pandemic (Carlisle, Jackson, & George, 2006). The study's conceptual framework, social justice, was preferred because it allows thorough analysis of the social conditions in which the female school principal must negotiate school leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Fraser (2008), social justice is a reaction to obstructing and undermining policies that support marginalisation and discriminatory practises. Commonalities and the idea of social justice, which includes promoting fair schooling and education, were noted by Marshall and Oliva (2010). The five guiding principles of social justice include direct social justice education and intervention, high standards, reciprocal community ties, and inclusion and equity - need to be applied in our educational systems to fight social injustice and manage education in the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study focuses on rural schools, which have been historically regarded as being underprivileged and marginalised. Fraser (2008) identified three elements of social justice: redistribution, acknowledgment, and representation.

These three dimensions are thought to be pertinent in this context. According to Fraser (2008), addressing injustices involves doing away with entrenched barriers that deny some individuals the opportunity to fully engage in social interaction on an equal footing with others. A conscious effort to address fundamental injustices that result from one group abusing its power over another is known as social justice. As its tenets seek to eradicate inequality, advance inclusivity, and create conditions that are supportive of all, social justice has been recognised as a valuable framework (Moyo, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought light long-ignored injustices and disparities in our educational system. The apartheid system's inequities that hurt schools and students caused the South African educational system to be fundamentally weak (Soudien, Reddy, & Harvey, 2021). The pandemic exacerbated the already pronounced disparity levels in our schools.

Challenges confronted by female school leaders.

Women in rural school leadership encounter several barriers when applying for leadership roles, according to local and international research. One source of difficulties is the underrepresentation of female principals, as well as the socioeconomic situation and the community setting.

Women are underrepresented in school leadership.

The supreme legislation of South Africa, the constitution, guarantees equality and prohibits discrimination based on social background, gender, race and creed. Sections 9(2) and 9(3) of Chapter 2 of the Constitution (RSA, 1996(a)) prohibit the state from unduly discriminating against anyone based on race, gender, or sex. Women are severely underrepresented in school leadership notwithstanding the

compelling arguments for their equal inclusion (Davis, 2020). In public schools, there are 71% (or 278,858) female teachers, compared to 29% (or 113,915) male teachers (or 29%). However, only 8 025 of the 12 428 permanently appointed male principals are female, making up 39% of the principal population (DBE, 2022). The data show that there are gender differences in leadership in education. The rate has increased from 36% (Davids, 2020), although it is still moving at a slower rate than their male peers. Inconveniently, women are frequently undervalued even though they are an underutilized natural resource and a calming influence in any organisation.

School contextual issues

Female school principals must deal with issues unique to rural schools. In general, rural areas are isolated and under resourced (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). Rural residents continue to fall far behind in schooling and are disproportionately affected by hunger and poverty. Like everywhere else in the globe, South Africa has many schools that are in rural areas, which disadvantages students (Hlalele, 2012). Rural occupancy in South Africa is a direct result of apartheid and colonial policies that included deliberate exclusion from opportunity, resettlement, and displacement. This, according to Hlalele (2012), shows that each rural area has a distinct set of needs and resources. Rural areas in South Africa are characterised by several factors, including lengthy travel times to urban areas, poor road conditions, a lack of running water, power, sanitation, and facilities for health and education, as well as a low level of economic status and limited access to opportunities for lifelong learning (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). Rurality is made worse by the persistent underfunding of schools in comparison to needs.

Community context

Msila (2013) asserts that regardless of the situation, society always views men as superior. Because they are viewed as inferior by society, women in some communities lack credibility as leaders (Netshitangani, 2018). Communities, according to Schmidt and Mestry (2021), are not ready to accept women as school leaders. Communities perceived the position of school manager as one that required seriousness and that only men could fulfil (Msila, 2013). Some of the challenges women have experienced come from the community, such as beliefs that women cannot discipline older students, especially male students; that women are too emotional; too physically weak; passive; and that men do not appreciate working under female leaders (Davis, 2018; Schmidt & Mestry, 2021). According to the literature, female principals have issues with sexism, discipline, and considerable teacher and learner absenteeism. This, according to Msila (2013), is a result of gender stereotypes that place high demands on men's dominance, autonomy, aggression, and achievement while placing strong demands on women's defense, nourishment, and affiliation (Moyo, Perumal, & Hallinger, 2020).

COVID-19's effects in South African schools

To combat the COVID-19 pandemic, South African schools abruptly closed their doors on March 19, 2020 (DBE, 2020). The uncertainty sparked rumours, suggestions, preliminary strategies and proposals for school recovery plans aimed at preserving the integrity of the academic year (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020; Ramrathan, 2021). A gradual approach to students returning to school seems realistic after much consideration. Discipline, nutrition, safety, and a lack of resources (connectivity, water, and sanitisation) are all issues that plague schools today (Dube, 2020; Mhlanga &

Moloi, 2020). Before re-implementing a functional educational system, the DBE attempted to address issues that schools were facing. For instance, 3,475 schools in South Africa needed a sufficient water supply through plumbing, water tanks, and boreholes (DBE, 2020).

To assist in extending the school year, DBE offered resources to students in all grade levels. These included worksheets, sample test questions and memoranda, educative programming on radio and television, online education using services like Microsoft Teams and Zoom, and worksheets. The May/June examination was delayed, the yearly teaching plan was condensed, and the goal was to finish the final portions of the examination by 15 December 2020. Schools can reopen using a variety of approaches that guarantee social isolation and sanitization (Ramrathan, 2021). Due to the paucity of teachers with co-morbidities, substitute teachers and educational assistants were hired to work alongside teachers. During COVID-19, DBE provides food to students through its Nutritional Programme.

The unequal educational system in South Africa is surfaced by COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the stark social and economic divides between the poor and the rich in South Africa, as well as the discrimination between whites and blacks and the differences between urban and rural schools, all of which continue to exist in our educational system 25 years following the end of white minority rule (Harris & Jones, 2020). South Africa has a lot of underperforming schools, especially public schools when compared to urban and former Model C schools (Hlalele, 2012; Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Dube, 2020). Both public and private schools have strong facilities and adequate funding, and both have students who come from more affluent socioeconomic situations. The confinement and closure of schools forced students to

adjust to a new normal of learning, but it also strengthened the two global school systems that already exist in South Africa (Spaull, 2013). Because most students lack computers or other portable electronic devices like smartphones and have limited or no access to the internet due to their geographic locations, digital learning further entrenches inequities (Ramrathan, 2021). Due to inadequate infrastructure, a lack of energy and technological devices, and a shortage of trained teachers, many students in the countryside were excluded since they did not have resources to access online platforms (McDonald, 2020). The transition to a new way of learning presented formerly underprivileged and marginalised rural learners with previously unheard-of difficulties (Dube, 2020).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The interpretative paradigm, which underlines how a person perceives and makes sense of social reality in accordance with the ideological viewpoints they hold, provided the context for this qualitative study (Kamal, 2019). The interpretivist research's goal is to provide a perspective on a situation and to examine how one group of people interprets its surroundings or the events it encounters. In order to comprehend how women leading schools dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, the researcher used a qualitative approach. The benefit of the qualitative method is that it tends to concentrate on the causes of a phenomenon and can produce detailed descriptions of the participants' cognitive processes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Furthermore, this study employed a phenomenological methodology. The lifeworld can be studied using a phenomenology research methodology instead of how we conceptualise, theorise, categorise, or reflect on it (Given, 2008). Long, in-depth interviews with respondents are typically required, and the resulting descriptions of the human experience are extremely rich and detailed (Wilson & Mclean, 2011).

In the Vhembe East district of Limpopo, six female principals were specifically chosen from rural public primary schools from grades R to 7. The leadership experience of the study's participants ranged from three to 21 years. The main technique for gathering data was semi-structured interviews. They were recorded, with the consent of the participants. The researcher preserved participants' privacy by practicing anonymity, confidentiality and suitable data preservation. To protect their identities, a code was given to each interviewee. Interviews were conducted for almost an hour, which was deemed to be the ideal length to collect the depth of data needed without making it unfriendly or taxing for the participants. The interviews took place beyond regular school hours. In this study, observational data augmented interview-based data. The DBE programme to contain COVID-19 in schools and school communities specifies the physical hygiene, physical separation, ventilation, use of personal safety equipment, availability of water, and any other activities that were to be observed. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data since it can draw attention to similarities and differences as well as produce unexpected impressions (Nowell, Norris, & White, 2017). Passwords were used to secure all the documents. The supervisor received the transcripts through password-protected email.

To uphold trustworthiness, the four criteria put forward by Lincoln and Guba (1985); credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were used. Approval of this study was sought from the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Johannesburg. Following that, approval was obtained from the provincial ethics and research committees of Limpopo Department of Education. After gaining permission from the respected authorities, the district was informed via the circuit leadership about the sampling of the six female school principals. The flexibility of the participants to withdraw at any time was emphasised by the researcher.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study was motivated by the research question: How are female school principals managing the COVID-19 crisis in rural schools? Data were obtained via in-depth interviews and observations. Themes that emerged throughout the thematic analysis are presented and analysed in the section below.

Difficulties faced by female school principals.

Disapproval by coworkers

The most significant finding was that all the six female participants concurred that they all experienced discrimination from both male and female coworkers when they were appointed to leadership positions. There is convincing evidence that every participant experienced rejection from their peers as they advanced to main positions. This feeling was supported by SP1, *"coming from another school and some of the teachers we expecting to get the post, they did not accept me as I am from another school"*. SP2 indicated, "c*oming to this school as a newly appointed principal, it was a big challenge, people became angry and negative and made my life very difficult"*. Participant SP5 explained that there were no problems when she was the department's head of department (HOD). Her colleagues unexpectedly shifted the goal posts after she was appointed to the position of principal. This is what she had to say: "*They did not accept me"*.

According to a study by Moyo (2020), many candidates for rural principal positions are at a recruiting disadvantage if they don't

have a long history with the organisation. In support of this, SP5

> *There were people who felt they were more qualified than me. They became angry, they were so negative and made my life exceedingly difficult. They were not cooperative at all. It was difficult to work with them in the beginning. Those were my colleagues, both females and males. Some even said that she came and found us here and we are not going to listen to that girl.*

When applying for leadership roles in school, certain females frequently encountered harassment, aggressiveness, and discrimination based on their gender (Lumby & Azaola, 2011). SP6 validated that by saying: *"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 take his position"*. Male educators presented female principals with quite distinct difficulties. The first time a female had led the school in its history, SP3 stated that she had been turned down. She claimed they treated her poorly and ran the school in a disorganised manner. *"It was not easy for all the people to accept that they will be led by a woman"*.

The participants' replies above demonstrated that when new female principals are hired, it immediately has a negative impact on long-time employees. The stereotypes regarding females as submissive leaders have persisted as stated by Mestry and Schmidt (2012), and it has harmed women's performance and potential. As a result, most of the participants who were questioned described tensions and a sense of displacement, as well as feelings of not belonging and ambiguity in their new roles and in their

interactions with both male and female coworkers. Female school principals confront ongoing struggles against institutionalised discrimination (Moyo, Perumal & Hallinger, 2020).

Resistance to change among teachers.

According to the results, six participants encountered some kind of coworker opposition. Male and female resistance varied in intensity, ranging from outright defiance to subdued non-compliance. The act of resisting or battling changes that upend the status quo is known as resistance to change (Heathfield, 2021). It is clear from the data that most educators who resisted change did so due to what Khumalo (2021) described as localised self-absorption, discomfort and bewilderment, limited tolerance for change, and varying appraisals of the situation.

Teachers are resistant because they dislike change and prefer the status quo. SP1 said the following about one of the participants: *"Educators did not want to change from the culture they used to like late coming, going to class late after breaks, they felt monitoring their work was a threat to them"*. In agreement, SP6 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"*. According to SP3, resistance occasionally results from self-interest, *"There are those that are known for gossiping, you will see groups organised to fight against me"*. Participant SP2 described how, because her coworkers were older and she was younger, when she suggested changes, she was told: *"We are not going to listen to that girl, she came and found us here"*.

The participant school principals' interviews made it very evident that their appointment to principalship, which was intended to be a pleasant and helpful event, was really crippling and traumatic. The scenario painted by SP3 is concerning;

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while she was a deputy principle, she and everyone else at the same school got along just fine, but as soon as she was elevated to principal, "they were reluctant to support me." She bemoaned further that: "*They were reluctant to change and wanted to stay there where they belong before trying to pull you down*". The data obtained from the female school principals made it clear that discrimination against women in leadership positions was still a problem, and that this discrimination was caused by the so-called "glass ceiling" for women in leadership positions in schools, where women could only be head of departments (HODs) or deputy principals. SP5 had the same thought and sounded despondent, grieving, "*I was an HOD in the school and when promoted, they started dragging everything so that I find it very much impossible for me to carry on with this job*".

This persistent stereotyping, dating back to the past, persists even though all the female school principals interviewed have a strong educational background and have diligently served their institutions as department heads or deputy principals. These positions are seen as a requirement or type of scaffolding for the position of principal, which, according to Mestry and Schmidt (2012), can be attributed to a lack of confidence in women's leadership stemming from a variety of issues. An example is given by Khumalo (2021), who asserts that communities are not ready to accept women to be appointed as school managers. This is supported by Moyo (2022), who notes that female principals had issues with sexism, discipline, and excessive teacher and student absenteeism.

Unwelcoming and oppressive circumstances

As a result of the large number of learners who attend under resourced schools with subpar facilities, unqualified teachers, low achievement levels, and high dropout rates, there is ongoing educational

inequity and a crisis in the system. All the participants indicated that many students in the rural areas attend under resourced schools with poor infrastructure, poor quality teachers, low achievement levels, and high dropout rates (Vally, 2019).

Participant SP4 noted:

As a female principal frankly speaking leading and managing a small school is incredibly challenging. As a small school we have a problem with the resources. 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 an exceptionally low enrolment.

Participant SP5 stated in her own words: "*we had a challenge with our ablution blocks, they are still using pit toilets*". Participant SP1 supported this, as stated: "*the school surrounding was dirty, lack infrastructure and not enough classroom*". 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 concurred that majority of learners come from underprivileged communities which participant SP2 stated: "*community parents are illiterate and unemployed*".

This finding was related to the findings by Du Plessis and Mestry (2019), who found that the problems faced by rural populations include poor physical infrastructure, poor school building conditions, inadequate lavatory facilities, and a lack of adequate transportation. The educational and economic situation of the rural populations in South Africa present a significant difficulty in the delivery of education. The region is far away and still largely undeveloped. Rural residents still

fall far behind in schooling and are particularly vulnerable to hunger and poverty (Hlalele, 2012). They also have diverse needs and resources than urban residents.

Navigating leadership in COVID-19 pandemic presents challenges.

According to Guihen (2019), there are obstacles and problems for women who are in leadership positions or who want to be in leadership positions. It was evident that all participants faced issues that bothered them while they carried out their responsibilities. While scuffling and nibbling with those boundaries, COVID-19 shut the door solidly on all aspects of daily life and disrupted education everywhere (Harris & Jones, 2020). The problems that previously existed in the schools were made worse by COVID-19. The female school principals who were contacted made it obvious that after classes resumed, several COVID-19-related difficulties surfaced when experimenting with leadership. The withdrawal of teaching assistants, lack of resources and rotational modelling are highlighted as major obstacles that made it difficult to navigate leadership in the pandemic.

COVID-19 accentuates equity and disparities.

The expansion of disparities and the rise in marginalisation have been cited as COVID-19's most significant effects on education (Dube, 2020; Omodan, 2020). The lack of educational supplies in rural South African schools and the heightened vulnerabilities that are present in rural places have also contributed to the discrepancy between rural and urban institutions (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020). The six female school principals brought attention to the disparities in the standard of living in the rural areas where their schools are located. Sanitation facilities and access to clean water are lacking in rural areas. When asked how she managed leadership

during COVID-19, participant SP1 expressed her regret that: "*we lack infrastructures like classroom, we do not have enough water*". SP5 concurred: "*We are still using pit toilets*". In agreement, SP6 stated: "*when it comes to the ablution block, we are using pit toilets and are at the back of the classrooms*". Regular hand washing would be impossible without a water supply.

When private schools and former model C schools were able to seamlessly transition to online learning, educational inequalities became clear. Learning never stopped and continued online. "When it comes to electronics, we are still very far," participant SP4 said. Participant SP2 had a similar opinion:

> *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.*

As Saavedra (2020) projected that this outbreak had the potential to exacerbate these outcomes; prior to the pandemic, the World Bank's learning indicator estimated that 53% of children in low- and middle-income countries were unable to read for understanding by the age of 10. The participant SP3's fuller response made this clear:

> *The damage cannot be remedied in only 1 year. It will take some time. We are only praying that please let COVID-19 ended so that learners can come back to normal, and we teach them*

normally and they can pick up.

During the pandemic, parental engagement can have a substantial impact on how much the kids learn. More educated parents and guardians may be more effective at helping their kids with their schooling. According to participant SP4:

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

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed South Africa's glary social and economic divides characterised by wealth and poverty, racial inequality between whites and blacks, and distinctions between rural and urban schools, 29 years into democracy, according to all the participants who were interviewed (Harris & Jones, 2020). Less likely to have access to important learning digital tools like computers and internet connections are students from poor backgrounds. Although switching to remote learning has become the new norm for many students, all the principals who were contacted said that neither students nor parents use any sort of technology and this lack of devices has caused disadvantaged, marginalized learners from those rural, poor, lost access to all learning (Dube, 2020; Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Hlalele, 2012). and vulnerable background. Both public and private schools have strong facilities and adequate funding, and both have students who come from more affluent socioeconomic situations. Ramrathan (2021) claims that parental support for teaching and learning as well as digital

learning tools like Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams, and Zoom have an extra advantage. While learners are adapting to new routine of schooling during the lockdown and closure of schools, the condition reinforces the two school systems (Spaull, 2013) that exists within the South African context.

Because most students lack computers or other portable electronic devices like smartphones and have limited or no access to the internet due to their locations, digital learning further entrenches inequities (Ramrathan, 2021). Due to poor infrastructure, a lack of energy and technological devices, and a shortage of competent teachers, many students in rural areas are currently excluded and unable to access online learning platforms (McDonald, 2020). The transition to a new way of living and learning has proven to be particularly difficult for rural learners, who were formerly underprivileged and marginalised (Dube, 2020).

Rotational modelling

Following the reopening of schools, the DBE advised changing the school schedule to make up for the missed teaching and assessment time and give students the chance to finish the grade they are in. The techniques used created a friendly, courteous, inclusive, and encouraging environment for everyone while halting the development of COVID-19. The rotational approach has been implemented at the schools of all six of the female school principals who were interviewed. Having classes or lessons on different days of the week for distinct groups of students or grades is implied by the term alternating days per week. The model was preferred because it was believed that COVID-19 protocols, such as physical distance, could be followed. Ironically, because of the paradigm, all participants gave their students a blank future. Instead of guiding these schools

towards the radical new, the system merely works to exacerbate their issues.

Participant SP6 says as follows:

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

Participant SP5 highlights this idea: "*we had no classes and no extra teachers*". Continuity and momentum among learners are lost on days when they are absent from school. SP1 remarked: "*this results in ineffective learning and teaching. Learners forget what they were taught, and absenteeism becomes worse*". The rotational model compromises curriculum coverage. This is what participant SP3 had to say about the delivery of the curriculum during COVID-19: "*it resulted in a content that we could not be finish. Learners were made to pass the grades to other grades but with nothing. They were not ready for the next classes*". This opinion is substantiated by SP2: "*it was difficult to cover or finish the syllabus. Time is too limited and can focus on slow learners who need more time for individual teaching*".

Even though the curriculum was condensed, teachers were unable to finish it, leaving gaps in the instruction of the students. Poor students did not have a satisfying meal on days when they were not in school because of the alternating schooling system. Quantified by participant SP3, "few are coming to receive food and leave." SP2 participant affirmed that this was true: "*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*". Rotational models weighed down the illiterate parents who were unable to help their children with their homework. 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". Participant SP5 reaffirmed these thoughts:

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 are also not with us.

The outcome of breaking up the class into smaller groups was teacher overload, a reduction in contact time for all grades, and a lack of classroom space. Participant SP2 explains:

There are many more classes now than before since each class can accommodate 20–23 learners only. Previously a teacher would teach 78 learners in two classes. Now because of COVID-19, learners should occupy 3 classrooms. That means extra classes for teachers.

The pandemic has seriously interfered with long-term plans that are often made in schools. The adverse consequences of this pandemic must be addressed by school leaders (Zhao, 2020). COVID-19 was a serious threat to children's futures and well-being. She also cautioned us that because the epidemic is so devastating, it could take ten years for us to recover. Many people have advocated for a 13-year basic education for the nation. Instead, if nothing changes, this generation will receive a basic education that is even

less than the anticipated 12 years. When you think about it, she remarked, this is an extremely challenging, demanding, and terrible position.

Removal of teaching assistants

The disappearance of teacher assistants, according to all female school principals who were interviewed, was the worst setback to their leadership and negotiating skills amid the ambiguous and unprecedented times of the COVID-19 pandemic. Considering the epidemic, the goal for the teaching assistants was to lessen job losses. In the lives of students, teachers, and parents alike, an education assistant was crucial. This included, among other crucial duties, assembling instructional materials for students, overseeing in-class activities, and helping students with their homework. In her own words, participant SP2 emphasised the following points:

The department tried to assist the school by providing us with eight educator assistances and six general assistants in December 2020 to April 2021. During that period, there were enough resources. I mean, they provided 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 expired in April, participant SP1 had this to say:

I wish they would appoint them on a full-time basis, they were helpful in controlling learners, sometimes even teaching, marking books, and so

because some are unemployed qualified teachers.

Participant SP6 affirmed this opinion: "*we thank the department that they provide us with the assistants. They came here and they helped us, they were able to teach*". This was mentioned by SP4: "*even the bringing of the assistants at least when we come to the whole school development all areas, we tried to deal with them*". When questioned about potential resources to address the issues, one member SP1 mentioned: "*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.*" Participant SP1 summoned: "*I think the department made mistakes by terminating them while we are facing the third waves*".

The participants noted that having aides in the classroom reduced stress, workload, and distraction. Isingoma (2014) claims that South African educators have challenges due to their need to maintain challenging environments, put up with disobedient students who disrupt class, and handle difficult environments. When students feel unqualified and unable to modify their learning strategies, several issues occur. The time it takes to maintain classroom order overwhelms teachers and leaves them with inadequate time to deliver courses efficiently and effectively (Isingoma, 2014).

According to Isingoma (2014), educators not only need to manage a range of both high performing and weaker learners and be able to provide individual attention to those who need it, but they also need to take care of additional administrative tasks like maintaining attendance registers, copying, and printing worksheets.

Teachers are battling to maintain a feeling of normalcy for both them and the

learners during the COVID-19 pandemic. The difficulties in managing the classroom have greatly increased and learning and teaching have gotten worse. Discussions in class or group projects cannot be facilitated by student involvement, and there is no longer any in contact intervention. The DBE significantly replaces instructors with comorbidities by appointing educators and general assistants. Withdrawing their support at a time when it is most needed in rural schools, where private and independent schools are well-equipped with resources to hire more staff, the equaliser of disparity in our educational systems, seems to be nothing more than political rhetoric from decision-makers and politicians.

The pandemic has seriously interfered with long-term plans that are often made in schools. The adverse consequences of this pandemic must be addressed by school leaders (Zhao, 2020). They are also anticipated to play a motivating and constructive role in calming concerns about the social and economic effects of this epidemic, such as the closure of schools and the difficulties associated with their reopening.

CONCLUSION

The data collected from the six female principals of the chosen schools that functioned as research sites was given in full in the research findings throughout this section. The first theme - obstacles faced by female school principals uncovered that they continue to experience unwelcome and unsettling resistance from male and female coworkers in the form of disobedience and sabotage, which is typically motivated by stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination. They are also confronted with oppressive and unfavourable environments when assuming leadership roles. The COVID-19 pandemic problem hit the world as those female school principals were addressing these pervasive inequities, which were accompanied by conventional myths and biased assumptions regarding female competency as school leaders. For schools all throughout the world, the COVID-19 pandemic created a unique crisis. The epidemic has had a devastating effect on South Africa's already deteriorating educational system, once again placing the burden of past inequality and ongoing exclusion on the poorest of the poor. Our unfair and unjustified societal institutions have been accurately depicted and exposed by the pandemic's imbalances and inequities. The talks revealed numerous COVID-19-related concerns that demand educators, students, and parents to adapt. These included adjusting to remote learning as well as studying through radio and television programming. They also covered maintaining home-based education. These include adjusting to new prices of learning as well as to online learning and studying through radio and television broadcasts. They also involve continuation of education from home and guided community-based learning. Government assistance is essential for female school principals to fulfil their responsibilities as leaders amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

In order to generate effective solutions, there needs to be a greater representation of women in leadership roles in schools. These women contribute a variety of talents, viewpoints, and structural and cultural distinctions. Women must be placed at the forefront of the post COVID-19 rehabilitation by the Department of Basic Education because the pandemic gave us the chance to rebuild in a considerate, humane, and long-lasting way. The government of South Africa must consider a variety of factors, such as ensuring that technology is available to all learners and must implement a rigorous national programme to guarantee that all teachers are proficient in online learning and that data is heavily subsidised. The discrepancies and injustices of our unbalanced and unsustainable socioeconomic institutions were amplified

and exposed by the COVID-19 epidemic. The pandemic has had a devastating effect on South Africa's already deteriorating educational system, once again placing the burden of past inequality and ongoing exclusion on the poorest of the poor. It was crucial to learn how female school leaders handled their leadership responsibilities throughout the pandemic. For schools all throughout the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has initiated a record crisis. To ascertain whether there are distinctions in female leadership issues related to rural-oriented and urban-oriented situations, further research on female challenges in

other regions with more urban-oriented schools is recommended. Lastly, it is recommended that further research should be conducted on men leading schools and the challenges they experience in compared to female school principals; it is advised.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

There are no competing interests to declare, according to the authors.

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