



**COMPLEXITIES OF LEADING THE SCHOOLS IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19  
BREAKOUT: PERSPECTIVES FROM SCHOOL MANAGEMENT TEAM  
MEMBERS IN EAST GRIQUALAND CIRCUIT**

**By**

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**A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Master of  
Education Degree in the  
Discipline of Educational Leadership, Management and Policy, School of Education,  
College of Humanities**

**UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL**

**June 2023**

**Supervised by:**

**PROFESSOR T.T. BHENGU**

## DECLARATION

I, Queerida Sindiswa Nenga solemnly declare that:

- i. This thesis entitled “**Complexities of leading the schools in the context of COVID-19 breakout: Perspectives from School Management Team members in East Griqualand Circuit**” is my original work.
- ii. This dissertation has not been submitted to any other institution of higher learning for the award of any degree or qualification.
- iii. I am fully aware of the University of KwaZulu-Natal’s (UKZN) policy on plagiarism and I have taken every precaution to comply with these regulations.
- iv. This dissertation does not contain other persons’ data, pictures, graphs, or other information, unless specifically acknowledged as being sourced from other persons.
- v. This dissertation does not contain other persons’ writing, unless specifically acknowledged. Where other written sources have been quoted, then:
  - (a) Their words have been re-written, and information attributed to them has been referenced accordingly,
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- vii. I am fully aware of the University of KwaZulu-Natal’s (UKZN) policy on research ethics and I have obtained an ethical clearance certificate from the University of KwaZulu-Natal’s Humanities and Social Science Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and my reference number is: **HSSREC/00004370/2022**.

Signature

Queerida Sindiswa Nenga (student)

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Date: 30 June 2023

## STATEMENT BY SUPERVISOR

This dissertation is submitted with ~~/without~~ my approval.



Signed: .....

Date: 30 June 2023

24 June 2022

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School Of Education  
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Dear QS Nenga,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00004370/2022

Project title: Complexities of leading the schools in the context coronavirus disease breakout: Perspectives from school management team members in East Griqualand Circuit

Degree: Masters

### Approval Notification – Expedited Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application received on 21 June 2022 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number. **PLEASE NOTE:** Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

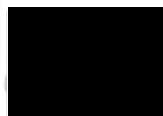
This approval is valid until 24 June 2023.

To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

**All research conducted during the COVID-19 period must adhere to the national and UKZN guidelines.**

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours sincerely,



Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)

/dd

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#### Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

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**INSPIRING GREATNESS**

## **DEDICATION**

Firstly, I gratefully thank Almighty God for granting me the special blessing to pursue my education up to this level. Father God, I praise and adore your holy name for the health, strength and wisdom you provided me throughout my studies. I dedicate this work to my family. First and foremost, this dedication goes to my children, Yamkela, Tito and Mbasa who have shown their support and patience in my career and education. I vow I will do anything in my power for you. This thesis is for you. For it represents the possibility to make dreams come true.

This dissertation is also dedicated to my late step son Inga Zituta who passed away on the day I was writing this dedication. Thinking about you son creates rivers in my eyes. Thank you for always being there for me during hard times in my life and for being the pillar of my strength. May you rest easy in grace and love. Secondly, to one of the most important and unrecognised people in our households, my housekeeper (helper) Nondzaliseko “Mandzalen” Yalezo for her love and support as well as understanding and patience throughout this long and winding process. Last but not least; I would like to dedicate this endeavour to my mother Laura Mandisa Nenga, my mother in-law Nobethu Pearl Mosana and also to my aunt Nobanzi Mcinga for their unconditional support, guidance and encouragement to pursue my dreams. And most importantly for their prayers.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I sincerely thank and appreciate my supervisor, **Professor TT Bhengu** for his dedication, scholarly comments and suggestions that formed an invaluable part of this study. Thank you for your unwavering support from the beginning of this thesis to the very end. You have challenged me beyond what I knew I was capable of. Without your professional guidance and support, it would have been impossible to go through this study, and I will be eternally grateful. I pray that God Almighty bless you abundantly as you continue to inspire the lives of countless people.

I am indebted to my friend and colleague Dr T. Rubela for not doubting my capability and for encouraging me to take up this gigantic task and for his continued support and mentoring efforts. My gratitude is also extended to my mentor Mr Zuko Moniwa for his professional and tireless guidance accompanied by words of wisdom, hope, patience, perseverance, understanding and tolerance which brought me to this achievement. I am also incredibly thankful to my critical friend, Nondumiso Precious Mlondo, who was always pushing me to engage in intellectually stimulating conversations. You assured me that this is possible and that I can make it. Thank you for your immense support and encouragement. Not forgetting to thank my other critical friend the late Xolo Nkadi who encouraged and supported me immensely during our academic journey. May his soul rest in peace.

To my family, no words of appreciation can ever suffice. Your emotional support throughout my studies is incomparable. My beautiful kids Yamkela, Tito and Mbasu you were there for me and you are the ones who evidenced the tough road I have travelled. Your invaluable support sustained me.

To the SMT members who participated in this study, thank you for taking the time to share with me your narratives, sometimes during lunch breaks or over the wee late afternoon when the sun was set to kiss the horizon because we could not sacrifice our teaching and learning time. Without those interviews and discussions with you, this thesis would be non-existent. You are such an inspiration.

## **ABSTRACT**

The education environment in South Africa is fraught with diverse layers of complexity. The aim of this study was to investigate the complexities that School Management Team members in three primary schools in East Griqualand Circuit in the Harry Gwala District dealt with as they led schools in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak, and also to understand how they lead during times of crisis. Given the close interaction of huge numbers of people, schools were declared as high-risk places in terms of transmission. To stop the virus from spreading, the Department of Basic Education instituted severe measures. These measures were presented in the form of new policies and regulations. So, the Department of Basic Education gave some of the responsibilities of enforcing these policies and regulations to the School Management Team members. Enforcing government mandated COVID-19 regulations presented the SMT members with new challenges and complexities, over and above their regular duties. Many insurmountable problems and challenges were encountered in terms of actual situations in schools. This study was located within a qualitative research design and used semi-structured interviews in the production of data. Interviews conducted lasted between 30-60 minutes each and included probing questions which assisted to elicit further information. I conducted interviews with nine SMT members, comprising of principals, deputy principals and departmental heads.

Prior to analysis, interviews were recorded and transcribed. Themes were created when data from transcriptions was coded, analysed, and categorised. The replies to the open-ended interview questions were analysed using categorisation and inductive coding to establish themes. The study's conclusions showed that it was difficult for SMT members to enforce some of the gazetted safety regulations, due to a series of factors their schools were faced with. There was also a lack of support from stakeholders like the Department of Basic Education and parents. And one of the lessons learnt is the importance of sharing and co-construction of solutions to problems.

## ABBREVIATIONS

SMT	School Management Team
SGB	School Governing Body
SP	School Principal
DH	Departmental Head
DP	Deputy Principal
DoE	Department of Education
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DPSA	Department of Public Service and Administration
REQV	Relative Education Qualification Value
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease of 2019
PPE	Personal protective equipment
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure
SASA	South African School Act
KZN	KwaZulu-Natal
UKZN	University of KwaZulu-Natal



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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **OVERVIEW AND THE ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY**

#### **1.1 Introduction**

Coronavirus disease of 2019, also known as (COVID-19) is a novel disease variant that causes sickness in humans (africacdc.org, 2021; Republic of South Africa, 2022a). It spreads among people through contaminated air droplets and when individuals come into contact with surfaces or hands that are contaminated with the virus then touch their eyes, nose, or mouth (africacdc.org, 2021; Republic of South Africa, 2022a). It has been acknowledged by many scholars that nothing like COVID-19 has ever been seen in history. Pandemics have occurred before, such as the devastating Spanish Flu of 1918, which killed almost 50 million people (Agrawal et al., 2021). The world, however, has never before had to adapt to conditions of hyper connectedness (Agrawal et al., 2021). The world went from reports of clusters of illnesses and deaths to global infections in just a few weeks in December 2019 (UNESCO, 2020). Given the close interaction of huge numbers of people, schools were designated as perilous places in terms of transmission ease (Republic of South Africa, 2022a). To stop the virus from spreading, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) took severe restrictions (Harris & Jones, 2020). In order to stop the proliferation of COVID-19 in schools, new policies and regulations were proposed as part of these initiatives. For instance, the wearing of personal protective equipment (PPE) at all times, cleaning and sanitising the surroundings, avoiding contact with others, maintaining proper hand sanitisation, and frequently applying alcohol-based hand disinfectant (Republic of South Africa, 2022a) were some of the measures that were put in place. The Department of Basic Education gave some of the responsibilities of enforcing the COVID-19 regulations to the School Management Team (SMT) members (Republic of South Africa, 2022a). Enforcing the government mandated COVID-19 regulations presented the SMT members with new challenges and complexities over and above their regular duties.

This study sought to investigate the complexities of leading schools in the context of the COVID-19 breakout and how School Management Team members coped during the times of crisis. This introductory chapter highlights the background to the study. It further specifies the research problem and formally declares the statement of the problem. The rationale for the study follows after the statement of the problem. The chapter also highlights the significance

of the study as well as the research questions. It further outlines the demarcation of the study. It concludes with the outline of the study and a chapter summary. There are other technical aspects that I must clarify on the outset. These include the fact that line spacing is 1.5 and all paragraphs are 'justified'. The spelling system adopted is that of the United Kingdom and citation and referencing style is APA 7<sup>th</sup> which does not require that in cases where the publication is written by more than three authors, surnames of all the authors must be written.

## **1.2 Background to the study**

COVID-19 was first reported in China and it spread throughout the world (Kumar et al., 2021). After the first incidence of COVID-19 in South Africa that was reported by the then Minister of Health, Dr Zweli Mkhize, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of March 2020, President Matamela Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa announced a national state of disaster on the 15<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 (Republic of South Africa, 2020). In response, to stop the disease's spreading, the Department of Basic Education introduced severe restrictions. Restrictions that were introduced included the sudden shutdown of schools beginning on the 18<sup>th</sup> of March 2020, this prevented nearly 17 million learners from preschool to secondary school from continuing their education (Republic of South Africa, 2020). New educational regulations, which were created specifically for the education sector, addressed the academic timetable modification, new instructional plans, systems of delivery, syllabus catch-up, health and safety provisions, and more (Mukute et al., 2020). The education sector approved and promoted the national actions to stop the transmission of COVID-19; hence, it demonstrated support and adherence to all the national protocols imposed (Maree, 2022).

While special care was taken to implement the COVID-19 policies and procedures in schools, most schools were doing their part and made sure that procedures intended to stop the virus from spreading were instituted properly. Many insurmountable problems and challenges were experienced when it came to the actual situations in schools (Maree, 2022). Most of the challenges that the learners experienced became worse as a result of the COVID-19 epidemic and its debilitating and upsetting impact on the people's bodily and mental health in general and in young kids, in particular (Kanyane, 2020). In education, COVID-19 was a key hazard to the welfare of young people and their future (van der Walt & Oosthuizen, 2021). According to the PAM document, Republic of South Africa (1996) safety measures in schools required that School Management Team (SMT) members managed the safety implementation process

(Bipath, 2017). School Management Team members needed to create proper plans and set goals for a safe learning environment. SMT members were necessary in guaranteeing that educators effectively enforced safety protocols and policies (Bipath, 2017).

Enforcing the government mandated COVID-19 safety protocols and regulations presented the SMT members with new challenges and complexities over and above their regular duties. Some of the issues identified that constituted complexities in this regard were the scarcity and lack of water which was important since sanitation played a key part in inhibiting and reducing the transmission of COVID-19. Moreover, broken and unhygienic lavatories and complications in accommodating social distancing in classrooms because of large enrolments led to shortages of space and furniture (Mchunu et al., 2021). Difficulties concerning physical assets persisted and challenged schools' exertions to react to the COVID-19 epidemic, particularly in the previously disadvantaged schools (Bhengu, 2021). It was difficult or impossible to imagine that no-fee schools (quintiles 1-3) could adequately handle COVID-19 associated problems due to their financial unsustainability (Bhengu, 2021). In order to accommodate large number of learners, schools had to adopt one of four models of attendance which were bi-weekly, alternate-day, a platoon model or maintenance of the status quo. This had adverse impacts on changes to the timetables (Mchunu et al., 2021). Anecdotal evidence also suggested that this also bore a negative effect on teaching as teachers had to teach one and the same thing repeatedly.

Other complexities faced were the consequences of closure of schools due to the pandemic which comprised bodily, emotional and educational harm to the school process (Kanyane, 2020; Sintema, 2020). As of 06 February 2022, attendance of learners in schools was again changed. The Government Gazette 45877 of 06 February 2022 stipulated that from the 07<sup>th</sup> of February 2022, all learners must return to daily attendance and traditional timetables with no social distancing being considered. Thus, the focus of this study is on understanding the complexities of leading the schools in the context of the COVID-19 breakout, focusing on the perspective of School Management Team (SMT) members in three selected primary schools in East Griqualand Circuit, in Harry Gwala District, KwaZulu-Natal province. I interviewed these participants to elicit their perspectives on what constituted complexities in leading their schools in the context of the COVID-19 breakout, the barriers that hindered them in handling COVID-19 safety procedures and regulations, and to also investigate how they managed to successfully lead during times of crisis.



### **1.3 Statement of the problem**

Although the COVID-19 epidemic affected both how we lived and how we studied, education was still seen as a fundamental human right (Department of Statistics South Africa, 2020). Globally, education was negatively affected (Harris & Jones, 2020). COVID-19 erupted and produced confusion in a brief period of time (Azorín, 2020). Unquestionably chaotic, COVID-19 upended the foundations of schooling. Much of the organisation of the classroom had to change (Harris & Jones, 2020). First-time learners were destined to have a completely different schooling experience than their forebears (Department of Statistics South Africa, 2020)

Due to the close contact of many people, schools were classified as high-risk places for COVID-19 transmission (Republic of South Africa, 2020). As mentioned elsewhere in this study, to curb the virus's transmission in schools, the Department of Basic Education instituted severe measures. Beyond my personal experiences but resonating with my professional experience, the ideal situation as stipulated by the government would be where there was wearing of face masks/shields, there was no sharing, people sanitised or washed hands with soap and water, classrooms were well ventilated, there was daily cleaning and disinfecting of buildings and high touch surfaces, and appropriate COVID-19 signage and posters were displayed throughout the school premises (Republic of South Africa, 2020). It was further stipulated that everyone should keep social distancing at all times and avoid direct contact with others such as handshakes or hugging (Republic of South Africa, 2020).

The reality of findings from literature revealed that unfortunately a number of barriers existed that prevented plans from being adopted effectively (Mchunu et al., 2021). Research has also shown that schools in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) were affected by an increase in the spread of COVID-19. Chisadza et al. (2021) also expressed concern by the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education in the rising frequency of COVID-19 infections in schools. The KZN Circular No. 74 of 2021 dated 18 August 2021, stated that there was an upsurge in the numbers of COVID-19 infections in schools in KwaZulu-Natal, and as a result, some of the learners, teachers and non-teaching personnel tested positive. An unparalleled crisis in every aspect of life, including education, had been brought on by the COVID-19 epidemic (UNESCO, 2020). As a result, COVID-19 had a terrible effect in schools across the globe, resulting in everything from school closures to challenges with adjusting to learn during a pandemic (UNESCO, 2020).

The problem explored in this study was that School Management Team members were tasked with the responsibility of implementing COVID-19 safety regulations in schools and anecdotal evidence suggested that some schools did not observe these regulations. Bayeni and Bhengu (2018) postulate that the part played by school administrators put them in a tough spot, where they had various responsibilities. They further postulate that their part in policy execution was fraught with complications, contradictions and complexities which confused both policy formulators and implementers in their respective spheres (Bayeni & Bhengu, 2018).

#### **1.4 Rationale for the study**

The rationale for conducting this study comes from my day-to-day observation as an educator at a school and one who was also personally affected by the complexities of the COVID-19 breakout. Secondly, undertaking this study was underpinned by my observation in neighbouring schools that despite drastic measures, guidelines and protocols issued by the government and the Department of Basic Education (DBE) to control the transmission of corona virus, teachers were not adhering to these stipulations. Although there were drastic measures, guidelines and protocols introduced by the government to inhibit and control the transmission of COVID-19; there were still a number of reported cases of infections in schools in the East Griqualand Circuit. What I had seen was that the COVID-19 policy was there but there was no proper, effective and efficient implementation, and there was also no monitoring of implementation of safety procedures. My personal experience indicates that teachers were doing the opposite and as such learners also broke COVID-19 safety protocols and regulations. Thus, schools in East Griqualand Circuit were always reported having cases of COVID-19.

As observed and noticed over time in the institution where I work and in some neighbouring schools, COVID-19 safety protocols like practising health and hand hygiene, cleaning and disinfecting, avoiding direct contact with others like hugging, hand shaking and touching each other, wearing of face masks were all violated by both the teachers and the learners. The challenge in our school started with the teachers. I noticed that most teachers did not always put on their masks or face-shields; they walked around the classrooms and offices normally, without proper personal protective equipment (PPEs).

Others wore their masks incorrectly. For instance, you would find that only the mouth was covered and the nose was not. In some cases, masks were worn but they sat below the chin. Teachers also stood or sat close to each other more, especially when they were having conversations and during lunch time. They seemed to like physical contact, such as patting each other, hugging each other when greeting and they also shook hands. They liked sharing; they borrowed each other's stationery such as pens, more especially when signing the attendance registers in the morning and in the afternoon during knock-off time, and this was where you would hardly find social distancing. They also borrowed each other's red pens for marking. Some even borrowed each other's cups for drinking coffee. They even shared food during lunch break in one lunch box. They also shared equipment like computers, staplers, dusters and so forth, without sanitising them. Kokstad is a very cold place; so, most often, you would find windows and doors in the classrooms closed for the whole day with no ventilation, yet, one of the rules for curbing the spread of COVID-19 was that fresh air has to be brought in by opening windows and doors (Republic of South Africa, 2020). Republic of South Africa (2020) further stated that you had to wash or sanitise your hands after handling your mask, after blowing your nose and even before touching your face.

The Republic of South Africa (2020) states that there should be daily cleaning and disinfecting of high touched surfaces like doorknobs, tables, countertops, handles, desks, toilets and sinks. From my personal observation in some of the schools in my circuit this did not happen as stipulated. Harris and Jones (2020) postulate that for school managers operating in these challenging and hectic situations the burden was constant and the alternatives were inadequate. Consequently, I observed that the implications that COVID-19 had in schools in East Griqualand Circuit had been enormous. This led to the closure of schools, time and again for deep cleaning. Educators in this circuit maintained that this resulted in a loss of teaching and learning time and resulted in low learner achievement. It is against this backdrop that this study was worth doing, to determine how leaders lead during times of crisis.

### **1.5 Significance of the study**

I believed that it was necessary to conduct this empirical research, as it would give information and insight about the intricacies of leading the schools in an environment fraught with crisis like the COVID-19 breakout. It would also contribute to an increased awareness of how leaders lead during times of crises or emergencies. This study would also be valuable to the Department

of Basic Education (DBE) in terms of understanding how teachers and SMT members managed the strict safety measures that were enforced in schools to ensure that the conduct and adherence of teachers and learners to the stipulated regulations and protocols was strictly monitored in schools. Having been exposed to the experience of how leaders lead during times of crisis, I found myself reflecting on these experiences and theoretical perspectives. Knowledge gained from this study has also assisted me to contemplate my way of handling crisis situations socially, as an active member of society or in my community, hence I participate in various structures and committees, over and above those in my work context as a member of a school community.

## **1.6 Research Questions**

A research without questions has no focus, drive or purpose (Collins, 2018). These questions assist, guide and help to generate data on complexities of leading the schools in the context of COVID-19 breakout.

### Main question

- What are the complexities that School Management Team members dealt with as they led schools in the context of the COVID-19 breakout in the East Griqualand Circuit?

### Sub-research questions

- What are the barriers that hinder School Management Team members in handling COVID-19 safety procedures and regulations in schools?
- How do SMT members lead during the COVID-19 outbreak?
- How do School Management Team members lead during the times of crisis?
- What are the lessons that School Management Team members learnt from their leadership practices during the COVID-19 breakout?

## **1.7 Demarcation of the study**

In this research, the population was purposely selected so as to focus on identified categories such as School Management Team members (SMTs) as they were mandated by the Department

of Basic Education (DBE) with the responsibility of enforcing COVID-19 safety regulations in schools. This study involved SMT members from three primary schools in the East Griqualand Circuit, Greater Kokstad Ward in the Harry Gwala. School principals were involved as they run the schools and are responsible for all matters pertaining to the daily administration of the schools; they are in charge of all the issues involving daily management of the school, educators, and learners. Deputy Principals were also included because they are second in command in schools and work in close collaboration with the principals in managing the schools. Departmental Heads were involved because they are managing the departments that they oversee.

## **1.8 Outline of the study**

The dissertation consists of five chapters. This part provides the overview of the entire dissertation, in which each chapter deals with a specific component of the study as indicated below.

### **1.8.1 Chapter One**

This chapter depicts the orientation and the general overview of the investigation. It comprises the introduction, the background to the problem, the statement of the problem, the rationale for the study, the significance of the study, the statement of the research questions, demarcation of the study, and concludes with the outline of the study and the chapter summary.

### **1.8.2 Chapter Two**

This chapter presents a literature review and an in-depth description of adaptive leadership and transformational leadership as the theoretical framework supporting this research. The literature reviewed in this study provides a window to examine the existing information and debates that were constructed with regards to complexities of leading schools in the context of the COVID-19 breakout.

### **1.8.3 Chapter Three**

This chapter focuses on the research design and methodology that was followed in conducting the study. In this regard, it details the qualitative approach that was adopted for the study. The research paradigm that was adopted, sampling technique used, data generation and data analysis methods used in the study are also discussed in this chapter. It further discusses the measures used to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the ethical considerations and the limitations of the study.

### **1.8.4 Chapter Four**

This chapter provides a detailed discussion of the data presentation and analysis, by using themes that were developed during the analysis process.

### **1.8.5 Chapter Five**

Chapter Five concludes the dissertation by presenting the conclusions reached after the presentation and discussion of findings. The chapter begins with the summary of the dissertation, and concludes with the discussion of the implications of the entire study.

## **1.9 Chapter summary**

This chapter has given an overview of the study. It has provided a background to the problem and examined the issues that motivated me to undertake the study. All other constituents of the first chapter of a dissertation have been explained. These include the rationale, the significance of the study, the research questions, as well as the significance and delimitations of the study. The next chapter will present a review of literature conducted for this study and theories that underpin the study.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

The previous chapter detailed the introduction and background to the study. In this chapter, international and local literature that foregrounds and exposes readers to the existing debates and knowledge about the topic are explored. Two main groupings of literature were considered pertinent to this study. First is the literature that is associated with the research topic and second, is the discussion of the theoretical framework and associated literature. The first focuses on the prevailing research and policy literature related to the complexities of leading the schools in the context of the COVID-19 breakout. The second focuses on a detailed discussion of the theory that constitutes the theoretical framework that underpins the study. The presentation of these two types of literature follows that same format, where debates are presented first, followed by the discussion of the theory.

Academics and scholars have many definitions of what constitutes a literature review. According to Van Wyk (2018), a literature review is an assortment of pre-existing materials (both published and unpublished) on a subject that include knowledge, ideas, data and evidence transcribed from a specific perspective. It is done in order to realise specific aims regarding the subject's nature, how it will be examined, and the efficient assessment of these documents in light of the proposed inquiry. Arguing along similar lines, Mudavanhu (2017) states that a literature review is a narrative of what has been written by others and is presented as a summary or summaries. Mudavanhu (2017) continues by explaining that this is done to review the literature that has already been published (clarify arguments and summarise pertinent theories and studies). Additionally, it is done to analyse the literature (pinpoint arguments for and against theories, determine the worth of research claims, and identify limitations in previous research), to recognise knowledge gaps in the literature (to pinpoint areas that have only partially been researched). Moreover, it is done to inform the proposed research, to provide justification, to contextualise the proposed research, and direct the choice for a suitable framework and methodology (Mudavanhu, 2017). According to Lopes and Oliveira (2017), a literature review locates, reads, and evaluates research documents, reports, theses, and other sources of academic materials on a specific research topic under consideration. It also reveals

techniques and statistical procedures that have not yet been tried by others. According to Morgan (2013), the purpose of a literature review is to emphasise prior work in the topic of interest and how new findings relate to earlier studies.

This notion serves as the foundation for the review, which attempts to show how the study can or will enhance an understanding of the challenges of leading schools in the context of the COVID-19 breakout and how school leaders (SMT members) manage under pressure. This review is based on reports, books, websites, and other published research papers and policy documents. This context serves as the backdrop for the review's discussion of the literature on the challenges of leading schools in the context of COVID-19 breakout, the problems that are faced by School Management Team members in handling COVID-19 safety procedures and regulations in schools, and the lessons that can be learned from how School Management Team members approach these challenges.

The Omicron variant wave and the coronavirus (COVID-19) epidemic had a profound effect on humanity at all stages and across all fields (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 2022). In an attempt to keep schools opened while simultaneously preventing the transmission of COVID-19 among the learners, teachers, and other non-teaching staff, nations around the globe had to establish health and safety protocols following the nearly global school closings in March 2020 that affected 1.6 billion students and learners, and also more than 100 million educators globally (UNESCO, 2022). These measures, however, were interrupted and re-evaluated as schools worked to handle new sets of issues highlighted by risks to school safety following the Omicron variant's debut in December 2021 (UNESCO, 2022).

## **2.2 Complexities of leading the schools in the context of COVID-19 breakout**

COVID-19 presented various challenges for schools, educators, learners and parents who had to adjust to the new teaching and learning conditions. The possibility of many learners falling behind was growing under the new conditions, and both the quality and accessibility of education were at risk (UNICEF, 2020). From the standpoint of the Department of Basic Education, School Management Team members were expected to implement COVID-19 safety requirements (Harris & Jones, 2020; Republic of South Africa, 2020). These safety regulations specified that all learners, teachers, support personnel and officials should practise social



distancing, mask wearing, and avoid direct contact with others such as handshakes or hugging. Everybody was instructed to hand wash regularly with water and soap or utilise a 60% concentration alcohol disinfectant sanitiser. Everyone was encouraged to avoid touching any part of their faces with unwashed hands. Cleaning and disinfecting frequently touched surfaces like door knobs and rails was recommended (Republic of South Africa, 2020). Additionally, everyone was expected to exercise coughing protocols where they coughed into their elbows, or a tissue paper and to throw it away in a properly maintained rubbish bin, and to conduct lessons outside or in a generously ventilate classrooms as far as possible. It was further stipulated that there should be COVID-19 posters displayed around the school and in classrooms. Floor markings, tape and other ways to maintain social distancing in queues at entrances should be installed and there should be no sharing (Republic of South Africa, 2020; van der Walt & Oosthuizen, 2021). Both teachers and learners were required to put on their face masks when in school (Luchembe, 2021).

Research by Soudien et al. (2021); Hanushek and Woessmann (2020); UNICEF (2020) suggest that the COVID-19 epidemic had serious educational effects in South Africa and throughout the globe. Learning gains made over time was lost due to schools closing and educational disparities that already existed were exacerbated. Sintema (2020) and Kanyane (2020) postulate that the consequences which the closure of schools had on the learners, as highlighted elsewhere in this dissertation, included physical, psychological and educational harm. Other scholars such as Mchunu et al. (2021) also illustrate numerous unintended costs of closing schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These consequences included among other things, unfinished syllabus, stoppage of school programmes, incomplete projects, cancellation and abridging of assessment, and skills and knowledge gaps. Other consequences they mentioned included, demotivated learners, demoralised teachers, stealing of material, misappropriation of funds, burglaries in schools, the lack of budget for repairs, misdirected fund allocations, hungry children and increased child abuse cases (Mchunu, et al., 2021). These scholars further state that this also brought to the fore how much work was required to return schools to a state conducive for effective teaching and learning (Mchunu et al., 2021). According to research by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, (2020) at the height of COVID-19, more than 188 countries, or almost 91% of registered learners globally, closed their schools in an endeavour to reduce the transmission of the virus. Management in schools were predisposed to transforming an unfavourable teaching atmosphere into a favourable one (Graczewski et al., 2009).

The narratives expressed in the paragraphs above indicate that School Management Team members were faced with complex challenges in leading their schools during the COVID-19 breakout as they were mandated to lead and manage these schools in the face of adverse conditions that made effective schooling an extremely difficult undertaking. This view is supported by research done by academics like Jonas and Mkulu (2022), who claim that School Management Team Members were given the responsibility to organise, direct, supervise, and regulate school activities under the provisions of the South African Schools Act (SASA) 84 of 1996 (Republic of South Africa, 1996).

Despite the fact that schools reopened and resumed their operations during the COVID-19 period, even more challenges broke out. Research suggests that social distancing, also called physical distancing as one of the procedures stipulated to curb the transmission of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) resulted in learners attending school on alternate days, resulting in less time for in-person learning (Landa et al., 2021; NCOP Education and Technology Sports Arts and Culture, 2020; Soudien et al., 2021). In many instances, this virus had reshaped education as an activity in which the relationship between teachers and learners was severed (Harris & Jones, 2020). Even though months of contact teaching and learning time was lost because of school closures mandated by the Department of Basic Education to curtail the proliferation of COVID-19; this was further exacerbated by the reduced attendance caused by social distancing policies (Landa et al., 2021; NCOP Education and Technology Sports Arts and Culture, 2020).

According to Mchunu et al. (2021), the DBE COVID-19 sector plan, which sought to empower school administrators to efficiently manage school plans and programmes for sustained improvement, appeared ideal on paper. These scholars further assert that this sector plan did not take into account the complicated scenario that prevailed in schools situated in underprivileged areas of South Africa, for instance, where there was inadequate sanitation. Bhengu (2021) makes a similar argument that the COVID-19 pandemic made the severity of educational disparities in our country clear to all. According to Khumalo (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the sluggish movement of government's exertions to eliminate poor hygiene infrastructure at some schools. According to research by Bhengu (2021), as well as Du Plessis and Keyter (2020), a significant amount of money was paid for short-term interventions during COVID-19, such as portable lavatories and water tanks, indicating the extent of

infrastructure backlogs in Section 20 schools, which were primarily designated as Quintile 1 and Quintile 3.

According to Khumalo (2020), Section 27's Julia Chaskalson disclosed that 3800 South African schools had pit latrines despite the DBE publishing the norms and standards for school infrastructure in 2013, which specified that all schools were required to have water, electrical power, internet access, functional restrooms, secure teaching space with a maximum of 40 learners, security, a library, and sports fields. Bhengu (2021) and Du Plessis and Keyter (2020) argue that it is still the case and has not been attended to. Statistics from Section 27 generated by Julia Chaskalson would not have become such a hot topic if the ambitious DBE endeavour had been carried out (Bhengu, 2021). Several academics argue that this was supported by the fact that seven years later (2020), the problem of school hygiene had remained a problem and had grown to be a crucial factor in determining whether or not schools reopened at the peak of the COVID-19 epidemic (Bhengu, 2021; Pretorius et al., 2022). In addition to its negative effects on people's health, the COVID-19 epidemic has had a considerable effect on how they study, make a livelihood, and live (OECD, 2020). Arising from the above discussion it is clear that such developments created difficulties and challenges for School Management Team members at a time when few people were aware of the outbreak and how it would affect learning and the behaviour of school stakeholders (Republic of South Africa, 2020).

School Management Team members were also expected to ensure that screen testing was conducted in schools to find individuals with COVID-19 who were not showing symptoms and who did not have a known, alleged or reported contact with COVID-19. This was done so that schools could take measures to prevent further proliferation of the COVID-19 virus (CDC, 2022). Moreover, School Management Team members were expected to ensure proper ventilation in the classrooms and offices to diminish the effects of COVID-19 airborne virus particles, by making sure that multiple windows and doors were opened, and fans, air conditioning, air filtration systems were used (Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research, 2022; UNESCO, 2022). Since the COVID-19 virus can be airborne for a long time, research shows that respiratory propagation was relatively more common. As a result, sufficient ventilation that rapidly circulated air within indoor areas was increasingly recognised as a necessary method to help minimise virus propagation (UNESCO, 2022).

Research in the US state of Georgia indicated that the prevalence of COVID-19 was 48% lower in schools with air filtering systems and 39% lower in schools with enhanced ventilation in comparison to schools that did not apply these methods (UNESCO, 2022). However, due to a shortage of electricity supply, schools in many nations, including South Africa, were not able to enhance ventilation sufficiently. Additionally, public schools typically had a more limited supply of electricity than private schools (UNESCO, 2022). Therefore, differences in infrastructure between schools might have further cemented existing educational outcome discrepancies, with the impoverished and most disadvantaged learners being negatively affected the most. Creating sufficient school infrastructure to reduce disease propagation was not a rapid or simple solution (UNESCO, 2022). For instance, in a study conducted by Mudaly and Mudaly (2021), several educators had complained about the Department of Basic Education's lack of support for the implementation of COVID-19 procedures in schools. In research conducted by Bhengu (2005); Du Plessis (2017); Bhengu (2021), it came out clearly that the South African Schools Act has devolved the responsibility for school development and administration to school level. The narrative above further highlights the challenges faced by School Management Team Members in carrying out their responsibilities of leading the schools in difficult times, such as those relating to the breakout of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As noted by Luchembe (2021), education facilities faced a number of difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic. Luchembe (2021) adds that one difficulty that seems to have gone undetected is the psychological stress that both learners and teachers experienced. Whoever the next person to get the coronavirus (COVID-19) might be was unknown due to the virus' nature. Luchembe (2021) further postulates that teachers had a higher risk of getting the virus because they served as front-line workers. According to Luchembe (2021), teachers regularly interacted with learners whose families' basic hygiene and hygiene standards was not known. This view is shared by other scholars (Bhengu, 2005; Du Plessis, 2017) who suggests that schools are affected by what happens outside, because they are part of the social system. Bhengu (2005) further points out that the school cannot not remain untouched by what is happening outside of it. According to Luchembe (2021), teachers were under a lot of psychological stress at work since their health was at jeopardy.

### **2.3 The barriers that hinder School Management Team members in handling COVID-19 safety procedures and regulations in schools**

The review of literature suggests that SMT members encountered numerous barriers as they dealt with COVID-19 safety procedures in the schools. In order to adapt for the educational environment, health regulations and plans were developed and released for all educational institutions to follow (World Health Organization, 2021). Unfortunately, research has shown that a number of barriers existed that prevented plans from being adopted effectively and permanently (Mchunu et al., 2021). These scholars further postulate that a major factor in these difficulties was because school administrators lacked the necessary abilities to successfully implement regulations like those for COVID-19. Harris and Jones (2020) express a similar view, stating that one of the difficulties was that school leadership lacked the requisite crisis management skills. They claimed that before COVID-19, the majority of school leadership preparation and training curricula were thought to be discordant with the trials that school leaders faced. It should be emphasised that the majority of school administrators have had little or no crisis management training; they have never faced a catastrophe of this magnitude, or range for such an extended period (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021). Anecdotal evidence suggests that in the school where I work and in some neighbouring schools, school management relied a lot on our Circuit Manager as well as on the COVID-19 Local Command Team for advice and in handling crises brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the field of education, COVID-19 posed a serious danger to the future general health of students (Nel et., 2021). According to Ocholla et al. (2019), COVID-19 had created a challenge for everyone's safety in schools that had never been seen before. The School Management Team (SMT) members were mandated to be in charge of overseeing daily operations at the school (Jonas & Mkulu, 2022; Molefe, 2013). In support of this, Jonas and Mkulu (2022) point out that the South African Schools Act, No. 84 of 1996, which established School Management Teams as the authority for managing South African schools, required that they should do so. Daniel (2018) adds that this Act established the fundamental framework for operating schools across the entire nation.

School Management Team members have a variety of responsibilities, including implementing education and training policies, planning for school development, managing daily operations of the school, monitoring and guaranteeing curriculum implementation, ensuring high quality

for new buildings and school upkeep, and building an atmosphere that is favourable to teaching and learning, including scheduling sports and games (Molefe, 2013; Pilane, 2017).

Considering all the responsibilities of the SMT, this study therefore, is of the view that the COVID-19 pandemic had brought School Management Team members in the East Griqualand Circuit a complex dimension of challenges and heavier duty load. For example, over and above the duties stated above, the School Management Team members were now expected to monitor and to ensure the implementation of COVID-19 safety regulations in schools despite all the hurdles and barriers they were faced with. They were to do all this following stipulated guidelines contained in the following official documents: Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) for the control and management of COVID-19 for educational institutions and communities; Government Gazette No. 44922; Government Gazette No. 44633; as well as any other circulars issued in this regard, such as DPSA Circular No. 07 of 2020; DPSA Circular No. 18 of 2020; Circular No.1 of 2020; Circular No.3 of 2020; KZN Circular No. 44 of 2020; KZN Circular No.06 of 2021; KZN Circular No.74 of 2021; KZN Circular No.77 of 2021(Department of Statistics South Africa, 2020). The SMT members were also expected to follow the Presidential orders and the Department of Health's advice (Republic of South Africa, 2022a).

In Circular No. 3 of 2020, schools were noted as high-risk locations that might quickly transmit the illness. Schools were therefore closed for a considerable amount of time. Additionally, it suggested that schools should encourage the learners to take part in motivating initiatives like Read to lead programmes, Math Buddies, and so forth, under the supervision and direction of parents. The supply of workbooks, worksheets, and readers supported this. Anecdotal evidence suggests that in the school where I work, as well as in some neighbouring schools in my circuit these support materials were submitted back to school either with work not done or some with work done in parents' handwriting, meaning that parents were not guiding and supervising their children's school work; instead, they were doing it for them. This posed a challenge for SMT members as the schools were left behind in curriculum coverage and learners' learning was disrupted.

According to DPSA Circular No.07 of 2020, departments were required by law to create and maintain an atmosphere at work that was risk-free for workers and safe for everyone. On the other hand, KZN Circular No.44 of 2020; dated 11 June 2020 stated that the safety of all

employees and learners at schools was facing challenges that had never been experienced before because of the threat of COVID-19. It further stated that in managing school health and safety against COVID-19, the Department of Basic Education was entirely reliant on the regulations/directives/guidelines as provided by the Department of Health. As stated elsewhere in this dissertation, scholars reveal that among the challenges that school management faced was the lack of appropriate skills to effectively implement policies (Mchunu et al., 2021).

Circular No.1 of 2020 discouraged the use of perfect attendance awards and incentives saying this might encourage people to come to school sick. Additionally, it was said that the school needed to set up a system for handling unwell learners and staff members who should be sent home as soon as it was feasible. Keeping learners at home from school hindered their ability to advance their education and had negative consequences on the need for child care. It encouraged learners and employees to stay home when they were ill. This posed a challenge for School Management Team members as they had to plan for catch up classes for these learners, and it was a drawback for educators and was very straining. In DPSA Circular No.18 of 2020 among other things, it is stipulated that all lavatories must be cleaned, including shared areas, doorknobs and communal electronic devices in order to ensure that the workplace was clean and hygienic. This directive did not happen as stipulated in some schools, often because these schools were faced with challenges of a shortage of water supply.

On the 08<sup>th</sup> of January 2021; KZN Circular No. 6 of 2021 was issued with directives and protocols that the SMT members were obliged to follow. Amongst these stipulations, it stated that SMT members were to ensure that before the schools opened, there must be visible floor markings for the purpose of managing the 1.5m social distancing protocol. It further stipulated that the requirement for 1.5m social distancing was to be adhered to all the time. On the 31<sup>st</sup> of July 2021, Government Gazette No. 44922 was issued with an amendment to the afore-stated stipulation of 1.5m social distancing. With this amendment, social distancing measures in schools were now reduced to one metre. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the issue of social distancing led to learners not attending school on a daily basis which resulted in further loss of teaching and learning time. This also resulted in teachers teaching one and the same thing over and over again.

KZN Circular No.74 of 2021, dated 18 August 2021 stated the challenge of increasing COVID-19 infections in schools. It also revealed that some schools did not have enough space to

observe the approved social distancing protocols. Whilst KZN Circular No. 77 of 2021 posited that the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Basic Education was noting with concern the increasing numbers of new COVID-19 infections in schools, it hypothesised that there was a great concern regarding conditions in schools with large enrolments which easily contributed to the spread of the virus. With the challenge of an increasing duty load for School Management Team members, they were also expected to organise and keep handwashing posts with detergent and water. They were moreover, expected to ensure that janitors sanitised school infrastructure meticulously and frequently. On top of that, School Management Team members were also required to ensure that classrooms and particularly water stations and toilets were cleaned at least once daily or twice if possible (Republic of South Africa, 2020). With these expectations in mind, Peoples Coalition (2020) reported that several schools encountered difficulties with a lack of water supply and broken, and unclean restrooms. Accordingly, I had observed that in most schools in my circuit (East Griqualand Circuit), including the school where I work, there were problems and challenges of water supply. These schools were also experiencing difficulties with damaged and unhygienic lavatories. Anecdotal evidence also suggested that in some schools, toilets especially for learners were either not cleaned properly or they were filthy, they also did not flush as a result of the lack of water. Even though these schools were faced with water challenges, procedures for control and prevention of the spread of COVID-19 demanded a lot of water usage. On top of all that, measures and protocols for schools to curtail the spread of coronavirus called for meticulous hand washing which was regular and methodical using soap and water (Republic of South Africa, 2020).

Arising from the above discussion, the premise of this study is that School Management Team members were faced with complexities in leading their schools in the context of the COVID-19 breakout, and they were also confronted by barriers that hindered them in handling the stipulated COVID-19 safety regulations. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that even though schools were provided with water stations for hand hygiene, these water stations were only filled up with water when they were installed; after that, there was no water provided so they remained dry. Some of them only worked for a few days and the taps were damaged; some were leaking since they were not sufficiently strong. In the final analysis, they were of no help or benefit to the schools. Despite this water challenge, schools also had a challenge of hand sanitisers running out whilst waiting for another consignment from the district office, which also took time to be delivered.



According to the study by UNESCO (2020), hand washing procedures were acknowledged as a prophylactic measure for a range of communicable diseases, including COVID-19. UNESCO (2020) further showed that a sizable number of primary schools in several countries lacked basic hand washing amenities to guarantee the safety of students and school workers during the outbreak of COVID-19. Nearly half of the schools in the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) are like this (UNESCO, 2020). A study conducted by Jonas and Mkulu (2022) affirmed that School Management Team members encountered several challenges in fulfilling their duties. Schools required a consistent source of clean water, alcohol-based hand sanitisers, clean classrooms, workplaces and restrooms more than ever before (Luchembe, 2021). This narrative underscores the point that School Management Team members leading in schools with the challenges stated above, faced enormous and critical hurdles, since hand hygiene was said to play an absolutely necessary role in stopping and managing the spread of diseases like COVID-19.

According to Maree (2022), large class sizes, which have historically been an issue in South African public schools, constitute another barrier to effective teaching and learning. Gustafsson and Maponya (2021) have a similar viewpoint when they state that approximately 50% of South Africa's elementary school learners joined classes that exceeded 40 learners per class. These scholars further state that about 15% of the learners are found in classes with more than 50 learners (Gustafsson & Maponya, 2012). Maree (2022) concurs with the view that the COVID-19 pandemic had made it difficult for most schools to find enough space in their classrooms to accommodate more learners. In reaction to the COVID-19 epidemic, social distancing policies had to be implemented in more than 109 nations worldwide (Mahaye, 2020). New standards for learner seating configurations were introduced in order to monitor social distance in classes (Republic of South Africa, 2020). Comparably, a study conducted by Luchembe (2021) revealed that meticulous design and precise measurements were made to minimise the space that desks occupied in order to create opportunities for a social distancing policy to be applied. Learners were expected to maintain a social distance of 1.5 meters while standing or walking and 1 metre while reclining. Teachers were also supposed to keep their physical distance from one another and from the learners they were teaching. Additionally, several classroom resources were taken away, which restricted the teaching and learning opportunities for learners (Maree, 2022). She goes on to state that learners of all ages needed to be reminded regularly to practise social distance at all times. Additionally, she asserts that it

was particularly challenging to guarantee that learners upheld social distancing when exiting classrooms, during break time, or at the start and at the end of school (Maree, 2022).

According to the studies done by Mchunu et al. (2021), the issue of social distancing meant revisiting timetables. These scholars further explain that for social distancing principle to be observed in the classroom, a minimum number of learners had to be accommodated, and this depended on the size of the classroom. This also led to more difficulties for schools with regards to the matter of space in the classrooms. Schools with big enrolments suffered a lot due to shortages of space and furniture. This had a negative effect on changes to the timetables (Mchunu et al., 2021). Some schools also separated learners into small groups and had each group staying together throughout the day; this was called cohorting (CDC, 2022). This strategy limited the number of learners, teachers and staff who come into contact with each other. Cohorting was often used with small children, who have trouble maintaining physical distance (CDC, 2022).

Studies further revealed that implementing social distancing in schools was difficult, especially in classrooms where more space per learner was required while the number of learners was still very high (NCOP Education and Technology Sports Arts and Culture, 2020). Studies also concurred that monitoring of learners for social distancing was a challenge. The compressed academic calendar also made it challenging for teachers to finish the curriculum (Luchembe, 2021). Ideas expressed in the above narrative highlight the complications and barriers that hindered School Management Team members in handling safety regulations in schools during times of crisis, most especially, that of COVID-19. As per my observation as a teacher at a school and also my observations in neighbouring schools, enforcing social distance was an enormous mission. This was caused mainly by inadequate space in the school as a result of the very high number of learners enrolled. Even though new norms for seating arrangements for learners were introduced, namely, learners attending school on alternating days and every available space in the school being used to accommodate learners, school halls; art rooms and laboratories, maintaining social distancing still posed a problem. Enforcing social or physical distance more especially in primary schools was a real challenge because small children could not understand the concept of social distancing; hence, it is in their nature to play close to each other and to touch one another. For these reasons, I noticed that there was no proper, effective or efficient implementation of this regulation.

According to research done in primary schools in Lusaka, Zambia, a study indicated that learners themselves posed other difficulties, particularly in the lower classes (i.e. Grades 1 to 4) (Luchembe, 2021). This scholar claims that it was typical for students in these classes to lose their face masks, forcing school managers to keep extra face masks on hand at all times. Additionally, some parents could not afford to continually buy new face masks for their kids (Luchembe, 2021). He also asserts that because wearing a face mask to school was required, these kids were not allowed to go to class until the government sent the school a fresh shipment of face masks. Some kids missed school; all these challenges had an impact on learning. Similarly, a study by Mwila and Ntambi (2021) discovered that most learners preferred to put face masks over their necks or ears rather than trying to wear them properly for extended periods of time. Mudaly and Mudaly (2021) claim that the majority of impoverished schools struggled to comply with the rules; had limited space, and either could not afford or did not acquire personal protective equipment (PPEs). Confirming the above narrative, anecdotal information suggests that the situation in some primary schools in East Griqualand Circuit, KwaZulu-Natal Province in South Africa was similar to what was happening in some other primary schools in other countries like Zambia.

The perfect scenario was the one in which everyone put their face masks or shields on, where people avoided sharing e.g., no sharing of possessions like stationery, cutlery, cups, food. It was also one where everyone sanitised with a disinfectant made from at least 60% ethanol or rinsed hands with soap and water, where people maintained social distance of at least 1 metre from each other. Moreover, it was also where all classrooms were ventilated sufficiently, where proper COVID-19 posters and signs were depicted everywhere in the school property and where there was a COVID-19 committee (Republic of South Africa, 2020). In a study conducted by Nivette et al. (2021), it was found that adolescents and young adults were a population that adhered poorly to public health initiatives intended to halt the transmission of COVID-19. Their study also revealed that it was more common to report non-compliance with COVID-19 hygiene-related activities. The rate of non-compliance with the social distancing criteria was also noticeably higher. Similarly, research done by Luchembe (2021) on preventative measures against the spread of COVID-19 revealed that teachers reported that during break time, learners shared food, learners also had a tendency of taking off their masks, while others soiled their masks as they played together. Furthermore, he averred that learners found it appropriate to swap or share items such as pencils. According to anecdotal information, learners would even switch their masks. The World Health Organisation (WHO) made a

specific plea to the youth in mid-March 2020 for increased adherence to COVID-19 safety regulations (Nebehay, 2020). This group was frequently infectious while exhibiting only minimal or no COVID indicators (Bialek et al., 2020). Consequently, they had a greater risk of transmitting the infection (Cohen et al., 2020).

Anecdotal evidence also suggests that some teachers in East Griqualand Circuit did not adhere to the stipulated COVID-19 safety regulations. They were doing the opposite of what the COVID-19 policies and regulations stipulated, yet they were supposed to lead learners by example, but they were the ones who were doing things incorrectly. For example, they did not maintain social distancing (they hugged each other; they shook hands when greeting; they sat and stood close to each other; they patted each other) they did not put their masks on, or if worn, their masks were sitting under the chins; they shared items such as stationery (red pens for marking, pens to sign registers) cups, eating utensils and food. They did not sanitise after touching or sharing items. They did not ventilate classrooms as per regulations, especially in the cold winter season, since Kokstad is a very cold place. Children observe and learn wherever they are and from whoever is around them (Rymanowicz, 2015; Ward et al., 2017). The narrative above shows that the School Management Team Members were confronted with challenges and barriers in implementation and managing of COVID-19 safety regulations in schools. The challenges they were faced with were not only structural, legislative and socio-economic, they were also with the learners and on top of that, with educators under their supervision as well.

As mentioned elsewhere in this dissertation, since the Omicron variant emerged in December 2021, the COVID-19 regulations were interrupted and re-assessed as schools struggled to deal with a new set of issues highlighted by threats to school safety (UNESCO, 2020). A few years after mandatory COVID-19 safety protocols and regulations were stipulated; an update in April 2022 by Department of Health Minister, Joe Phaahla on safety procedures was announced. The Minister stated that for schools or learning institutions, regulation 4B excluded the school environment from the requirement of maintaining a social distance or physical distance of at least one metre from another person (Republic of South Africa, 2022b). Secondary, primary, and special education classes resumed daily attendance. The legal requirement for students in schools to maintain a one-meter social distance was then rescinded (Republic of South Africa, 2022a).

Masks were no longer required as per the removal of directive 16A from the COVID-19 pandemic response guidelines in June 2022. Therefore, it was no longer necessary for learners to wear face masks in the classroom or other indoor gatherings. The option to continue wearing a face mask in schools was available to learners and staff (Republic of South Africa, 2022a). The Department of Health Minister, Joe Phaahla stated that a School Governing Body (SGB) could decide to keep its own mask mandates in place and that was distinct from the government's own policies (Republic of South Africa, 2022b). The South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) expressed concern over the removal of the mask requirement, saying that, doing so might increase the risk of the virus spreading to both teachers and learners. A SADTU representative asserted that, because of the large number of packed classrooms in South Africa and the inadequate ventilation in some schools, masks were occasionally the sole line of defence against illness (Cloete, 2022). The discussion in this section has clearly shown that SMT members faced numerous barriers which tended to undermine their efforts at implementing health safety protocols as required by education policy.

#### **2.4 Lessons learnt from how School Management Team members dealt with the complexities of leading the schools in the context of the COVID-19 breakout**

The world fundamentally and drastically changed education due to a shift in its axis (Harris & Jones, 2022). The significance of leadership in the educational system, including in School Management Teams, has never been greater than it was, given the world-wide COVID-19 breakout (Harris & Jones, 2022). According to Bhengu and Svosve (2019), the presumption seems to be that leaders in schools have the necessary capabilities and competencies to deliver, given the decentralisation trends of governments. According to Mudaly and Mudaly (2021), the Department of Basic Education's apparent lack of support for the implementation of COVID-19 guidelines in some schools was worsened by contextual variables. One of the lessons learnt from the aforementioned accounts is that dealing with a crisis like the COVID-19 epidemic needs leaders to think creatively. Enhancement of teachers' and students' overall welfare was essential at the same time (du Plessis et al., 2022).

The worldwide waves of school closings and re-openings have amply illustrated how crucial effective leadership was to learning in all modes (Education Development Trust, 2020). Despite the prevalent narrative about learning losses, which were undeniably true and significant, it is also critical to acknowledge that fresh learning occurred at the height of the

pandemic. Both educators and learners gained flexibility, resilience, and adaptability (Harris & Jones, 2022). These scholars go on to say that people in leadership positions discovered new ways to communicate with their co-workers and stakeholders; to lead differently in times of crisis, and, most importantly, to guarantee that teaching and learning never stopped. Among the many difficulties that school leaders encountered is that of helping communities recover from devastating economic, social, and emotional events. During challenging times, school leaders have to provide direction, focus, and encouragement, foster resilience, and inspire optimism while remaining committed to achieving the best results for their learners and school communities (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2020). According to DeMatthews et al. (2021), the pandemic has made school leaders more stressed because of the additional duties related to schools closing, re-opening, and social distancing practices.

Members of the School Management Team are expected to uphold their "duty of care" when implementing safety regulations in schools (Bipath, 2017). Education leaders have to be able to forge new routes if they are to lead in those turbulent times and beyond. They cannot simply carry on as usual. This is another lesson learnt from how School Management Teams handled the challenges of leading the schools through times of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak (Harris & Jones, 2022). In support of this, the Education Development Trust (2020) maintains that leadership is currently evolving. According to a study conducted by Pollock (2020), leadership during the pandemic changed from leadership in predictable times to leadership in tumultuous times, highlighting the evolving nature of school leaders' roles.

There was a certain kind of leadership, decision-making, and action required in the COVID-19 epidemic (du Plessis et al., 2022). According to Harris and Jones (2022), it would be a fallacy to simply reorganise or rebrand what was pertinent prior to COVID-19, as much of those skills and training might no longer be appropriate. Among other things, the South African Constitution and the Schools Act demand that fundamental adjustments should be made in terms of leadership styles (Harris & Jones, 2022). Due to the importance of leadership and the inevitable nature of transformation, leaders have to be ready to react to an emergency and create a more fair and robust education system after it (Education Development Trust, 2020). According to Harris and Jones (2022), a school leader now needs to have the ability to manage and handle crises. Furthermore, Harris and Jones (2022) claim that during the COVID-19 crisis, leaders and teachers collaborated to guarantee that learners' education was uninterrupted; this demonstrated the power of leadership in action. Today, leadership is a team sport. Harris and

Jones (2022) also assert that managers and other leaders have to collaborate with their staff members in order to achieve objectives and implement change, as demonstrated by the literature reviewed for this investigation, which shows that School Management Team members collaborated with teachers to implement COVID-19 safety regulations (Harris & Jones, 2022). As the pandemic continued, school management was crucial to ensuring that learning continued (Harris & Jones, 2022).

The narrative above showed that while the crisis was very difficult for school leaders; it had also given them a chance to accelerate reform at an unprecedented scale and velocity (Education Development Trust, 2020). Leading a learning organisation is a challenging task, not clearly defined (Bhengu, 2005; Du Plessis, 2017). Leaders are required to move swiftly and strategically in order to find the best solutions during crises like COVID-19 (Bhengu, 2021). It has also been shown that infrastructure differences between schools further cement educational inequality, with marginalised and disadvantaged learners suffering the most. It takes time and effort to build a sufficient school infrastructure to reduce disease transmission. However, in the medium and long term, investments in bettering school infrastructure and facilities should be high on the priority list of educational policymakers and planners (UNESCO, 2022). This is what School Management Team members as leaders of schools should motivate and push for. This is due to the threat of new COVID-19 variants and the possibility of other future epidemics. Alongside, there is also a necessity to observe the situation, given Sustainable Development Goal target 4.a (to develop and improve education facilities so that they deliver safe and productive learning environments) (UNESCO, 2022). Despite the impoverished surroundings in which schools may be located, school management must also make sure that a reasonably high quality education is offered (Naicker & Mestry, 2013). Success or failure in a school is determined by its leadership (Bhengu & Svosve, 2019).

According to the Education Development Trust (2020), only a meagre investment has been channelled into understanding how to select and professionally cultivate leaders so they can develop a wide range of educational results for all learners. Leadership is frequently given insufficient attention. All of these emphasise the significance of leadership in managing change and the accompanying dynamics (Zulu et al., 2019). The COVID-19 crisis has unequivocally shown that the wellbeing of communities correlates with the health of the educational system. Therefore, to better protect the welfare of the learners and teachers, leaders need support and training (Education Development Trust, 2020). Researchers like Fotheringham et al., (2022)

have found that considering the difficulties encountered during COVID-19 and previous epidemics can influence support for school leaders' future reactions to closures, epidemics, and crises.

## **2.5 Theoretical framework**

Theoretical and conceptual frameworks serve as the foundation for research projects and give them important structural frames (Cohen et al., 2017). According to Morgan (2013) and Cyr (2019), a study's theoretical framework essentially gives the research a structure. According to Osanloo and Grant (2016), a theoretical framework is a blueprint for research that functions as the literal and figurative building blocks from which all knowledge for a study is built. It is based on formal theory and employs related precepts and principles to explain events and relationships. As a result, a theoretical framework serves as an anchor and a foundation for the literature review, problem statement, and significance of the study. Given the background I have sketched in the previous chapter, the aims of the study and its critical questions, two leadership theories were selected for use in this study to understand how School Management Team members lead schools in the context of the COVID-19 breakout, and these theories are Adaptive Leadership and Transformational Leadership. Adaptive Leadership prepares, supports, motivates, and mobilises the followers to adapt to the change that is occurring, as opposed to Transformational Leadership which changes the follower into a better person (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Drucker, 2018; Montgomery, 2012). In order to consider and manage all the variables, complexities, and challenges that were present in schools during the COVID-19 epidemic, a complex South African educational system requires a mixture of adaptation and transformation.

### **2.5.1 Adaptive leadership**

In 1994, Dr Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky developed Adaptive leadership (Bolman & Deal, 2017; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). Adaptive Leadership is a practical leadership model that supports people and societies to acclimatise and flourish in challenging situations (Joy, 2020). Adaptive and complex problems can be handled in various ways, often needing many answers and alterations in many areas. Co-operation, constant learning and revision, the use of diverse opinions, and shared leadership responsibilities are all essential components of adaptive leadership (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2020; Heifetz & Linsky,



2014). Adaptive Leadership Theory was deemed suitable for analysing the behaviours of School Management Team members given different innovations and difficult problems that members confronted while doing their jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic. By using an adaptive strategy, school management could help school communities become more resilient to the pandemic's potential future disruptions (Bagwell, 2020). Adaptive leadership is the capability of a leader to change course in the face of impediments and novel situations (Joy, 2020).

Future pandemics like COVID-19 pandemic could be managed using practical and technical lessons learnt from crises like the Spanish flu pandemic (du Plessis, 2020). Similarly with COVID-19, Harris and Jones (2020) note that school leaders operating in intense and chaotic conditions face constant pressure, few options, and a lot of sleepless nights. These scholars go on to say that some administrators have been put in difficult situations where they become the weak link in the system. Therefore, it may not be surprising that the development of the COVID-19 virus caused sudden changes in the responses, processes, procedures, and protocols that school management have had to follow. Leaders have used diverse actions and competencies to manage adaptive difficulties as part of their adaptive leadership practices. Adaptive Leadership Theory identifies two types of challenges, namely, technical and adaptive challenges.

Heifetz et al. (2009) argue that most leaders do not succeed in effectively adapting to new realities simply because they fail to make a clear distinction between technical and adaptive challenges or problems. Therefore, due to this lack of distinction, they tend to treat adaptive challenges as if they are technical challenges, whereas, they are not. The main distinguishing feature is the fact that technical challenges usually have predictable outcomes if procedures are followed as stipulated, and the existing structures and expertise that is available is known. However, with adaptive challenges, more personal beliefs and cultural norms are often at play, and new learnings and new, unknown ways of doing things have to be found. This makes it clear that adaptive challenges are complex and less predictable compared to technical challenges (Heifetz et al., 2009). Therefore, what compounds this problem even further is the fact that when challenges come, they are not clearly labelled as either technical or adaptive, and in many instances, they contain both characteristics (Heifetz et al., 2009). Therefore, leaders who use adaptive leadership strategies have to be prepared to learn new things during the process of tackling challenges. Such learnings can entail considering difficult options that

can be uncomfortable to many if not all, yet they may be able to resolve the imminent challenges, as well as bring stability in terms of being adaptable for the future as well. In the context of this study, many of the challenges can easily be referred to as technical, although some can be adaptive. Therefore, SMT members have to understand these important issues about adaptive leadership, and thus, need to learn to address technical and practical issues in addition to complicated issues, also referred to as adaptive issues (du Plessis et al., 2022).

School leaders (SMT members) need to have the requisite skills to assist their schools in overcoming the difficulties of uncertain educational environments by adopting both technical and adaptive leadership strategies whenever they may be appropriate (Bagwell, 2020). Instead of using dictating techniques, leaders need to use adaptable techniques by focussing on reflections, analysis, and facilitation to improve learning (Du Plessis & Keyter, 2020). This approach to resolving problems is consistent with the adaptable challenges aspect of Adaptive Leadership Theory. This is because adaptive leadership is the capability of a leader to change course in the face of impediments and novel circumstances (Joy, 2020). Adaptive leaders follow up with stakeholders to ensure that they are conscious of the proposal and have the chance to offer comments. In the context of this study, members of the School Management Team were critical in efforts to stop the spread of COVID-19. Therefore, they were expected to take action to alert the school community about the virus and its possible transmission (Republic of South Africa, 2020). Consequently, adaptive leaders encourage their subordinates and staff to develop themselves through the process of organisational change (Deszca et al., 2019; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). Adaptive problems are substantially more difficult considering how complicated people and their behaviours are. In operating within adaptive challenges, leaders go outside their previous knowledge of the crisis' background or experiences in order to adapt and reinvent new kinds of conduct in order to affect human behaviour (du Plessis et al., 2022).

Harris and Jones (2022) argue that it would be erroneous to merely rebrand or restructure what was pertinent to COVID-19 in the past because most of that training and development may no longer benefit current realities. This is something that has already been discussed elsewhere in this dissertation. Since the COVID-19 pandemic was constantly changing, leaders had to quickly come up with solutions whilst also recognising the multifaceted (health-related, financial, social, political, and cultural) nature of the crisis. They also dealt with unpredictability, incomplete information, numerous unknowns, and the need to act quickly

(Ramalingam et al., 2020). As previously mentioned in this chapter, UNESCO (2022) agreed that COVID-19 safety regulations and protocols were disrupted after the Omicron variant's appearance in December 2021 and were re-evaluated as schools worked to attend to a different set of issues manifested by threats to school safety.

Responding to the emergency needs, adaptive leadership encompasses what is referred to as the 4As: Anticipation, Articulation, Adaptation and Accountability (Ramalingam et al., 2020). *Anticipation* - leaders who are flexible foresee future demands, trends, and opportunities. This requires making a decision about what needs to be done to effect change and acting upon that decision (Ramalingam et al., 2020). *Articulation* - To increase general awareness and support for action, adaptive leaders need to identify future demands. *Adaptation* - Adaptive leaders change as needed to channel on-going learning and response modification. *Accountability* - Adaptive leaders are also responsible for making sure that decision-making processes are as clear as possible and that they are open to criticism and challenge. (Ramalingam et al., 2020).

The most effective reactions to the epidemic clearly demonstrated all four aspects of adaptive leadership (Ramalingam et al., 2020). There is little doubt that leadership in general has long possessed the traits associated with adaptive leadership. However, the unanticipated pressure placed on leaders to assist their organisations in successfully adapting to the change is something that is relatively new, especially at a time when all too familiar and traditional leadership paradigms have been shown to be unproductive (Joy, 2020). This scholar further states that in difficult times, an adaptive leadership paradigm actually works rather effectively. To deliver the best means and adjust the team's structure, work plan, and aims to overlap with the COVID-19 emergency, leaders have to exhibit adaptive performance, such as efficient management of crises and job stress, innovative problem solving, constant learning, and interpersonal adaptability (Bajaba et al., 2021). The fact that COVID-19 data was constantly changing presented members of School Management Teams with significant difficulty. Therefore, leaders at all levels have to explain what they are doing, why they are doing it, and how decisions are taken in order to sustain trust in the process even if mistakes are found (Ramalingam et al., 2020).

The identification of a shared configuration of goals and the potential aimed at cooperative activities across various sections and stages of response can be greatly aided by adaptive leadership. These discussions are more thorough, promote ownership of decisions, and improve

conversation (Ramalingam et al., 2020). According to the narrative above, adaptive leadership theory has lately been recognised as a useful theoretical foundation for leaders in challenging or crisis situations like managing schools during the COVID-19 breakout.

### **2.5.2 Transformational leadership**

The second theory that I adopted to complement Adaptive Leadership Theory is Transformational Leadership Theory. James MacGregor Burns is regarded as the father of Transformational Leadership as he is the first person who advanced the idea in 1978 (Bhengu & Svosve, 2019; Seligman, 1980). The field of education has used transformational leadership over the past 40 years (Bhengu & Svosve, 2019). This approach is more long-term in nature. The primary notion is to replace egocentric, transient, specific objectives with higher-level, long-term value-based objectives. This paradigm shift frequently raises employee commitment, self-confidence, and satisfaction (Careda, 2021). Projections indicated that COVID-19 would be present for the long term (Sarun et al., 2021). Members of School Management Teams were therefore required to adapt and focus on the pandemic's long-term effects while also changing their leadership philosophies.

The COVID-19 crisis affected more than simply public health; it also had an impact on the economy, society and politics. It was a complicated systemic issue that necessitated altering behaviours and interactions between various groups (Kelly, 2003). A transformational leader delivers clear instructions and provides frequent feedback while taking the time to ensure that communications are heard and understood. This is crucial in order for people to comprehend precisely what is required of them during turbulent moments (Sarun et al., 2021). Kelly (2003) contends that transformational leadership, which quickly adapts to change in a catastrophe, is the most effective style of leadership in an emergency. The fear of failure, of not knowing what to do, and of having to learn new rules and procedures can all be brought on by change (Kelly, 2003). This theory works best where leaders work closely with the staff under their control, and they have to inspire people in such a way that they can bring about change in the organisation without close guidance or constant supervision by the leader (du Plessis, 2017). Fundamentally, school leadership aims to transform an unfavourable learning environment into a favourable one (Graczewski et al., 2009). Educational leaders need to act as social change agents in the context of challenging school environments (Bhengu, 2005; Du Plessis, 2017). Despite the trials that the schools faced in the context of the COVID-19 breakout, members of

School Management Team were in charge of making sure that an education of at least a minimally high standard was provided.

The features of transformational leadership match with learning ideals because a transformational leader is required to lead as well as to learn and foster an atmosphere that is favourable to learning. The characteristics of transformational leadership are consistent with learning concepts because a transformational leader is expected to not only lead but also to learn and provide an atmosphere that is conducive to learning (Bhengu, 2005; Du Plessis, 2017). Bhengu (2005) further asserts that learning is not just for learners, but it is also for adults (educators), and it is not only for individual learners, but also for the school as a whole (Bhengu, 2005; Du Plessis, 2017).

There are four aspects to transformational leadership. Transformational leaders empower followers through these practices; namely, idealised influencing, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration. Each of the four key pillars describes characteristics that are valuable to the transformation process (Northouse, 2021). Therefore, SMT members could instil courage and give guidance through times of uncertainty. Leaders who want to have an idealised impact must set an example of moral behaviour, inspire pride in others, and win people's respect and trust. Leaders must be able to foster an environment that is friendly to renewal, change, zeal, openness, and involvement (Bhengu & Svosve, 2019; Van Loggerenberg, 2002). Therefore, it was essential for SMT members to foster an environment where teachers and learners embraced the desired changes during the turbulent times of the COVID-19 breakout.

Inspirational motivation and idealised motivation are complementary. Inspirational motivation talks about how well a leader conveys a vision to inspire and compel followers (Bass & Bass, 2009). Motivated leaders set elevated criteria for their subordinates, express hopefulness about their long-term goals, and give the job at hand purpose (Bass & Bass, 2009; Zaccaro et al., 2018). Arising from the explanation of transformational leadership in leading the schools in the context of COVID-19, there is impetus for School Management Team members to involve other teachers in decision-making processes and seek their advice and contributions. If followers are to be inspired to take action, they tend to possess a strong feeling of resolve (Juneja, 2019). Therefore, School Management Team members are expected to motivate and encourage teachers in the implementation of COVID-19 safety regulations. In doing this,

leaders need to be able to motivate the people they work with to take initiative in influencing change by using inspirational motivation (Van Loggerenberg, 2002). Members of the School Management Team, for instance, should motivate teachers to accept change brought about by COVID-19 in the classroom. It is assumed that the followers will be keen to put more energy into their jobs; that they will be inspired, upbeat, and confident about their talents for the future (Juneja, 2019).

The extent to which leaders raise questions, take chances, and solicit feedback from followers is referred to as intellectual stimulation. These kinds of leaders inspire and encourage innovative thinking from their followers (Juneja, 2019). This author further states that leaders promote and advance individuals with independent thought. Learning is a value for this kind of a leader, and unforeseen events like COVID-19 are seen as opportunities to learn because no one has ever before encountered and handled such a catastrophic phenomenon. The followers question, deliberate carefully, and come up with more effective ways to carry out their jobs (Juneja, 2019). Regarding intellectual stimulation, this pillar emphasises the necessity for groups or persons to be knowledgeable about policy provisions for resource organisation (Van Loggerenberg, 2002).

Individual consideration is another aspect of transformational leadership and is one of the most important competencies for a leader to possess (Van Loggerenberg, 2002). It describes the degree to which the leader addresses each worker's requirements, serves as a mentor or coach to the staff, and pays attention to their individual needs and concerns. This aspect is known as individual consideration (Juneja, 2019). In times characterised by complexities and difficulties such as those brought about by the COVID-19 breakout, leaders need to be able to show compassion and support, maintain open lines of communication, and present problems to the staff. This takes into consideration the necessity for respect and acknowledges the distinctive input that each follower can offer to the group.

## **2.6 Chapter summary**

This chapter has presented a review of literature that is pertinent to the theme of complexities that School Management Team members dealt with as they led schools in the context of the COVID-19 breakout. In addition, studies linked to this topic were also reviewed and explored the barriers that hinder School Management Team members in handling COVID-19 safety

procedures and regulations in schools. The lessons learnt from how School Management Team members dealt with the complexities of leading the schools in the context of the COVID-19 breakout were also examined. The reviewed literature also helped this study by providing tools through which to scrutinise how leaders lead during times of crisis. Furthermore, the chapter has discussed two theories that constitute a theoretical framework for the study. The next chapter provides a detailed discussion of methodological issues relating to this study.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

The preceding chapter focused on the literature review and theoretical framework that was employed in this study. In this chapter I present and explicate the research design and methodology employed for this study. I begin with a discussion on the research paradigm and the research design. I further present the research methodology, as well as sampling methods or techniques. This is followed by an explanation of how data was generated and examined. Furthermore, I elaborate on issues of trustworthiness, ethical considerations and limitations of the study. Finally, I presented the chapter summary.

#### **3.2 Research paradigm**

A research paradigm is a philosophical or theoretical rationalisation for undertaking an investigation (Žukauskas et al., 2018). Hammersley (2012) and Williams (2020) elucidate that paradigms are not straightforward methodologies, rather, they are different perspectives on how the world works and presumptions about how we can understand or learn about it. In addition, Lincoln et al. (2017) hypothesise that paradigms differ from consultant work in that they are required to add rigorously and rationally to an existing body of knowledge as opposed to immediately addressing an issue. Both an interpretivist and a critical perspective can be taken when examining a qualitative approach (Pham, 2018). To explain the subjective realm of human experiences, this inquiry, nevertheless, employed the interpretivist paradigm.

The interpretivist paradigm emerged from the realisation that information in the human and social sciences could not be understood using methods similar to those employed in the physical sciences because people understand their surroundings and take action based on that understanding, but the rest of the world does not (Pham, 2018). The interpretivist paradigm, which is built on the idea of creating novel knowledge, is the most suitable paradigm for this study because it involves opinions and personal anecdotes and is qualitative in nature. The Interpretive paradigm is concerned with precise explanations of how people interpret their surroundings and the significance of specific acts (Cohen et al., 2017). Similarly, Christiansen



and Bell (2010) and Zulu et al. (2021) agree that interpretivists try to explain how people make meaning of their environments and the settings of their home and work area. For research like this study, where the aim is to comprehend meanings from the participants' viewpoints, the interpretive paradigm was deemed appropriate (Cohen et al., 2017; Zulu et al., 2021). In this study, the interpretive research paradigm was used to understand how School Management Team members led their schools in the context of COVID-19 from their own perspectives and not from mine as a researcher.

### **3.3 Research design**

According to Guba and Lincoln (1994), as well as Lincoln et al. (2017), a researcher can choose between quantitative and qualitative research as their two main research methods. This study sought to identify the complexities that School Management Team members dealt with as they led their schools in the setting of the COVID-19 breakout. Therefore, the research that is reported in this dissertation adopted a qualitative research approach because it is appropriate for describing and addressing questions about the participants and the contexts (Guenther & Falk, 2021; Richardson & St Pierre, 2005). Thus, qualitative research is a form of inquiry that is applied to create or enhance hypotheses and understandings of the subjective realities of the participants (Cohen et al., 2017). Qualitative researchers undertake research about how the subjects or participants behave based on how they understand their experienced world (Cohen et al., 2017; Nieuwenhuis et al., 2021).

The application of a qualitative approach in this study was necessitated by the fact that it enabled me to understand the participants' subjective world in their natural work settings, through the use of textual information (Pandey & Pandey, 2015; Welman et al., 2005). In support of this, Creswell and Poth (2016) aver that qualitative studies investigate phenomena and are most helpful in understanding the circumstances in which people find themselves, in order to articulate what is happening within that phenomenon. Additionally, this study sought to comprehend the lessons learnt from how School Management Team members deal with complexities of leading the schools during times of crisis; hence, there is a need for a qualitative approach that can be used to formulate theories. It is an approach that is not attainable through quantitative approaches that confirm or refute theories. According to Creswell and Poth (2016) and Creswell (2014), qualitative research is characterised by the participants' perceptions that are verbally generated from individuals. In addition, Rymanowicz (2015); Zulu et al. (2021)

claim that the goal is to advance a thorough, all-encompassing understanding of a certain phenomenon.

### **3.4 Research methodology**

In this study, I intended to capture the realities of School Management Team members' experiences of, and their thoughts about the complexities of leading the schools in the setting of the COVID-19 breakout. Methodologically, I employed a qualitative research approach to the study and located it within an interpretive paradigm. In order to generate data, I conducted a series of semi-structured interviews. Using qualitative research approach as a methodology offers a thorough, in-depth description and analysis of one or more situations, such as a person, group of individuals, or an organisation (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2016). The choice of using semi-structured interviews was influenced by the nature of its descriptiveness and its ability to detail what it was like to be in specific circumstances, meaning that my study's research questions will be answered.

### **3.5 Research sample and sampling methods**

Non-probability sampling is excellent for exploratory and qualitative research, and it is economical (Taherdoost, 2016). When a researcher utilises their judgement to select a sample that is most pertinent for the study's goals, this is known as purposive sampling (Vehovar et al., 2016). For this study, I chose a purposive sampling method. The rationale for my decision to employ this sampling technique is that it allowed me to select participants based on pertinent criteria. Purposive sampling, also known as judgemental, selective, or subjective sampling, refers to sampling methods that rely on the researcher's judgement when it comes to picking the elements such as people, cases/organisations, events, or pieces of data that are to be studied (Cohen et al., 2017). The major goal of purposeful sampling should not be the proportionality of the sample, but rather that the selected sample should help resolve the problems raised by the study (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2016).

The sample size was set at nine participants. The sample size is determined by the number of participants that are needed to achieve data saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Participants are people who may be able to take part in the study and generate data (Ioannidis, 2015). The selection of participants was purposive so as to focus on identified categories such as School

Management Team members (Cohen et al., 2017). The categories of participants consisted of school principals, deputy principals, and departmental heads. These participants constitute what is called School Management Team in South Africa. School principals are responsible for leading the entire school, while deputy principals are second in charge in the schools and work closely with principals in leading the schools. The departmental heads are responsible for leading various departments within the schools. I must also point out that the sample size consisted of three members per category of the school management team (three School Principals, three Deputy Principals and three Departmental Heads) which were purposively selected from three selected primary schools in East Griqualand Circuit. I must also highlight the fact that all selected schools in this study have more than one Deputy Principal and more than one Departmental Head but only one was selected per school in each category. According to the PAM document, Republic of South Africa (1996) annexure A.5 and A.6 the core duties and responsibilities of the Deputy Principal and Departmental Head are individual and varied, depending on the approaches and needs of the particular school. In this case Deputy Principals and Departmental Heads that were selected were those that were members of the COVID-19 committee in their schools hence they were directly involved in all matters pertaining to COVID-19. As already mentioned elsewhere in this study three primary schools in the Harry Gwala District in the province of KwaZulu-Natal were selected as the research sites. The selected school names are Imbasa-yesizwe Primary School (IPS), Blue Crane Primary School (BPS), Protea Primary School (PPS).

### **3.6 Data generation methods**

Qualitative data can be generated from different methods, for instance, oral interviews, written accounts, drawings, poetry, photographs, timelines, observations, documents, artefacts – all transformed into written texts (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2016). For this study, primary data was used. Primary data is when researchers generate their own data, unlike secondary data which is the use of data generated by other researchers (Bell et al., 2022; Brynard et al., 2014). The techniques that I applied to generate data for this study were semi-structured interviews. Interviews generally, are regarded as the most widely used methods of qualitative data generation. They are a discussion between two people or more exchanging opinions on a subject of shared interest (Brinkmann, 2015; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2018). There are diverse forms of interviews that are applied in research to generate data such as structured interviews, semi-structured interviews, unstructured/narrative/exploratory interviews and focus groups

(Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2016). In this study I used semi-structured interviews with all the participants and they were audio recorded for subsequent transcription into textual format. The participants were presented with a list of questions that were arranged ahead of time and they were invited to answer in their own words in a semi-structured interview. Some interviewers use a topic guide as a reference to make sure all interviewees respond to the same questions (Roulston & Choi, 2018). Semi-structured interviews provide a high response rate, and enabled me as an interviewer and as a researcher to be there to explain the questions to prevent participant misinterpretation. This is the justification for the chosen data generation approach.

### **3.6.1 Semi-structured interviews**

In order to get the members of the School Management Teams (SMT) to share their personal opinions and experiences, semi-structured interviews were used. In qualitative research, semi-structured interviews are widely employed (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2016). According to Van Teijlingen (2014); King et al. (2018) a semi-structured interview is one that has a series of pre-set questions whose ordering can be altered subject to the interviewer's judgement of what seems most relevant at the time. Various scholars like Blandford (2013); Hofisi et al. (2014); Blandford et al. (2016), also concur that in semi-structured interviews every interviewee can be asked the same questions but, there is flexibility in how the questions are asked and occasionally it is possible to ask additional probing questions. According to Holly (2016), as well as Tracy (2019), the benefit of semi-structured interviews is that they free the research participants from severe limitations of prepared questions, allowing for more emic, emergent understandings to arise. To acquire comprehensive, rich information and insight from the research participants, I used semi-structured interviews. A total of nine interviews were conducted meaning that one interview session per participant was held. These interviews lasted for about 30 minutes to an hour per participant. Interviews were recorded and the reason for recording the interviews was to preserve the depth and accuracy of the individual utterances as well as the responses (Bearman, 2019; Briggs & Coleman, 2019). The recordings also enabled me to spot any gaps that required more investigation in a subsequent session.

### **3.7 Data analysis**

When analysing the data, the interviewer's power seems to revert to the interviewer as the researcher to draw out information from the data generated. Utilising appropriate methods and readily available data, data analysis entails extracting information from data (Cohen et al., 2017). These scholars further state that data analysis is a procedure that involves systematising, accounting for, and illuminating the data. Some researchers, like Clarke and Lane (2006) and Creswell and Poth (2016), contend that the data analysis for qualitative research necessitates specific knowledge of the successive stages, which include preparation and organisation, describing and presenting the data, analysing the data, interpreting the data, drawing conclusions, reporting the findings, ensuring accuracy, reliability, coherence, corroboration, validity and reliability. Here, the interviewer reorganises the story into chronological and socio-cultural context. In this study I have followed the afore mentioned steps of Cohen et al. (2017), Clarke and Lane (2006) and Creswell and Poth (2016).

In qualitative, semi-structured interview research, important data analysis includes thematic, content, narrative, and analytic induction (Bazeley, 2021). For this study, the thematic method was used since it is an easier technique for collating high-quality data, especially for qualitative research that uses emergent themes. Thematic analysis is a form of qualitative data analysis that looks for recurrent ideas in the data, which are referred to as themes (Bazeley, 2013; Bazeley, 2020). According to Hammersley (2006) and Hammersley (2018), interviewing is an effective strategy but necessitates audiotaping the interviews. As a result, when I conducted the interviews, they were recorded on audio and later written down in a textual format where I manually analysed them. Before starting the actual analysis, I started by reading and re-reading the transcripts repeatedly to familiarise myself with the content and to get the gist of the participants' responses.

In analysing the transcribed interviews, I broke down words and sentences into smaller components. The data was coded. Coding is the arrangement and sorting of data to develop themes (Maxfield & Babbie, 2014). The next step was to focus on identifying themes. I conducted an initial cataloguing of qualitative data where parts of data were scrutinised to discover similarities and variations which were then grouped together under similar characteristics. Themes that were pertinent to the research questions were identified. I would go back to the data to find more that could reinforce the themes. The next step was data cleaning

to guarantee that no data were mistakenly disqualified, included or improperly recorded. Reduced and categorised versions of this massive data were created for the purpose of thematic data analysis (Fetterman, 2019; Goetz & LeCompte, 1981). Interpretations did not only reflect my understanding of the material, but they were inclusive of the participants' reflections on the issue. This is consistent with interpretive research paradigm.

### **3.8 Issues of trustworthiness**

When it comes to assessing whether or not to believe the research findings, a crucial moment in qualitative studies occurs and it entails using a variety of techniques to ensure that what a researcher presents as findings, are indeed findings and not his or her preconceived ideas and beliefs. The subjectivity of the researcher may affect the findings in qualitative investigations. Therefore, it is crucial to mitigate this by using a quality standard sieve, and many qualitative researchers adopt a framework of trustworthiness that was popularised by Lincoln and Guba (1985), and it comprises four criteria, namely, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln et al., 2017). Many academics have adopted Guba's constructs, and they all agree that trustworthy investigations should include credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability as criteria to establish trustworthiness (Amankwaa, 2016). In this research, I chose this framework by Guba and Lincoln (1994) and Lincoln and Lincoln et al. (2017). The paragraphs that follow explain these constructs respectively.

#### **3.8.1 Credibility**

Credibility is the extent to which the results mirror the participants' reality and lived experiences (Amankwaa, 2016; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Anney (2014) delineated credibility as the extent of trust that can be assigned to the veracity of research findings and the determination of whether the study's findings represent credible information that is derived from the participant-provided primary data. Shenton (2004) and Daniel (2019) assert that a qualitative researcher judges the findings' trustworthiness based on how closely they correspond to reality.

To ensure credibility for my study, I used a variety of techniques, which included giving the participants enough time to read the interview transcripts so they could confirm their

contributions. My interpretations were more credible as a result of this. I made sure that what I found was what the participants maintained and not my own interpretation. Additionally, consent would be confirmed, ensuring that genuine individuals were eager to provide information and voluntarily participate in interviews (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017). I must also indicate that the period of data generation for this study was from 04 November 2022 to 31 January 2023.

### **3.8.2 Transferability**

Transferability is the second of the four criteria and it entails the extent to which research findings can be used in circumstances that are similar (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln et al., 2017). According to Lankshear and Knobel (2006), transferability refers to how far the results of a qualitative study may be used in new settings with new participants. To guarantee that any subsequent research carried out under comparable circumstances would produce similar, if not the same results, every stage and condition of this study had to be properly documented. I also made sure to include all the relevant details about the study's setting, the population size, the sampling procedure, the sample size, and the inclusion criteria, the data production techniques used, as well as the data generation techniques and instruments, as well as data analysis techniques that were used.

### **3.8.3 Dependability**

Dependability is the third criterion of the four criteria. According to Guba and Lincoln (1994) and Lincoln et al. (2017), dependability is an evaluation of the effectiveness of an integrated process of data generation, data analysis and theory generation. Additionally, they suggest that dependability and credibility are closely related. According to Guba and Lincoln (1994); Lincoln et al. (2017), the study's methodology should be detailed comprehensively so that other researchers can duplicate it and achieve the same results. In the context of this study, I used a dependability audit which ensured that all the processes that were followed were explained in minute detail.

### **3.8.4 Confirmability**

This is the fourth and last of the four criteria of ensuring trustworthiness of the findings. Confirmability measures the extent to which the research conclusions are corroborated by the data generated (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln et al., 2017). Burke (2016); Lincoln and Guba (1982) claim that confirmability has to do with making sure the information is accurate. I addressed confirmability in this study by making sure that my recordings were transcribed and the transcripts were discussed with participants to confirm that the scripts really reflected the contents that transpired during our interviews. Additionally, I made sure that each participant's understanding and my interpretation agreed. During the interview sessions, I also used member checking, thereby making sure that I understood everything that the participants said. I had to ensure that there were no misunderstandings between what the participants said and what I thought the participants meant by what s/he said.

### **3.9 Ethical issues**

Ethical considerations deal with what is morally tolerable or improper when interacting with the participants in order to acquire data (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Mills & Gay, 2019). Most South African universities have Research Ethics Committees that guarantee ethical regulation of their institutions' research work in accordance with international best practices (Israel & Hay, 2006). This research project obtained clearance from the Research Ethics Committee in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Because this study involved people and it was also related to their occupations, it was then vital to address ethical concerns, as they largely focus on the moral issues of all phases of the study (Parameshwara, 2019). The following ethical deliberations were made, which includes informed consent, ensuring no harm, confidentiality and anonymity. During interviews I ensured that I observed ethical practices. I informed participants about their rights, for instance, that they could choose to remain anonymous, or their real names and places could be acknowledged. Commonly in social research, participants are guaranteed anonymity to protect their identity for various reasons including undue pressure from society (Edwards & Weller, 2016). I also ensured anonymity of participants during writing up the research report hence they chose to remain anonymous. Therefore, pseudonyms were used to conceal the identities of the schools and participants. In order to distinguish between the responses from the nine



participants and the three selected schools, I used pseudonyms for the schools and codes for the participants.

### **3.9.1 Informed consent**

I ensured that the participants' autonomy was respected. The study's nature, as well as each participant's right to decide on whether to participate or not, were explained to them all. They all received assurance that their participation was voluntary, to put it another way. Moreover, all participants were made cognisant of the purpose and goals of the study and the form of the research so that they felt free to participate in the study from a position of knowledge (Parameshwara, 2019). I therefore requested participants to sign the informed consent forms. This form was called a declaration of informed consent. This means that the participants agreed to participate in the study, having satisfied themselves that they understood what the study was about. I had explained the nature of the study, and their autonomy was respected as they participated voluntarily, and they had the right to withdraw from the study anytime they felt the need to do so.

### **3.9.2 No harm**

The other ethical consideration is what Cohen et al. (2018) called the principle of non-maleficence; simply meaning no harm to the participants due to their participation in the study. I ensured that principles of non-maleficence were adhered to; therefore, I did not expose the participants to any form of physical, emotional and psychological harm, nor even in situations that shamed, embarrassed or diminished self-respect. I ensured that they were not identifiable by anyone, including people who could cause them harm if their identities were disclosed. That is why I had to use pseudonyms to conceal their identities.

### **3.9.3 Confidentiality and anonymity**

The information given by the participants was their interpretation of the complexities of leading the schools in the setting of the COVID-19 breakout, in the school they worked in. Hence, it was vital to maintain that the answers were kept confidential and that they would not be traced back to any participant in order to guarantee that no harm would be done because of their participation in the investigation (Parameshwara, 2019). Participants in social research are

typically given anonymity in order to safeguard their identity for a variety of motives, such as unwarranted social pressure (Coffelt, 2017; Novak, 2014). In order to preserve anonymity, pseudonyms rather than real names were used.

### **3.9.4 Ensuring that permission is obtained**

All stages of the research were done in compliance with the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) ethical requirements to ensure that all components of the study were ethical, legal and that permission to conduct research was granted. Before beginning the research, permission from the University and other stakeholders was sought (Parameshwara, 2019). For beneficence to be ensured, gatekeepers permission letters from Department of Basic Education and from the School Principals were obtained. Then I applied for ethical clearance from the University of KwaZulu-Natal HSSREC (Human and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee).

### **3.10 Limitations of the study**

Many researchers are of the view that every study will have some limitations as no study is perfect. This research is qualitative and as such, cannot produce findings that are generalisable across the population. Similarly, qualitative research is subjective, and as such, it is likely to generate biases in the findings. It is because of this reality that I adopted Lincoln and Guba's (1994) framework of ensuring trustworthiness so that I could be confident that the findings I arrived at came from the participants and are not my own biases.

### **3.11 Chapter summary**

This chapter has focused on the issues of research design and methodology that were used in conducting this study. It started by highlighting and describing the research paradigm that was used in the study. The chapter also provided an explanation of a qualitative research design methodology that was used. Other important methodological issues that were presented include the research population, the sample and the sampling procedure; data generation method employed; the procedures used to analyse qualitative data, as well as issues of ensuring the trustworthiness of the findings. Towards the end of the chapter, ethical considerations are explained, and justification for their use are provided. The next chapter presents the analysis and the discussion of findings.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **DATA PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

The foregoing chapter concentrated on research design and provided a synopsis of the qualitative methodology that was employed in the study. This chapter provides a detailed data presentation, the analysis of the data and the subsequent discussion of findings which is broken down into different themes. Data analysis is described as a process that consist of organising, accounting for, and illuminating the data (Cohen et al., 2017). Data analysis is also described by Marlow (2005) as a way of giving meaning to the data generated. Similarly, Ader (2008) describes data analysis as a method of examining, cleaning, changing and supporting decision making. Therefore, based on what these scholars say, in this study, like all other qualitative studies, data was transcribed before data analysis was conducted through various steps, including coding and sorting similarities and variations in the responses from the interviews that had been conducted with various participants (Principals, Deputy Principals and Departmental Heads, as School Management Team (SMT) members. Thereafter, the data was grouped into various themes. The themes that emerged were as follows: (i) the barriers that hindered School Management Team members in handling COVID-19 safety procedures and regulations in schools. (ii) SMT members' leadership practices and experiences during the COVID-19 outbreak. (iii) Leading during times of crisis. (iv) Lessons SMT members learned from their leadership practices during the COVID-19 breakout.

The main purpose of this chapter is to present and analyse the generated data from the three categories of participants (Principals, Deputy Principals and Departmental Heads). As part of that analysis and discussion, an attempt is made to synchronise the emerging themes with the research questions which steered the study. As indicated in Chapter Three, the use of a qualitative research approach to generate data through semi-structured interviews, was employed. Given the research ethics detailed in the previous chapter, schools and participants are indicated by the pseudonyms below:

- School names: Imbasa-yesizwe Primary School (IPS), Blue Crane Primary School (BPS), Protea Primary School (PPS).

- School Principals: SP1, SP2, SP3
- Deputy Principals: DP1, DP2, DP3
- Departmental Heads: DH1, DH2, DH3

The focus of this study was on understanding the complexities of leading the schools in the context of the COVID-19 breakout, and the study captured the perspectives of the SMT members in three selected primary schools. Separate interview guides were developed to direct the discussion with each category of participants in the School Management Team. The interview questions had been developed to link directly with the research questions that underpinned the study. To justify the claims that I made, participants' voices in the form of *verbatim* quotes were used. The literature reviewed in Chapter Two is injected to enhance the discussion of the findings.

## **4.2 Profiling of schools and participants**

In this section of the study the profiles of three participating schools are presented as well as that of the nine participants who took part in this study.

### **4.2.1 Profiling of schools**

All three schools in the study were public primary schools. They all belonged to Quintile 1. They charged no fees at all. According to the DBE (2019) in South Africa all public schools in each province are grouped into five rankings called quintiles. The Minister establishes the national quintiles for public schools each year, which the MECs must use to identify the schools that are not allowed to collect tuition fees and other funds in the schools. There are Quintile 1-3 and Quintile 4-5 institutions. These schools are organised in descending order of poverty. There are "no fee-paying schools" in Quintiles 1-3. Quintile 4-5 schools are "fee-paying schools". The factors used to classify schools include income, illiteracy, and unemployment rates in a community, and are established by considering the economic situation of the area surrounding the school. Government grants are given to schools based on their quintiles. Quintile 1 schools get the largest percentage allocation per learner, while Quintile 5 schools get the smallest. Quintile 1-3 schools are in an extremely precarious financial situation where they depend entirely on the government's grant (Bhengu, 2021).

In addition, the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 makes a distinction between two types of schools, namely, Section 20 and Section 21 schools (Republic of South Africa, 1996). Schools under Section 21 get their financial allocations paid directly into their banking accounts, and are given more authority and responsibility to manage their budget allocations and choices about what and where to buy the schools' equipment and other needs compared to their Section 20 counterparts. A small amount is given directly to Section 20 schools, but the provincial department does pay for services and materials. Section 21 schools receive funding from the department and are capable of handling their own finances and acquisitions. Two schools in this study were categorised as Section 21 schools and they were Imbasa-yesizwe Primary School (IPS) and Protea Primary School (PPS). Blue Crane Primary School (BPS) was categorised as a Section 20 school.

All three schools in this study had an average of 50 learners or more per class. According to a study conducted by Steyn and de Waal (2001), the Department of Education (DoE) set a teacher: learner ratio of 1:35 in primary schools. This has been supported by a study conducted by Bhengu (2021) which indicated that in most schools the challenge of large class sizes has not been successfully dealt with. Therefore, this means the schools in this study are overcrowded.

#### **4.2.1.1 Imbasa-yesizwe Primary School**

Imbasa-yesizwe Primary School is a very old school, having been built on a farm more than 80 years ago. The first classroom was a rondavel. The school has faced numerous challenges with the farm owner who ended up demolishing the school and chasing learners away. The school had to look for a new site. Imbasa-yesizwe Primary School is a Quintile 1 public school with limited access to basic amenities and a low socioeconomic background, and it is situated in the East Griqualand Circuit. Most homes in the community are either child headed or headed by grannies. IPS has 26 Post Level (PL) 1 state paid educators, 2 SGB paid educators, 4 Departmental Heads, 2 Deputy Principals and a Principal. There are also 11 non-teaching staff members comprising an Administrative Clerk, a Security Guard, 5 Food Handlers and 4 Cleaners inclusive of a Groundsman/Aid. The school has 24 classrooms and a total of 1244 learners enrolled in Grades R through to Grade 7.

#### **4.2.1.2 Blue Crane Primary School (BPS)**

Blue Crane Primary School is also a Quintile 1 public primary school. It is situated in an informal settlement in the East Griqualand Circuit. The school was built by the then Department of Education more than 20 years ago. BPS is serving a community which is poverty-stricken, with high levels of unemployment, and most people rely on the government's social grants of different kinds. Most children are staying with their grandmothers. Those who happen to have job opportunities are working on the nearby commercial farms. BPS has an enrolment of 1168 learners. It has 28 Post Level (PL) 1 state paid educators. It has 4 Departmental Heads, 2 Deputy Principals, and a Principal. It has 8 non-teaching staff. This school starts from Grade R to Grade 7. There are 24 classrooms to accommodate these 1168 learners. The classrooms are characterised by overcrowding as each classroom carries 50 learners or more on average.

#### **4.2.1.3 Protea Primary School**

Protea Primary School (PPS) was established more than 50 years ago. It is situated in the Greater Kokstad Municipality in the East Griqualand Circuit. The school starts from Grade R to Grade 7. It is an under resourced school. Like the other two schools in this study, PPS is a no-fee paying school and it relies solely on funding by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) in terms of the Norms and Standards framework. It has 33 Post Level 1 (PL1) educators who are all state paid. It has 4 Departmental Heads (PL2), 2 Deputy Principals (PL3) and a Principal (PL4). The school also has 12 non-teaching personnel. This school is the biggest of the three participating schools with an enrolment of 1674 learners, accommodated in 33 classrooms with an average of 50 or more learners per class.

### **4.2.2 Background information of participants**

Background information about all the participants in this study is shown in a table below, and this includes their academic qualifications, distribution by positions they are holding, years spent in school, duration in the current position, and years' service in the school. Understanding the participants' perspectives and their capacity to contribute crucial and pertinent information to this study was made easier by learning more about their backgrounds. Table 1-3 below

revealed that all the participants in the selected primary schools are relatively experienced School Management Team (SMT) members with more than five years in leadership and management positions, leading at different levels of operation. They all hold formal academic qualifications from accredited higher institutions of learning. In order to be regarded as a professionally trained teacher in South Africa, one must meet the requirements of the South African Council of Educators (SACE) and the Norms and Standards for Educators (DoE, 2000).

Participant	Position holding	Number of years in the current school	Number of years in the current position	Qualifications
SP1	Principal	16	08	REQV 14 (Further Diploma in Education)
DP1	Deputy Principal	24	14	REQV 15 (BEd Honors in Education Management)
DH1	Departmental Head	19	10	REQV 15 (BEd Honors in Education Management)

**Table 1: Background information of participants – Imbasa-yesizwe Primary School**

Participant	Position holding	Number of years in the current school	Number of years in the current position	Qualifications
SP2	Principal	21	21	REQV 14 (Advanced Certificate in School Management and Leadership)
DP2	Deputy Principal	06	06	REQV 14 (Post Graduate Diploma in Education Management)
DH2	Departmental Head	21	11	REQV 14 (Advanced Certificate in Education Management)

**Table 2: Background information of participants – Blue Crane Primary School**

Participant	Position holding	Number of years in the current school	Number of years in the current position	Qualifications
SP3	Principal	28	19	REQV 14 (Advanced Certificate in Education Management)
DP3	Deputy Principal	22	06	REQV 15 (BEd Honors in Education Law and Policy)
DH3	Departmental Head	22	06	REQV 14 (Advanced Certificate in Education Management)

**Table 3: Background information of participants – Protea Primary School**

### **4.3 The emerging themes**

As discussed above, several themes emerged from the data generated in this study. These themes are illustrated by selected quotation excerpts from participants. As a result, the emphasis of this part of the chapter is on data presentation relating to the challenges of school leadership in the context of the COVID-19 breakout. The following four major themes had to be created in order to respond to the study questions: (i) the barriers that hindered School Management Team members in handling COVID-19 safety procedures and regulations in schools. (ii) SMT members' leadership practices and experiences during the COVID-19 outbreak. (iii) Leading during times of crisis. (iv) Lessons SMT members learned from their leadership practices during the COVID-19 breakout.

#### **4.3.1 The barriers that hindered School Management Team members in handling COVID-19 safety procedures and regulations in schools**

The study's participants referred to a number of barriers they faced in running their schools during the COVID-19 breakout. The most outstanding barriers that the participants cited were the complications and realities they were facing in the implementation of policy guidelines and health protocols, principally the challenges of handling social distancing in schools. This has been addressed as structural issues and social issues regarding social distancing that the SMT members had to deal with. Other issues that came up were the barriers encountered in management of the protocol of hand hygiene and sanitation in schools, since hand hygiene played a crucial role in combating the spread of the corona virus. They also mentioned the issues of stress, fear and anxiety brought about by COVID-19 breakout which also became barriers in their work performance. The details about these barriers are provided as sub-themes below and as Sections 4.3.1.1, 4.3.1.2 and 4.3.1.3 respectively.

##### **4.3.1.1 Structural issues and social issues regarding social distancing that the SMT members had to deal with**

The complications and realities in schools that SMT members in this study faced as they attempted to implement policy guidelines and health safety protocols took various dimensions. These dimensions included issues of social distancing practices; barriers encountered in the management of hand hygiene and sanitation protocols in schools. The issue of social distancing



featured a lot for most of the participants interviewed in this study. According to their statements during interviews, they all shared the same sentiments with regard to social distancing issue. It emerged that social distancing posed lots of challenges because of the large number of learners enrolled in all three schools in this study. They did not have enough space and furniture to observe the gazetted social distancing which demanded that learners should be 1.5 metres apart.

When I asked the Deputy Principals about the barriers that hindered them in handling COVID-19 safety protocols, among the complexities stated, the issue of social distancing came out, and DP1 in her presentation asserted:

*...there was an overcrowding in classes so we couldn't do that 1.5 meters that were supposed to do so it was a big challenge because we had so many learners and also the classes were so small...*

Arguing along similar lines, DP3 had the following to say:

*Overcrowding, it's unfortunate that Protea Primary School it's a school in the location so it's very overcrowded... Eh... non-adherence of social distancing... we were expected to observe i-social distance that was the thing that we were not used to so people did not understand why they should keep i-social distance.*

Similarly, DP2 had this to say:

*Eh... as you can see our school it has got i-problem of i-infrastructure... the classes are few so it hindered a lot -COVID-19 because we were requested to do the rotational learning of which eh... that one also did not assist much in terms of ...social distancing because the classrooms are too small ...so it was totally impractical for us... So, i-social distancing was not easy for us to maintain.*

During interviews with participants, it also surfaced that social distancing was not only a structural issue but, it was also a social issue that the SMT members had to deal with.

In that regard, DH2 had this to say:

*So, teachers were also forgetting to maintain social distancing for example you would find them standing close to each other chatting, during meetings they would sit next to each other. You would also find them hugging and shaking hands or even patting each. As monkey see, monkey do, learners also broke COVID-19 safety regulations. They would play with each other with no social distancing, they touched each other, and some even had physical fights.*

DH3 also shared the same sentiments, and said:

*Human is a social being in other words it means that they are people who want to do things together, speak together, play together, display affection to other people. So, this meant that at certain times educators would forget the seriousness of not touching... and it required a strong leader to remind them in a very polite manner that they were endangering each other's lives.*

School facilities had to operate at 50% of their capacity or less, in accordance with Government Gazette No. 43372 of May 29, 2020, volume 659 paragraph (10) in order to satisfy health and safety protocols, and social distancing criteria. Studies conducted by various scholars indicated that large class sizes in South African public schools constituted another barrier to ensuring that COVID-19 health standards were followed in classrooms (Maree, 2022). Gustafsson and Maponya (2021) also concur that around half of South Africa's primary school learners are enrolled in classrooms with more than 40 learners. Inequality and averages were significantly worse than in nations like Chile, Indonesia, Morocco, and Iran (Gustafsson & Maponya, 2021). In support of this, Maree (2022) concurs with the view that the COVID-19 pandemic made it challenging for most schools to find enough space in their classrooms to accommodate more learners. Similarly, Chatzipanagiotou and Katsarou (2023) found that setting up and upholding safety measures inside schools to safeguard the physical safety of all parties involved, proved to be an exceedingly difficult task for school leaders who had great difficulty organising their schools in accordance with the established health protocols. They added that managing school classes with social distancing and large class sizes posed an additional barrier to effective protocol application. The issues indicated above confirm the complexities that School Management Team members were faced with in handling safety regulations in schools during times of crises brought about by the COVID-19 breakout.

#### **4.3.1.2 Issues of hand hygiene and sanitation protocols**

The findings revealed that the participants encountered a big challenge in applying hand hygiene and sanitation protocols in their schools. The main reason for this was a lack of sufficient water supply in their schools. This reality undermined effective implementation of hand hygiene and sanitation, whereas these two measures played an important role in reducing the transmission of COVID-19. According to Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) for the control and management of COVID-19 for educational institutions and communities, measures and protocols to curtail the spread of COVID-19 entailed meticulous, regular hand washing

using soap and water (Republic of South Africa, 2020). Speaking to the principal of Imbasayesizwe Primary School, he elaborated as follows:

*The water supply here in... eh... it's not constant ehm... we asked for... from the department the tanks that they can be filled with water from Rand Water. It was difficult to have the water in school in time so you'll find out some days there's no water in tanks but the learners are here so when they want to wash their hands they can't wash their hands... Yha... water problem was an issue, really it was an issue.*

In an interview with DP1, she also mentioned the challenge of sufficient water supply. She stated:

*...and then there was water shortage we had... it was the biggest issue in our school. Yes, we have received the tank, the tanks... there were two of them but we faced with challenges in terms of filling up the tanks.*

In an interview with DH2, the challenge of a scarcity of water also came up as having detrimental effects on the efforts of minimising transmission of COVID-19 in the schools. She had the following to say:

*We also had eh... scarcity of water in this township. The municipality closes water most of the times during the day so there is water shedding. We had to buy tanks for provision of water... Even though these tanks could not provide water to the toilets, therefore, the issue of unhygienic toilets was not really, properly, effectively addressed because even the use of buckets of water was not sufficient for the whole school's toilets.*

DH1 had the following to share about scarcity of water supply in her school:

*...in our environment there is a shortage of water especially where we are situated because we are on top so the pressure from the tanks is very low so this area around the school has no water... Then the department provided the washing stations which never worked.*

The issues surrounding water supply in some schools, particularly in rural communities is recorded in the literature and social movements. For instance, Peoples Coalition (2020) revealed that some schools were faced with challenges of water supply. This is consistent with what emerged from my interactions with the participants in this study; they all highlighted that their schools were also in the same difficult situation. The issues presented by some of the participants in the interviews revealed that it was difficult for them to adhere to the stipulation of hand washing. Seemingly, enforcing the government mandated COVID-19 safety protocols and regulations presented SMT members with new challenges and complexities over and above their normal duties. The literature supports what the study's participants are stating. Scholars

like Bhengu (2021) and du Plessis (2020) endorse the view that the scale of the infrastructure backlogs in Section 20 schools, which are primarily found in Quintile 1 to Quintile 3, can be seen in the fact that during the COVID-19 breakout, a substantial amount of money had to be invested in short-term interventions like mobile toilets and water tanks. According to Khumalo (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the government's tardiness in eradicating subpar sanitation infrastructure at several schools. Bhengu (2021) also highlights that the lack of physical resources continues to hamper efforts to combat the COVID-19 outbreak.

#### **4.3.1.3 Stress, fear and anxiety experienced in schools during the COVID-19 breakout**

Stress, fear and anxiety are some of the dynamics on the ground that made the efforts of SMT members a bit more complex and difficult to achieve. Out of nine participants interviewed in this study five of them revealed the problem of stress and anxiety that was experienced in schools during the COVID-19 breakout. In an interview with SP1, he expressed the view that anxiety negatively affected his efforts at combating coronavirus. This is what he had to say:

*When the COVID-19 broke out... it brought a lot of anxiety. People were uncertain, people thought that the virus is gonna kill all of us. Eh... I was one of them; I was very afraid.*

This view was also shared by DP1 who commented:

*...everyone was traumatised by this deadly disease; so, everyone had a fear of being infected and affected; so, there were so many things that eeehhh... were hindering the progress and the process of teaching and learning. We were unaware of this situation so, if people are unaware of the situation eeehhh... such as this so they tend to fight with each other, we had so many conflicts created by this because of fear people were... had fear.*

Similar views were expressed by other participants. For instance, in her interview, DP3 had this to say:

*The other barrier was fear. People were afraid of the unknown regardless of all the precautions set by Department of Health as the pandemic was spreading daily; so, people were living under fear. COVID-19 disease was the most dangerous disease that ever came across with so the teachers were... had anxiety and panic attacks.*

Highlighting the issue of how stressful it was to work in the midst of COVID-19, DH1 explained:

*When we opened in term 3 in 2020, we had to try out new teaching strategies and methods; there was a lot of stress due to fear of getting the virus, and perhaps, dying.*

When DH1 was asked if stress and fear affected the teachers only or if learners were also affected by such a phenomenon, she explained:

*The stress was mostly amongst the teachers... the stress that was caused to teachers was because they are working closely with the learners; so, they are touching them, touching their books; you see; so, it was easy for them to get the virus.*

With regard to the challenges of stress and anxiety that came up during interviews DP3, the Deputy Principal of Blue Crane Primary School asserted:

*...the educators were shocked, they had anxiety; they could not work well; they were afraid of this COVID-19.*

The above responses are confirmed in the study by Luchembe (2021) that teachers were under a lot of psychological stress at work since their health was exposed to high risk. Bogans et al. (2022) stated that dealing with stress and worry about the epidemic became a verbalised concern for school leaders as they became the key psychological support system for their school community during the course of the pandemic. In support of this view, a study conducted by Chatzipanagiotou and Katsarou (2023) indicated that apprehension and fear in the SMT members, triggered by the proliferation of coronavirus and the uncertainty of what may occur daily, left most school leaders with extra tasks of providing emotional support to their staff members. A study conducted by Dasborough and Scandura (2022) also revealed that school leaders experienced severe stress during the COVID-19 pandemic. They further stated that leaders who were extremely stressed and anxious created anxiety among their junior staff members. According to Luchembe (2021), one difficulty that seemed to go undetected is the psychological stress that both learners and teachers experienced during the COVID-19 breakout. Reid and Sam (2021) point out that the COVID-19 pandemic required a conspicuously different analysis of leadership in a crisis because of long-term stress related to continuously changing condition at the schools.

#### **4.3.2 School Management Team members' leadership practices and experiences during the COVID-19 breakout**

Even though months of contact learning time were lost because of school closures mandated by the Department of Basic Education to curtail the spread of COVID-19; this was also further exacerbated by the reduced attendance caused by social distancing (Landa et al., 2021; NCOP

Education and Technology Sports Arts and Culture, 2020). Education during the COVID-19 outbreak was in many ways re-defined as an experience where personal interaction between teachers and students was disturbed (Harris & Jones, 2022). The findings of this study indicate that education was indeed disrupted during the COVID-19 outbreak. During interviews School Management Team members indicated how they ensured educational survival in the face of the complexities confronted. Some participants indicated that in their schools they went beyond the call of duty and offered extra classes and they also indicated that leading schools during this time included having to adapt to the new conditions of work and do rotations. In their leadership during this era, they also revealed that they were facing challenges of various stakeholders not playing their roles adequately. According to the participants' statements, this apparent lack of support from stakeholders hampered successful implementation of COVID-19 policies and regulations in schools. The two key stakeholders that they highlighted are the officials of the Department of Basic Education, and the parents. The challenge entailed a failure to support schools in their efforts to fight and contain the spread of COVID-19. Combined, the lack of cooperation and support from these two key stakeholders presented challenges for the process and progress of teaching and learning. Co-operation between interested parties, as well as members of a school community is regarded as a pivotal part of school leadership in periods of calamity as it positively impacts reactions during and directly after the emergency incident (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023). The details about these practices and experiences are provided as four sub-themes below as Sections 4.3.2.1, 4.3.2.2, 4.3.2.3 and 4.3.2.4 respectively.

#### **4.3.2.1 Leading for educational survival in the face of complexities encountered and going beyond the call of duty**

When SP1 was asked how they ensured that lost teaching and learning time that was caused by the COVID-19 breakout was recovered, he said:

*... We talked to our educators to have eh... extra classes so we can try to... get our learners taught... Our educators were also afraid of this new pandemic. So, it was not easy to get everyone on board so it was to talk to those few that will listen and eager to help and teach learners those extra classes.*

The notion of going beyond the call of duty was also expressed by other participants such as SP3, who articulated his views like this:

*Dealing with the issue of teaching and learning we devised a plan. Those who were not at school due to absenteeism, due to failure to understand the time table, we give them thirty minutes extra to stay behind to finish the work.*

In an interview with the Departmental Head from Protea Primary School, he indicated that the random outbreaks tended to disrupt the rhythm of teaching and learning. When I asked him about strategies that he used to close those gaps of lost teaching and learning time, he responded:

*... We were compelled to implement extra classes like afternoon classes so that those learners that were lagging behind should actually be updated.*

After doing the analysis, the participants' responses indicated that not all SMT members offered extra classes in their schools. For example, speaking to the Departmental Head from Blue Crane Primary school, she said:

*Even though things were not easy for us... we could not offer extra classes to ensure optimum teaching and learning because of their age as well as transport issues. But trimmed ATPs really... really... helped.*

Various scholars reveal that despite the reality of education losses, which were undeniably real and significant, it was also important to identify that new learning occurred during the peak of the pandemic. They further state that educators and learners learn to be malleable, hardy and adaptable (Harris & Jones, 2022). How crucial effective leadership is to learning in all forms has been amply illustrated by the waves of school closings and reopenings that occurred around the world (Education Development Trust, 2020). Individuals in leadership positions discovered new ways to lead during the crisis and, most importantly, learned how to make sure that teaching and learning never stopped. To achieve goals and implement change, managers and other persons in leadership roles have to collaborate with their staff (Harris & Jones, 2020).

#### **4.3.2.2 Rotational learning as one of the strategies adopted by the Department of Basic Education and schools**

While special care was taken to plan and implement the COVID-19 policies in schools, and most schools were doing their part to make sure that procedures intended to stop the virus' spread were conducted properly, many insurmountable problems and challenges were experienced when it came to the actual situation in schools (Maree, 2021). According to the participants' responses, in an effort to keep the schools open, they opted for all available avenues at their disposal. Speaking to the participants in this study, they revealed that in their

schools they opted for rotational learning. Rotational learning was one of the measures that was adopted by the DBE during the COVID-19 breakout. In other words, leading the schools during this time included having to adapt to new conditions of work and do rotations. This was one of the attempts to comply with social distancing principles and policy. In other words, when all the learners were at school at the same time, it would be impossible to practise social distancing. When I asked the Deputy Principal from Blue Crane Primary School how she ensured education continuity during COVID-19 breakout, she asserted:

*We did rotational learning because we could not accommodate all the learners so we grouped the learners so that they give each other eh the chance...*

In an interview with DH3, he indicated that in his school they also implemented rotational learning. He asserted:

*Every classroom had to be divided into two groups attending on alternative days. The curriculum timetable had to be adjusted to be relevant to the situation.*

He further elaborated:

*COVID-19 pandemic did not offer many optional choices, it to a great extent prescribed a do or die situation or circumstance. Every classroom had to be divided into two halves. The problem posed by the division of learners into two groups also meant that there was a considerable duration where you could not see them and once they are absent from school the tendency is that they do not go to their books and revise so resulting in the fact that a lot of information was lost, meaning that eh... before you embark on a new lesson you have to sort of start from the previous lesson and check whether you are sti... they are still on the right track and if not, you have to abandon that lesson and try to keep them up to date.*

In a similar vein, the Principal of Imbasa-yesizwe Primary School said:

*The learners we had to... they had to come on sections eh... days were divided, this class comes the next day doesn't come the next day the other group comes.*

Sintema (2020) and Kanyane (2020) postulate that the consequences which the closure of schools had on learners included physical, psychological and educational harm. Scholars suggest that in many instances, COVID-19 reshaped education as an activity in which the relationship between teachers and learners was disconnected (Harris & Jones, 2022). According to Republic of South Africa (2020) schools had to consider and apply any of the following timetable models according to their context and functionality: (a) Daily and weekly rotation, (b) bi-weekly rotation, (c) platooning or shifts, (d) traditional and daily attendance,



(e) hybrid attendance. It is clear from the responses above that in a bid to keep the schools open and to ensure education continuity the schools in this study opted for rotational learning.

#### **4.3.2.3 Lack of support from the Department of Basic Education**

All nine participants interviewed in this study stated that there were deficiencies in terms of seeking and obtaining backing from the Department of Basic Education at district and provincial levels. This notion was expressed through different responses offered by the participants. These ranged from late delivery of PPEs which hindered the implementation of COVID-19 safety protocols and thus compromised the safety of everyone in the schools. There was also a lack of psychological support services for those who were going through stress and anxiety. There were infrequent or no responses to requests for additional resources like prefabricated classrooms and furniture; hence, there was a challenge of adequate floor space to adhere to the regulation of social distancing because of large class sizes. There were infrequent or no responses to requests for repairs of water tanks and washing basins that were supplied by the Department of Basic Education, and this resulted in ineffective use of this equipment. There were no responses to requests for water tanks to be filled with water; hence, they ran empty and handwashing was deemed to be a critical factor in fighting the proliferation of the COVID-19 virus. The participants also stated that there was minimal training, guidance and monitoring in terms of COVID-19 policy guideline implementation. All these challenges contributed to the complexities of managing schools during such a difficult time.

In an interview with SP1, he indicated that there was no support from the Department of Basic Education. In his response he said that the COVID-19 breakout brought them stress and anxiety. When I asked him if there was any psychological support provided to him and his staff members, he elaborated:

*Any professional help; nothing; we didn't get any help from the department in... in a like psychologist or those people who work with our minds or brains no we were just thrown in the deep end of the swimming pool. Eh... there was really no... no support in those cases, we were told what to do like those protocols that we... we were given eh... in relation to COVID-19.*

When SP1 was asked about other difficulties that he experienced in his leadership during the COVID-19 breakout, he further elaborated on the lack of support from the department, saying:

*I remember I had to ask and I wrote letters to ah... our Circuit Manager, asking for prefab classes and some new furniture that didn't happen so... we were left on our own. It was difficult from manpower to resources. We didn't get help at all from the department.*

In a similar vein, the Principal of Protea Primary School commented:

*The difficulty that we experienced firstly is the distribution of mobile classrooms. The Department of Education when they were distributing mobile classrooms, that we applied for and also attaching our enrolment. To my surprise prefabs were distributed to schools which did not need them, that was frustrating.*

He went on and said:

*Another frustration is furniture. The manner in which the furniture was distributed by the district office was not fair and it was not good. So, that was the frustration seeing the department failing to manage the resources equally, efficiently for the betterment of learners and for the betterment of the school.*

In an interview with DH3 about guidance, training and resources that were provided regarding the implementation of COVID-19 regulations, his response corroborated what the other participants had told me:

*From our department's side there, was no training whatsoever, nor were workshops provided. Instead, we were bombarded with lots of circulars and gazettes... On top of that our department never even visited our schools to monitor compliance or to give support. There was never any follow up.*

In her response to the same question, DH2 said:

*The resources that were provided by the department gave us challenges as the consignments were delayed and when they come, they were in short supply.*

Arising from the views expressed by the participants above, it is clear that they experienced lots of challenges when it came to support by the Department of Basic Education. What the participants in this study are saying is also found in literature. For instance, in a study conducted in the United States of America by Hayes and Derrington (2023), it was found that school leaders revealed the lack of guidance from state and district officials when schools first started closing, and they had to assess the situation for their schools and take action. Similarly, research conducted here in South Africa by Mudaly & Mudaly (2021) concurred with such experiences, and found that several educators complained about the Department of Basic Education's lack of support for the implementation of COVID-19 procedures in schools. They further stated that the Department of Basic Education's lack of support for the implementation

of COVID-19 guidelines in some schools was worsened by contextual variables. As noted by Luchembe (2021), education facilities faced a number of difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### **4.3.2.4 The lack of support and collaboration from parents**

According to this study's findings, all the curriculum managers (Departmental Heads) in the study offered similar opinions based on their experiences in their schools with regards to parental involvement in their children's school-work. The participants revealed that this caused problems in schools especially on the curriculum side of teaching and learning as the work that was given to the learners to do at home was either not done, or done in parents' hand writing. They stated that this gave teachers an extra burden of work because learners would come back to school blank and having forgotten what was taught and they were compelled to either redo the previous lessons before embarking on new lessons or implement extra classes. This also posed problems for the management plan as work could not be finished on time. In her response DH2 had the following to say:

*Once a child is at home, education stops because most of our learners have no support from their parents at home. As much as teaching and learning is our responsibility at school, but if there was collaboration between teachers and parents there wouldn't be any difficulties nor challenges.*

In a similar vein, DH3 elaborated:

*It was sadly noted... noticeable that 40% of our learners lacked parental supervision... as they would come back not having done the homework with no valid reasons.*

In an interview with DH1 she said:

*When we opened in term 3 2020, we had to try out new teaching strategies and methods... So, the teachers had to provide learning packs and activities of work to work at home which was not very fruitful in our environment where parents are uneducated and found it very difficult to assist their children so... even if the work is sent at home teachers had to still do the work because parents were unable to do the work.*

When DH3 was asked to give his closing remarks at the end of the interview, this Departmental Head expressed the feeling that it was important to share his experiences regarding the complexities of leading the school in the context of COVID-19. In his statement he said:

*COVID-19 was sort of like a wake-up call exposing the fact that about 40% of parents were not involved in their children's education; 10% were reluctant and 5% did not*

*even know what was happening with the child. If I were to make an example, it is like taking a car and parking it in a garage and then in the afternoon you come and fetch it... Education is or involves three people, a teacher, a child or the learner and the parent. And if the parent is a reluctant participant, then the whole idea of education is futile. Teachers alone cannot win this battle; parents need to be involved in their children's education.*

In an interview with DP2 of Blue Crane Primary School, she also commented about the challenge of parents' lack of support in their children's education. She emphatically stated:

*Parents are not encouraging their learners in the home to do their school work. Homework was not done..., learner packs were not done... As I've indicated we've i-  
parents in this background of our school that are not fully involved in the learning of  
their learners a huge challenge.*

During the closure of schools as a result of the pandemic an official document was issued which was Circular No.3 of 2020. It advised that schools should encourage learners to participate in stimulating programmes that were established such as the Read to Lead programme, Maths Buddies etc. through the supervision and guidance of parents. This was supported by schools through the provision of workbooks, worksheets, readers and so forth. What the participants presented from the discussions above highlights the complexities they experienced because of the lack of parental involvement and collaboration in their children's schoolwork. Undeniably, the contribution and association of key interested parties such as parents or guardians of the learners was very much needed. The new way of learning depended heavily on the learners and their families (Torres, 2021).

#### **4.3.3 Leading during times of crises**

A mandate has been given to the School Management Team (SMT) members to be responsible for the daily management of activities in the school (Jonas & Mkulu, 2022; Molefe, 2013). In support of this, Jonas and Mkulu (2022) point out that in South Africa, schools are supervised by School Management Teams that were introduced in 1996 by the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996. Daniel (2017) further points out that this Act set the base structure for managing schools in the whole country.

During the interviews when participants were asked about how do they lead during times of crisis, they all stated different aspects that they apply. On one hand, they had similar strategies

that they employ throughout the turbulent times. Among the aspects mentioned, involvement of stakeholders, communication and team work were the most outstanding approaches they apply.

#### **4.3.3.1 Involvement of stakeholders, communication and teamwork**

In an interview with SP3, he asserted:

*Eh... during times of crises like the crisis of COVID-19, when there is a crisis I alert all stakeholders, all people involve first... and also working as a team also assisted.*

The Principal of Imbasa-yesizwe commented that “*It’s mainly to get all the stakeholders involved in all the problems...*”

Echoing similar views, DP1 also stated:

*Team work is very important so in each and everything... I involve others. I think another thing that is very important is to be transparent, make sure that you communicate.*

The notion of communication during times of crisis was also highlighted by SP2 who said:

*“I’ve learnt that communication is very vital during the times of crisis”.*

The Deputy Principal from Protea Primary School mentioned the same strategies as other participants. She had the following to say:

*During crisis, I gather all the relevant stakeholders... Team work became important as we need each other during crisis.*

What the participants in this study stated about the way they lead during crisis is also found in literature. For instance, Haynes and Derrington (2023) state that during times of crisis leaders should exhibit social skills; they should have an ability to work with others and get along with others. These scholars further assert that leaders who possess social skills have the ability to make connections with people from various backgrounds and cultures (Haynes & Derrington, 2023). They facilitate the work of all stakeholders to ensure a united effort. When I asked the participants if they received any training in crisis management, they all revealed that for managing the COVID-19 crisis, they did not receive any training; some stated that they only did Crisis Management while they were training for teaching and others said they did Crisis Management in developmental courses like their post graduate qualifications. In this regard, the Principal of Imbasa-yesizwe asserted: “*No, no training that I received to manage any crisis.*” Speaking to the Departmental Head from Protea Primary School, he said: “*I haven’t... been trained*”.

DP1 shared the same sentiments and retorted: “*Not at all*”. Although the narratives from these participants dominated the discourse, others were less pessimistic. For instance, one Departmental Head indicated that he had received some training, although, not from the Department of Basic Education. This is what DH1 had to say in that regard:

*I’ve received the training through my studies in Education Management.*

Scholars such as Hayes and Derrington (2023) note that any crisis adds to the complexity of leadership. Similarly, Marcus et al. (2019) concur that in a crisis, the complexity of leadership is amplified. We can infer from the aforementioned comments that School Management Team members should possess crisis management skills which are especially important during precarious times such as those posed by the COVID-19 crisis. It should be highlighted that the majority of school leaders have received little to no training in crisis management, and they have not handled a crisis of this size and complexity before (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021). A school leader now needs to have the ability to manage and deal with crises (Harris & Jones, 2020). The majority of school leadership preparation and training programmes prior to COVID-19, are likely to be out of sync with the difficulties facing school leaders today (Harris & Jones, 2020). Crisis leadership differs from leadership during more normal times (Förster et al., 2022).

#### **4.3.4 Lessons SMT members learned from their leadership practices during the COVID-19 outbreak**

The final stage of successful crisis management is deliberate learning from the crisis and the organisation’s crisis experience (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023). According to Du Plessis and Keyter (2020), one of the lessons to be learned is that managing during a crisis like the COVID-19 epidemic demands leaders to think creatively. Speaking to the School Management Team members about lessons learnt in leading during times of duress, three key lessons emerged. The importance of involving stakeholders when dealing with a crisis was the first among the lessons learned. Therefore, consulting others for help and advice was deemed important. The second lesson learned is ICT integration in schools to facilitate learning. The third lesson is the importance of remaining calm in a crisis situation. These three key lessons are discussed in Sections 4.3.5.1, 4.3.5.2 and 4.3.5.3 respectively.

#### 4.3.4.1 Getting stakeholders involved

The Deputy Principal of Blue Crane Primary School had the following to say about involving stakeholders in a crisis:

*I... learnt that you cannot really run or lead the school alone; all stakeholders should be involved and they are needed. So, it was clear during the time of COVID-19... So that was what I've noticed that the stakeholders are very... very... very important in the school. We should not eh... operate in silos as the schools... I learnt that they must be involved at all material times so that we ensure the smooth running of the school.*

When the Departmental Head from Imbasa-yesizwe Primary School was asked what she had learned from leading in disruptive times such as those brought about by COVID-19, she spoke about the involvement of stakeholders. She articulated it thus:

*Collaborate with different stakeholders to get help.*

SP1 shared the same opinion. He stated:

*I learnt that if we involve all our stakeholders in the school ah... things get better... the load is not that heavy because everyone knows what is happening and what is expected of them.*

What the participants are saying in this study is also found in literature. For instance, in a study conducted by Michalis (2020), the findings revealed that the crisis of COVID-19 was one of the biggest tests companies faced and they needed the trust and support of their stakeholders as they struggled to cope with the new reality. Suarez (2022) agreed that leading public schools through the perilous terrains of a global pandemic is a difficult undertaking, and also that it was during these tumultuous times that it was essential for school leaders to connect with stakeholders and interact with them. Education leadership theorists have recently tried to define effective school leadership in the light of COVID-19 in terms of leadership practices, capabilities, and skills as a guide to help school leaders steer effectively through the unfamiliar waters of the crisis by reducing the danger for the school community at both a personal and organisational levels (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023). These scholars go on to say that there are a few important characteristics that make up the profile of effective school leadership crisis management, depending on the school and community contexts that might decide the effective adoption of crisis leadership. Collaboration between stakeholders in the school has been highlighted as one of these essential qualities. A complex systems thinking approach offers a perspective that overtly recognises the interdependency and interrelationships of all agents with the system; the fact that small changes or additions to rules can have significant

effects, and the fact that altering one aspect of the system can have unexpected effects on the entire system (Obolensky, 2014).

This study employed Adaptive Leadership theory which is specifically focused on leadership in complex systems or situations and is helpful when thinking about how to respond to change, uncertainty and crisis (Bolman & Deal, 2017). The creators of the adaptive leadership model, Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky defined four foundational principles of effective Adaptive Leadership, which are: Organisational Justice; Emotional Intelligence; Development; and Character. Looking at what the participants in this study said about getting the stakeholders involved touches on the principle of organisational justice. Here, adaptive leaders foster a climate where every employee in the organisation may be heard (McKimm et al., 2022). The issue of stakeholder involvement raised by participants also touches on emotional intelligence which confirms that adaptive leadership values relationships (McKimm et al, 2022).

#### **4.3.4.2 ICT integration in schools**

The second lesson relates to the integration of ICT in teaching and learning in schools. The participants in the study also highlighted the issue of ICT (Information and Communications Technology) integration in their schools as an important lesson learned. They acknowledged for instance, that they could not offer online classes that their counterparts were offering during the prolonged closure of schools during COVID-19 which affected teaching and learning as traditional face-to-face instruction could not take place. In her presentation DP2 asserted:

*What I've also learnt is that ICT it should be integrated in our school; you see, now because of this COVID-19 we could not be able to do the online classes because our learners are not exposed to ICT... They are not exposed even here at school to ICT like the... use of computers because we've got no computer lab so they are not exposed to anything related to ICT...*

She also spoke of the disparities between Ex-Model C schools and African schools which are schools that are mainly in townships and rural areas and are under-resourced and deprived of many facilities and equipment. She commented:

*The issue of COVID-19 pandemic it really showed the gap that is that we have between the former Model-C schools and the schools for black people. The gap was clearly seen during the COVID-19 pandemic because our learners were not learning during COVID-19 but the former Model-C schools they were learning, they were doing the*



*online learning and our learners could not be involved in such because they are not exposed and they do not have resource.*

The Deputy Principal from Protea Primary School also expressed her concern about the issue of technology in schools. She articulated:

*I have learnt that South African schools must take teaching of technology seriously as technology was the best method to be used during COVID-19... In most schools they were using remote learning; they were using zoom platform to have their meetings etc. So, we need to take technology seriously in our schools.*

DP2 further added:

*I discovered that if we cannot integrate ICT in the learning of our learners we are killing them because everything is about ICT as we are in the 4<sup>th</sup> industrial revolution.*

The narratives expressed by the participants suggest that their leadership practices need to change and foreground ICT integration so that teaching and learning can proceed even if teachers and learners cannot come to school. Literature supports what the participants said in their responses. According to Toyana (2020), a quarter century after the end of the white minority rule, the South African educational system continues to be deeply divided along racial and economic lines. This was made clear by the emergence of COVID-19 and the subsequent national shutdown of the nation. The idea presented above is supported in a study by Dube (2020) as well. He also agrees that most schools in rural South Africa were unable to access the online learning that their wealthy peers could during the country's severe lockdown. From this perspective it is evident that the issue of ICT in public schools is a major concern, especially in those schools that were previously disadvantaged and are still underprivileged. Similarly, a survey carried out in the United States revealed that many school administrators in underprivileged communities spoke of a lack of digital infrastructure and the difficulties in offering students virtual learning (Hayes & Derrington, 2020). They also disclosed that a large number of Florida school children were in homeless shelters without access to computers or the internet, while others lived in remote, underdeveloped locations without broadband, making it impossible for them to access the internet.

In contrast, many of the urban and suburban schools were able to secure devices and internet. Hayes and Derrington (2020) further reveal that schools in California in the United States of America ensured that all their learners had Wi-Fi and schools found ways to provide free computers for children. Schools in Pennsylvania, also in the United States ensured that learners had computers and devices. Schools in Minnesota managed to give their learners Chrome

Books. They further stated that teachers from Montana moved from in-person meetings to virtual lessons to address their learners' learning needs (Hayes & Derrington, 2020). The schools in New York held Google Meets with their learners. In a related study, Chatzipanagiotou and Katsarou (2023) found that socioeconomic status differences among students were cited by school leaders as a contributing factor to learners' unequal access to digital education throughout the pandemic period. This inevitably leads to the widening of educational differences in terms of academic performance in students between public and private schools in Turkey. Technology-savvy school leaders emphasised how having processes in place helped throughout the pandemic (Hayes & Derrington, 2020). The discussion above is derived from a developed economy perspective; thus, suggesting that socioeconomic deprivation occurs even in highly industrialised economies and also that their plights, in some respects, remain similar to those suffered by schools and communities in South African rural areas.

#### **4.3.4.3 The importance of being calm in a crisis situation**

The third and the last lessons is more about leaders' personal attitudes and behaviours. It is the notion of remaining calm even under difficult circumstances. In a study conducted in the United States of America, scholars like Hayes and Derrington (2020) noted that it was crucial for school leaders to practise emotional self-regulation by acting as role models and remaining calm during the disruption because teachers, students, and parents were overwhelmed by the COVID-19 crisis. During interviews in this study, the participants also mentioned that they learnt that it is important to remain calm during a crisis situation. Speaking to the Deputy Principal from Imbasa-yesizwe Primary School, she said:

*Lesson number 1 ... it is the one that has saved me from this COVID-19 is that you need to be calm; stay calm; be calm even if you see that this situation is beyond you but you need to be calm.*

The Departmental Head from Protea Primary School also mentioned the principle of remaining calm during times of crisis. He emphatically stated:

*The adverse effects of any crisis, is that it poses and possesses a potential to overwhelm people. Meaning in other words that once you are overwhelmed you cannot think straight. You'd only have your defence lines are destroyed. The basic survival skill in any crisis situation is to remain calm.*

He further added:

*A crisis situation triggers a chain reaction of defeats once one loses focus. When one loses his or her composure one cannot think straight. This is followed by illogical decisions that perpetuate blunders, panic attacks and chaos... Never lose your cool in a crisis situation if you want to stand a fighting chance.*

When I asked SP1 what lessons he had learnt from dealing with emergent challenges and difficulties such as those posed by the outbreak of COVID-19, he was not hesitant and said:

*Calm! Don't get too afraid, you see when you calm you are able to use your brains properly... Yha... to be calm that's what I learnt from this outbreak of COVID-19.*

From the conversations above, it became clear that the participants in this study learnt to display calmness during the crisis and that worked for them in leading their schools during those trying times of the COVID-19 breakout. According to research conducted by Hayes and Derrington (2020), remaining calm during the COVID-19 crisis helped school leaders in American schools to manage and lead their school effectively. They further postulated that since teachers, learners and parents were overwhelmed by the COVID-19 crisis, it was important for school leaders to self-regulate their emotions by serving as role models and staying calm during the disruption (Hayes & Derrington, 2020).

#### **4.4 Chapter summary**

This chapter presented the analysis and discussion of findings from the qualitative data generated through semi-structured interviews. The data was divided into several themes and sub-themes. In addition, I made connections between the study's research findings and the literature that was covered in Chapter Two. At the beginning of the chapter, the profile of the participating schools and the participants themselves are provided. The next chapter concludes the study by presenting conclusions and making recommendations.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

The foregoing chapter presented and discussed data that were generated through the use of semi-structured interviews from three primary schools in the Harry Gwala District. This chapter discusses the conclusions that are drawn from the findings discussed in Chapter Four regarding the complexities of leading the schools in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak. The discussion of conclusions is grounded in the research questions that underpinned this study. Firstly, a synopsis of the entire study, in the form of a summary is presented. Secondly, the chapter discusses the conclusions of the study using four critical research questions. Thirdly, attention is also drawn to the implications of the study, presented in light of these conclusions. Finally, a chapter summary concludes the chapter and the whole study.

#### **5.2 Study summary**

COVID-19 brought many challenges to schools, teachers, children and parents who had to adapt to new methods of teaching and learning. Guidelines and policies were issued and these were planned to fit into the school environment to curb the spread of COVID-19. The Department of Basic Education gave some of the responsibility of enforcing the COVID-19 regulations to the School Management Team members. Regrettably, a range of challenges hindered the effective and sustainable implementation of COVID-19 procedures and policies in schools. It is for this reason that I embarked on an investigation of this plight. Consequently, this study attempted to investigate the SMT members perceptions of the complexities of leading schools in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak. The main intention was to understand the SMT members' views and experiences of leading during times of crises such as that of COVID-19. Three primary schools in the Harry Gwala District in the province of KwaZulu-Natal were the research sites.

In the first chapter, the study was introduced to lay the foundation and understanding of the problem. It encompassed an overview and orientation to the study. As part of the orientation to the study, I presented the background to the problem, and this was followed by the statement

of the problem. I then gave the rationale for the study, which was followed by the significance of the study and the key research questions. The demarcation of the study, as well as the outline of the study brought the chapter to the end.

In the second chapter, I provided an in-depth review of literature related to the complexities of leading the schools in the context of the COVID-19 breakout, and further revealed silences and gaps in literature. Both local and international literature was utilised to draw insights on this topic. I also paid particular attention to the theoretical frameworks that underpinned the study, namely Adaptive leadership and Transformational leadership. In Chapter Three, I provided details about the design and methodological issues. These involved the discussion on the research paradigm and research design. Research methodology, as well as sampling methods were also presented in this chapter. Details on how data were generated and analysed were also given. So, the use of semi-structured interviews within a broad qualitative research approach, to generate data was explained and justified. Further to that, I elucidated the issues of trustworthiness, ethical considerations and limitations of the study.

The data generated and the interviews with the participants are discussed in Chapter Four. A detailed discussion and interpretation of the data that emerged from the analysis was broken down into five themes and sub-themes. Drawing from the research questions presented in the first chapter, the themes and sub-themes used are; (i) The barriers that hindered School Management Team members in handling COVID-19 safety procedures and regulations in schools. Sub-themes being:

- Structural and social issues that the SMT members had to deal with.
- Issues of hand hygiene and sanitation protocols.
- Stress, fear and anxiety experienced in schools during COVID-19 breakout.

(ii) School Management Team members leadership practices and experiences during the COVID-19 outbreak, with the following themes:

- Leading for educational survival in the face of complexities encountered and going beyond the call of duty.
- Rotational learning as one of the strategies adopted by the Department of Basic Education and schools.
- Lack of support from the Department of Basic Education.
- Lack of support and collaboration from parents.

(iii) Leading during times of crisis, and the sub-themes that came up are:

- Involvement of stakeholders, communication and teamwork.

(iv) Lessons SMT members learned from their leadership practices during COVID-19 outbreak, with the following themes:

- Getting stakeholders involved.
- ICT integration in schools
- The importance of being calm in a crisis situation

### **5.3 Key research questions restated**

This section restates the research questions that were posed in Chapter One. The purpose of restating them is to highlight their role in organising the discussion of the conclusions. The research questions are used in this chapter as headings to direct the discussion of the conclusions. The following is a list of five research questions for the study:

#### Main question

- What are the complexities that School Management Team members dealt with as they led schools in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak in the East Griqualand Circuit?

#### Sub-research questions

- What are the barriers that hinder School Management Team members in handling COVID-19 safety procedures and regulations in schools?
- How do School Management Team members lead during the COVID-19 outbreak?
- How do School Management Team members lead during the times of crisis?
- What are the lessons that School Management Team members learned from their leadership practices during the COVID-19 outbreak?

### **5.4 Presentation of conclusions**

The research questions that were posed in chapter one will now serve as headings in order to organise the presentation of the discussion.

#### **5.4.1 What are the barriers that hindered School Management Team members in handling COVID-19 safety procedures and regulations in schools?**

In the findings regarding the barriers that hindered School Management Team members in handling COVID-19 safety procedures and regulations in schools the issue of social distancing was said to be the most challenging aspect. This issue emphasised the complications and the realities in schools faced by SMT members in the implementation of policy guidelines and health protocols. This was due to a number of factors such as large learner enrolments in these schools. And as such, the participants did not hide the fact that they could not observe the gazetted social distancing which was 1.5 meters. The literature that was discussed in Chapter Two specified that the perfect scenario was the one where people maintained social distance of at least 1.5 meters from each other and this had to be adhered to at all times. This was later changed to 1 meter, but still the schools could not adhere to this protocol. The data also revealed that the challenges posed by social distancing also included social and cultural issues that the SMT members had to deal with. They even mentioned that humans are social beings, so people want to do everything together irrespective of the prescriptions around these issues. One conclusion to be made in this regard is that SMT members experienced difficulties in forcing teachers and learners to adhere to the COVID-19 health and safety regulations. It is also evident that the environment within which schools in rural communities experienced numerous challenges that were beyond their control and the Department of Education was hardly available to assist them to effectively implement COVID-19 health protocols. More details about this aspect can be found in Section 4.3.1.1 of Chapter Four.

The results of the study also showed that SMT members were faced with an enormous task in terms of handling COVID-19 safety procedures and regulations. There were also barriers that hindered SMT members from handling stipulated safety protocols in schools. The challenge of a scarcity of water, as well as sanitation in schools in the study came out as a barrier that hindered the SMT members' work of implementing health and safety regulations. And, as a result, the issue of unhygienic toilets and hand hygiene which was said to be the most crucial aspect in combating the spread of the virus was not properly adhered to. The study also revealed that even the water tanks that were provided to schools by the DBE were useless as they did not assist as a result of malfunctioning and being out of order all the time. The conclusion that I make here is that the issue of handling COVID-19 health safety protocols was and still

remains a pipe dream as SMT members in rural schools do not have the capacity to respond to such important issues. The study by Bhengu (2021) captures this reality when it comes to the schools' capacities in rural communities to respond to COVID-19 demands. In other words, this study is adding to the same debate about the extent to which SMT members in deprived school contexts can effectively and efficiently respond to crises such as COVID-19. Further details on this aspect can be found in Section 4.3.1.2 of Chapter Four.

Another finding was on the issue of stress, fear and anxiety that was experienced in schools during the COVID-19 breakout. In many excerpts that have been used as evidence to support various claims I have made in Chapter 4, SMT members stated that COVID-19 brought uncertainty, stress, anxiety, fear and panic attacks to the teachers and learners as well. Some SMT members mentioned that even they themselves were anxious. The reason given that caused stress and anxiety was the fear of being infected and affected. Other reasons included the fear of the unknown. This presented complexities for the SMT members as they had to deal with teachers and learners psychological and social needs and provide counselling and emotional support even though they themselves were stressed and anxious and also needed counselling. What can be concluded from this finding is that SMT members in the study did not have sufficient capacity to deal with issues of anxiety and fear that staff members experienced. The SMT members themselves pleaded to the DBE to no avail, to provide psychological support to the teaching staff. Therefore, SMT members were rendered helpless to provide any kind of support to the teaching staff to cope with the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### **5.4.2 How do School Management Team members lead during the times of crisis?**

According to the findings presented in Chapter Four, School Management Team members stated that they applied different approaches when leading during times of crisis. The findings suggest that during times of crisis SMT members mentioned the importance of applying social skills such as teamwork and communication. They also mentioned the involvement of stakeholders as one of the most important aspects to apply when leading during times of crisis. This issue of the involvement of stakeholders was also mentioned in the previous topic of lessons learned from leading during times of turmoil. Therefore, this indicates that working in collaboration with other people and not in isolation is very important. Participants stated that two heads are better than one. The study also revealed that brainstorming helps to come up



with a multitude of different ideas. Therefore, it can be concluded that the participants placed value on collaboration and sharing of problems and decision-making. The outbreak of COVID-19 underscored the importance of sharing and the co-construction of solutions to problems. More details on these important issues can be found in Chapter Four, Section 4.3.3.

#### **5.4.3 What are the lessons SMT members learned from their leadership practices during COVID-19 breakout?**

The first finding from the data presented in the previous chapter about the lessons learned from how SMT members dealt with the complexities of leading the schools in the context of the COVID-19 breakout indicated that there was an urgent need to get various key stakeholders involved during the times of turmoil. In many excerpts from the interviews, SMT members spoke about the need to collaborate with different stakeholders at all times. I found that this was either to get help, or to reduce the load on one's shoulders, or to put everyone involved on the same page. It can be concluded that in the context of this study, SMT members began to appreciate the importance of what I can call multilateral wisdom. In other words, to hold a leadership or management position is not sufficient to ensure efficiency of the organisational operations if other stakeholders are marginalised and their inputs ignored.

The second finding about the lessons learned was the importance of ICT integration in schools. The findings have shown that traditional face-to-face teaching and learning could not take place during prolonged closure of schools during the COVID-19 breakout. The study has revealed that all the schools in the study could not offer online classes that some schools in more affluent school categorised as Quintiles 4 and 5 were offering. The data also indicated that this affected teaching and learning as learners could not even do the work that they were given to do while at home. The data further indicated that learners in schools in the study were not exposed to the use of computers or anything related to ICT. These schools could not even acquire ICT resources. From this perspective it is evident that the issue of ICT in public schools, especially in rural communities is a major concern. I have also discovered that this is depriving learners of some skills that they should be learning and that is computer literacy skills. Even if it is basic skills. This was also a barrier that hindered teaching during times of crisis when traditional face-to-face interaction could not take place. One conclusion to be drawn from these findings is that SMT members in the study have begun to acknowledge the need for investing in ICT availability and subsequent integration in the teaching and learning situation in their schools.

The last finding and conclusion relate to the lesson that the participants expressed regarding the need to be calm during difficult times such as the outbreak of COVID-19. While all the participants highlighted this need to be in control and be able to stay calm, it can be concluded that they did not feel adequately capable of this personal attribute. None of the participants declared that s/he was able to remain calm when COVID-19 broke out; they nevertheless, acknowledged the need to do so. Section 4.3.4 has more information on this aspect.

### **5.5 Implications of the study**

The findings and conclusions have various implications relating to numerous research related issues. First among them is the need for School Management Team members to be trained on crisis management. Secondly, conclusions emphasise the need for school leaders and managers to upscale efforts to acquire ICT equipment and the provision of requisite skills in utilising computers in facilitating teaching and learning processes. Success in that regard has huge benefits for sustainability of teaching and learning processes even if further natural emergencies such as COVID-19 attack the country. Other implications relate to the kind of research that can be done on this topic. For instance, this study was conducted in three schools only and in one district. Perhaps, a large scale study is required to reveal what is happening in other areas of the country.

### **5.6 Chapter summary**

This chapter presented the conclusions that were drawn from the findings presented and discussed in Chapter Four. These conclusions were organised based on the research questions. Implications of the study were also outlined.

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**KWAZULU-NATAL PROVINCE**

EDUCATION  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

**OFFICE OF THE HEAD OF DEPARTMENT**

Private Bag X9137, PIETERMARITZBURG, 3200  
Anton Lembede Building, 247 Burger Street, Pietermaritzburg, 3201  
Tel: 033 392 1051

Email: Phindile.duma@kzndoe.gov.za

Enquiries: Mrs B.T. Ntuli

Ref.:2/4/8/7300

Mrs Queerida Sindiswa Nenga  
P.O. Box 115  
**KOKSTAD**  
4700

Dear Mrs Nenga

**PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN THE KZN DoE INSTITUTIONS**

Your application to conduct research entitled: **"COMPLEXITIES OF LEADING THE SCHOOLS IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19 BREAKOUT: PERSPECTIVES FROM SCHOOL MANAGEMENT TEAM MEMBERS IN EAST GRIQUALAND CIRCUIT:"**, in the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education Institutions has been approved. The conditions of the approval are as follows:

1. The researcher will make all the arrangements concerning the research and interviews.
2. The researcher must ensure that Educator and learning programmes are not interrupted.
3. Interviews are not conducted during the time of writing examinations in schools.
4. Learners, Educators, Schools and Institutions are not identifiable in any way from the results of the research.
5. A copy of this letter is submitted to District Managers, Principals and Heads of Institutions where the Intended research and interviews are to be conducted.
6. The period of investigation is limited to the period from **08 June 2022 to 31 March 2025**.
7. Your research and interviews will be limited to the schools you have proposed and approved by the Head of Department. Please note that Principals, Educators, Departmental Officials and Learners are under no obligation to participate or assist you in your investigation.
8. Should you wish to extend the period of your survey at the school(s), please contact Miss Phindile Duma at the contact numbers above.
9. Upon completion of the research, a brief summary of the findings, recommendations or a full report/dissertation/thesis must be submitted to the research office of the Department. Please address it to The Office of the HOD, Private Bag X9137, Pietermaritzburg, 3200.
10. Please note that your research and interviews will be limited to schools and institutions in KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education.

**HARRY GWALA DISTRICT**

**Mr GN Ngcobo**  
**Head of Department: Education**  
**Date: 08 June 2022**

GROWING KWAZULU-NATAL TOGETHER

## LETTER OF REQUEST TO DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

P.O Box 1515

Kokstad

4700

25 May 2022

Attention: The Head of Department (Mr G.N Ngcobo)

Department of Education

Province of KwaZulu-Natal

Private Bag X9137

Pietermaritzburg

3201

Dear Mr Ngcobo

### REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

My name is **Queerida Sindiswa Nenga**, a Master of Education student studying at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, School of Education (Pietermaritzburg Campus). As part of my degree requirements, I am required to conduct research. I therefore kindly seek permission to conduct research in three schools under your jurisdiction in the Harry Gwala District. The title of my study is: **Complexities of leading the schools in the context of COVID-19 breakout: Perspectives from School Management Team Members in East Griqualand Circuit.**

This study will focus on understanding the complexities of leading the schools in the context of COVID-19 breakout and how leaders lead during the times of crisis in selected primary schools in Harry Gwala District. The planned study will focus on School Management Team members in three primary schools (three from each school). The study will use semi structured interviews. Participants will be interviewed for approximately 30-45 minutes at the times convenient to them which will not disturb teaching and learning. Each interview will be voice-recorded.

Responses will be treated with confidentiality and pseudonyms will be used instead of the actual names. Participants will be contacted well in advance for interviews, and they will be purposively



selected to participate in the study. Participation will always remain voluntary which means that the participants may withdraw from the study for any reason, anytime if they so wish without incurring any penalties.

You may contact my supervisors, UKZN Research Office or myself should you have any queries or questions.

I (Queerida Sindiswa Nenga) can be contacted at:

Email: (sindiswa.zituta@gmail.com)

Cell: (079 6373840/ 072 2120356)

My supervisor is Professor T.T. Bhengu, at the School of Education, Edgewood Campus of the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

His contact details: e-mail: [bhengutt@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:bhengutt@ukzn.ac.za) ; Phone number: 031 260 3534.

For additional information, you may also contact the UKZN Research Office through:  
[HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za)

Your anticipated positive response in this regard is highly appreciated.

Yours sincerely

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Mrs Queerida S. Nenga

## LETTER TO GATEKEEPER (PRINCIPAL)

P.O Box 1515

Kokstad

4700

25 May 2022

The Principal

Dear Sir/Madam

### REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

My name is Queerida Sindiswa Nenga. I am a Master of Education student studying at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, School of Education (Pietermaritzburg Campus). As part of my degree requirements, I am required to conduct research. I therefore kindly seek your permission to conduct this research at your school. My study title is: **Complexities of leading the schools in the context of COVID-19 breakout: Perspectives from School Management Team Members in East Griqualand Circuit.**

#### Please note that:

- Your identity will not be divulged under any circumstance/s, during and after reporting process.
- All your responses will be treated with strict confidentiality.
- Fictitious names will be used to represent your names.
- The interview may last for about 1 hour and may be split depending on the participant's preference.
- Data will be stored in secure storage and destroyed after 5 years.
- The research aims at knowing the challenges of your community relating to resource scarcity, peoples' movement, and effects on peace.
- Your involvement is purely for academic purposes only, and there are no financial benefits involved.

I (Queerida Sindiswa Nenga) can be contacted at:

Email: (sindiswa.zituta@gmail.com)

Cell: (0796373840)

My supervisor is Professor T.T. Bhengu, at the School of Education, Edgewood Campus of the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

His contact details: e-mail: [bhengutt@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:bhengutt@ukzn.ac.za) ; Phone number: 031 260 3534.

For additional information, you may also contact the UKZN Research Office through:  
[HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za)

I hope this letter will find your positive consideration, thanking you in advance.

Yours sincerely

---

Queerida S. Nenga

## LETTER TO PARTICIPANT

P.O Box 1515

Kokstad

4700

30 May 2022

Dear Participant

### INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

My name is Queerida Sindiswa Nenga. I am a Master of Education student studying at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, School of Education (Pietermaritzburg Campus). As part of my degree requirements, I am required to conduct research. I have identified you as one of my potential research participants. I therefore kindly seek your permission to be part of my research project. The title of my study is: **Complexities of leading the schools in the context of COVID-19 breakout: Perspectives from School Management Team Members in East Griqualand Circuit**. The objectives of the study are:

- To identify the barriers that hinder School Management Team members in handling COVID-19 safety procedures and regulations in schools.
- To comprehend lessons learnt from how School Management Team members deal with complexities of leading the schools in the context of COVID-19 breakout.
- To explore how leaders lead during the times of crisis.

#### PLEASE NOTE THAT:

- Your confidentiality is guaranteed as your inputs will not be attributed to you in person but reported only as a population member opinion.
- The interview may last for about 45 minutes to an hour and may be split depending on your preference.
- Any information given by you cannot be used against you, and the collected data will be used for purposes of this research only.
- Data will be stored in secure storage and destroyed after 5 years.
- You have a choice to participate, not participate or stop participating in the research. You will not be penalised for taking such an action.

- The research aims at knowing the challenges of your community relating to resource scarcity, peoples' movement, and effects on peace.
- Your involvement is purely for academic purposes only, and there are no financial benefits involved.
- If you are willing to be interviewed, please indicate (by ticking as applicable with an X) whether you are willing to allow the interview to be recorded by the following equipment:

	Willing	Not willing
Audio equipment		
Photographic equipment		
Video equipment		

I (Queerida Sindiswa Nenga) can be contacted at:

Email: (sindiswa.zituta@gmail.com)

Cell: (079 6373840 / 072 2120356)

My supervisor is Professor T.T. Bhengu, at the School of Education, Edgewood Campus of the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

His contact details: e-mail: [bhengutt@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:bhengutt@ukzn.ac.za) ; Phone number: 031 260 3534.

For additional information, you may also contact the UKZN Research Office through: [HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za)

I hope this letter will find your positive consideration, thanking you in advance.

Yours sincerely

---

Queerida S. Nenga

## **INFORMED CONSENT FROM PARTICIPANT**

### **DECLARATION**

I..... (full names of participant) hereby confirm that I understand the contents of this document and the nature of the research project: Complexities of leading the schools in the context of COVID-19 breakout: Perspectives from School Management Team Members in East Griqualand Circuit and I consent to participating in the research project. I am also fully aware that I am at liberty to withdraw from the project at any time should I so desire, without any negative or undesirable consequence. I am also aware that there are neither any foreseeable direct benefits nor direct risks associated with my participation in this study. I therefore understand the contents of the letter fully and I do GIVE CONSENT/DO NOT GIVE CONSENT to the interview being voice-recorded.

**SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT**

**DATE.....**

**DATA GENERATION TOOL**  
**INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR SCHOOL PRINCIPALS**

**TITLE:**

Complexities of leading the schools in the context of COVID-19 breakout: Perspectives from School Management Team members in East Griqualand Circuit

1. In this school how have you as a principal responded to the reported cases of learners, teachers or non-teaching personnel who have tested positive?
2. How has the outbreak of COVID-19 affected the manner in which the school is run?

**Probes:**

- What difficulties have you experienced in your leadership as a result of COVID-19 breakout?
  - How have you dealt with these difficulties?
3. How have the policy guidelines provided by the DBE and Health Department assisted you in running the school?
  4. What are the barriers that hinder you as a principal in handling COVID-19 safety procedures and regulations in the school?
  5. There are health protocols that had to be used in schools to prevent the spread of the virus. Please share with me how you as a school have managed to adhere to such health protocols?

**Probes:**

- How has your school ensured that you fully observe such health protocols?  
If there were some deviations, how have you as a school handled such deviations/  
non-observance of health protocols?
6. What have you learnt from dealing with emergent challenges and difficulties such as those posed by the outbreak of COVID-19?
  7. So as a principal how do you lead during times of crisis?

**Probe:**

- Is there any training you have received in managing crisis?

**NB:** Before we conclude our interview, is there anything you would like to share with me as a researcher on the complexities of leading the schools in the context of COVID-19 breakout which I have not asked you, but you feel that it is important to share.

I thank you for taking part in this study and for the information you have shared.



**DATA GENERATION TOOL**  
**INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR DEPUTY PRINCIPALS**

**TITLE:**

Complexities of leading the schools in the context of COVID-19 breakout: Perspectives from School Management Team members in East Griqualand Circuit

1. In this school how have you as a deputy principal responded to the reported cases of learners, teachers or non-teaching personnel who have tested positive?
2. How has the outbreak of COVID-19 affected the manner in which the school is run?

**Probes:**

- What difficulties have you experienced in your leadership as a result of COVID-19 breakout?
  - How have you dealt with these difficulties?
3. How have the policy guidelines provided by the DBE and Health Department assisted you in running the school?
  4. What are the barriers that hinder you as a deputy principal in handling COVID-19 safety procedures and regulations in the school?
  5. There are health protocols that had to be used in schools to prevent the spread of the virus. Please share with me how you as a school have managed to adhere to such health protocols?

**Probes:**

- How has your school ensured that you fully observe such health protocols?  
If there were some deviations, how have you as a school handled such deviations/non-observance of health protocols?
6. What have you learnt from dealing with emergent challenges and difficulties such as those posed by the outbreak of COVID-19?
  7. So as a deputy principal how do you lead during times of crisis?

**Probe:**

- Is there any training you have received in managing crisis?

**NB:** Before we conclude our interview, is there anything you would like to share with me as a researcher on the complexities of leading the schools in the context of COVID-19 breakout which I have not asked you, but you feel that it is important to share.

I thank you for taking part in this study and for the information you have shared.

**DATA GENERATION TOOL**  
**INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR DEPARTMENTAL HEADS**

**TITLE:**

Complexities of leading the schools in the context of COVID-19 breakout: Perspectives from School Management Team members in East Griqualand Circuit

1. In this school how have you as a departmental head responded to the reported cases of learners, teachers or non-teaching personnel who have tested positive?
2. How has the outbreak of COVID-19 affected the manner in which the school is run?

**Probes:**

- What difficulties have you experienced in your leadership as a result of COVID-19 breakout?
  - How have you dealt with these difficulties?
3. How have the policy guidelines provided by the DBE and Health Department assisted you in running the school?
  4. What are the barriers that hinder you as a departmental head in handling COVID-19 safety procedures and regulations in the school?
  5. There are health protocols that had to be used in schools to prevent the spread of the virus. Please share with me how you as a school have managed to adhere to such health protocols?

**Probes:**

- How has your school ensured that you fully observe such health protocols?  
If there were some deviations, how have you as a school handled such deviations/non-observance of health protocols?
6. What have you learnt from dealing with emergent challenges and difficulties such as those posed by the outbreak of COVID-19?
  7. So as a departmental head how do you lead during times of crisis?

**Probe:**

- Is there any training you have received in managing crisis?

**NB:** Before we conclude our interview, is there anything you would like to share with me as a researcher on the complexities of leading the schools in the context of COVID-19 breakout which I have not asked you, but you feel that it is important to share.

I thank you for taking part in this study and for the information you have shared.

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## Sindiswa Nenga First Draft Dissertation

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