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# **The Principals' Management Challenges Associated with Covid-19 Pandemic Management Guidelines in the Mkhuhlu Circuit, South Africa**

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## **Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic spread swiftly across nations, impacting every sector, including education. This extraordinary pandemic led to significant changes in the delivery of basic education. This research aimed to investigate the management challenges faced by principals in rural secondary schools within the Mkhuhlu circuit of Mpumalanga, South Africa, in relation to pandemic management. This study employed a mixed-methods research approach, specifically an exploratory sequential design, in which qualitative data collection and analysis guided the following quantitative phase. The qualitative phase utilised planned sampling, while the quantitative phase implemented simple random selection. The quantitative data were processed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), and thematic analysis was used to analyse qualitative information and enhance the findings from the quantitative phase. The results revealed that during the COVID-19 lockdown, both the teaching and learning processes, as well as the responsibilities of school leaders, underwent considerable changes, resulting in a shift towards remote learning. The findings underscored the crucial role of principals in formulating strategies to tackle the challenges arising from the pandemic. Grounded in Systems Theory, the study illustrated the interconnectedness of various components of school management and the importance of adaptive leadership during emergencies. The research suggested that schools might benefit from a certain degree of decentralisation, granting principals more authority over daily operations. This additional autonomy would

allow principals to focus on teaching and improve their management of future crises. The implications of these findings suggest that enhancing training, resource allocation, and support systems is crucial for strengthening the resilience and adaptability of school management practices in the face of pandemics.

**Keywords:** Management practices, policy implementation, principals.

## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 outbreak is, by far, the most significant virus pandemic to have threatened human life in history, emerging in China late in 2019. To curb the rapid increase of the pandemic, partial and total lockdowns were imposed, resulting in the total closure of schools in approximately 192 countries globally (UNESCO, 2020). Within this context, over 1.6 billion learners worldwide were compelled to stay out of school as social distancing was enforced locally and regionally to contain the spread of the pandemic (Adeyeye et al., 2021). The virus pandemic was unevenly distributed across South Africa's geographical locations, reaching even the most remote rural areas. Rural areas are experiencing a range of health issues due to limited or inadequate resources (NCIRD, 2020). According to Muremela et al. (2021), managing schools in areas that lack infrastructure is considerably challenging.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has progressed more rapidly than any other virus, it is essential to acknowledge that, prior to its emergence, numerous viruses existed, some of which have resulted in school closures. In contrast, others did not, such as the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), identified in 1982 and still prevalent today (Shabangu, 2025). According to Senoge, principals have been given policies which guide them on how to handle the HIV pandemic issues. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the primary measures implemented were directives from the government and the Department of Basic Education (DBE). These instructions did not include guidance on how principals should manage their schools to facilitate positive teaching and learning.

A statement delivered by Deputy Minister of Basic Education, Dr Reginer Mhaule, on 15 January 2021, stated that school reopening should be delayed by two weeks, as the number of infections continued to increase, which interfered with principals' management practices because they had to reschedule all their plans. Whatever programmes take place at school, a school calendar is followed, which assists principals in planning all their programmes. However, COVID-19 disrupted principal management practices because, as soon as changes were made, principals also had to adjust their schedules. *'You will recall that the original pre-COVID school calendar had scheduled school to return on the 13th of January 2021 (Mhaule 2021).* Teachers' unions continued to oppose the decision, as the WHO requires a 14-day consecutive decline in COVID-19 infections for schools to reopen (Govender, 2022). The pandemic had a series of challenges which required proper attention from school principals and all stakeholders involved.

## 2. Problem statement

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, schools in remote areas of South Africa had faced a series of management challenges (Mokoena, 2024). Most of those challenges remained unresolved, as they were left to the School Governing Body (SGB), which negatively impacted the school's effective management (Simeon, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these issues, as principals faced sudden school closures, challenges in implementing remote learning, and the need to adjust to rapidly changing policies (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023). Previous studies have primarily focused on broad district or provincial outcomes, resulting in a lack of circuit-level evidence and a limited understanding of how existing management challenges influenced principals' responses during crises. This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to address this gap. Initially, it gathered numeric data to measure issues, followed by qualitative data to enhance comprehension. The research investigates explicitly the challenges faced by principals in managing schools during pandemics in the Mkhuhlu circuit of Mpumalanga Province.

### Research objectives

- To investigate the principals' management challenges associated with the virus outbreak.
- To explore strategies for managing schools in rural schools of the Mkhuhlu circuit during the pandemic.

### Research questions

- What are the principals' management challenges associated with the virus outbreak?
- What are the strategies employed by principals to enhance management practices during the virus outbreak in the rural school Mkhuhlu circuit, Mpumalanga, South Africa?

## 3. Theoretical framework

A theoretical framework serves to justify the selection of participants, variables, and search strategy (Brown & Luzmore, 2025). A theoretical framework's primary role is to place the researcher in relation to the investigation. It is a manual for effectively addressing the ideology inherent in qualitative research. According to Bingham et al. (2024), a theoretical framework places the study inside the field. It allows the researcher to theorise about the study. It is beneficial to establish explicit assumptions about the interconnectivity of the way things are related in the world. According to Motitswe (2025), a theoretical framework is analogous to a lens through which one observes the world. It also serves as an orientation to the investigation and represents the researcher's attitude in his research. Its function in this scenario is to frame the work.

Schools are highly rated organisations in communities that are geared towards the development of young people (Percy-Smith et al., 2023). They comprise educators, principals, learners, school management teams, SGBs, and parents who work together to provide a conducive environment for learning, teaching, and support. The system theory of governance, as proposed by Ludwig von Bertalanffy in 1930, informed this

study. Ilhami (2023) highlights that the nuance system theory helps to analyse the policy, as well as resources and needs, the key implementing actors and policy outputs. Malunga (2023) similarly describes systems theory from the perspective of key actors, which in this case include school management teams, SGBs, and officials in the DoBE. Social influence notably determines human behaviour and actions.

Schools are a vital part of society, and they require human and financial resources to thrive and fulfil their mandate (Brown et al., 2023). Mncube et al. (2023) assert that rural schools are poorly resourced, and the teaching introduced after reopening required several human resources which did not exist in rural schools. During the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, for example, principals were expected to teach and manage teachers who were far fewer in number than the class groups created to accommodate the new distance learning levels introduced to reduce the spread of the virus. Stephen (2024) add that schools, as an integral part of society, need human and capital resources to survive and develop in the context of this study, school principals require differentiated management capacities based on the context and availability of resources to successfully handle any pandemic that might affect the promotion of teaching and learning particularly in rural areas which are still dominated by poor resource, both human and physical resources.

#### **4. Literature review**

In this section, the challenges which principals experience when managing the virus pandemic are discussed.

One of the symbols of a democratic education system is its character of inclusivity, transparency, and accommodativeness of all relevant stakeholders, and more specifically, the governing bodies of schools (Timidi et al., 2024). This is evidenced by the establishment of SGBs as stipulated in the South African Schools Act, Act 84 of 1996 (RSA, 1996). However, this democratic nature of school governance is still facing insurmountable challenges, as there are areas where SGBs do not exist and where they traditionally lack management skills. Challenges such as unfamiliarity with meeting procedures, difficulties in managing large volumes of administrative work, and insufficient knowledge of relevant legislation highlight weaknesses in school governance (Khantsi, 2024). Given the significant responsibility of managing COVID-19 that has been assigned to them, it is interesting to see how they adjust and execute their added role, which is rather health-related, unlike their usual management duties.

#### **Knowledge of the SGB about duties and responsibilities**

The SGBs lack confidence and are uncertain about their duties (Mngomezulu, 2018). In this regard, Slabbert (2021) contends that illiteracy among SGB members, especially parent-governors, contributes to inefficiency, arguing that this is possible because illiteracy precludes parents from accessing relevant information. Labuschagne (2021) notes that many SGBs lack the necessary skills and experience to exercise their powers effectively. Implied in this case is the conviction that, despite the democratisation of the educational space, issues of values, attitudes, and skills still preclude the democratic participation of parents through the SGB in schools (Chikafalimani &

Ramabodu, 2025). With these operational inadequacies, the SGB will be in the spotlight, given the task of managing COVID-19 that has been mandated to them.

### **Politics in schools**

Political violence in South Africa often leads to high levels of intolerance and subsequently too much violence within the education system (Truter et al., 2025). Banata (2025) notes that some incompetent stakeholders have been appointed in key positions for political reasons rather than on merit. The influence of politics is evident in various spheres of education. For instance, Ngema (2025) claims that Grade 12 results are twisted during the standardisation process at Umalusi to create an illusion of educational growth and prosperity. There appears to be a skewed focus away from educational matters to political contestations, which naturally grab the attention of many organisations and institutions alike. This is confirmed by Sipho (2025), who advises that SADTU needs to align its educational leadership role with its political standpoint carefully. This appears to be caused by the increased involvement of teachers in party political activities through teacher union representation, to the detriment of effective school management.

### **Corruption and misallocation of resources**

Corruption is also a social ill that has serious ramifications in the management of schools. This is exceptionally debilitating when it affects the entire education system. Local government has also been persistently vulnerable to exploitation and corruption, which includes nepotism, the fraudulent awarding of tenders, and the circumvention of procurement processes (Coetzee, 2020). As has been seen already, when the Minister of Education announced the phased opening of schools, there have been debates and disagreements among political parties, and SADTU even threatened that its members should not report back to school, citing school unpreparedness. This mirrors the challenges ahead for school management as COVID-19 cases increase and fears of spikes in schools heighten.

### **Staff appointment and development**

The DBE (2016) notes that inappropriate appointments are made at various levels within the Department, and this has also attracted calls to make sure that school principals are appointed on merit and based on competency tests (van der Merwe, 2023). There is also a need to ensure that effective human development strategies are put in place to capacitate poorly equipped staff members in schools (Atstsaury et al., 2024). It is currently acknowledged that there are programmes and training workshops in place to enhance the skills of teachers and school principals. However, strides are still required to ensure that investments committed in terms of time and budget are commensurate with the benefits that accrue from such engagements (DBE, 2016). The management capacity of principals is also hampered by poor retention of qualified and dedicated staff in schools. The high staff turnover at school levels, which is the core delivery point of education, affects efficient educational administration, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

From the literature reviewed, I can infer how pandemics, notably the COVID-19 pandemic, have affected societies and the management of schools: For example,

- Influence on Education Systems: Pandemics have disrupted traditional educational systems, forcing schools to adapt rapidly to new circumstances (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2023).
- Challenges for School Principals: According to Bush (2022), school principals faced unprecedented challenges in managing schools during pandemics.
- Health and Safety Concerns: Pandemics raise significant health and safety concerns for schools (Jabbari et al., 2023)
- Adaptation and Innovation: Sato et al. (2023) stated that, despite challenges, pandemics have prompted innovation and adaptation within education systems.
- Policy Responses: Governments and educational authorities have responded to pandemics with policy measures aimed at mitigating the influence on schools and students (Osegbe, 2025).

The literature study indicates that school principals in South Africa confront several issues, encompassing both structural and contextual challenges. Challenges such as inadequate school governance, insufficient skills among SGB members, political interference, corruption, and inadequate staff development significantly hinder effective school management. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these issues by necessitating innovative approaches to leadership, crisis management, and health-related decision-making that transcend standard administrative functions. Although previous studies have explored governance and management issues in general, there has been little attention to how these factors specifically affect principals' capacity to manage schools efficiently during a pandemic. This study seeks to rectify this gap by examining the management strategies, constraints, and adaptive measures employed by school administrators in tackling the issues presented by the COVID-19 crisis.

## 5. Research design and methodology

The research methods employed in this study outline the approach taken to investigate the problem and explain why specific strategies and techniques were used.

### Research Paradigm

This article was framed within the pragmatist paradigm. In most written work on research methodologies, pragmatism has been characterised as a multifaceted (mixed) paradigm for guiding the analysis of mixed strategies (Wills & Lake, 2020). Taguchi (2018) observes that pragmatism is a practical philosophy that supports mixed methods research and involves the complementary application of positivism and interpretivist in a single study.

### Population

The population for this study consisted of post-level one educators who were randomly selected, as well as principals who were purposively selected, from the secondary schools in the Mkhuhlu circuit.

### Research approach

A mixed research approach, comprising qualitative and quantitative methods, was followed in this study to complement each other. I opted to use a mixed-methods

approach because it allows for the gathering of both quantitative and qualitative data, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the research topic.

### **Data collection procedure**

Semi-structured interviews and a self-administered questionnaire were employed to gather qualitative and quantitative data. Interviews, held in principals' offices for 40–45 minutes, facilitated a comprehensive investigation and the examination of non-verbal cues. The questionnaire had enquiries regarding demographics and the impact of the pandemic on principals' management methods. Responses were evaluated using a 5-point Likert scale (Mdhluli, 2018). Deputy principals disseminated and retrieved questionnaires within a fortnight. Collectively, these instruments documented comprehensive data and overarching patterns on the administration of schools during the outbreak.

### **Data analysis**

Data were analysed through Thematic Analysis for qualitative data. Interview recordings were transcribed, coded, and grouped into themes. For quantitative data, a Social Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used, with responses summarised on a five-point Likert scale, and the results were presented in tables.

### **Ethical considerations**

The University of Zululand's Research Ethics Committee approved the project. Permission to gather data was also acquired from the circuit managers, school administrators, and SGBs in the relevant research regions, in accordance with informed consent. Before the data collection procedure began, a letter verifying informed consent was provided to the respondents. This was done to ensure that respondents participated in the study voluntarily and with a complete understanding of the research subject. The respondents were informed that they were at liberty to continue or withdraw their participation at any point during the study without incurring any repercussions (Kuzhabekova, 2021).

## **6. Presentation of findings and discussion**

Principals' management challenges associated with the virus pandemic management guidelines.

### **Time management**

Table 1 shows whether sanitising the learners had a toll on the time allocated for tuition.

*Table 1 – Time management during sanitising learners*

<b>Response format</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Valid percent</b>
Strongly agree	75	56.3	56.3
Agree	24	18.0	18.0
Undecided	12	9.0	9.0
Disagree	13	9.8	9.8
Strongly disagree	9	6.8	6.8
Total	133	100.0	100.0

The sanitisation of learners has influenced the amount of time allocated for tuition by 74.3% of respondents. Sanitising can be time-consuming, and it can also reduce the amount of time available for teaching and learning, as it takes time away from the educational process. It can be disruptive to the learning process as students are taken out of class to be sanitised. This can have a significant impact on educational outcomes, as the reduced time allocated to teaching and learning can result in a decline in student achievement. To minimise the disruption to the learning process, it is vital to ensure that students understand the importance of sanitising and can do it quickly and efficiently.

Furthermore, it is also vital to ensure that teachers have adequate resources to provide instruction during the sanitising process. According to Ramrathan (2021), the South African curriculum is demanding and time-intensive. The measures, according to the participants' views, have attracted time management challenges despite being critical in managing the pandemic and ensuring safety in school environments. Over 56.3% of the respondents in the study were of the view that the sanitisation measures had an influence on their time management capacity.

**Table 2 – Temperature screening consumes too much time for teaching and learning**

Response format	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent
Strongly agree	68	51.1	51.1
Agree	25	18.8	18.8
Undecided	17	12.8	12.8
disagree	13	9.8	9.9
Strongly disagree	10	7.5	7.5
Total	133	100.0	100.0

The findings resonate with those in Table 2, which indicate that around 69.9% of the respondents felt that implementing Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), such as taking temperatures, was equally costly in terms of time allocated for teaching. There is evidence in the total number of 68 (51.1%) respondents who strongly agree and 25 (18.8%) respondents that temperature screening consumes too much time for teaching and learning, which makes the principal go the extra mile to compensate for the lost time. The findings suggest that temperature screening is diverting a significant amount of time from teaching and learning, which can be detrimental to students' learning outcomes. Furthermore, it puts an extra burden on the principal to make up for lost time. Therefore, it is essential to find ways to reduce the time required for temperature screening, such as automating the process or utilising more efficient methods of temperature testing. This will help ensure that students receive the quality education they deserve. Automating the temperature screening process can help reduce the time required for screenings, and more efficient methods of temperature testing can also expedite the process. This can help free up more time for the principal to focus on providing quality education and ensuring that students receive the best education possible.

To understand this trend, qualitative interviews provided a glimpse into possible reasons why participants view time management as a challenge. The influence on classroom time varied across different schools and grades within the same school. Hoadley (2021) noted that the timetabling models adopted by most schools to fulfil statutory social distancing requirements were the primary cause of additional time loss. The findings above support her view that a significant amount of time was lost on sanitising and ensuring that all SOPs were entirely in place.

**Participant 3:** *"In as much as they are good, the screening 'eats' the time for teaching and learning".*

**Participant 2:** *"We had to change the timetable to accommodate time for screening and sanitising at the entrance gate, and that is time gone, considering that a lot of days for learning had been lost due to lockdown".*

These findings support the findings of a quantitative study that temperature screening consumes too much time for teaching and learning, which makes the principal go the extra mile to compensate for the lost time. Time wasting can be understood from the lens of the need to cover for lost time in the school curriculum.

**Table 3 – The need to cover for lost time in the school curriculum**

Response format	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent
Strongly agree	94	70.7	70.7
Agree	19	14.3	14.3
Undecided	5	3.8	3.8
Disagree	11	8.3	8.3
Strongly disagree	4	3.0	3.0
Total	133	100.0	100.00

Table 3 presents the results of the questionnaire item on the view that the need to cover the school curriculum due to time lost affects the principal's management practices. The findings lead to the conclusion that the need to cover the school curriculum due to time lost affects the principal's management practices.

The principal's management practices are influenced by the need to cover the school curriculum due to the time lost, as indicated by 94 (70.7%) respondents who strongly agreed. The survey results suggest that most respondents strongly believe that the lost instructional time due to the pandemic needs to be made up for, so students can effectively learn the necessary material. This is likely because the lost time puts more pressure on the principal to find ways to ensure that students receive the same quality of education they would have received prior to the pandemic. To ensure that students receive a quality education, the principal must make up for lost instructional time through creativity and effective strategies.

According to Hoadley (2021), the curriculum coverage at no-fee schools has been more significantly influenced by COVID-19 than that of schools in affluent communities.

Because most children who attend public schools for free do not have access to computers or other learning resources, it is crucial that students can continue their education outside of the classroom. Thus, the wealth gap in access to technology that exists in the wider world has reached the classroom.

In Hoadley (2021), the estimations show that each day of school that is cancelled results in the loss of two days of education. There is a concern that students skipped material from one grade before moving on to the next. It can therefore be concluded that, although the measures were necessary, they impacted the time allocated to teaching and learning processes.

### **Learner dropout**

The number of out-of-school children in South Africa tripled from 250,000 to 750,000 between March 2020 and July 2021, according to the UNICEF (2021) report. The same UNICEF (2021) report observed that the dropout rate among girls in secondary education in Malawi increased by 48%. In Kenya, a pooled sample of 4,000 adolescents aged 10 to 19 years revealed that 16% of girls and 8% of boys did not return to school after the COVID-19 lockdowns. In Liberia, 43% of pupils did not return to school, while in Uganda, 10% of primary and secondary school learners dropped out

One thing that is certain from this report is that COVID-19 had an impact on the learner dropout levels and the respondents in this study. There is no doubt that the challenges of losing learners would pose a management challenge for the principals.

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**Table 4 – Learners drop out of school due to the spread of the virus pandemic, which influences principals' management practices**

Response format	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent
Strongly agree	72	54.1	54.1
Agree	26	19.5	19.5
Undecided	20	15.0	15.0
Disagree	9	6.8	6.8
Strongly disagree	6	4.5	4.5
Total	133	100.0	100.0

Table 4 presents the views of respondents regarding the issue that the spread of the virus pandemic influences principal management practices, leading to learners dropping out of school. In the survey, 72 (54.1%) respondents strongly agreed that the

virus pandemic influences principal management practices by causing learners to drop out of school. This could be because many households are struggling financially due to the pandemic, and dropping out of school may be the only viable option for some families. Additionally, some parents may be fearful of sending their children to school during the pandemic, leading them to opt for homeschooling or withdrawing their children from school altogether. As a result, this could put an even greater strain on already struggling households, further limiting students' opportunities to access education and prepare for the future.

### **Principal inadequacies**

Another challenge that the study managed to identify has to do with the fact that principals had inadequacies in ensuring that they effectively dealt with the pandemic in schools, as mandated by the policies they had been given by the Department of Education.

**Table 5 – Principals find it challenging to implement some of the virus pandemic policies in schools**

	<b>frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Valid percent</b>
Strongly agree	76	57.1	57.1
Agree	29	21.8	21.8
Undecided	15	11.3	11.3
Disagree	10	7.5	7.5
Strongly disagree	3	3.5	3.5
Total	133	100.0	100.0

Table 5 shows that approximately 79% of respondents agreed that school principals find it difficult to implement pandemic policies; this is likely because many of these policies have had to be implemented quickly and are complex and challenging to manage. Additionally, principals do not have the same level of control they had before the pandemic, as parents and other stakeholders are more involved in decisions than ever before. Despite the complexity of the policies and the increased involvement of parents and other stakeholders, 21.8% of respondents still agree that school principals are doing their best to implement the pandemic policies as effectively as possible. However, it can be concluded that principals face difficulties in implementing guidelines related to the virus pandemic in schools, and qualitative data support this.

**Participant 8:** *"As a school, we have experienced a virus pandemic in the past, but there was nothing like what we are experiencing with the COVID-19 virus. We used to deal with those viruses in a particular way; however, the present pandemic, the coronavirus, has interfered with our management practices at our school. Things were always hard".*

This finding suggests that both quantitative and qualitative participants concur that school principals find it challenging to implement pandemic policies.

### Management of principal practices during the virus pandemic

The respondents were asked to give their views on whether the shortage of resources makes it difficult for the principal to compile accurate information at school.

*Table 6 – The shortage of resources makes it difficult for the principal to compile accurate information at school*

Response format	frequency	Percent	Valid percent
Strongly agree	46	34.6	34.6
Agree	31	23.3	23.3
Undecided	22	16.5	16.8
Disagree	16	12.0	12.0
Strongly disagree	18	13.5	13.5
Total	133	100.0	100.0

The study found that 57.9% of respondents agreed that principals find it difficult to implement many SOPs in schools without sufficient resources (Table 6). While 25.5% of respondents disagreed that principals find it challenging to implement many SOPs in schools without resources. Maree (2023) observed that the pandemic exacerbated other pre-existing difficulties in South Africa, including inadequate access to clean water, limited educational resources, and underfunded schools. Dlamini and Zulu (2024) observed that a remote secondary school could not adhere to pandemic laws owing to “insufficient infrastructure, internet connectivity, and learner-teacher support materials...” The discrepancy between the two groups is likely since those who agree likely have firsthand experience with principals attempting to implement SOPs with limited resources.

In contrast, those who disagree may not have had the same experience. Principals require additional resources to implement SOPs effectively. This is very important for schools in disadvantaged areas, where resources are often scarce and principals must make difficult choices. Therefore, it is essential to provide schools with adequate resources to ensure the successful implementation of SOPs. Without adequate resources, principals may not be able to hire sufficient staff or purchase the necessary technology to implement SOPs properly.

Furthermore, it is more challenging to ensure compliance with SOPs in disadvantaged schools that lack resources, as there is often less capacity to monitor and enforce them. This aligns with the views raised by Butler (2021) that a strategic response cannot be implemented without the participation of the school community. Effective risk management and risk mitigation at an educational institution necessitate the participation of all relevant parties, including administration, faculty, staff, students, parents, and the broader community (Butler, 2021). The principals may not have recognised that extensive consultation, feedback, and monitoring are crucial to the plans’ success, and are putting them into practice continuously. The schools were taught to improve and implement their strategic programmes and activities despite the pandemic, thanks to regular stakeholder dialogues and discussions, faculty and

learner capacity building, open communication through hotline centres, and quality assurance and monitoring mechanisms.

*Table 7 Responsibility of Principals to ensure that virus guidelines are followed*

Response format	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent
Strongly agree	80	60.2	60.2
Agree	21	15.8	15.8
Undecided	15	11.3	11.3
Disagree	7	5.3	5.3
Strongly disagree	10	7.5	7.5
Total	133	100.0	100.0

According to Table 7, approximately 76% of the respondents indicated that most school principals agreed that principals adopted management practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, 12.8% of respondents disagreed that schools' principals disagreed with adopting management practices during COVID-19. This indicates that most principals are adapting to the challenges posed by the pandemic by implementing new management practices, such as remote learning, improved safety protocols, and other measures to protect students and faculty. In addition to these measures, many schools have had to make tough decisions about budget cuts and staffing, while also implementing new technologies to facilitate remote learning. All these changes have been necessary for schools to remain open and continue to provide quality education to their students, allowing them to adjust and adhere to the legislation. According to Fullan (2022), principals' operations before the pandemic required them to demonstrate both strong leadership and the ability to navigate ambiguity. Participants reported overseeing and supervising both human resources and physical plant operations.

Fullan (2022) notes that the evaluation of the principal's ever-expanding role is consistent with this view, as both principals and teachers must attend to students' needs in a variety of areas, including academics, health, and safety. It was also decided that a significant part of the principal's job would be to oversee the school's teaching and administrative staff. The principal's duties were affected in various ways by the pandemic's impact on school administration, including changes in accountability measures and staffing levels. Some respondents mentioned that a lack of staff made it harder to run the school. The sixth participant said that they had the budget to pay for interventionists, but nobody had applied for the job. A similar point was made by most respondents, who lamented the absence of available substitute teachers. Before the pandemic, these worries were less common. According to Butler (2021), as with Fullan's (2023) evaluation, the principal's duties increased even further during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **The principals' management challenges associated with the virus outbreak**

The implementation of pandemic guidelines and regulations presented numerous difficulties for school principals, affecting various aspects of school management and operations.

### **Management Challenges**

The requirement to regularly sanitise learners and conduct temperature screenings was time-consuming, detracting from instructional time. Teachers had to balance their teaching responsibilities with these new health protocols, resulting in a strain on their workload and affecting the school's overall management. The need to cover lost instructional time due to pandemic-related disruptions posed significant challenges. Schools adopted various timetabling models to comply with social-distancing requirements, which often resulted in additional time loss and uneven impacts across different schools and grades.

The pandemic led to an increase in student dropout rates, which further complicated school management. The high dropout rates significantly impacted the overall educational environment, prompting principals to develop strategies to re-engage students and mitigate the long-term effects of the pandemic on education. Implementing specific pandemic policies was challenging, especially in schools with limited resources and infrastructure. Principals struggled with the transition to online learning, particularly in communities that lacked access to necessary technology and internet connectivity.

Effective management practices were hindered by a lack of resources, including staff shortages and insufficient technological support. The pandemic exacerbated existing resource constraints, making it difficult for principals to implement and maintain necessary health and safety measures. Ensuring that students consistently wore masks was a significant challenge for principals. While necessary for health and safety, enforcing mask mandates required constant attention and created additional stress for both teachers and students.

### **Pandemic Management Practices**

The absence of specific pandemic management policies and reliance on external directives highlighted the need for tailored policies and comprehensive training for school staff. Schools must develop localised policies to better prepare for future crises.

### **The target-oriented solutions for enhancing principals' management practices during a virus outbreak in the Mkhuhlu circuit, Mpumalanga, South Africa.**

In response to the identified challenges, several targeted solutions were proposed to enhance the management practices of principals during virus outbreaks.

#### **Target-Oriented Solutions**

##### **Support from SGBs and Government Officials**

Approximately 76% of respondents indicated that support from SGBs and government officials was crucial for managing pandemic challenges effectively. Principals struggled to maintain compliance with both educational and pandemic safety regulations without external assistance. Therefore, SGBs and government officials must provide structured guidance, continuous supervision, and logistical support to help principals manage schools efficiently during crises (Becker, 2022).

- **Collaboration Among Principals:** Frequent meetings among principals to discuss pandemic-related issues and share strategies proved beneficial.

Collaboration enabled principals to exchange ideas, offer mutual support, and develop practical solutions to common challenges. Regular meetings or online forums can formalise these networks, facilitate mutual support and enhance decision-making in various scenarios (Stone-Johnson & Miles Weiner, 2020).

- Financial Reallocation: Financial resources were redirected to address pandemic-related needs, which created budget constraints for other school activities. According to Cockrell (2020), to ensure the availability of essential resources without disrupting other school activities, institutions must effectively manage their budgets to maintain operational efficiency.
- Technology Integration: There was a critical need for modern technological devices and improved online platforms to support remote learning and administrative functions. Educational institutions can maintain instruction and effectively manage situations during closures or emergencies, provided they possess modern technology, training in digital platforms, and reliable internet access (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2023).
- Professional Development: Ongoing professional development for teachers in online and blended learning methods was necessary to improve their ability to deliver effective instruction. To assist principals in addressing future challenges, continuous education and training in emergency leadership, crisis management, and online pedagogical methods are essential (Stephen, 2024).

## 7. Conclusion

The principal management practices were affected by the closure of schools due to the pandemic, as most principals frequently meet to discuss coronavirus pandemic issues and exchange ideas that can assist them in overcoming the challenges. This suggests that principals demonstrated adaptation and collaborative leadership, utilising peer support as a key technique to navigate the crisis. The investigation outlined in this article has established its validity through the data collected during the study, demonstrating a strong alignment with the research questions, objectives, and aims. This research suggests that the information gathered is the most valuable for the sampled group, including school principals. Such insights have increased awareness among stakeholders regarding the significance of collaboration during emergencies. These findings theoretically align with the Systems Theory of Governance, which conceptualises schools as linked systems where the acts of one player, such as a principal, influence and are influenced by other actors, including teachers, SGBs, and DBE officials. The study demonstrates the effectiveness of principals' collaborative and adaptive management strategies within the interrelated components of the school system during a crisis. The findings of this study underscore the urgent need for intervention programs and turnaround strategies to be adopted by the DBE, alongside other relevant stakeholders, to improve school operations during crises. The engagement of the DBE would encourage school stakeholders to work together more effectively, leading to enhanced governance and management within schools.

## Recommendations of the study

- The principals should work as a team with all stakeholders to keep stability in relation to learner safety in schools. Hence, consultation hours are suggested to equip both parties.
- The DBE should equip principals with the knowledge and skills to deal with a crisis in their schools.
- Provide opportunities for professional learning with a focus on adaptive leadership practices to equip principals with the skills and knowledge necessary to deal with unforeseen changes.
- Assist principals in formulating accountability standards for students that encourage connections to academic, as well as social and emotional learning, for the complete child.
- Allocate essential resources and train principals to facilitate better positive interactions and the development of improved relationships among all members of the school community.

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