

Revisiting management of high school teachers during Covid-19: Implication for leadership contingency

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Abstract

The period of Covid-19 outbreak led to the interruption of normal school functionality due to unprecedented turmoil in the management of high school subject teachers worldwide. The unexpected increase in the number of teachers who were directly or indirectly affected and infected during the pandemic brought hesitation to school principals on the appropriate crisis management approach. Thus, this study aims to revisit the management of high school subject teachers during Covid-19 at the Ubombo Circuit Management Cluster in South Africa. Using a case study design, a qualitative telephone semi-structured interview was conducted to gather data. This study finds that the chaos brought by the Covid-19 pandemic in the Kwa-Zulu Natal Department of Education was too sudden that nobody was initially trained to face its impact both in teaching and management. As a result, there was no concrete action plan and crisis management strategies the school principals followed in handling high school subject teachers. During the height of the pandemic, most of Ubombo Circuit Management Cluster school principals creatively attempted various management strategies that they believed would cater for their schools. Hence, this study finds it necessary for the Department of Education to develop policies to equip school principals with necessary skills and knowledge to face future contingencies.

Keywords: *educator, learner, school management, school leadership, Covid-19*

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1. Introduction

The global chaos created by the outbreak of Covid-19 raised questions on the ability of school principals to respond to the crisis in South African schools. While the classes were suspended during the school closures (Kavrayci & Kesim, 2021), school principals became the first responders, focusing on the basic health and psychological needs of the school community and, later on, curriculum and instructional matters (Kaul et al., 2022). At the onset, school principals and subject teachers were unarmed and ill-prepared to cope with the sudden crisis (Jena, 2020) including the continuity of all educational activities. According to Kwatubana and Molaodi (2021), anxiety among school principals grew as schools were perceived as sites of infection. The many sorts of inconsistencies and conflicting directives from educational authorities have possibly created a timid stance and discomposure in school management during the crisis. This definitely raised the question of whether schools have learned the lessons on contingency planning. As school principals were called the boundary spanners (Ståhlkrantz & Rapp, 2020) during the crisis, studies have provided empirical evidence on their emergency school management (Kafa, 2023; McLeod & Dulsky, 2021; Day & Taneva, 2023; Fahy et al., 2024; Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023; Ågren et al., 2023). However, leaders, researchers and policy makers assert the need for school principals to be equipped with contingency planning (Spyropoulou & Koutroukis, 2021; Adams et al., 2023; Steinsund & Eid, 2023).

While school principals struggled with creating conducive environments for learners and educators during the pandemic (Pedroso et al., 2021), they eventually used various leadership and or management styles to facilitate teaching and learning focused on educational goals (Rahman & Subiyantoro, 2021). During the unprecedented pandemic period, school principals were forced to use their personal innovative leadership and management skills and resources to adjust to the crisis (Ramos-Pla et al., Arco, 2021). Hence, this study centred on the exploration of the school principals' management of the high school teachers during Covid-19. As they were expected to perform their core duties at the midst of the pandemic, they were also required to shed light on the clear direction schools should take.

This study focused on revisiting the experiences of selected high schools at the Ubombo CMC, uMkhanyakude District in the KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa. The centrality of the management was the disruptions on schooling activities such as teaching, learning and assessment. Empirical evidence heavily focused on the lived experiences of the teachers

(Selvik & Herrebrøden, 2024; Udd & Berndtsson, 2023; Bhatia & Joseph, 2023)) and the management effectiveness of school principals (Apaydın & Manolova Yalçın, 2024; Ramos-Pla et al., 2021; Dare & Saleem, 2022; Elomaa et al., 2024; Taun et al., 2022) but limited research was conducted on the specific strategies employed by the school principals in handling the teachers (i.e. Siregar et al., 2022; Dayagbil et al., 2021; Weiner et al., 2021). The study aims to shed light on the implication of school principals' management practices to planning future contingencies.

2. Literature review

2.1. School management during Covid-19

As described by Chatzipanagiotou and Katsarou (2023) during the pandemic, school principals were tasked to bear the onus of managing teachers and learners in a stressful situation, applying a varied range of roles, implementing reforms and ever-changing policies within their schools, while also navigating structural limitations and inadequate resources. For instance, many Swedish school principals who were at the forefront of managing subject teachers in compulsory schools were nervous about the health of teachers (Ahlstrom et al., 2010). While management of teachers in Brazil was taunted trauma experienced by both teachers and learners (Reimers, 2022), Kosaretsky et al. (2022) shat that teacher management in Russian schools opted creating mirror sites and hosting education resources to reach communities where learners were mainly found. In India, the suspension of teaching, learning, and examinations due to the lockdowns compelled school principals to guide subject teachers through online platforms (Jena, 2020) including WhatsApp groups of guardians, parents, learners, and teachers for effective communication. These are similar scenarios in African Region including Egypt (Rezk et al., 2020) where teaching moved mostly online, Ghana (Tuffour et al., 2021) that introduced distance learning platforms and home-based learning, Mpumalanga Province (Msiza, 2022) that imposed social media and other online platforms and Eastern Cape Province (Mutongoza et al., 2021) that implemented blended learning.

In terms of teaching and learning, Mukuna and Aloka (2020) revealed that in South Africa, the cost of purchasing mobile phones, lack of electricity in some households, low network and Internet coverage, and costly maintenance requirements for data and Wi-Fi services were the challenges faced. In fact, the school principals in the Mpumalanga Province had to find alternatives to reach out to teachers, parents, and learners (Msiza, 2022) including

the use of radio (Omodan, 2020). At the height of the pandemic, high school subject teachers combined various delivery and instruction modes (Costin & Coutinho, 2022) by using social media for online instruction and distance learning platforms for learning materials and assignments (Kosaretsky et al., 2022). In some cases, where there is limited access to electronic resources and online tools (Boer & Asino, 2021), school principals were forced to pilot the best online teaching platform (Moliner et al., 2021). For instance, in Ghana, the Ministry of Education came up with systems such as i-Box education portals, solar panels, and online learning multimedia laboratories to support quality teaching and learning (Bariham et al., 2020).

In terms of school management, in Zimbabwe and Botswana, Mamvuto and Mannathoko (2022) found classes implement in double-shift to reduce class sizes. The South Africa followed suit to start teaching on a rotational approach (Boloka, 2022). While majority of the school principals are preoccupied with the basic challenges on Internet data (Adekunle et al., 2020), private tutors re-took a stance in managing teaching and learning by establishing personal classes for the learners (Resk et al., 2020). While teachers were challenged by the declining student performance (Costin & Coutinho, 2022), they were mostly managed through hotlines by specialists from education management agencies, education psychologists, and school counsellors (Kosaretsky et al., 2022).

Effective management at the time of pandemic required school principals to manage both the school activities and the spread of Covid-19. According to Kafa and Pashiardis (2020), although the physical presence of a school principal was incontrovertibly significant, the effort to manage and coordinate the online learning process was a catalyst and essential for them to control the sudden change. They were defined by their determination and hope (Harris & Jones, 2020) and the heightened sense of responsibility in supporting teachers and learners' achievement of academic and non-academic outcomes (Hauseman et al., 2020). In this regard, they ensured that teachers worked effectively in using technology to communicate with learners, thereby possessing confidence in new and different kinds of academic duties. On the other hand, Samuel (2020) argued the necessity to implement health precautions while school activities continue. Aside from developing innovative teaching and learning designs (Boer & Asino, 2021), they were also responsible to promote a sense of belonging and make the relationship between the school, learners, parents, and the community (Mutongoza, 2021)

while ensuring that teachers work to achieve the school's aims and objectives (Msiza, 2022) and coping with the days of normal schooling (Van der Berg & Spaull, 2020).

2.2. Theoretical framework

This qualitative study was orientated in the discipline of education management and leadership borrowing from Fred Fiedler's 1958 contingency theory of management. According to Shala et al. (2021), contingency theory shows the relationship between leadership effectiveness and situational circumstances. Effective leadership depends on the contingencies of the situation, demanding the nature of the task and how secure they are. Reams (2023) argues that the contingency model is characterised by three components, namely leadership style, situational favourableness, and matching style to the situation. Based on the leadership style, Fiedler's model displays the Least Preferred Co-Worker (LPC) Scale, which entails an individual's feelings towards one's co-worker that the person least wants to work at their organisation. Secondly, situational favourableness is based on the level of support a work environment is for a manager. The matching style to the situation entails that a manager, in order to be effective, must match the leader's style to the right situation.

The contingency model is centred on two variables that aim to identify scenarios and influence the efficacy of individual management (Subri et al., 2020). Firstly, the 'positional power' tests the effect that a manager has on the efficiency of followers by accepting them. This factor reflects how the management style and ability impact the outcome of the situation. The second factor is that of 'task structure,' which measures how specific guidelines are to be met in order to meet the purpose of the organisation. This factor tests the activities that must be conducted as instructed by managers.

Based on the variables of the contingency theory (Subri et al., 2020), this study aims to explore whether school principals were centred on the 'positional power' factor or the 'task structure' factor. Furthermore, grounded on the advantage of being supported by several empirical studies (Shala et al., 2021), Fiedler's contingency theory of management was relevant as a frame of reference for the study. The theory has been found valid and reliable in explaining how effective management can be achieved in research (Shala et al., 2021; Reams, 2023). Similarly, the contingency model implies that findings from studies were used to address management problems that an organisation needed to resolve (Reams, 2023). Since COVID-19 was a situational factor for the effectiveness of school principals to manage

schools, it is imperative for school principals to apply Fiedler's contingency theory of management in order to successfully manage subject teachers for future contingencies.

3. Methods

The qualitative research method was considered appropriate for the study. This method focuses on the generation of theory centred on an open-ended and flexible approach to assessment, narratives, ethnographies, and case studies (Mehrad & Zangeneh, 2019).

3.1. Research design

Since the study was qualitative in nature, Cropley (2022) explains that the purpose of qualitative method is to describe and analyse the world as it is experienced, interpreted, and understood by people during their everyday lives and within their context. The qualitative research is valuable as it studies people in their own definitions of the world, gives meaning to a phenomenon, focuses on subjective experiences of individuals, and is sensitive to the contexts in which people interact with each other (Mouton, 2022). According to Ugwu and Eze (2023), qualitative research aims to achieve a wide understanding of social phenomena in their natural environments. This means that reliance is on the direct experiences of people as agents of meaning-making in their daily lives. Moreover, qualitative research focuses on 'why' rather than 'what' of social phenomena (Ugwu & Eze, 2023).

Since the focus of this study is on an in-depth case of the Covid-19 pandemic, a case study was deemed appropriate. Case study is a logical and systematic plan (Khanday & Khanam, 2019), usually qualitative in nature and aims to provide an in-depth description of a small number of cases, which can range from one to twenty (20) or more (Mouton, 2022). Mutongoza et al. (2021) emphasise that a case study design allows the researcher to get a deeper understanding into selected cases to be studied.

3.2. Population and sampling

The non-probability sampling method was used purposively to select participants from Ubombo CMC. Since the Ubombo CMC has four circuits, School Management Team (SMT) members from each circuit made the sample size; six experienced (over three years in a management position) school principals from high schools. Table 1 shows the biographical data of the participants. Pseudonyms were used to represent the schools of the participants. A pseudonym to name respondents was also used, and they were given codes according to their management position. The gender, age, and home language of each participant are also shown.

Moreover, the highest qualifications of each participant and years of experience in the management position are indicated.

Table 1

Biographical data of participants

Participants	Gender	Age (years)	Home Language	Highest qualification	Years of experience	Position held in management
Indlulamithi High School						
DH1	Male	31	IsiZulu	BEd	3	Departmental Head
Wattle High School						
DH2	Female	41	IsiZulu	PGCE	8	Departmental Head
uMkhiwane High School						
DP1	Male	36	IsiZulu	BEd	6	Deputy Principal
Pine High School						
DP2	Female	49	IsiZulu	BEd	8	Deputy Principal
Aloe High School						
P1	Female	54	IsiZulu	BEd Hons	4	Principal
uMsimbithi High School						
P2	Male	50	IsiZulu	PGCE	8	Principal

Legend: DH1: Departmental Head 1; DH2: Departmental Head 2; DP1: Deputy Principal 1; DP2: Deputy Principal 2; P1: Principal 1; P2: Principal 2

3.3. Data collection instrument

A qualitative semi-structured telephone interview was used for data collection. The length of the interview ranged from 20 to 30 minutes per interviewee. The telephone interview was preferred because it was a feasible method enabling interviewees to respond at any convenient time other than physical contact, which would demand interviewing only during the day. Open-ended questions were generated from the four research questions. According to Elhami and Khoshnevisan (2022), open-ended questions allow the interviewer to collect related data from the interviewee(s) in detail with personal feelings, emotion, ideas, and with less self-censorship. Probing was done to help the researchers explore responses relevant to the research questions. Robinson (2023) explains that probing achieves access to an extra level of detail and depth via verbal prompts to describe, elaborate, demonstrate, or explain a prior answer to an interview question that the participant has already responded to. The appropriate

and ethical utilisation of probes within interviews is a skill that should be intensively developed by qualitative researchers (Robinson, 2023). Since questions were asked in English, participants were asked twice to ensure credibility, and were allowed to express themselves conveniently in their preferred language. The participants' responses were transcribed through an audio recording application, allowing the validity of the responses during analysis and interpretation.

3.4. Research Ethics

According to Arifin (2018), ethical considerations in a qualitative study have a particular resonance due to the in-depth nature of the study process, which is central to protecting human subjects through the application of ethical principles. Flemming and Zegwaard (2018) point out the importance of getting approval before the commencement of data collection. Ethical matters in this study included issues of informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality.

Consent. The participants were physically approached to explain the purpose of the study and the process of data collection. Grounded on matters of consent, the researcher provided an informed consent form to participants for them to sign in agreement that they would be part of the study. Furthermore, participants were informed that their participation in the interview was voluntary and that if they wished to withdraw, they could do so at no cost.

Anonymity. Bos (2020) argues that anonymity seems like a safer guaranteed matter for protecting participants' identities. Since this study relied on audio recording for data collection, the researcher valued anonymity by informing the participants that their identities would not be revealed; hence pseudonyms were used. However, the researcher relied heavily on confidentiality rather than anonymity.

Confidentiality. Bos (2020) defines confidentiality as an agreement between the researcher and the participant not to disclose specific personal information. Grounded on the concepts of Flemming and Zegwaard (2018) that confidentiality is mainly used in interviews, participants were informed that their responses would be recorded for data analysis purposes only and that their identity would not be revealed in the study. The privacy and confidentiality of the information were managed during the telephone interview on matters such as revealing who the caller is and requesting to be in a quiet environment to ensure a noise-free recording.

3.5. Data analysis

Thematic data analysis was used in the process of categorising themes and sub-themes, as edified by Peel (2020). According to Finlay (2021), the six steps of thematic data analysis include: the researcher becoming familiar with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; themes are reviewed, defined, and named; and writing up phase. To answer how the high school subject teachers were managed during Covid-19 at the Ubombo CMC, the steps outlined by Finlay (2021) were contextualised for the process of data analysis.

Firstly, the researchers familiarised themselves with the transcribed data before generating codes. With the research questions in mind, data were concisely and meaningfully organised, as affirmed by Peel (2020). At this point, the coding of the participants in relation to their positions held in the management was done. Moreover, key themes and sub-themes were linked with the four research questions. Reviewing the themes considered the elimination of those that did not address the research questions. Therefore, the relevancy of data interpretation relied on the well-crafted themes arranged in table 2.

Table 2

Arrangement of themes and sub-themes

Theme no.	Themes	Sub-themes
1.	Managers of high school subject teachers during COVID-19 at the Ubombo CMC.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School Management Teams • Circuit managers
2.	The process of managing high school subject teachers during COVID-19 at the Ubombo CMC.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Methods and processes followed
3.	The environment where high school subject teachers were managed during COVID-19 at the Ubombo CMC.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School environment • Online platforms • Home environment
4.	Reasons for the management of high school subject teachers during COVID-19 at the Ubombo CMC.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need to pursue careers • Saving instructional time • Lessons to be learnt from the pandemic

4. Results

This results were obtained through the telephone semi-structured interview and document analysis. The participants' information from the audio recording device was transcribed as is. Some participants gave their responses in the isiZulu language. Consequently, information was typed as is and without editing to ensure validity. The information was further translated into English so that it is comprehensible to people who are unfamiliar with isiZulu.

Theme 1: Managers of high school subject teachers during COVID-19 at the Ubombo CMC

Participants were asked to explore who managed high school subject teachers during Covid-19 at the Ubombo CMC, which most of them gave similar responses. The SMT was mentioned to be the most effective role player in the management of high school subject teachers. However, the circuit managers were also mentioned as taking a stance in supporting and managing subject teachers.

School Management Team. Most participants mentioned that the SMT managed high school subject teachers during Covid-19 at the Ubombo CMC. Participants expressed themselves as follows:

DH1 stated:

"I and the principal managed subject educators during COVID-19."

DH2 expressed:

"In our school, the SMT decided to have a meeting to discuss how the whole school would be managed. In the SMT, there is a principal and two departmental heads. As an older person who had comorbidities, she (the principal) suggested that she would communicate with us while she was at home because she feared being infected. We then came up with a solution: she would manage us as departmental heads through calls and WhatsApp and deliver paperwork to school, such as circulars if needed."

When further asked who would then be managing other subject teachers, DH2 elaborated:

"Well, we, as DHs, managed subject educators. We then decided that when schools were closed, subject teachers and class teachers would manage their

learners with support from us, and that's how it went. So, it was a top-down approach that we took in the management of our school."

DP1 said:

"During the COVID-19 period, the school management team, which consists of the principal, deputy principal and departmental heads, were responsible for the entire management of the school."

The participant was further asked to elaborate on the number of SMTs responsible for the management of subject teachers. He responded:

"I am the only one who is the deputy principal, so I am delegated to work as a principal in her absentia. We worked with three HODs (departmental heads) during that time. Fortunately, all SMT members reside close to the school, so it was not that difficult to meet face-to-face to make decisions on how to manage our school."

P2 mentioned:

"The school was managed by the SMT, which is the school management team. We have three members: the principal and two departmental heads. However, one co-opted post level 1 educator assisted us in managing the school because we were expecting another post as our school enrollment was growing. So, she was acting as a DH for the Humanities Department. So, to answer your question, the SMT managed subject educators during COVID-19."

Circuit managers. Although the circuit managers indirectly managed subject teachers, they played a role in supporting the management of subject teachers during Covid-19. These are the sentiments of the participants in this regard.

DH1 stated:

"The circuit manager ensured that we get support in managing subject educators during unusual times. We were all confused about how to manage, but through his support, we, as the SMT, tried our best to manage subject educators."

P1 alluded:

“Even though we tried to ensure that teaching and learning were done, we got instructions from the Department of Education through umhloli (circuit manager).”

P2 stated:

“We got support from our circuit manager through his visits, and we felt motivated as principals to further manage our subject educators without fear during the crisis.”

Theme 2: The process of managing high school subject teachers during Covid-19 at the Ubombo CMC

Participants were also interviewed to explore what was done to manage subject teachers during the pandemic. Firstly, they were asked to relate what was done and then probing kicked in for them to explore how it was done. This theme incorporates the methods and processes undertaken thereof.

Strategies and processes followed. Participants provided various strategies that were used to manage subject teachers in the CMC. WhatsApp groups, Facebook, Zoom meetings, radio stations, take-home activities, and departmental circulars were among the methods used to manage subject teachers during Covid-19. Other participants uttered that phone calls helped to manage subject teachers remotely. In some instances, managers referred subject teachers to listen to radios to access Matric intervention programmes, which they would use in their classes.

DH1 stated:

“So, in our WhatsApp group, all subject educators responded to our instruction.”

DH2 mentioned:

“The principal managed us as DHs remotely using cellphone calls, and we, as DHs, managed subject educators remotely and in full attendance.”

When asked whether they considered other ways of managing subject teachers remotely besides phone calls, DH2 responded:

“Only WhatsApp groups and phone calls were tried to manage subject teachers.”

DP1 asserted:

“We, as the SMT, were then used to holding meetings via Zoom and planning how subject educators could be supported during COVID-19 times. Besides the fact that some learners had no cellphones, other subject educators complained that they would not use their data because the government did not compensate them. As a result, it was difficult to manage through convincing them to opt for Whatsapp lessons. Another reason that prevented the SMT from successfully managing subject educators during lockdown is that sometimes educators would not show or respond to WhatsApp meetings or pick up calls.”

DP1 added:

“We also advised subject educators to listen to some lessons from radio stations such as uKhozi FM and Maputaland Community Radio as there were curriculum recovery programmes. In that way we thought it was going to be fruitful to share with their learners.”

DP2 stated:

“We were confused about what strategies we could use. Our superiors were even hesitant to give us directions on their own. They had to get instructions from the provincial government on when to continue teaching and when to stop. So, in our school, we tried WhatsApp groups to communicate instructions to our subject educators since we had times when schools were closing. However, the strategy of WhatsApp helped and somehow created challenges.”

Besides phone calls and social media platforms, some participants adopted the rotational learner attendance approach to be able to manage high school subject teachers. However, some managers mentioned that little was done to manage subject teachers.

DH1's excerpt:

“There was not much effort put into managing subject educators since they were few, so they complied with our instruction when they were supposed to be at school. Schools closed when the pandemic hit hard and reopened when the infection rate was low. So, the unity that we had with subject educators made us manage with ease.”

DP1 said:

“During the time when both learners and educators were to be at school, the adjusted rotational approach for the return of learners was implemented in our school. That was because our school had a high enrollment of over 800 learners, so we couldn’t allow all grades to return to school at once. However, we didn’t compromise regarding Grade 12 subject educators and learners; they all came to school. We were lucky enough because it is mandatory that all Grade 12 learners reside near the school for extra classes, so subject educators had no worries to deliver lessons.”

Similarly, DP2 mentioned:

“Besides the use of WhatsApp to manage subject educators, we adopted the method of allowing learners to go to school on a rotational basis. We could not let all learners attend since we are managing a big enrolment school.”

The Guidelines for Development of the School Timetables Reopening of Schools (2020) suggested three models to be used in schools for the attendance of learners. The models included platooning, alternating days per week and bi-weekly rotational attendance. Firstly, platooning is applied when schools allow two separate sets of subject teachers and learners to use the same building, one set in the morning and one in the afternoon for teaching and learning. The alternating days per week implied that grades alternate classes or lessons on different days of the week. Lastly, the bi-weekly rotational attendance allowed grades to attend school on alternate weeks. The mentioned strategies imply that there should be a consistent model to be adopted by school principals to manage subject teachers in future contingencies.

Theme 3: The environment where high school subject teachers were managed during COVID-19 at the Ubombo CMC

Participants revealed that the management of subject teachers took place in the school, through online platforms and at home.

School environment. It is evident from the findings that teaching and learning continued in the CMC during Covid-19; subject teachers attended schools when they were reopened.

DH1 stated:

“The management of subject educators took place both in the school and when they were at their homes. At school, it was a usual management role displayed by the SMT while ensuring COVID-19 protocols.”

DP1 said:

“At school, the SMT was in full force, and we attended school except on days when we had to temporarily close due to recorded cases. It was hard because there was a time when the principal and two departmental heads tested positive for COVID-19, so we had to keep our shoulders on to manage subject educators.”

P1 articulated:

“Well, the place where management of subject educators was on two folds. The DH managed subject educators at school when COVID-19 infection was low, and at home when the pandemic was high”.

Online platforms. High school principals tried online platforms such as WhatsApp and Zoom to manage subject teachers during COVID-19. However, it is evident that such platforms were ineffective in some schools.

DH1 stated:

“...even though there were slight challenges to hold meetings via WhatsApp due to clashes on a particular scheduled time, but subject educators would later respond positively on the deliberations and instructions given.”

DP1 mentioned:

“We managed subject educators at school and through online platforms such as WhatsApp groups, Zoom, and phone calls.”

DP2 reiterated:

“So, in our school, we tried WhatsApp groups to communicate instructions to our subject educators since we had times when schools were closing.”

Home environment. Some participants articulated that the management of high school subject teachers took place while they were at home. This was because schools were closed

during the national lockdown. However, some participants highlighted that it was difficult to manage subject teachers while at home.

DH1 stated:

“Subject educators were managed through social media channels and telephonically when they were at home.”

Similarly, DH2 said:

“It was a bit easy to manage subject educators because they were managed from home and even at school through different levels of management.”

Contrary to DH1 and DH2, DP1 opined:

“I could say little was done to manage subject teachers while they were at home. That was due to inaccessibility to technology and other reasons that teachers gave.”

P2 stated:

“The effort to manage learners while they were at home was unsuccessful due to the reasons I mentioned.”

Theme 4: The need to manage high school subject teachers during Covid-19 at the Ubombo CMC

Participants were asked on the necessity to manage high school subject teachers during Covid-19. While everyone can carry-on with their individual tasks, school principals ensure to manage both the virtual and onsite working environments.

The need to pursue careers. Most participants revealed that learners, especially those in Grade 12, had to pursue their careers regardless of the Covid-19 pandemic. Likewise, subject teachers had to play their part for some reasons. It is learnt that if the management of high school subject teachers had not occurred during the entire Covid-19 period, learners would have perhaps had delayed career goals.

DH2 mentioned:

“We had very rare cases of serious illnesses from subject educators and learners, so we thought they were classified under low risk of serious admissions. Although that was a risk we took, it worked for us because many of those learners are in universities and colleges. So that was a fruitful risk for them, and we could not be blamed for managing them in that situation.”

DH2 added:

“Subject educators, on the other hand, had to be managed during the pandemic not only to do their work but to do their work under vigilance. We needed to ensure that they were not infected while doing their work.”

DP1 stated:

“...This means that our learners are in tertiary institutions as we speak, so if we couldn't manage subject educators to teach our learners, they would have lost the years of their tertiary studies.”

DP2 articulated:

“... Starting with subject educators, they needed to trust us and feel motivated and comforted by us to do their work willingly. So, the onus was to let them consider the future of our learners at hand. As hard as it was, they had to try to assist our learners through teaching, so we managed them on that. Learners also had to value their future. They had to prioritise their education amid the pandemic so that they could be doctors, teachers, nurses, and the list is endless...”

P2 argued:

“There was a time when we as principals thought that the department was gambling with our lives, forcing us to work under COVID-19, but I also felt that it was unfair for learners not to learn. They had a future ahead of them as well. I think we had to manage our schools to manage that gap.”

Saving instructional time. One of the reasons explored by participants for managing high school subject teachers during the pandemic was saving instructional time. The core function of teaching and learning had to be kept running. Participants affirmed in this regard.

DH1 avowed:

“I think it was reasonable to manage subject educators during COVID-19 because the main core in the school is teaching and learning. As a result, without that core function, we would have no professionals and educated citizens.”

Similarly, DP2 went on to say:

“Maybe to add, I would say the provincial government expected us to manage teaching and learning. Curriculum management was a necessity. Our learners had to learn even though we were facing COVID-19. In essence, teaching and learning was the main reason for subject educators and learners to go to school.”

P1 revealed:

“It was important for several reasons but eyokuqala nje, abantwana kwakungafanele balahlekelwe isikhathi sokufunda (firstly, learners were not supposed to lose the instructional time). They needed to learn regardless of the challenge. Our department tried to save that time, although there were gaps here and there.”

Lessons to be learnt from the pandemic. It is undeniable that there were lessons learnt from the Covid-19 period that school principals encountered unprecedented exposure to managing high school subject teachers.

DH1 opined:

“Subject educators were to be managed so as to make them realise that their pastoral role was meant to provide a conducive environment for their learners even during challenging times.”

DH2 mentioned:

“As I mentioned earlier, our school is located in an impoverished area so izingane zethu kwakufanele bavuke bazithathe, bafunde noma izimo zingavumi ukuze baxoshe ikati eziko (our learners had to shoulder on and learn during those hard times to eradicate poverty).”

Similarly, DP1 alluded:

“We had to act as loco parents (in place of a parent) as we had to take care of our learners. Some had lost their loved ones, so we had to take a pastoral role to

ensure that even those that feared the virus and those that were orphans were taken good care of.”

5. Discussion

Since school principals were called on to bear the onus of managing a particularly stressful situation, serving a diverse range of roles worldwide (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023), the findings revealed similar insight from the study area. The SMT managed most of the high school subject teachers at the Ubombo CMC, including the principals, DPs, and DHs. The management of high school subject teachers successfully relied on the instructions set by either one or all members of the SMT. The findings also revealed that the school principals either delegated the DP or the DH to assume management duties when they were absent or infected by the disease. Apart from the SMT's role in managing high school subject teachers, circuit managers also took a stance to support school principals in the process. It is understood that the circuit managers' role is to manage school principals. However, through the findings, they accepted the onus to guide SMTs in managing subject teachers since the pandemic was unprecedented.

School principals explained explicitly how the high school subject teachers were managed during Covid-19 in the CMC. Unlike Brazil where communication modes such as WhatsApp, YouTube, and Instagram were used to propose learning activities (Costin & Coutinho, 2022), the methods used in the management process at Ubombo CMC were WhatsApp groups, Zoom meetings, Facebook, phone calls, and radio stations. Some schools also initiated an alternative approach to learner attendance. Moreover, the DBE assisted school principals with issuing circulars, guiding them in managing teachers.

During the surge of Covid-19 infections in the country, schools were closed entirely. However, some school principals at the Ubombo CMC opted to use online platforms to manage high school teachers remotely. SMTs communicated instructions to manage subject educators through WhatsApp groups, Zoom meetings, calls and, in rare circumstances, on Facebook. Although some school principals revealed that some challenges emanated from these methods, they tried to keep the schools running, particularly in Grade 12. Challenges such as inaccessibility to smart cellphones, data costs, network problems, and load shedding seemed to threaten the process. Apart from online platforms, some school principals advised teachers to listen to radio stations such as Ukhozi FM and Maputaland Community Radio. This aimed

to assist subject teachers to impart educational broadcasts to their learners. Similarly, Ghanaian schools had opted for remote teaching endorsed by the government to deliver lessons through platforms such as the Internet, television, and radio (Tuffour et al., 2021). Learners at Ubombo CMC listened to educational programmes from the radio aimed at recovering the curriculum. Furthermore, some public announcements were communicated via these platforms. Grade 12 learners were also invited to collect study material from school during the lockdown to keep them updated with the formal curriculum.

Platooning, alternating days per week and bi-weekly rotational attendance were among the methods outlined by the Guidelines for Development of the School Timetables Reopening of Schools (2020). Most school principals adopted the approach of alternating days per week for the attendance of subject teachers and learners. School principals allowed grades to attend on certain days a week, with Grade 12 attending daily. The findings revealed that this method was only applied to schools with large enrollments. In essence, this approach aimed to lessen the fast transmission of the virus among teachers and learners. However, schools with few learners allowed all to attend when schools reopened.

Although the pandemic seemed to paralyse the efforts of school principals to manage teachers, the findings suggest that there was a need for Grade 12 learners to continue their studies in tertiary institutions. This implies that the accumulation of gap years anticipated during the crisis was avoided through continuous engagements with subject teachers and learners in matters of curriculum delivery. The core function of teaching and learning was kept on its wheels amid the pandemic. This means that instructional time was saved. Various methods were attempted to enhance teaching and learning. School principals continued to manage subject teachers so that the notional time for teaching and learning was not lost. Consequently, most learners pursued their studies at various tertiary institutions. Lastly, the findings suggest that there were lessons learnt from the unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic. The pastoral role of subject educators was intensified as they were able to take care of the learners. This was central to identifying learners from impoverished backgrounds as well as those who became orphans because of the pandemic.

The pandemic has taught school principals to be resilient and exemplary to their subordinates in leading through challenges. It could be brought to light that school principals should perhaps welcome the use of technology in schools. This has been observed when subject teachers and learners spent most of their time at home during the pandemic. As a result, the

online approach would be feasible for managing teachers and learners not only during future crises, but also at present times.

6. Conclusion

Management of high school teachers became a challenge to most school principals as they were not prepared during the Covid-19 pandemic. Consequently, there was no effective strategy and practices used to manage teachers at Ubombo CMC; everything emanated from what was necessary during the situation. Hence, the experiences shared by the participants imply the necessity for contingency leadership. School principals must be equipped with the skills to implement necessary strategies in times of crises and chaos. However, they should have been armed with necessary tools given the proper support. Hence, this study sees the need to develop and put in place a contingency management plan to be used by all school principals during any crises. As the educational landscape has been changed during and after the pandemic, it becomes a necessity to allot budgets for school gadgets and backup plans such as solar panels or generators to eliminate load shedding. As part of the training programmes, schools develop training sessions for any technological use for learning, contingency plans in cases of crises, and effective handling of students and personnel under traumatic circumstance.

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