




Teachers' Experiences on the Implementation of COVID-19 Protocols Amidst the Pandemic in Mmashadi Circuit of the Sekhukhune District

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ABSTRACT

The global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic extended to the education sector in South Africa, prompting the implementation of preventative measures by the National Coronavirus Command Council. These COVID-19 protocols included the wearing of face masks or face shields, ensuring maximum ventilation, washing of hands, and school attendance routines to deal with overcrowded classrooms, among others. This study aimed to delve into the implementation of COVID-19 protocols in schools, focusing on the strategies utilised and the challenges teachers encountered. Employing a qualitative research methodology within a case study framework, the study involved eight teachers (five male and three female) from four schools in the Sekhukhune District, selected through purposive sampling. Data were elicited through semi-structured interviews to gain a thorough understanding of the phenomenon and coded for anonymity purposes. Aligned with the goal of the study, thematic data analysis was adopted for analysing the data. The findings revealed that teachers faced significant challenges in balancing their responsibilities in implementing COVID-19 protocols alongside making up for lost teaching time. However, alternative strategies were employed by teachers to mitigate this loss including the deployment of assistant teachers to support protocol and assist students with homework, additional security personnel to help guard and control unnecessary school visits, and for teachers to provide supplementary notes and embark on online learning. Recommendations include the increased deployment of support personnel, increased community involvement, training teachers to use online learning platforms, and for the Department of Basic Education to develop a guidance sheet to assist teachers in navigating the challenges of teaching during a pandemic.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19, pandemic, protocols, challenges, strategies, online learning, social distancing

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 disrupted people's daily routines significantly, and this disruption persisted until cases began to decline in 2022. Schooling was among the many facets of life that were affected by these unprecedented circumstances. On March 5, 2020, the National Institute of Communicable Diseases confirmed a positive COVID-19 test. On March 26th, the South African President announced a national lockdown in response to the spread of the Coronavirus. Schools had never been closed for such a long period of time before, which negatively affected the education system (Molise & Dube, 2020).

The lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are still evident in the school system today, suggesting that its impact is far from over. According to Duraku and Hoxha (2020), the closure of institutions of learning as a preventative measure to curb the spread of COVID-19 affected educational systems around the world.

The study set out to investigate how COVID-19 protocols were implemented by schools and the challenges thereof. Furthermore, teachers' experiences pertaining to the challenges they faced during the intense conditions of COVID-19 were also ascertained. In this study, the main aim was to identify how schools managed the COVID-19 regulations internally, the challenges they faced, and how the pandemic continues to affect their learning and teaching routines. Importantly, it attempted to discover how schools ran and implemented the COVID-19 protocols to establish which challenges they experienced and what the possible solutions were. Several COVID-19 regulations were mandated for all institutions to adhere to in order to curb the spread of the pandemic, including the implementation of social distancing measures (Ahmed & Sintayehu, 2022). Yet, there remained challenges in most schools, such as finding sufficient space in classrooms to accommodate more learners during the pandemic (Maree, 2021). The space issue raised challenges in implementing the COVID-19 protocols and regulations. Dube (2020) argued that although several studies pertaining to COVID-19 have been conducted, none have specifically investigated how schools' implementation of COVID-19 protocols was carried out, and the associated challenges. As most schools experienced challenges during implementing COVID-19 protocols, this gap in the literature underscored the need for research in this area.

Critical regulations and protocols had to be considered and managed effectively to avoid any risk of positive COVID-19 cases (Fitriah et al., 2020). Schleicher and Reimers (2020) contended that the closure of schools resulted in students learning only a fraction of what they would have learned under normal circumstances. This demonstrated very clearly that successful learning occurs in schools, and that maintaining school operations requires strict adherence to numerous protocols. Since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, learning in schools took place under strict precautionary measures as schools tried by all means to contain the spread of the disease (Ahmed & Sintayehu, 2022). This study aimed to delve into the implementation of COVID-19 protocols in schools, focusing on the strategies utilised and the challenges teachers

encountered. Based on the purpose outlined, the following research questions were formulated:

- What are the educators' challenges in implementing COVID-19 protocols?
- How do teachers' strategies enhance the implementation of COVID-19 protocols?

The paper is structured in the following way: it begins by documenting the challenges experienced in teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures teachers employed to support learning. Next, the researchers review the related literature on the challenges experienced by teachers in teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures employed to support learning. Finally, the paper describes the research methods used to collect and analyse data to draw significant conclusions. The literature revealed a lack of in-depth research and studies on how schools implemented COVID-19 protocols, as well as the challenges they encountered in doing so. By addressing the research questions, the study aimed to contribute to the development of effective policies for the implementation of COVID-19 protocols in schools.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teachers challenges in implementing COVID-19 protocols

COVID-19 emerged as one of the most traumatising pandemics in recent history. According to the 2019 report by the World Health Organization (WHO), COVID-19 is classified within the coronavirus family which affects both animals and humans. However, it was confirmed by WHO that Covid-19 had not been previously identified in humans. The COVID-19 outbreak originated in Wuhan in 2019 and soon started spreading worldwide (Esposito & Principi, 2020). The transmission of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-COV-2) is known to occur through respiratory droplets during physical contact or through contaminated surfaces (Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020). As a result, COVID-19 led to many educational institutions having to close or shut down academic activities while finding ways to continue with teaching and learning sensitive to minimising the number of infections (Dube et al., 2022).

In this study, the researchers reviewed previous studies to explore the challenges teachers experience during the implementation of COVID-19 protocols in general. For instance, Izhar, Al-dheleai, and Na (2021) conducted a study focusing on teaching during the time of COVID-19. Their study investigated the challenges faced by teachers in initiating online class sessions. The findings of the study revealed that before the COVID-19 shutdown, educators and learners were able to connect directly during classes and communicate their emotions through facial expressions. However, because of the pandemic, the study highlighted that teachers were unable to work face-to-face with learners and observe crucial cues such as their facial expressions, behaviour, and body movements to determine the level of learners' understanding. A separate study conducted by Akol (2022) focused on teaching challenges during the pandemic and served as the foundation for a strategic intervention program. The study revealed that a number of the pandemic instructors faced several issues including technology use, output

submission, evaluation authenticity, communication connectivity, parental support, tools/gadgets, financial problems, and the learning environment. The study also indicated that a lack of access to learning tools such as gadgets, a dependable internet connection, and financial limitations among the students and parents play a crippling role in the success of blended learning.

The aforementioned studies exhibited similarities and differences in terms of their findings. Izhar et al., (2021) study resonated with Akol's (2022) findings, specifically identifying communication as a challenge. They contend that teachers and learners found it difficult to communicate face-to-face since the instruction took place online. Conversely, some differences were also noted in the two studies (Izhar et. al., 2021; Akol, 2022). While one study emphasised school closure as a challenge, the other study pointed out a lack of access to learning tools because of financial constraints. Nonetheless, neither of the studies focused on the implementation of the COVID-19 protocols, which underscored a need for the current study to be undertaken. By filling this gap in the literature, the current study seeks to provide valuable insights into the practical difficulties faced by educators in adhering to COVID-19 protocols within educational settings.

Several studies were predominantly centred on the effect the COVID-19 pandemic had on teaching and learning. Scholars such as Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021) focused on how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted teaching and learning. Their study, akin to many others in the field, focused on alternative learning opportunities and disadvantages during the pandemic. Tarkar (2020) argued that in efforts to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus, governments worldwide implemented measures to close schools and colleges. As a result, schools were closed all across the world to curb the virus from spreading. After months of suspended schooling activities, some countries around the globe began to reopen their educational institutions (Ahmed & Sintayehu, 2022), however, very few studies were conducted on how these schools should have implemented the COVID-19 protocols, as well as the challenges that schools faced in the process.

According to Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021), the COVID-19 pandemic caused the greatest upheaval in education systems in human history. Due to major breakouts, the South African government introduced preventative measures to inhibit the spread of the disease. The initial step by the South African government, with the aid of information obtained from the Department of Health and the World Health Organization, was to implement the national lockdown. Consequently, schools were shut down temporarily. The lockdown necessitated the prolonged closure of schools, thereby negatively impacting educational routines. Upon reopening, Maree (2021) highlights that space in schools was a major problem, creating difficulties in effectively implementing certain protocols.

Teachers' strategies to enhance the implementation of COVID-19 protocols

School closures were a strategy devised to curb the spread of the virus. However, it is important to note that these closures were not intended to be permanent, but rather temporary measures

to address the immediate public health crisis. As schools reopened, measures were put in place to ensure that the spread of the virus within schools was contained (Di Domenico, Pullano, Sabbatini, Bolle, & Colizza, 2021). Maree (2021) observed that finding sufficient space in classrooms to accommodate more learners during the pandemic was a significant challenge for most schools. Thus, it became inherently challenging to use social distancing, one of the COVID-19 protocols, in such institutions. A dire need arose for the researchers to consider the review of previous studies on COVID-19 to explore the strategies the teachers used to curb the high infection rates.

Izhar, Al-Dheleai, and Ishak (2021) conducted research in Malaysia with a focus on exploring techniques to continue with education during COVID-19. Their study examined the actions and tactics adopted by the Ministry of Education (MoE) to ensure that learning was delivered to all public-school children within the country. The review found that the (MoE)proposed four techniques to be implemented during COVID-19: digital learning communities for professional development; collaboration with mass media and digital learning communities for professional development; synchronous and asynchronous (online classes); and flexible class schedules and pedagogies. Moreover, the results indicated that the established measures allowed the system of education to deal with the school's abrupt closure and provide essential education to children amidst the pandemic.

A separate study by Reimers and Schleicher (2020) adopted a framework aimed at guiding an education response to the COVID-19 Pandemic of 2020. The study concluded that in order to preserve students' mental health and general well-being, as well as to mitigate potential online risks, schools ought to have advised students and their families on how to utilise screens and other online resources responsibly. The study also discovered that if an online teaching technique was inconvenient, teachers should have devised different methods of delivering lessons. The methods included using TV programs (especially in cases where a relationship with television stations was achievable), podcasts and radio broadcasts, as well as digital or hardcopy learning packets.

Indeed, both studies exhibited similarities and differences in terms of results. The common issues revealed in the studies (Dube et al., 2022; 2023; Izhar et. al., 2021; Reimers & Schleicher, 2020) pointed to the creation of partnerships between the school and the community during online learning. This partnership could have been enhanced through collaboration with different media houses for broadcasting the lessons to the learners. Izhar et al., (2021) research differed from that of Reimers and Schleichers' (2020) in its emphasis on flexible class schedules which are rotational and blended in nature. Furthermore, they highlight guiding parents and learners on the safe and cautious utilisation of online resources to protect learners from any cyber harm or mental health. These similarities and differences provide a solid foundation for exploring the strategies used by teachers while implementing the COVID-19 protocols.

A large number of studies were also conducted on effective techniques to sustain teaching and learning during the pandemic. Among these, Esposito et al., (2021), reported that schools had to remain open to ensure that proper learning took place and eliminate social and economic issues as a result. The findings further suggested that this should have been done in absolute compliance with recommendations for preventative measures. Esposito et al., (2021) maintained that the school buildings should have been adapted, the ratio of learners to that of teachers addressed, and relevant education provided about infectious diseases and prevention. However, the researchers noted, that it still did not address the issue of the ways in which schools should have implemented the COVID-19 protocols.

While the protocols were readily available and explicated, the primary concern lay in their execution. As a result, the implementation of these protocols remained a significant unresolved issue. Preventative measures including wearing protective facial masks, social distancing, and washing hands regularly were put into place (Baboolal-Frank, 2021). However, to ensure correct adherence to the advised COVID-19 preventive measures, adult supervision and consistent reinforcement of safe personal behaviours were crucial (Li et al., 2021). This demonstrated clearly that students had to be supervised, particularly by their teachers, but that teachers also had to be adequately informed to carry out the task effectively.

Moreover, educators bore the additional responsibility of ensuring strict adherence to the COVID-19 protocols announced by the Ministry of Health and Education. This demanded a significant portion of their time which led to stress for both teachers and students (Di Domenico et al., 2021). Consequently, assistant educators had to be used to help in an attempt to manage the situation. This strategy was adopted by schools to maintain control over the issue, as assistant educators not only provided advice but also frequently reminded students about how to follow the COVID-19 protocols as specified in their job description.

According to Duraku and Hoxha (2020), despite the widespread transition to online learning in educational institutions worldwide, various factors were believed to have impacted the quality of distance learning, teacher effectiveness, and student learning outcomes. This necessitated learners and teachers to be physically present within the school premises for learning to take place. This presented a challenge as learners attended in sizable numbers, requiring effective management to adhere to the COVID-19 regulations. In addition, both learners and teachers were at risk of spreading the virus. Therefore, according to Dooley et al., (2020), it was imperative for them to strictly adhere to the regulations and protocols of COVID-19 at all times.

Notwithstanding the depth of research carried out by several researchers, such as Maree (2021) and Tarkar (2020), the challenge of how teachers had to implement COVID-19 protocols persisted. As a result, there arose a need for an investigation into effective methods for teachers to implement these protocols in order to mitigate the spread of the virus and reduce high infection rates.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The framework for the study was grounded in appreciative inquiry (AI) (Braun et al., 2016). AI is premised upon three tenets, namely valuing the talents that people have, promoting social interaction among people who are affected by a particular problem, and devising strategies that are driven by people for the people (Cooperrider et al., 2008). According to Clements., (2020), the first assumption involves the belief that people who exist in a particular setting have a unique set of talents, and such talents need to be considered when teachers devise mechanisms to address the challenges of curriculum implementation. The skills and abilities of teachers became crucial when implementing COVID-19 protocols. The second assumption acknowledges that the same people who are affected by a particular problem are the same people who can solve that problem (Luhailima et al., 2022). This does not occur in a vacuum; these people need to interact socially in order to understand the challenges that confront them. The third assumption is based on creating a space for people to be at the centre of determining the strategies that they think work effectively in solving their problems. Solutions to educational challenges should not be imposed on the teachers, but the teachers should be allowed to identify remedies that work and those that do not.

Hlalele (2019, p.478) defined AI as "... a process that promotes positive change in organisations or communities by focusing on peak experiences and successes of the past". The theory is premised on the notion that schools as communities of learning possess unique and diverse forms of assets that teachers can use in solving the challenges that compromise effective teaching and learning. As an approach, AI is strength-centred and highlights the benefits rather than the drawbacks (Arnold et al., 2022). Additionally, AI is said to possess a great transformational ability through constructing what is efficient and leveraging it to drive transformation. The 4D cycle (Figure 1) comprises four phases: discovery, dream, design, and delivery. First, the discovery phase is centred on appreciating what works well, whereas the dream phase is based on exploring what could be encouraging people to think outside the box. The design phase, on the other hand, emphasises the practical measures required to get closer to the ideal scenario. Finally, the delivery phase focuses on the commitment to transform, as well as how to sustain the envisioned future. In the context of the study, AI provided a strength-centred approach with great emphasis on the positive aspects rather than focusing on the problems (Arnold et al., 2022).

The researchers postulated that schools are endowed with unique assets that have enabled them to maintain their resilience and adaptability in the face of pandemics experienced by society. Their sustainable rural livelihoods were entrenched in the teachers' ways of knowing, doing, and being. Therefore, AI was considered relevant to this study as it advocates for positive change, an optimistic attitude toward change, and an appreciation of people's experiences. Hlalele (2019) too viewed AI as a strength-based approach since it focuses on the capacities that the communities have in solving their problems through their indigenous ways of knowing. AI focuses on an understanding of organisational assets. Hence, the researchers concurred that

the teachers possessed indigenous knowledge concerning traditional herbs that could have been used by schools during the pandemic to fumigate classrooms possibly contaminated with the virus. This knowledge included medicinal plants known to alleviate flu and other respiratory ailments. AI was useful in answering the research questions of the study because it is unapologetic in its focus on ensuring positive change, believing communities can be strengthened through collaborative efforts.

METHOD

The study adopted a qualitative case study design, deemed appropriate for addressing both scientific inquiries and real-life societal issues (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Furthermore, this approach allowed the researchers to obtain more knowledge about the challenges teachers experience during the implementation of COVID-19 protocols by providing tangible context and insights. The case study enabled the researchers to answer the questions pertaining to the challenges teachers experienced while implementing COVID-19 protocols. This study aimed to delve into the implementation of COVID-19 protocols in schools, focusing on the strategies utilised and the challenges teachers encountered. The research questions were linked to the teachers' real-life experiences acquired during the implementation of the COVID-19 protocols and the possible challenges they were confronted with in their classes (Braun et al., 2016). The participants' experiences and vocal responses to the research questions provided valuable insights into the realities teachers faced while implementing COVID-19 guidelines. Their accounts shed light on how they navigated their teaching techniques amidst unusual circumstances to ensure effective instruction and mitigate the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Through their narratives, participants conveyed a palpable sense of the pandemic's impact on their real-life settings.

Research Locale

The research was conducted in South Africa at the four schools from Sekhukhune South District, Mmashadi circuit, in Limpopo Province. These schools were categorised according to quintile three status. Schools A and B were situated in a rural area, and Schools C and D were situated in a suburban area. The four schools were selected based on their proximity to the researchers' location and the existing close relationship between the researchers and the schools. Schools A and B had insufficient resources to deal with the spread of COVID-19 as most of the learners were from poor socio-economic backgrounds. On the contrary, schools B and C had sufficient resources to buy materials such as face masks and sanitiser for both the teachers and learners to curb the spread of the virus in their schools.

Selection of the Participants

For the study, participants were purposefully selected using a case study approach. In-depth sampling is a basic requirement of qualitative research to select information-rich cases (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The samples comprised two categories: the participating schools and the individual participants from each school. Specifically, participants were selected among the

individuals in the schools who implemented COVID-19 protocols daily to generate specific data. Furthermore, two participating educators were selected from each school, adding up to a total of 8 participants from each of the two participating schools. Table 1 depicts the profiles of the participants.

Table 1.

Profiles of the participants

School	Teacher Codes	Experience	Gender	Age
S1	E11	30	Male	50-55
	E12	18	Female	45-49
S2	E21	8	Male	30-35
	E22	16	Female	35-40
S3	E31	4	Female	25-30
	E32	20	Male	40-45
S4	E41	5	Male	25-30
	E42	7	Male	25-30

The sample size was modest, allowing the researchers to obtain enough data from the individuals very quickly. The schools were labelled S1, S2, S3, and S4. The educators were labeled E11, to indicate educator 1 from school 1, and E12, to indicate educator 2 from school 1, respectively. Therefore, for educators, there were E11, E12, E21, E22, E31, E32, E41, and E42 for all educators from the respective schools.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were deemed the most appropriate instrument to elicit data from the participants. According to Creswell & Creswell (2017), conducting "semi-structured interviews involves a few predetermined areas of interest with possible prompts to help guide the conversation". Furthermore, this type of interview "is superbly suited for several valuable tasks" (Braun et al., 2016, p. 6). The determinative factor aided the researchers in their discourse with the subjects. In this study, open-ended type questions played a significant role in facilitating an in-depth exploration of the participants' own experiences with the implementation of COVID-19 protocols. As advocated by Kollamparambil and Oyenubi (2021), questions were repeated to ensure that the interviewee could make sense of them before responding. A probing approach was employed to obtain clarification or more information, allowing the researchers to distinguish between the participants' responses and their perspectives (Ngwenya & Hlophe, 2021). The teachers provided detailed and comprehensive information. Following the interviews, the critical issues raised and parallels and differences in the data were highlighted (Mashaba & Maile, 2022). All of the interviews were taped, transcribed, and analysed in accordance with predetermined processes. As a result, the researchers gained data-rich

information on the participants' experiences of implementing the COVID-19 protocols, the challenges they experienced, and possible strategies they could have used to address such hindrances. All teacher participants signed consent forms prior to the interviews (Dube, 2020). The consent forms did not reflect the participants' real names. Additionally, the participants' biographical information was kept private by assigning them pseudonyms or codes to safeguard their identity.

Instruments

Data collection was carried out using the Teacher Interview Guide (TIG). As per Braun et al., (2016), semi-structured interviews entail asking research questions and receiving responses from study participants. During the interviews, each participant had 30 minutes to answer open-ended questions. The TIG allowed the researchers to establish real-life, honest, and challenging encounters with the participants (Ngwenya & Hlophe 2021), which aided in answering the main research questions, namely: What are the challenges teachers experience during the implementation of COVID-19 protocols? How do teachers' strategies enhance the implementation of COVID-19 protocols? According to Landa, et al., (2021), observations allow for a thorough comprehension of mediating a deep understanding of the participants' behaviour and their environment. Through the TIG, the researchers obtained a clear picture of how the four teachers implemented the COVID-19 protocols in their classrooms. Throughout the process leading up to the presentation of the research findings, the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants' identities were maintained, as per Maree (2022). The study's validity and reliability were enhanced by the data-generating procedure (i.e., semi-structured interviews) (Ngwenya, 2020). The researchers posited that the process of COVID-19 protocol implementation required teachers to be flexible in selecting the resources and materials that may have helped to curb the spread of the coronavirus. The participants' explanations, arguments, and experiences, vindicated, validated, and justified this assumption.

Data Analysis

The study's data were analysed using qualitative thematic analysis (TA). In this instance, thematic analysis revealed the participants' main claims (Maree, 2022), and conclusions were drawn based on reliable evidence and reasoning from raw data (Nowell, 2017). According to Braun et al. (2016, p. 3), this approach to data analysis entails "dismantling, segmentation, and assembling data to form meaningful patterns to draw inferences". Ngwenya and Hlophe (2021, p. 177) defined data analysis as "primarily an inductive process of categorizing data and identifying patterns and relationships among categories". Ngwenya (2020) argued that even if analytic methodologies vary based on the researcher, their induction procedures and strategies are consistent. First, the researchers evaluated, synthesised, and transcribed the data received from individuals before interpreting, synthesising, and combining all pertinent information into one seamless unit. Then, the data were categorised to identify correlations, themes, and patterns (Ngwenya & Hlophe, 2021). The third step involved data analysis, which commenced by listening to the audio recordings and reviewing the video files. A review of the camera images

and transcriptions ensued. Finally, the responses of the eight participants were thoroughly evaluated before the information was deconstructed and reassembled. Triangulation was used by integrating multiple data sources from the principals, departmental heads as well as learners. Semi-structured interviews were used as data collection method. The interviews later transcribed and circulated among the participants to confirm the correctness of the data to mitigate potential bias or misrepresentation. This approach enabled the researchers to enhancing the reliability and validity of the findings by verifying if the utterances made by the participants during semi-structured interviews were correctly represented.

Ethical Considerations

To ensure ethical compliance, ethical clearance (TREC/402/2022:PG) was granted for this study by the Turfloop Research Ethics Committee of the University of Limpopo. The principals of the schools were contacted for permission and provided with all the information pertaining to the purpose of the study, and how the schools would benefit from this research. Once the principals granted permission, the teachers were contacted for the study. Participants were briefly informed that participation was voluntary, that an audio recorder and camera would be used during the interview process, that they would remain anonymous, and that they could opt out during any stage of the research. Participants were only engaged after they had signed informed consent. Furthermore, the interviews for the study were conducted within the school premises during school hours to eliminate the risk of harm. Finally, all participants were given fictional names and codes to protect their identities.

FINDINGS

This section discusses the findings that arose in line with the research questions that pertain to the study.

Teachers challenges in implementing COVID-19 protocols

To ascertain the experiences that educators had with the COVID-19 protocols and how those experiences influenced their comprehension of the difficulties that educators encountered in putting these protocols into practice, the subsequent inquiry was posed: What difficulties do teachers have when putting COVID-19 protocols into practice? This investigation aimed to fully understand the extent to which educators were aware of COVID-19 guidelines and how this knowledge impacted their capacity to apply these protocols to reduce the virus's transmission and infections. The respondent's perspectives are expressed in the following passages.

E11: Content delivery. Learners spent much time at home rather than at school during the COVID-19 pandemic. There is too much workload for teachers because of class divisions. And it was impossible to align the annual teaching plan because of the limited time.

E12: The need for more classrooms because of social distancing. The rotation of learners delayed the completion of annual teaching plans and pacesetters.

E21: Annual teaching plans were not covered because of rotational classes.

E22: Individual work (pupils) Learners were not able to work in pairs or groups. Fear seemed to draw attention and disturb learning. Closer discussions one-on-one with learners became less active.

E31: Learners attended classes rotationally, which resulted in a backlog. E33: An increased workload and rate as a result of split classes.

E41: Learners were scared and could not actively focus and participate in lessons.

E42: Restrictions led to limited experience in learning some concepts in other lessons, especially subjects that needed practicality.

It was deduced from participants' statements that due to students learning from home, teachers faced challenges in engaging with them directly. Consequently, teachers had to resort to organising online classes to ensure continuity in education. However, teaching and learning had to continue even though learners had to learn at home. Learners' peer learning was also compromised because they no longer had the opportunity to discuss the content that was presented to them in class as peers. Similarly, the teachers had to adopt a different mode of teaching since they could not access all the learners at once, given the rotational classes that were adopted as a result of COVID-19 protocols, geared towards protecting the lives of the learners' high infection rate during the pandemic. The endeavour towards ensuring effective teaching and learning was also derailed by the teachers' will and drive to complete the syllabus. The fear of teaching and learning in such an unusual situation was fueled by the concern of both teachers and students to do so in the abnormal reality. The latter presented obstacles that both educators and learners had to overcome to effectively teach and learn the material, particularly in those areas where students were expected to engage in practical activities that influenced the subject matter.

Teachers' strategies to enhance the implementation of COVID-19 protocols

To investigate how educators employed their understanding of the COVID-19 protocols to create efficient means of putting them into practice, the researchers posed the following query: In what ways do instructional tactics improve the way that COVID-19 protocols are applied? This investigation aimed to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the degree of familiarity instructors had with the COVID-19 procedures and how this familiarity influenced their capacity to conceive successful implementation strategies. The excerpts that follow describe the respondent's viewpoints.

E11: extra support of teachers within a particular classroom with the employment of assistant teachers

E12: Virtual lessons were a solution because they made it easier to cover up some lost time. platforms such as Zoom Meeting for live classes and WhatsApp for sharing information and supporting material.

E21: The use of LTMS such as projectors, DVDs, and TV learning channels, as well as the use of WhatsApp groups to share learning content.

E22: The use of WhatsApp to communicate with learners and provide support lessons.

E31: Technology dominated as WhatsApp groups, Facebook, projecting information, and online learning were utilised to support learning.

E33: COVID-19 compliance procedures. extra activities to close the gaps.

E41: Learners were encouraged to engage in virtual group discussions, and extra lessons were provided in the after-hours.

E42: Online extra lessons were put forward, and consultations were extended to take place on social media platforms.

Based on the utterances of the participants above, it is evident that the teachers went the extra mile to devise online lessons to ensure the continuity of learning despite the adverse circumstances caused by the pandemic. The content was shared via platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook to facilitate learning. For under-resourced schools, the instructional materials schools had to be shared via the same applications, encouraging learners to access lessons using their parents' laptops or tune into broadcasts provided by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) on their home television sets. Guided by the endeavour to restore the COVID-19 protocols, the teachers had to provide extra activities that learners had to complete at home. The learners were encouraged to ask questions based on the content that was given to them as part of their homework via the WhatsApp and Facebook chat boxes that were created by the subject teachers. Given the existence of COVID-19. Learners were made to participate in extra lessons, which were organised by the teachers through social media platforms. This demonstrated a proactive approach to adapting to the circumstances imposed by COVID-19.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This section discusses the findings of the study.

Teachers' challenges in implementing COVID-19 protocols

This study demonstrated the diverse experiences of teachers regarding the problems in teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their experiences included an increased workload for teachers; the delayed completion of annual teaching plans and pace setters; a shortage of classrooms and learning materials; learners' fear and lack of focus; a lack of practical work for practical subjects; and rotational class attendance. The teachers' responses highlighted significant disruptions to teaching and learning, which continue to present ongoing challenges. Educators are compelled to go above and beyond to compensate for trimmed topics from previous grades, reflecting the profound impact of the pandemic on educational continuity. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing learning gaps, placing additional strain on educators as they strive to devise strategies to address these widened disparities. Esposito et al., (2021) supported these claims, stating that the school buildings should have been adapted, the ratios of teachers to learners should have been addressed, and proper instruction should have been provided about infectious disease prevention. Hence, it is imperative for DBE to develop a guidance sheet to assist teachers in navigating the challenges of teaching during a pandemic. Teachers should not be expected to design discretionary strategies to respond to challenges such as dealing with

overcrowding. The findings of this study do not exist in isolation, the researchers also compared them with previous studies to identify similarities and differences in the challenges faced by teachers during the implementation of COVID-19 protocols.

For instance, Barrot et al.,(2021) conducted a study focusing on the challenges encountered by students in online learning during the pandemic and their strategies for overcoming them. The findings of the study showed that the problems faced by college students when it comes to virtual learning differed concerning the types of challenges and their extent. Some of the major challenges were directly related to their learning spaces in their homes, while their minor challenges involved technological literacy and competency. The findings also revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic posed a great impact on the quality of the students' learning experience and mental health.

A study by Atmojo and Nugroho (2020) advocated for the transition of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes to online platforms. The study focused on the educational activities and hardships in Indonesia during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the COVID-19 pandemic, EFL teachers engaged in virtual learning which encompassed various activities such as monitoring learner attendance and grading assignments either synchronously or asynchronously in accordance with the policies of their respective schools. In order to achieve virtual learning, different applications and platforms that include learning management systems as well as further alternative resources were employed. The study also indicated that online learning is not effective if teachers lack preparation and planning.

The findings of a study conducted by Barrot et al., (2021) exhibited noteworthy similarities with the current study regarding the influence of learners' home environments on online learning. The findings corroborated that when learners engaged in online learning from their respective homes, they were compelled to operate the learning gadgets and navigate through platforms used for online learning. This situation posed fear and discomfort among learners due to challenges related to technological literacy and competence. Another similarity observed was that learners' anxiety and concentration issues during online learning contributed to mental health problems. The findings also affirmed that the increased workload for teachers resulted in frustration and stress, and ultimately compromised their health.

In support of the findings of this study, Atmojo and Nugroho's (2020) research also highlighted the importance of teacher planning and preparation. Moreover, their study confirmed that a lack of teacher preparation contributed to the challenge of teachers not completing the annual teaching plans and pacesetters. The findings also noted that as a result of learners having to embark on rotational classes, teachers had to ensure frequent and continuous monitoring of learners' class attendance. However, these studies also exhibited some significant differences. Barrot et al., (2021) addressed issues related to learners' home environment, technological competence, and learners' mental health, but their study did not discuss shortages of classrooms and learning materials, nor did it address learners' inability to engage in practical work for subjects requiring hands-on experience during the COVID-19

pandemic. Likewise, Atmojo and Nugroho (2020) underscored the limited utilisation of diverse online platforms and the need to provide additional resources to learners. In contrast, the current study highlighted that teachers had to extend their efforts to compensate for the topics that were not covered due to the abnormal teaching and learning conditions brought about by COVID-19.

Teachers' strategies to enhance the implementation of COVID-19 protocols

This study unveiled the diverse experiences of teachers concerning the measures they employed to facilitate learning amid the pandemic. The array of responses highlighted strategies that teachers utilised to implement COVID-19 protocols effectively. These included the employment of assistant teachers, virtual lessons, rotational classes and lessons, teaching through online learning platforms, TV learning channels, extra-curricular activities, and social media platforms. The findings also revealed that the online teaching workshops had to be organised by the subject advisors, geared towards training the teachers on how to teach, communicate, and share the activities online. The responses of the teachers demonstrated that teachers were prepared to go the extra mile by using different platforms to teach and share instructional materials and activities using online applications. Duraku and Hoxha (2020) agreed with the foregoing points of view, arguing that a great deal of institutions of learning globally adopted the process of transitioning to online learning. Several elements were believed to influence the quality of distance learning, teacher performance, and student knowledge, and abilities. Therefore, teachers must be professionally trained to conduct lessons using online learning platforms. The results of this study do not exist in isolation; the researchers also compared them with findings from previous studies to identify similarities and differences in the challenges teachers face during the implementation of COVID-19 protocols.

Zhang, et al., (2020) conducted a study on the ceasing of contact classes without having to stop the process of learning. The study looked at the Chinese educational emergency management policy during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. The findings revealed that online teaching training for teachers was organised and that the teachers' education department produced a package of materials for teachers, which dealt with virtual lessons and assessment techniques, applications of information technology, cases of school epidemic prevention, as well as local teacher training cases for local teachers. In a separate study by Zhou et al., (2020) titled, "school's out, but class's on", they researched the largest online education in the world today.

The study took into account China's practical approaches during the COVID-19 epidemic prevention and control as a reference point. The findings of the study revealed that most of the schools in the country actively use "cloud" technology to select virtual classrooms independently, popular virtual teaching, learning through TV visuals as well as other various strategies used for the virtual education process. Furthermore, it indicated the importance of using teaching resources when providing virtual learning that encompasses diversified, rich, and quality virtual teaching materials that include and cover all subjects.

The findings of the study by Zhang et al., (2020) identified significant similarities with the current study in terms of online teaching training for teachers and materials for teachers, which involved virtual teaching techniques, and applications of information technology. The findings corroborated that during COVID-19, teachers went the extra mile by utilising various platforms to deliver instruction and share materials and activities with learners through online applications. Additionally, the study highlighted the necessity of organising online teaching workshops by subject advisors to train teachers on effective teaching methods during the pandemic. This finding is supported by Zhang et al. (2020) who contended that virtual education training for teachers was organised by the teacher education department concerning the usage of online learning platforms.

Likewise, the results of Zhou et al.,(2020) study also indicated similarities with the findings of this study. Their research underscored the significance of utilising online learning platforms, a point that aligns with the emphasis placed on this aspect in the current study. Some of the lessons were presented and broadcast on television. Conversely, the findings of both the previous studies exhibited some significant differences. Zhang et al. (2020) emphasised the importance of employing various assessment strategies, while the current study revealed that the utilisation of assistant teachers helped to alleviate the workload burden on teachers. Similarly, Zhou et. al (2020) highlighted the usage of school-related teaching resources while the current study indicated the importance of pursuing extra-curricular activities using different social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp.

Value of the Study

The findings of this study will provide schools and society with the necessary strategies to implement COVID-19 protocols effectively, thereby ensuring a safe working and learning environment. The demand for quality education during the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated comprehensive knowledge and practical measures to contain the spread of the disease without disrupting school programs. This underscored the need for well-functioning schools where the safety of both learners and teachers is ensured at all times. For researchers, this study facilitates exploration of the impact of COVID-19 on schools and their ability to address the challenges of implementing protocols. Additionally, it assists schools in assessing the effectiveness of their protocol implementation strategies. Ultimately, these insights can inform the development of new policies guiding schools in selecting and effectively implementing COVID-19 protocols, as well as managing similar challenges as they arise.

Limitations

At the time of the study, the schools were in their fourth semester, which presented constraints and limitations. However, the researchers were able to gain access to both institutions because they do not employ final tests; rather, they rely on continual assessment methods. The sample size employed in this study comprised two schools. One school was in the rural area, while the other was in the semi-rural part of Limpopo Province, South Africa. Despite the small sample size, the researchers were able to gain insights into the implementation of COVID-19 protocols

in the schools and develop a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by teachers in implementing these protocols. Additionally, they identified the strategies employed by teachers to mitigate the spread of the virus. Other researchers may consider increasing the sample size and the number of participating schools to determine if the results may be replicated.

CONCLUSION

The study has examined how schools implement COVID-19 protocols and the challenges experienced by teachers, along with their experiences in navigating these difficulties. It is essential to acknowledge that COVID-19 is not the only pandemic that schools may encounter in the future. As a result, schools must look closely into how any potential pandemic can affect schooling and always be prepared to effectively implement protocols on how to curb the spread of disease. The study uncovered that teachers faced significant responsibilities in their efforts to implement COVID-19 protocols, all while needing to compensate for the lost time that should have been dedicated to teaching and learning. Alternative strategies such as online teaching and learning to make up for the lost time that was lost as a result of implementing COVID-19 protocols were employed to mitigate this loss, including the deployment of assistant teachers to support protocol implementation and assist students with homework. Furthermore, security personnel had to be increased to help guard and control unnecessary school visits by parents. Teachers also provided supplementary notes and embarked on online learning by sending activities through WhatsApp and other applications.

Recommendations

Emanating from the findings of this study, the study recommends that the DBE should increase the deployment of educator assistants and involve parents to support school principals, teachers, and learners in both implementation and managing their daily tasks to address the challenges related to implementing COVID-19 protocols. The study further recommends that more stakeholders must be engaged to provide support with new updates and current affairs pertaining to how schools can best implement COVID-19 protocols. The study also recommends that teachers must be professionally trained to conduct lessons using online learning platforms. Moreover, teachers should not be expected to design discretionary strategies to respond to challenges such as dealing with overcrowding. Hence, the final recommendation is for intervention DBE to develop a guidance sheet to assist teachers in navigating the challenges of teaching during a pandemic.

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