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School leaders' responsibilities for ensuring safe schools for teaching and learning during COVID-19

Abstract

The outbreak of the coronavirus disease was declared an international public health emergency as the virus spread across many countries and territories. Due to the rapid rate the virus was spreading, the South African president announced the closure of schools in March 2020. The protection of children and teachers was incredibly important. Precautions were necessary to prevent the potential spread of COVID-19 in school settings; however, care had to be taken to avoid stigmatising students and staff who may have been exposed to the virus. With a phased-in approach to grades returning to school, school leaders had to ensure that their environment was safe, conducive, welcoming, respectful, inclusive and supportive at all times. A qualitative case study, involving individual interviews with principals, was conducted using the Health Theoretical Framework of attitudes, behaviours and communication (ABCs) to investigate how school leaders were ensuring a safe and conducive environment for teachers and learners. The findings highlighted establishing an emergency School Management Team to be the COVID-19 point of contact, implementing social distancing, frequent sanitising, mask-wearing, daily screening, encouraging flexible school times and promoting the outdoor classroom. Staff with comorbidities were assigned non-contact duties.

Keywords: *School leaders; a safe environment; responsibilities; ABCs of health; safety; teachers and learners.*

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic was declared a public health emergency of international concern (Bender, 2020). The closure of schools affected teachers, learners, parents and relevant stakeholders in education across the world (UNESCO, 2020). Although there has been a low infection rate among school-aged children, the closure of schools on 18 March 2020 by the South African government and the Department of Basic Education (DBE), was one measure taken to mitigate the spread of the disease in South Africa (DBE, 2020a). The national lockdown came into effect on 26 March and remained in place until 30 April 2020. In June 2020, the South African government agreed to re-open schools using a phased-in approach. School leaders were

tasked to ensure that their schools meet the required standards and precautions for creating a safe environment for teaching and learning (DBE, 2020a).

The issue of health and safety for teachers, learners and other officials became a primary concern to parents, teacher unions and the public. Teachers' unions and parents were reluctant about teachers, learners and other officials returning to schools amidst the COVID-19 pandemic (Bengu & Nair, 2020). Some of the questions raised by teachers and parents were: How safe is the school environment? What measures will be taken to ensure the safety of teachers and learners? How will schools maintain social distancing to prevent or minimise the risk of COVID-19 infection?

Due to the pandemic, many schools were moving away from compliance with legislative requirements and focusing on a safety culture. Some school leaders agreed not to open their doors to learners, despite the DBE indicating to them that they should return to school. Most school leaders were listening to the voices of parents and the unions regarding the reopening of schools. To ensure safety, school leaders, staff, learners and parents needed to cooperate, collaborate and communicate to provide an authentic safety culture within the school environment (Arnou *et al.*, 2020). This article explored how school leaders created a safe and conducive learning environment for their teachers and learners during the re-opening of schools as well as identifying some of the challenges principals faced.

The safety of the school environment is a collaborative effort from all stakeholders. According to Bhengu and Nair (2020), teachers' unions, parents and other stakeholders agreed that the school environment is potentially a high-risk area for the spread of the virus. Reimers *et al.,* (2020) stated that for school leaders, the COVID-19 pandemic is a quintessential adaptive and transformative challenge, with no prescribed or preconfigured guidelines to support teachers and learners.

According to the DBE (2020d), the school calendar for the academic year 2020 was re-organised to support a "phased-in" plan for the re-opening of schools. This plan was a progressive means of managing the risk of infection. This would help to ensure that schools can manage a smaller number of learners present while in transition from the Level 5 lockdown measures. For a precise and efficient response to the pandemic, the DBE (2020a) highlighted the importance of a national alert level and separate provincial, district and metro alert levels for targeted interventions. Table 1 provides a summary of COVID-19 alert levels.

Table 1:   Summary of COVID-19 alert level activities

ALERT LEVEL 5	ALERT LEVEL 4	ALERT LEVEL 3	ALERT LEVEL 2	ALERT LEVEL 1
Drastic measures to contain the spread of the virus and save lives. (Full lockdown)	Extreme precautions to limit community transmission and outbreaks, while allowing some activity to resume.	Restrictions on many activities, including at workplaces and socially, to address a high risk of transmission.	Physical distancing and restrictions on leisure and social activities to prevent a resurgence of the virus.	Most normal activity can resume, with precautions and health guidelines followed at all times. Population prepared for an increase in alert levels if necessary.

Source: DBE 2020.

Gronholt-Pederson (2020) agreed that when the COVID-19 pandemic started, every stakeholder within the school environment had a crucial role to play in curbing the spread of the virus. All schools were expected to follow the national and municipal alert levels (DBE, 2020a). Schools should be safe spaces for learners, teachers and non-teaching staff. A collaborative effort that entails total commitment and dedication was expected from teachers and learners to curb the spread of the virus and ensure safety from infection within the school environment. According to the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) (2020), to ensure the safety of teachers and learners, the concept of safety had to be meaningful and understood to encompass the well-being of all staff and learners on the school premises. According to the DBE (2020b), the COVID-19 pandemic had placed school leaders in an unenviable situation to manage their schools and promote safety.

2. Literature review

Schools should play a crucial role in ensuring safety for teachers and learners. UNICEF (2020a) agrees that as schools begin to re-open, it is important that measures and precautions are taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Reimers (2020) acknowledged that school safety should include adherence to policies and guidelines and that all decisions should be data driven. According to the DBE (2020f), schools planning to re-open must ensure that all safety precautions and measures are in place. These measures should include cleaning practices, proper and adequate ventilation conditions and physical distancing protocols. A safe school environment encourages learning by safeguarding the health and safety of staff and learners. School safety is not achieved with a single programme, but begins with prevention in mind; thus, providing teachers and learners with physical and psychological safety (DBE, 2020f).

2.1 Importance of a safe and conducive learning environment

The school environment is a significant learning space in which teachers and learners spend a considerable part of the day. According to the California State PTA (2016) and Arslan (2018), a safe school is a place in which staff and learners are free to learn and teach in a non-threatening or psychologically harmful environment. The DBE (2020d) also agreed that a healthy education environment is vital to teachers and learners' health and well-being. School principals play an active role in ensuring a safe school environment to protect teachers and learners. During the phased-in approach to the re-opening of schools, the DBE (2020a) agreed that appropriate measures, according to the national guidelines, would assist school leaders to ensure measures were in place to prevent the spread of the virus. The DBE (2020d) further articulated in their guidelines for schools that school leaders had multiple roles and functions to promote safety and hygiene in their schools and at the same time, maintaining the highest educational standards of their schools during the pandemic.

Through education, teachers and learners can become advocates for disease prevention and control at home, in school and their communities. Clapper (2010) states that school leaders must look for learning environments that are safe and conducive during emergencies. His statement is appropriate for the current COVID-19 pandemic because school leaders need to be creative and amenable to suggestions and they must be willing to try novel methods of ensuring safety for all learners and staff (DBE, 2020e). For effective teaching and learning to occur, teachers and learners must feel safe and secure to enter the school environment. Jenson (2008 cited in Clapper, 2010) stated that in an unsafe learning environment, teachers and learners become more aware of the need for survival and protection. Psychological and

health safety becomes critical as teachers and learners brave through their teaching and learning journey during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To create a safe school environment, GDE (2020) and Bonell (2013) believe that a positive relationship between learners and school staff is crucial. They agree that school leaders must be supported by relevant stakeholders to develop a dynamic safety team of teachers and learners who will focus on the overall school climate as well as crisis and emergency preparedness, response and recovery. With the current COVID-19 pandemic, the GDE (2020) states that the provision of a safe school environment has gained momentum among parents and other stakeholders. According to the DBE (2020b), all school managers should be visionary in creating and maintaining a positive and safe environment for all teachers and learners during the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers, learners and other officials need to become extremely vigilant and cautious, both inside and outside the classroom (GDE, 2020).

2.2 Preventative measures to minimise COVID-19 infections

The DBE (2020b) maintains that school leaders should identify areas that are potentially risky and begin to find appropriate intervention measures to ensure physical and psychological safety for teachers and learners. According to the DBE (2020d), school leaders should consider developing planned emergency strategies to respond to crisis situations. In the current situation, the COVID-19 pandemic is an emergency that calls for carefully thought-out strategies to create a safe and conducive environment to minimise infection. The school safety and crisis team should be involved in emphasising learners' positive behaviour and following the safety protocol of the school (DBE, 2020c). The team should also be helping teachers support learners in need, assessing at-risk learners and providing appropriate interventions and referrals (DBE, 2019). Every school must ensure that their school crisis and emergency plans are reviewed on a continued basis, protocols for appropriate behaviours are updated and everyone is made aware of them. These plans, according to the DBE (2020d), should be linked to the national alert levels and the broader community needs.

Another measure advocated by the DBE (2020a) and the Global Education Cluster (2020) is ensuring safe school operations. They recommend that school management should develop school emergency contingency plans. UNICEF (2020a) stated that schools must cancel all communal events or meetings and assemblies that usually take place on school premises. They further endorse frequent handwashing and sanitation of all people on the school premises. To facilitate handwashing and sanitation, the school should make sure that there are adequate handwashing stations with soap and water. It is also advisable that an alcohol-based hand rub is placed in each classroom, at entrances and exits and near lunchrooms and toilets (DBE, 2020d). It is also necessary to disinfect and clean school buildings and classrooms daily. Particular emphasis should be placed on providing clean water and sanitation facilities. The Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2021) advised that all surfaces that had been touched by many people such as railings, tables, sports equipment, door and window handles, toys and teaching and learning resources should be sanitised frequently to prevent the spread of the virus.

The DBE (2020a) recommended that schools should stagger their school start and end times for teachers and learners. Every individual entering the school environment is requested to wear their mask, have their temperature taken and ensure appropriate social distancing. Both Bender (2020) and the Global Education Cluster (2020) agree that learners' desks should be at least one metre apart to ensure social distancing. The DBE (2020a) delegated authority

to school leaders to adapt school policies where appropriate to accommodate teachers and learners to promote a safe and healthy school environment. They indicated that school leaders should design and plan flexible attendance and sick leave protocols that encourage learners and staff to stay at home when they are sick. They further stated that school leaders should discourage the use of perfect attendance awards and incentives during the pandemic.

School leaders should plan for possible changes to the academic school calendar, especially around break times and exam schedules (GDE, 2020). They should also plan for continuity of learning using different methodologies to accommodate all learners. In cases where learners are absent or schools are closed for prolonged periods, learners should be supported through online/e-learning strategies; assigning reading exercises for home-based studies; radio, podcast or television broadcasts of academic content; giving teachers instruction to conduct remote daily or weekly follow up with students (Reimers *et al*., 2020). The DBE (2020a), Bender (2020) and the Global Education Cluster (2020) agreed that all staff and learners should know the latest facts surrounding COVID-19 to avoid misunderstanding and misinterpretation. They should have knowledge and information through the curriculum about COVID-19, its symptoms, complications, how it is transmitted and how to prevent transmission.

3. Theoretical framework

A theoretical framework "provides an overview of perspectives and research results regarding the proposed topic" (Ferreira, 2012:34). This research was underpinned by the ABCs of the Safety Model for Safety Management Systems (Ackland, 2013). This model aimed to determine the attitude, behaviours and commitment of school management towards the safety of its stakeholders (in this instance teachers, learners and relevant stakeholders within the school community). The safety management system, according to Ackland (2013), is as easy as ABC, considering the attitudes of people, their behaviours and their commitment towards safety. School leaders' attitudes towards safety, the environment or the customers (teachers, learners and parents) during the COVID-19 pandemic will determine what they will or will not be able to do. The actions that the leaders and the customers take depend on their awareness of what is required to change and how it is aligned to the overall safety in the education environment (DBE, 2020a). The Safety Model for Safety Management Systems advocates attitudes, behaviours and communication among all stakeholders in an organisation. The attitudes, behaviours and communication amongst school leaders, teachers and learners are crucial in ensuring a safe school environment.

UNICEF (2020b) views school leaders and teachers as important role players in ensuring that appropriate behaviours are maintained at all times. How school management teams, teachers and learners behave and communicate during the pandemic affects the protection and safety of all stakeholders. The A, B and C fundamentals are common to all management systems and their effectiveness depends on the people involved within the school community. UNICEF (2020b) stated that school leaders and teachers are in a position to promote safety precautions and measure during the phased-in approach to schooling. School staff should communicate information about COVID-19 from reliable sources and ensure that all learners understand how COVD-19 spreads and how each one can protect the other in establishing classroom procedures and protocols.

A safe system within the school environment can easily be spoilt by the unsafe behaviours of people working within it (DBE, 2020d). If school leaders do not put in place safety measures and teachers, learners and parents do not adhere to these measures, there is a risk of creating an unsafe environment. The DBE (2020f), in their communication to schools and school communities, stated that it is the responsibility of all staff and learners to adopt appropriate and responsible attitudes, behaviours and communication while in the school environment for the safety of everyone. School leaders' priority should always be safety. Regarding the behaviour of staff, it is critical to look at the perceptions of teachers, learners and parents; how they act or react in a given situation – this is in alignment with the ABC's safety model. An effective safety management system needs to invoke safety, mindfulness and actively encourage a positive safety culture (Ackland, 2013).

4.   Research methodology

This article explored how school leaders attempted to create a safe and conducive learning environment for teachers and learners during the re-opening of schools in the COVID-19 pandemic and what challenges they faced, using an interpretivist paradigm. The primary research question formulated for this research was: *How did school leaders ensure a safe school environment for teaching and learning during the reopening of schools*? The adoption of the interpretivist paradigm allowed the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the various measures and precautions school leaders embarked upon, to ensure a safe school environment for teachers and learners (Yin, 2016).

A qualitative approach was, therefore adopted using a single case study methodology. The single case study included identified school leaders from one district in the Gauteng Province in South Africa. The qualitative approach provided detailed information and insights from school leaders regarding their commitment to ensuring a safe environment during the pandemic. This approach encouraged school leaders to expand their responses to share their experience in making schools safe. Purposeful sampling was used to identify five school leaders (SL1–5) employed by the Gauteng Department of Education, who were responsible for creating a conducive and safe learning environment in their schools during the phased-in approach to schooling. The researcher sent out invites to ten schools in the Gauteng area and only five responded positively. The selection criteria were the school had to be a public school under the Department of Basic Education; a School Management Team (SMT) had to participate in the telephonic interview and the schools had to have permission from the DBE to re-open to learners using the phased-in approach. According to the DBE (2020a), the phased-in approach for the learners who were returning to schools would take place across seven phases.

Telephonic interviews were the primary means of collecting data for participants to avoid any contact with the authors. Semi-structured interview questions were the primary data collection method, with departmental documents as secondary data sources. The policies and guideline documents were systematically reviewed and evaluated against the mandates of the DBE regarding COVID-19 protocols. An interpretative analysis of each document was done and reported in the findings. Participants responded to each of the questions. Interviews lasted approximately 30-45 minutes. Unstructured questions served to explore the participants' views on how they created a safe and conducive learning environment during the COVID-19 pandemic for their teachers, learners and general staff.

Data analysis was inductive and was mainly based on information obtained from transcripts of the interviews (Maree, 2017). The data were analysed using a thematic approach (Creswell, 2014). The researcher compared the data sources in search of common themes (Creswell, 2014; Maree, 2017). The content of the data was analysed and presented in a descriptive format with verbatim quotes. The flexibility of qualitative research analysis allowed the conversion of raw data into the credible findings of the study.

The University of Pretoria and the Gauteng Department of Education granted permission for the study to be conducted. The researcher adhered to the ethical principles of informed consent, confidentiality and privacy, honesty and openness, access to findings and avoiding harm as described by Maree (2017). The authors obtained informed consent telephonically from all the participants in the study. The principle of anonymity was clearly articulated to the participants before undertaking the research (Creswell, 2014). After consent had been obtained, the author phoned each of the participants. The author also explained that withdrawal from the study was possible at any time. Pseudonyms were used to conceal the identity of the participants. The codes SL1, SL2, SL3, SL4 and SL5 were used for the school leaders in the discussion. Trustworthiness was ensured through treating the participants with the utmost respect throughout the research and aspiring to develop trustworthy relationships built on honesty and transparency (Creswell, 2014). Furthermore, to ensure the credibility of the data, the researchers transcribed and coded the data; thereafter themes were identified and grouped. The data were checked and rechecked separately by both authors. The authors also presented the data in an unbiased manner to avoid skewing the interpretation. The findings from this research can be transferred to other provinces where school leaders can learn best practices for implementation in their schools.

5. Results: Findings and discussion

In exploring school leaders' responsibilities for ensuring safe schools for teaching and learning, the authors categorised the findings into two broad themes, namely:

- Measures were taken by school leaders to create safe schools for teaching and learning; and

- Challenges experienced by school leaders in creating safe schools

  This section presents findings that emanated from the participants' responses.

5.1 Theme 1: Measures were taken by school leaders to create a safe school for teaching and learning

The COVID-19 pandemic is a novel pandemic. There are no textbooks or readily available materials for guidelines for school leaders to follow. School leaders were advised to follow the basic principles discussed below:

5.1.1 Adherence to DBE guidelines, circulars and communication

School leaders relied on information circulated by the DBE through guidelines (DBE, 2020e) and circulars (DBE, 2020f). All SMTs agreed that the current situation is unique to them. They also agreed that there was no right or wrong way of doing things in their schools to ensure safety. They had to follow the DBE guidelines, namely: "Coronavirus Orientation: Guidelines for Schools – for teachers, support staff and learners on the COVID-19 outbreak in South Africa" and Circular 1 of 2020 "Containment/Management of COVID-19 for schools and school

communities". School leaders attended workshops and district-based meetings organised by the Gauteng Education Department (GDE) regarding safety protocols on the re-opening of schools. Information from these workshops and the guideline documents and circulars were used to orientate their staff with the screening protocols so that they become conversant with the compliance protocols of the national and international norms and standards.

All participants indicated that teachers were continually updated with regulations and laws through correspondence and handouts to make them aware of the changes and the dynamics of how the School Management Team's strategic plans synchronised with professional accountability. To further support teachers in his school, SL2 stated:

> I downloaded resources from international platforms to incorporate COVID information in all subjects and gave them to teachers. I made sure that the information was taken from reliable websites such as WHO, UNESCO and National Health.

5.1.2   Making safety precautions visual

School leaders stated that they were required to ensure that safety protocols were visibly placed around their school environment. According to SMTs, they placed much emphasis on creating posters and other visual media emphasising the importance of handwashing, social distancing, wearing masks and avoiding large groups and gatherings. School leaders also indicated that since the first day of school, learners were informed of, and shown where the sanitising stations were set. Teachers were informed to impress upon learners the importance of the safety protocols.

5.1.3   Sick students, teachers and other staff should not come to school

School leaders were instructed by the DBE that they should inform their students, teachers or staff members who are unwell or experience comorbidities not to come to school. School leaders mentioned that, according to Circular 1 of 2020 (DBE, 2020f), they were required to establish procedures to follow when learners and staff become sick at school or arrive at school sick, as they should be sent home as soon as possible.

According to the Standard Operating Procedures policy document (DBE, 2020e), school principals were tasked to ensure that they adopt a flexible approach to school timetabling, exam schedules and leave for staff who are diagnosed with chronic illnesses. School leaders were instructed to keep thorough records of all staff. Staff were requested to complete a health profile questionnaire regarding their comorbidities. This information was sent to the district offices every month. According to the DBE (2020e), school leaders, together with the district office, had to take the necessary precautions to always ensure the safety of all teachers and learners to prevent the spread of infection and to officially advise those who are unwell to stay at home.

5.1.4   Social distancing

According to the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2021), social distancing, also called physical distancing, means keeping a safe space between yourself and your colleague. To practice social distancing, it is required that teachers and learners stay at least two arm lengths away from each other. The CDC further advises that social distancing should be practiced in combination with other everyday preventative actions to reduce the spread of COVID-19, including wearing masks, avoiding touching your face with unwashed hands and

frequently washing your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. In response to social distancing, all school leaders, namely SL1, SL2, SL, SL4 and SL5 agreed that:

> They have limited mixing of classes and after-school activities; all schools had arranged their desks to ensure a distance of 1 metre apart. Learners were required to stay in one classroom throughout the day, while teachers moved between classrooms. School days were staggered to vary the start and end times. Class sizes have been split into smaller groups and smaller groups attended school on specific days. School grounds and assembly areas were marked, taped and other barriers were used to maintain 1 metre distance. Some lessons were taught outdoors and teachers and learners were encouraged not to gather or socialise in groups.

5.1.5   Mask wearing in schools

Mask should be used as part of a comprehensive strategy of measures to suppress transmission and save lives. UNICEF (2020b) states that if learners are allowed to wear fabric masks, then school leaders, teachers and learners should be familiar with when they should wear masks; also, how to dispose of used masks safely to avoid the risk of contaminated masks in classrooms and on the playground. SL1 and SL3 stated that they provided masks to all their learners who attended school on alternative days. SL3 indicated that he asked the Chair of the School Governing Body to get a group of parents to sew masks for their learners. This was a very successful project. To ensure that masks were disposed of safely, SL4 mentioned that "plastic bags" and "dirt bins" were placed around the school premises where learners could drop off their used masks.

5.1.6   Schools should provide water, sanitation and waste management facilities

UNICEF (2020a) stresses the importance of frequent handwashing and sanitisation procedures in schools. According to the DBE (2020e) schools should procure the necessary supplies from the relevant service providers. Schools should prepare and maintain handwashing stations with soap and water, and if possible, place alcohol-based hand rub (hand sanitisers) in each classroom, at entrances and exits as well as near lunchrooms and toilets. To this SL4 responded:

> Before my teachers and learners came to school, I requested the GDE to have my school sanitised. The sanitation company came to my school and sanitised the entire school. I also made sure that I received the appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) for my school. I am in a poor community and I know that my learners will not be able to afford sanitation liquid and masks. I had this ready for them when they came to school.

According to Bender (2020), the fundamental principles can help keep learners, teachers and staff safe at school and curb the spread of the virus. The findings show that since COVID-19 is a novel pandemic with no book knowledge to follow (Reimers *et al*., 2020), most school leaders had to rely on advice from the DBE, the media and reliable sources. They agreed that for school leaders, the COVID-19 pandemic is a quintessential adaptive and transformative challenge that has no prescribed or preconfigured guidelines to support teachers and learners, yet these managers had to use their insights and knowledge from available literature, guidelines, circulars, protocols and the media to adapt and make their schools safe and conducive. In line with the theoretical framework of the ABCs (attitude, behaviours and communication) of the model for safety management systems (Ackland, 2013), there was evidence of behaviour change in the school organisation when learners

attended school from June to December 2020. Furthermore, teachers and learners were receptive to information regarding the pandemic and adhered to the safety protocols. All school leaders, SL1, SL2, SL3, SL4 and SL5 confirmed that the COVID-19 protocols were an agenda item for discussion in staff meetings and assemblies. They also indicated that every teacher had to spend at least five minutes discussing and emphasising safety measures to all learners, especially, frequent washing of hands, sanitising, wearing of a mask and observing social distance.

5.2 Theme 2: Challenges experienced by school leaders in creating a safe school for teachers and learners

Harris and Jones (2020) stated that schools that have re-opened have faced significant challenges of social distancing, rigorous cleaning and the careful arrangement of all movement and association around the school.

5.2.1 Teachers' health challenges and unions

The re-opening of schools during the phased-in approach posed some challenges to school leaders. According to school leaders, they received information from the department requesting them to provide information on teachers who experienced health challenges. In some schools, most teachers experienced an average of two to three medical challenges such as diabetes, asthma or hypertension. They were placed at high risk (DBE, 2020e).

According to most school leaders, (SL1, SL3 and SL5) almost 70% of their staff experienced comorbidities. To the DBE these teachers are at high risk of COVID-19 infection and therefore should not return to school. This posed a major challenge to school leaders because they had to work with a limited number of teachers. Furthermore, teacher unions recommended that their members do not return to school and teachers informed their principals that they are responding to the call from their unions. Most principals indicated that they were left helpless between the department requesting them to re-open schools and the unions asking teachers not to return to school.

Harris and Jones (2020) stated that it is a complicated situation – school leaders had to do much more with less. The maintenance of social distancing and ensuring a safe environment means extra work and extra pressure on those staff members who can return to work. According to Bhengu and Nair (2020), teacher unions played a significant role in preventing teachers from returning to school., Five teacher unions recommended that teachers do not report to schools due to the lack of readiness under the COVID-19 protocols. Ackland (2013) agrees in his ABC model that safety is of paramount importance in any organisation and teacher unions have heeded this. All school leaders, SL1, SL2, SL3, SL4 and SL5 stated that they heeded the advice of the unions and respected the decision of their teachers who did not want to return to school. They also indicated that they too were concerned about the safety of their teachers, especially those with comorbidities.

5.2.2 Parents' reluctance to send their children to schools

The call for children to return to school in South Africa and globally has heightened the fear and anxiety amongst parents and children. Parents are fearful and anxious that their children may become infected with COVID-19 while at school. They fear that their children will bring COVID-19 into their households. Furthermore, teachers also fear for their safety (The Scientist Collective, 2020). According to SL2, most parents refused to send their children to school.

They were scared that their young children would not maintain social distancing, which could lead to spreading the infection to the home environment. According to Gronholt-Pederson (2020), parents are questioning why their children should be "guinea pigs" and therefore made a calculated decision not to send their children to school. SL2 stated that:

> Most learners' parents were concerned that their children will be travelling on public transport and they do not know of the safety conditions in these mini-buses and taxis. They were afraid that their children will become infected onboard these buses and taxis, thus carrying the virus to their homes and spreading the infection.

5.2.3   The lack of personal protective equipment

During the phased-in approach, many schools did not receive their personal protective equipment (PPE) as indicated by SL3, SL4 and SL5. This equipment was en-route to schools; however, it did not reach the desired destination (Macupe, 2020). This left school leaders in a chaotic and challenging situation, delaying the re-opening of schools. Bengu and Nair (2020) stated the disappearance of the PPE makes the re-opening of schools an elusive goal. Schools were also not provided with hand sanitisers, soaps and non-contact temperature assessment devices. Most school leaders, SL3, SL4, SL5 indicated that:

> They have contacted the district office to inform them that they have not received the appropriate PPEs, and other equipment. According to these school leaders, the district officials themselves were unaware of where the equipment was coming from or where it is stored.

Most school leaders shared their disappointment due to the lack of information and support from the Department of Education. Furthermore, at a press briefing on Monday 1 June 2020, the Minister of Education announced that no school would be allowed to open if it does not meet the health regulations to minimise the spread of COVID-19. School leaders shared their disappointment and frustration with the Department of Education due to conflicting messages.

6.   Recommendations

Learners missed a substantial number of schooling days due to the lockdown and the aggressive spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, creating a safe and conducive learning environment is critical in supporting all learners to achieve the targeted learning outcomes. To prevent the spread of COVID-19, every individual needs to work collectively and collaboratively with all stakeholders, namely: policymakers, parents, instructional leaders, teachers, learners and support staff, to ensure a safe and conducive learning environment.

The following recommendations are proposed by the authors to ensure a safe school environment for teachers and learners during the phased-in approach to schooling. Each school is recommended to establish a COVID-19 School Management Team (SMT) led by the school principal and designated staff members who will be responsible for the management of issues about COVID-19. This includes ensuring a safe school environment, teacher and learner absenteeism (sick leave), communication between relevant stakeholders and support to school staff and the school community. The team should also monitor the effectiveness of symptoms-reporting, monitoring, rapid testing and tracing of suspected cases. School leaders and their COVID-19 team should manage the implementation of interventions such as physical distancing, regular hand washing or using sanitisers, practising coughing etiquette and wearing a mask. These interventions should be reinforced throughout the day by all

learners. Schools should help to prevent stigma and discrimination by encouraging students to be kind to each other and avoid stereotypes when talking about the virus.

Another recommendation is that school leaders should keep a health profile of their staff, including their comorbidities. This information will assist school leaders to adapt the school timetable for those teachers who may work from home. School leaders should adopt a hybrid learning model, where most students and teachers participate in virtual learning, while some students and teachers engage in in-person learning. School leaders should promote and demonstrate regular hygiene, clean and disinfect school buildings regularly, ensure that there is an increase in airflow and ventilation in all classes, post signs encouraging good hand and respiratory hygiene practices.

School leaders could implement the use of outdoor spaces as much as possible. According to Ayotte-Beaudet (2021), outdoor spaces allow learners to meet their teachers and classmates in person, at the same time observing a safe distance. The outdoor classes also allow for teachers to incorporate outdoor education into their lessons. Children will also engage with the outdoor environment to learn more about social behaviour. They agree that outdoor spaces can also encourage teachers to combine physical activity with educational content.

School leaders must ensure that teachers and learners are checked and screened daily before entering the school premises as per the DBE/DOH screening guidelines, including a symptom evaluation and a temperature check. Harris and Jones (2020) agree that crisis management during the unforeseen pandemic is critical in all schools and school leaders need to be visionary and proactive. According to the DBE (2020f), school leaders should also ensure that psychological services and support are made available to learners and teachers exposed to the virus. Curriculum developers should be encouraged to include health-related topics during pandemics across the curriculum as a means of awareness and advocacy. The topic of pandemics and diseases should not be confined to the Life Skills curriculum.

7. Conclusion

The call for children to return to school, both in South Africa and globally, has caused much anxiety, fear and tension. There is a growing need for parents and society to be reassured that their children and teachers will be safe within the confines of the school environment. Teachers also need support in reducing risk in their classrooms and minimising school-based transmission. Harris and Jones (2020) state that crisis and change management are now fundamental and essential skills of every school leader. Managing an effective school in disruptive times (such as the COVID-19 pandemic) will require more than basic problem-solving. Instead, all school leaders will need to be involved in continuous emergency management, which will require support and teamwork from all staff to ensure safe and conducive teaching and learning environments.

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