

EXPLORING SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOL MANAGEMENT RESPONSE TO COVID-19 PANDEMIC: CASE OF SELECTED SCHOOLS IN PETSANA, SOUTH AFRICA

By

NTHOTO PRISCILLA MOKOENA

B. Ed- Senior Phase and FET; B. Ed- HONS (UFS)

DISSERTATION

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Master of Education in Education Management and Leadership**

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**DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION MANAGEMENT, POLICY, AND COMPARATIVE
EDUCATION**

FACULTY OF EDUCATION

Supervisor: Dr Bunmi Isaiah Omodan

UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE

BLOEMFONTEIN

October 2024

DECLARATION

I, Nthoto Priscilla Mokoena hereby declare that this dissertation, **EXPLORING SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOL MANAGEMENT RESPONSE TO COVID-19 PANDEMIC: CASE OF SELECTED SCHOOLS IN PETSANA, SOUTH AFRICA**, submitted in fulfillment of my Master's Degree qualification at the University of the Free State, is my independent work. All the references I have used have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

I further declare that this work has not previously been submitted by me at another university or faculty for the purpose of obtaining a qualification.



25/01/2024

.....Date.....

Nthoto Priscilla Mokoena

ETHICS STATEMENT



GENERAL/HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (GHREC)

03-Mar-2022

Dear Ms Nthoto Mokoena

Application Approved

Research Project Title:

Exploring school management response to the COVID-19 pandemic in public schools

Ethical Clearance number:

UFS-HSD2021/2066/22

We are pleased to inform you that your application for ethical clearance has been approved. Your ethical clearance is valid for twelve (12) months from the date of issue. We request that any changes that may take place during the course of your study/research project be submitted to the ethics office to ensure ethical transparency. Furthermore, you are requested to submit the final report of your study/research project to the ethics office. Should you require more time to complete this research, please apply for an extension. Thank you for submitting your proposal for ethical clearance; we wish you the best of luck and success with your research.

Yours sincerely

Dr Adri Du Plessis

Chairperson: General/Human Research Ethics Committee

205 Nelson Mandela
Drive
Park West
Bloemfontein 9301
South Africa

P.O. Box 339
Bloemfontein 9300
Tel: +27 (0)51 401
9337
duplessisA@ufs.ac.za
www.ufs.ac.za



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DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to the following important individuals in my life: My Parents, Mamolato Mofokeng-Mokoena and Mabeko Geelbooi Mokoena, for their never-ending support for me throughout my studies. They have been there for me since I was born and have always loved and encouraged me to be a better version of myself. My two sons, Nkosingiphile and Lwazi Malinga, were the motivation I needed throughout the journey. And above all, God Almighty, who gave me the strength to finish the study. “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

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ABSTRACT

Public schools' management faces different challenges, ranging from a lack of an effective mechanism to manage the COVID-19 pandemic when it struck. This study explored management's response to the COVID-19 pandemic in public schools. The Strategic Management Theory as a theoretical framework for the study assist the researcher to come up with strategic plans capable of helping public schools' management to manage their schools effectively. The study is situated in transformative paradigm and adopted a Participatory Research Design to enhance public school management strategies towards effective management of the COVID-19 pandemic in schools. Semi-structured interviews were used to generate data. This is appropriately in line with the qualitative research approach since it understands the experiences of individuals through non-numerical data. The participants comprised nine (9) people: public school principals, deputy principals and departmental heads. The participants were selected using the purposive sampling technique to select the principals and deputy principals and convenient sampling to select the departmental heads. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data generated through a qualitative research approach. The study found that syllabus reduction, shortage of teachers and absenteeism, and workload pressure are challenging that school management faced during the pandemic. It was also found that COVID-19 regulations, teamwork among staff members, and extra classes are methods that school management adopted to deal with the virus. It was concluded that online learning, parental involvement, and modification of the school syllabus were the best possible solutions that might help deal with such a pandemic in the future.

Keywords: School Management Team, Public schools, Online learning, Syllabus, COVID-19

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

Acronyms	Meanings
4IR	Fourth Industrial Revolution
ATP	Annual Teaching Plan
COGTA	Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs
COVID-19	Corona Virus Disease of 2019
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DH	Departmental Heads
DoE	Department of Education
DP	Deputy Principals
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
MEC	Minister of Education
P	Principals
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
PR	Participatory Research
SMT	School Management Team
TA	Thematic Analysis
TP	Transformative Paradigm
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UNICEF	United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund
WHO	World Health Organization

CHAPTER ONE

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The COVID-19 pandemic was first discovered in China in December 2019 (WHO, 2020). Therefore, this led to the government shutting down public places, including schools in response to the surge in cases outside of China (Mkhize, 2020). This decision exposed the inequality between public and private schools, with schools closing for two months and private schools continuing online teaching and learning. The Minister of Basic Education announced that all schools would close, affecting nearly 10 million learners (Parker et al., 2020). As a consequence, Grosberg (2019) state that private schools had classes of 10-15 learners, allowing teachers to distribute study material evenly and access advanced technologies. Private schools learners could learn through long-distance learning, whereas public school learners were at a standstill; they did not have the resources to learn at home (Omodan, 2020a; Omodan, 2020b). Therefore, public schools faced challenges due to limited internet access and limited teacher and resource availability. Public school management had to wait for the announcement of when schools would reopen, and faced challenges such as shortage of teachers, resources, syllabus implementation, and COVID-19 rules and regulations (Anderson, 2020). They had to ensure safety, implementing COVID-19 protocols, and allocate limited textbooks and resources to learners without making significant changes. As a result, the pandemic left public schools in an uncomplimentary position, constantly fought by parents.

However, the coronavirus pandemic did not just affect South African schools, but it impacted the whole world. According to UNESCO, 63 million teachers in 165 countries were concerned. 1.3 billion learners worldwide were out of school or university, with some 320 million learners affected in India alone (Rawal, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic's surge commencement has disrupted school systems across the United States (WHO, 2020). Therefore, how educators could keep learners engaged in remote learning, support the continued progress of learners who were already at risk, and prepare for an uncertain future were among the challenges educational leaders faced (UW University of Education, 2020). However, every educational institution worldwide adopted online instruction due to this pandemic. Exams were taken online, courses were taken

online, and assignments were submitted via email (Srivastava and Singh, 2020: 4). Keevy *et al.* (2020) state that those in South Africa who demand higher levels of basic facilities in all schools were informed by the database of schools and school resources. For instance, many schools do not currently have access to running water. Learners could not maintain basic personal hygiene, such as washing their hands, which put them and the teachers at risk of infection (Citizen, 2020). As a result of the lockdown and consequent restrictions employed to halt the spread of COVID-19 in South Africa, curricula were overhauled, and class hours were shortened. The rapidity of change accelerated in 2020, with changes ranging from focusing on the quality of education outcomes to providing basic amenities such as running water and toilets to lesser-priority improvements (Keevy *et al.*, 2020) even though these systems in South Africa, as many other instances before the pandemic, were fragile.

Many studies have been conducted on different topics on the effect of COVID-19 on education, learners, teachers, and families, but none of them have been able to find out how public schools management were able to manage COVID-19 in schools. For example, a study by Burgess and Sievertsen (2020) examined the effect of COVID-19 on education, focusing on schools, skills, and book learning, while a study by Hart (2020) examined the impact of COVID-19 on educators and learners. However, Tyson (2020) has studied schools, social inequality and COVID-19. Therefore, this study outlines the challenges that the public schools' management faced and continues to encounter due to COVID-19. It assisted in developing strategies to deal with these challenges and finding a way forward.

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

This study investigated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the effective running of public schools by school management teams (SMT). Considering that before COVID-19, public schools already had problems such as; a shortage of resources and infrastructure. However, the pandemic brought along its challenges, whereby public school management suffered from its impact on schools, teachers, learners and parents. Some of the challenges included keeping learners in the schools' premises healthy and making sure that they kept their social distance; many learners failing to return to school because most had lost hope in learning and others were afraid to return; learners losing teaching time and it could not be recovered; the syllabus from 2020 to 2021 had

been trimmed and teachers could not finish the syllabus in their respective schools due to the manner that their learners attended; having to adhere to COVID-19 regulations, public schools could not accommodate all learners in classes due to lack of resources; shortage of teachers, and overcrowded classes. McDonald (2020) supported that public schools also suffered from the observance of social distancing inside the classroom. Therefore, there is a need to develop effective strategies that could assist school management in responding to such pandemic and unexpected events like COVID-19.

1.3 PRELIMINARY THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Strategic management theory was adopted to theorize the study. According to Tucci (2020), strategic management is the nonstop planning, monitoring, analyzing, and evaluating each requirement the organization desires to accomplish its objectives and goals. However, according to strategic management theory, organizations will need to constantly assess their strategies for success in light of shifting business environments. Tucci (2020) claims that strategic management helps businesses evaluate their success level, develop strategies, put those strategies into action, and assess their current situation. This includes constructing and applying key objectives and creativities to be occupied by organizational management on behalf of stakeholders grounded on resource deliberations and a valuation of the organization's environment (Omalaja & Eruola, 2011: 61).

This study relies heavily on the theory to provide management with strategies for effectively responding to COVID-19 challenges in public schools. According to Kenton (2021), a descriptive approach to strategic management emphasizes the implementation of strategies. In contrast, a prescriptive approach outlines the development of strategy. To put it another way, these schools differ in how strategies are developed, whether they are more like general guidelines that must be followed or established through an analytical process that considers all opportunities and risks. Through strategic management theory, there will be suggested strategies and solutions for the research problem. On this occasion, if the failure to deal with COVID-19 challenges in rural public schools is left unaddressed, it will continue to affect public schools negatively. According to du Plessis (2020), public school management faces the following challenges due to COVID-19: accommodating learners in schools, syllabus coverage, shortage of teachers, and shortage of

resources. As a result, the theory is a good fit for the study because its tenets align with the objectives of the study.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTION

1.4.1 How does management respond to the COVID-19 pandemic in public schools?

1.5 RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES

1.5.1 Research Aim

This study explores management's response to the COVID-19 pandemic in public schools in Petsana.

1.5.2 Research Objectives

This study:

1. Investigate the challenges faced by public school management due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Consults methods that public school management adopted to manage the COVID-19 issues.
3. Find possible solutions for effectively managing COVID-19 and similar viruses in public schools in the future.

1.6 PRELIMINARY RESEARCH METHOD

1.6.1 Research paradigm

The transformative paradigm (TP) serves as the study's research paradigm. According to Jackson et al. (2018), the definition of transformative paradigm is considered to be a research structure that scrutinizes the power imbalances that lead to marginalization, examining the experiences of marginalized communities and linking the results to actions to reduce inequalities. According to Martens (2005), the essential principles of the transformative paradigm offer a general structure for addressing social justice issues and, consequently, for making methodological decisions. For this study, the transformative paradigm helps transform the way public school management thinks and solves problems that arise in public schools. It assists with realizing new ideas and tools in education that help respond to the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this paradigm, researchers argue that information is valid if it can empower and transform individuals' lives. The fundamental instrument used by researchers to uncover new information is theory. According to Neuman (1998), facts flow into a theory continuously extended through reference to practice. This study aims to learn the truth of what is happening at schools and try to come up with solutions to improve the situation of public school management. From the methodological standpoint, the study aims to dispel myths, illusions, and erroneous information and empower individuals to change society (Kawulich, 2021; 13). The research process employs the qualitative method. The methods of data collection and sampling are utilized in qualitative studies. This study focuses on managements' reaction to the COVID-19 epidemic in rural public schools. Therefore, the predicament in finding solutions to the problems the management faced explored. Romm (2014:139) also believes that by embracing this paradigm and leading research by researchers, we ensure that research results transform the communities in which research occurs. As a result, the transformative paradigm is relevant to this study.

1.6.2 Research approach

This study adopts a qualitative research approach. A summary of the wide variety of non-numerical measurement methods is provided by qualitative research (Trochim, 2002: 9). Therefore, the qualitative proponents' desire to counter that their data is subtle, nuanced, thorough, and related means that the study approach may perhaps be much more than just words or text. Nieuwenhuis (2007a:75) states that qualitative research involves procedures and communal and cultural contexts that underlie various behavioral patterns. The researcher tells a comprehensible story through the eyes of those who are a part of this study. According to Morse and Field (1996), qualitative research thus aids others in comprehending and making sense of reality. The study aimed to learn about and show how people react to, participate in, and live with the COVID-19 pandemic in public schools. Therefore, because it provides us with depth and detail, qualitative research is preferable for this study; By recording one's attitudes, feelings, and actions, it goes beyond just analyzing ranks and counts. In particular, it opens communication between the researcher and the participants and inspires them to elaborate on their responses, which may open up previously unconsidered topics.

1.6.3 Research Design

The study adopts a Participatory research design. Implementing the Participatory Research (PR) design is a logical approach to this study as it allows for active collaboration between the participants (Breitbart, 2010). This provides an opportunity to seek a resolution of the problem from multiple perspectives, enabling participants to move beyond their understandings and work towards a collective understanding of the issue at hand (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). By engaging in a dialogue, exchange and shared learning process, PR positions all involved parties as equally valid and valuable resources and recognizes that meaningful solutions cannot be reached without contributions from everybody involved. As such, it is well suited to addressing practical and theoretical questions within this research setting.

1.7 DATA COLLECTION

In this study, the data collection method was interviews. Nieuwenhuis (2007b:51) defines an interview as an interactive discussion in which the interviewer asks questions to learn about the participants' thoughts, beliefs, views, opinions, and actions. Interviews will be used in this study to determine how public school management responds to COVID-19 challenges. Also, I want to use this research method to see the world through the participants' eyes. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather the data. A semi-structured interview, according to Dejonckheere and Vaughn (2019), is a type of interview in which the interviewer only asks a few planned questions because it gives the candidates a chance to discuss the subject on the spot; I thought it was a good fit for this study.

1.8 SELECTION OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

This study was performed in South Africa, in the Free State province, Thabo Mofutsanyana District, in a small community called Petsana Reitz. The study consists of three public schools: one primary school, one intermediate school and one secondary school. It comprised nine participants –three principals, three deputy principals, and three departmental heads. The participants were selected as follows: purposive sampling technique to select the principals and deputy principals, and convenient sampling to select the departmental heads. According to Crossman (2018), a purposive sampling technique is selected as a non-random sample based on the characteristics of a population and the study's objective. Critical, selective, and biased

samplings are other names for purposive sampling. I used this technique to select principals because they are heads of schools; they receive everything before it goes to the School Management Team. According to Lavrakas (2008), convenient sampling methods are non-probabilistic sampling in which individuals are sampled because they provide an appropriate data source for researchers. The researcher used this method for the departmental heads because they are the main characters in this study and are very important.

1.9 DATA ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATION, REPORTING AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

The data generated in this study were analysed using thematic analysis. This study uses TA to identify pattern behaviour among rural public school management and point out how COVID-19 affects their schools. According to Maguire and Delahunt (2017:2), thematic analysis is the procedure of finding patterns or themes in qualitative data. The data was analysed using thematic analysis to gain knowledge and insight. Through thematic analysis, researchers can gain a more in-depth comprehension of the group or status quo they are studying. Maguire and Delahunt (2017:3) mention that the goal of thematic analysis is to recognize themes (that is, patterns of data that are significant or intriguing) and use those themes to drive or advocate research. This is not just a data summary. It is properly interpreted and interpreted in thematic analysis. In addition, this demonstrates that the data have been organized and summarized rather than analysed. However, in the present study, the thematic analysis was conducted following the six-step process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, pp. 16-24). The steps are as follows:

- Familiarization with the Data: Engaging deeply to develop an initial understanding.
- Generating Initial Codes: Systematically coding the data to identify significant features.
- Searching for Themes: Examining the codes and identifying features to find overarching themes.
- Reviewing Themes: Refining and modifying the themes to accurately represent the data.
- Defining and Naming Themes: Clearly articulating the essence of each theme and assigning a descriptive name.
- Writing the Report: Compiling the findings into a coherent and comprehensive written document, connecting the analysis back to the research questions and existing literature.

This structured approach ensured a rigorous and systematic data analysis, facilitating the extraction of meaningful insights. This is most appropriate because the main themes of the analysis were made to respond to the research objectives upon which sub-themes were generated.

1.10 VALUE OF THE PROPOSED RESEARCH

The study benefits all rurally located public schools. Most importantly, it also benefits the school management as they would know what the problems are and ideas on how to solve them. Outbreak management plans also need to consider how a setting will ensure that every pupil "receives the quality education and care to which they are normally entitled" (Worth, 2021).

1.11 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Free State Department of Education granted permission to conduct the research in one of its schools after an ethical clearance application was submitted to the ethics committee of the University of the Free State. The study participants were given the following considerations: In order to participate in the study, consent was sought from the participants. They were then given a consent form to sign. Both the participants' anonymity and the information's confidentiality were upheld. It was made clear to the participants that they could opt out of the study at any time. Finally, participants' identities and personalities will not be altered in any way (De Vos *et al.*, 2017: 115).

1.12 LAYOUT OF CHAPTERS

The subsequent are the chapters' arrangement and description for the study: Chapter One, Chapter Two, Chapter Three, Chapter Four, and Chapter Five.

Chapter 1: Introduction and Background to the study

Chapter 2: Theoretical framework and literature reviews

Chapter 3: Methodology

Chapter 4: Data analysis and interpretation

Chapter 5: Findings, conclusions and recommendations

CHAPTER TWO

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

2. Introduction

This chapter presents the theoretical framework and the literature review of the study. The study aims to develop better ways for public schools to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic and any other form of the virus that may arise in the future. This section looks more at the study's theoretical framework: strategic management. Under strategic management, there is a prescriptive, descriptive approach and strategic management processes. As a result, these will be utilized to accomplish the study's goals. The researcher examines the application of strategic management by highlighting its advantages and disadvantages in this chapter. In addition, this chapter provides an in-depth review of the existing research on the difficulties that management has faced due to COVID-19, outlining the approaches other schools have taken to deal with the pandemic and identifying potential solutions for COVID-19 management. The study's interpretation and understanding of chapter three will benefit from this understanding.

2.1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopted the Strategic Management approach as a theoretical framework. Strategic Management is a practical theoretical framework for this study because it examines the school's long-term goals and objectives and how it might maintain its competitive advantage in a changing environment. According to Edwards (2014), the study of strategic management teaches how to effectively manage organizations and apply creative thinking in the right circumstances. It is necessary to know both the science and the art of strategic management to guide organizations as their strategies emerge and change over time. According to Robinson (2005), strategic management is a method for transforming the static plan that is currently in place into a proper, systematic procedure. The organization may experience some immediate changes as a result of strategic management.

2.1.1 Assumptions of Strategic Management

The route of setting goals, procedures, and intentions to increase an organization's competitiveness is referred to as strategic management, according to Kenton (2022). Strategic management is the

planning, management, and use of resources to effectively define and achieve goals in a business (Thakur and Hale, 2022). The two definitions state that the business should go back to its drawing board when faced with a challenge, set its goals and plan its way forward to achieve its goals and objectives. It also includes examining the business's internal procedures and external influences. However, the researchers who employ this strategy aim to accomplish two things: to gain an advantage over their rivals, serve as a model for business growth, and assist in adjusting to new internal and external changes (Reddy, 2015). Strategic management is essential because it lets an organization look at where it can improve its operations. As a result, it examines how staff and resources can be used effectively to achieve these objectives. Strategy evaluation, internal organization analysis, and strategy implementation are frequently included in strategic management (Kenton, 2022).

Reddy (2019) claims that it directs the organization in the right direction, enables businesses or administrations to become proactive rather than reactive, directs businesses to prepare for and face future challenges, plays an important role in decision-making, ensures competitiveness and long-term survival, provides a competitive advantage over the market and contributes to the growth and success of businesses. Thus, there are several schools of strategic management thought: a descriptive and prescriptive approach. A descriptive approach focuses on implementing strategies, whereas a prescriptive approach outlines how strategies should be developed (Kenton, 2022).

However, for this study, I focus on the prescriptive approach. In addition, according to Kenton (2022), these schools differ in how strategies are established—whether they are more like all-purpose guidelines that must be followed or developed through an analytical process that considers all prospects and threats. In the following section, I explained Strategic Management's prescriptive approach in greater detail.

2.1.2 Prescriptive Approach of Strategic Management

Mintzberg and Waters (1985) define prescriptive strategy as an intended course of action, in contrast to Ansoff's (1975) description of this strategy as a comprehensive, step-by-step procedure. According to Fahey (1981), these steps characteristically include classifying the organization's task statement, setting aims and objectives, and establishing plans such as resource allocation after the organization scans the environment for opportunities that best fit its competencies. Therefore,

the prescriptive strategy-making approach derives from the economic notion of rational decision-making (Murray, 1978). The prescriptive approach proposes that the organization's available options should be considered objectively and rationally before selecting the best option. The best outcomes will result from selecting the choice based on this criterion. The consistency of the option with the organization's duty and purposes, as well as the financial analysis and shareholder response, are all methods for determining the option's viability (Lynch, 2009). The process is a separate part of the prescriptive strategy-making approach. After choosing an option, you implement it, control how it is carried out, and make any necessary adjustments. The following are a few hints that can help you determine the significance and advantages of strategic management.

2.1.3 Advantages of Strategic Management

According to Robinson (2005), the strategic management process frees management from responsibility and enables them to contemplate the organization's future away from day-to-day operations. If this discipline is lacking, the organization may become overly fixated on solving the following concern or problem without considering the bigger picture. According to Guven (2020), the strategy offers a framework within which all employees can make operational decisions daily and understand that these decisions all contribute to the same direction for the business. Therefore, according to Ivanova and colleagues (2019), strategy establishes goals, identifies threats and opportunities, identifies strategies for maximizing strengths and minimizing weaknesses, validates an organization's mission and values, and provides a vision for the future. Consequently, it creates a framework and specifies the precise parameters within which decisions can be made. Providing the management and staff with a framework within which they can make these decisions helps them concentrate more effectively on the aspects that will contribute to the business's success. By allowing everyone to participate in the strategic discussion, they can learn more about the direction, the reasons for choosing it, and the benefits it brings. For some, just being aware is enough; you must comprehend to gain numerous individuals' full support. According to Dabrisius and Bau (2019), an organization must establish goals and success metrics as part of a strategic management process. Organizations must determine what is essential to their continued success before mandating goal setting and delegating these necessary actions to senior management and

the board (Guven, 2020). The times are rapidly changing, and each day brings about significant shifts. The following are some of the limitations of management-level strategic planning.

2.1.4 Disadvantages of Strategic Management

The various continuous processes that check all kinds of major, critical components are part of strategic management. This includes the organization's inside and outside environment, long-term and short-term goals, strategic resource management, and organizational structure (Kabeyi, 2019). However, this is a time-consuming procedure because any one factor can be affected by others. As a result, it is essential to comprehend the issues and all relevant factors. This frequently takes a long time and ultimately affects the organization's growth. Ginter *et al.* (2018), the implementation of strategic management necessitates a great deal of management patience and time due to the complexity of the process. Effective strategic management necessitates resource organization and strong leadership. Top management must devote sufficient time to strategic management to implement it successfully. Managers must devote a lot of time researching, preparing, and educating their employees about this new management (Ivano *et al.*, 2019). This lengthy and time-consuming orientation and training would hinder the organization's regular operations. There is a negative impact on day-to-day operations, and the organization may face long-term consequences. For instance, they are busy researching the specifics of strategic management, so they neglect many issues that require daily attention.

According to Lynch (2009), there may be a significant increase in attrition if the issues are not properly resolved on time. In addition, employees' performance will suffer as a result of not receiving the necessary resolution to their issues. Your strategic management process may be jeopardized if management decides to devote all important resources to boosting employee performance and motivation (Vuven, 2020). This management system's implementation is challenging compared to other management strategies. Employees and employers must communicate effectively throughout the implementation process (Dabrisus & Bau, 2019). As a result, strategic management must be implemented to keep employees fully engaged. Employees must also be held accountable for their work and participate actively in the workplace. This accountability is intended not only for upper management but also for all lower-level employees. One person cannot do this alone; it takes a team effort. It is necessary to delegate a number of

routine decision-making activities when these kinds of processes are implemented, as doing so would negatively impact the business (Robinson, 2005).

2.1.5 Relevance of the theory to the current study

Public school management had to face many problems due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and in most cases, they could not properly strategize due to the everyday challenges the schools faced. However, for this study, the theory plays an essential role in providing strategies for management to respond effectively to the COVID-19 challenges in public schools and any other virus that may occur. According to Kenton (2021), prescriptive and descriptive approaches to strategic management differ depending on whether strategies are established through a systematic process in which all threats and opportunities are considered or whether they address more general guidelines that must be followed. The theory will provide the school management with principles to follow in order to be disciplined in the running of the schools.

Through strategic management theory, there will be suggested strategies and solutions for the research problem. On this occasion, if the failure to deal with COVID-19 challenges in rural public schools is left unaddressed, it will continue to affect public schools negatively. According to du Plessis (2020), public school management faces the following challenges due to COVID-19: accommodating learners in schools, syllabus coverage, shortage of teachers, and shortage of resources. As a result, the theory is appropriate for the research because its tenets align with the study's goal, which is to develop novel strategies for addressing school-related issues. The educational system has previously utilized strategic management on numerous occasions. Strategic management has provided planners with “the potential and opportunity to act proactively toward the future, technology, and the environment as a whole through education” (Habibi, 2019: 2).

The theory allows the school management team to go back to its drawing board when faced with a new challenge that disturbs the running of the school and helps with coming up with new ideas on how to adapt to the challenges. Strategic management offers the general direction of the school and consists of setting goals for the school, developing rules and tactics to achieve those objectives, and allocating resources to implement the plans (Wooi, 2017). This theory provides school management with the correct procedure to obtain the school's set objectives and make the school competitive. It goes back to resource management in schools, the efficient and effective utilization

of the school's resources and the usage of the available resources to achieve the school's goals. Krenek (2018) states that the theory focuses on ways that reinforce the school's mission, dream, standards, goals, and purposes. This allows stakeholders to voice and agree on the same main concern and focus on the same path to improvement. Strategic management is the alteration of school management to improve basic education. It is a set of key practices carried out by school leaders, teachers, learners, parents, supervisors, counsellors and support staff. It involves a process of long-term change due to (Wooi, 2017).

Furthermore, Strategic Management framework is highly relevant to the study as it provides a structured lens through which to investigate the multifaceted challenges public school management face due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The framework's emphasis on long-term planning and adaptability is crucial in understanding how schools navigated the immediate disruptions caused by the pandemic. As Edwards (2014) posits, strategic management involves applying creative thinking to manage organizations effectively, which is evident in how schools assessed and addressed the challenges of syllabus reduction, teacher shortages, and increased workload. The framework facilitated a systematic approach to identifying these challenges, aligning with the prescriptive strategy's focus on rational decision-making and the strategic realignment of resources to maintain educational standards (Lynch, 2009).

Furthermore, the Strategic Management framework guided the consultation of methods adopted by public school management to address COVID-19 issues, underscoring the prescriptive approach's utility in developing and implementing strategies. By employing a strategic lens, the study could delineate the effectiveness of teamwork, implementing extra classes, and adopting health regulations as proactive measures. This aligns with the assertions of Robinson (2005), who highlighted the role of strategic management in enabling organizations to proactively prepare for and face future challenges. The framework suggests avenues for possible solutions to manage COVID-19 and similar viruses, emphasizing the need for strategic foresight and the continuous evaluation of strategies (Kenton, 2022). This strategic orientation is critical for public schools to develop resilient and flexible strategies that can adapt to the evolving landscape of public health crises.

2.2 REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.2.1 Introduction

This section presents the review of relevant literature on school management response to the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on challenges faced by school management teams due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which are lack of resources and allocation of learners in schools, online learning, shortage of teachers and administration challenges. Consult methods in public schools' management adopted to manage the COVID-19 issues. The themes reviewed are better hygiene and cleaning practices, screening and syllabus trimming. Accompanied by possible solutions for the effective management of COVID-19 in public schools, which were the introduction of learning, syllabi, and frequent hygiene practices in public schools. An empirical literature review accompanies each objective.

2.2.2 Challenges faced by public-school management due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This section focuses on the challenges public school management faces due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This was done in response to the study's first objective. COVID-19 has put forward many problems in the education system, especially in public schools, and school management teams suffered a great deal trying to devise ways to run their schools effectively. In the following subsection, these challenges were reviewed.

2.2.2.1 Lack of resources and allocation of learners in schools

In South African public schools, resources have always been a struggle; however, this was due to damage to school infrastructure by learners and local thugs. School management teams have done means to solve the problem with a huge failure because when they install cameras, they get broken. Therefore, numerous teachers have to work with susceptible learners with few resources to support them (Amato, 2015). The school management team had to support teachers and learners with the little resources they had at schools during COVID-19 and make sure that they accommodated all learners. Mulford and Johns (2004) state that many schools lack critical material resources and basic substructures such as cleanliness, water, roads, transportation, electricity and information and communication technology. However, this impacts negatively on the school management team as it hinders them from performing their duties and learners' enjoyment and performance at school.

In 2020, the Minister of Health instructed people to keep a distance of 1.5 meters as a way of helping to weaken the spread of the virus that causes COVID-19. This meant that on the school premises, learners also had to keep a distance of 1.5, but how would this be possible when public schools accommodate more than 900 learners in their schools? School management teams had to see that learners adhered to this directive. According to Meador (2019), most schools' classes are built to accommodate at least 30 learners, but lately, public schools are forced to accommodate more than 40 learners in a single class. Kumari (2020) states that it was advised by experts in the field that people should maintain a distance of 1.5 meters to avoid getting infected by COVID-19. Therefore, having to share the learners in half to accommodate a social distance of 1.5 meters became a problem because public schools could not accommodate all their learners on the school premises. This meant that the school management team had to sit down and brainstorm ideas on accommodating learners in classes.

That was not the only problem, as most public schools had tables where learners shared in pairs; as a result, there were not enough tables for social distancing. So, most schools had to buy single tables for learners and more chairs. This, however, had to happen for the whole school. As a result, the school management team had to secure funding for the new furniture as the school budget did not cater to such. The education sector lost R1.5 million during the 2020 budget speech. Chaskalson *et al.* (2020) mention that in addition to these cuts, most of the basic education budget was reprioritized to fund COVID-related interventions in schools. In other words, the subdivision did not obtain additional money to deal with the pandemic.

Section 29 of the Constitution states that all South Africans have the right to basic education, as well as basic education for adults and further education through reasonable means should be gradually made accessible and reachable. It is in line with the South African Schools Act, which was passed in 1996 and aimed to guarantee that every learner has equal access to high-quality education. During the pandemic, most learners had no form of learning means to educate themselves; this violated learner's rights. However, the school management team had to make a plan that their learners would be taught at home, which was impossible. Bernard (2002) states that, in some cases, learners struggle to access books and materials. Most learners at public schools share textbooks, and others do not have them at all. According to Herald (2010), this is the case in many schools where eight or more learners share one textbook or worse when the teacher only has

the textbook and reads the section relevant to the class. So when the pandemic hit, they were not allowed to make contact with or see their friends, which hindered them from being educated at home. In this case, the school management team had to make copies for each learner during the pandemic and make deliveries to their homes for their learners; this was a problem because it was an impossible task to do.

Learner's enrolment increase every year in schools, and most schools are forced to use what they have from previous years (Census, 2021). A classroom of 35 or more learners would not be a learning environment without books. Especially when compared to well-resourced semi-private and private schools with a typical class size of 20 learners (Amato, 2015). Census (2021) further states that a severe shortage of textbooks and other educational materials has hit the education sector hard. Therefore, a shortage of textbooks hit both primary and secondary schools. Teachers are forced to move more slowly, making the syllabus difficult to complete. This, however, impacted the school management during COVID-19 in (rural) schools. Efroymson (2020) mention that school management had high stress levels due to project delays, rushed projects with elevated errors and loss of good teachers. They had to devise better ways to allocate what school premises had to teachers and learners so that everyone would feel better and safe at school. Therefore, it was not easy for the management to get all learners and teachers in class, for teaching and learning to occur.

2.2.2.2 Syllabus coverage

Thus, moving slower during a pandemic was a problem because other schools with better school resources had already covered some topics during the lockdown, and public schools were already behind. According to the guiding principles to deal with this epidemic, social distancing is a key factor in how and when schools reopen (Lordan *et al.*, 2020). According to Ramrathan (2020), this uncertainty has led to speculation, proposals, and interim plans for school recovery plans to maintain the integrity of the school year. The doubt surrounding the lockdown era and the disease's course throughout the nation hindered the ability to develop a final plan for the academic year's retrieval. This affected the school management team because they had to return to schools during the pandemic to assess their schools and their ability to welcome learners back. With that in mind,

they had to work out how their schools would cover the lost time and the backlog in learners' academics.

Ramrathan (2020) says that school, college and university leaders and faculty took numerous actions to save the school year and are responding to the developing concern about closing educational campuses (schools, colleges and universities) and the perception of time lost to cover the syllabus. The reopening of schools began in June 2020. Most schools used a rotational schedule in which learners went to school every second or third day (Reddy, 2022). In 2021, this rotational schedule was maintained. According to academics in the field of education, there will be a decrease of 50% in school contact time in 2021 and 60% in 2020. In schools with fewer resources, learners lose more school time. However, the amount of learning both knowledge and skills—lost and the extent to which disadvantaged children may be affected is unknown. According to Reddy (2022), the global literature reveals that learners in lower grades were likelier to lose knowledge than learners in higher grades, and learners from poorer households and countries experienced higher levels of learning loss. This had a negative impact on the school management team because the department was breathing down their necks, demanding a way forward and alternative ways to prevent the above-mentioned problem from happening again.

2.2.2.3 Online learning

Mpungose (2020a) says that e-learning is education conducted via the Internet. It is also called "online learning" and refers to any learning that happens online and not in person. According to Rodrigues *et al.* (2019: 88), forms of instruction that take place at different times and/or places between the learner and the trainer using multiple forms of material refer to online learning. During the pandemic, South African school management was compelled to switch from traditional classroom instruction to online instruction (Mpungose, 2020: 1). However, this has been a problem as many schools and colleges around the world that have largely relied on traditional face-to-face classes have found it difficult to transition to online learning as they do not have time to prepare for virtual classes (Ontong & Waghid, 2020). This posed a challenge to the public school management team as they had to ensure that learners learn and get information on time and have an internet connection. Rapanta *et al.* (2020: 923) mention that the sudden shift from regular face-to-face classes to online learning did not leave enough time for learners, teachers and parents to

prepare for the new teaching methods. During the global pandemic, many learners sought additional assistance to access and prosper in online learning as a result of this.

However, learners were aware of online learning and some platforms, such as Google Classroom, but they also desired to use additional social media platforms (Agormedah *et al.*, 2020). The problem now lay with the older teachers because many were unfamiliar with the new technologies, and management needed to assist them. However, they did not like online learning because they did not have formal orientation and training, they did not think they could always get to the Internet, and they did not have enough money (Mpungose, 2020). It was challenging for the school management team to change the staff's attitude and behavior; they had to work hard to pursue them. The administration's introduction of distance learning to support distance learning and online education delivered through radio, television, and the internet has left children from economically disadvantaged, marginalized and vulnerable families with learning methods that are inaccessible and inequalities in access and quality of education are widening (Ngwacho, 2020: 2).

2.2.2.4 Shortage of Teachers

Before the coronavirus pandemic, it was anticipated that there would be a shortage of teachers. This shortage worsened when more teachers quit their jobs early or switched careers due to COVID-19-related issues (Roger & Spring, 2020). The shortage of teachers in schools was already a challenge for the management because they could not find suitable candidates to teach at their schools. As a result, in 2020, the situation worsened when a third of educators said the epidemic had made them more likely to retire early, especially those over 50 and those with more than 20 years of life expectancy (Ellis, 2021). Substitute teacher shortages also put even more pressure on already overworked and exhausted school teachers. According to Gecker (2021), the impact of COVID-19 on teachers includes creating different lesson plans for learners in the classroom or at home. To teach online classes, learn new technologies like learning management and collaboration software, and collaborate with counselors and management to deal with learners who are consistently absent, depressed, unmotivated, or stressed. Educating parents on effectively teaching lessons at home or monitoring their children's progress; keeping up with irregular grading due to illness-related absences of learners and teachers. Although these changes have been overwhelming for some educators due to the short amount of time available for training and preparation, they

may ultimately be beneficial. Therefore, it was difficult for management to find teachers during the pandemic (Rogers and Spring, 2020). As a result, the school management team had to find ways to cover for the absent teachers. Melia (2022) revealed that where hundreds of teachers have been out or absent, managers had to help protect classrooms. Whereby in some cases, managers had already been helping for months in classrooms to fill in for sick and quarantining staff regardless of their work.

2.2.2.5 Administration challenges

Sahoo (2021) mentioned that COVID-19 was a completely new problem, unlike other issues of the past. There were no precedents or guidelines for management, which had to make decisions independently, some of which were difficult, without any helpful hints from the past. Therefore, the pandemic had a significant impact on school management. They have to worry about the physical and mental health of their staff and learners in addition to meeting the ever-changing safety protocols set forth by the government and county to keep their schools open. According to Einhorn (2022), the following is a lengthy and daunting list of issues that school management face: severe staffing shortages, bloody arguments over wearing masks, severe academic deficiencies, terrifying illnesses, and disruptive quarantines. In addition, managers were grappling with difficult questions regarding the most effective ways to deal with issues related to learner discipline, including violence, which some educators claim has become a growing concern. As a result, Norwich University Online (2020) notes that school management manages the communities' emotional responses to the crisis, which includes assisting them in overcoming feelings of loss, frustration, anger, and anxiety. As a result, they had to devise strategies for balancing the expectations of the public with the needs of those impacted. Due to fluctuating staffing levels—whether from sickness, shortages, or resignations—today's managers are also required to accomplish more with fewer resources. Even though school shootings are extreme circumstances, management often has to make difficult decisions to keep their schools safe (Einhorn, 2022). They also have to deal with teachers' growing concerns and needs for more work under pressure and in unusual circumstances.

According to Thessin and Louis (2019), school management is tasked with upholding their schools' academic success in a fast-changing world, even while schools are closed to physical learning.

Also, supervisors and principals need to be more open and honest with parents than ever before. They can assist parents in making well-informed decisions regarding what is best for their children's safety and academic success through consistent, ongoing communication. In 2020, Salem University said that school principals had had a unique role despite challenges at every level of education. Principals have had to use their expertise and education to address new leadership challenges from fresh perspectives because they have been caught between the plans made by the district administration and the requirements of their teachers and learners.

2.2.2.6 Empirical Literature on Challenges Faced by Public-School Management

Different studies have been conducted exploring management's response to the COVID-19 pandemic in public schools. In the study conducted by Nabe-Nielsen *et al.* (2021), it was discovered that it is important for the management of the school to understand their teachers' uncertainties and fears for the period of the pandemic. In relation to this, Robosa *et al.* (2021) it was revealed that the absence of resources considerably challenged school management team and teachers, the management of learners and the amount of work that contributed to stress. Therefore, another study by Angaw (2021) argues that the policy responses given by the government during COVID-19 had limitations and a lack of institutional implementation platforms. Another study by Akram *et al.* (2021) argued that the COVID-19 pandemic has unexpectedly forced school leaders and teachers to assess pedagogical measures to provide quality education to learners and change curricula. A study by Pollock (2020) and Argyropoulou *et al.* (2021) found that school principals struggled to create an environment where learners learn and teachers teach. At the same time, they were expected to explore new ways to support online learning and public school operations through passionate digital education. Another study done by Anderson *et al.* (2020) found that the expected and urgent need to jump on and adapt to new technologies for virtual learning and online classes during COVID-19 caused confusion and emotional strain on teachers and school management teams. A study done by Brackett *et al.* (2020) discovered that working from home added stress to school principals. It made it very difficult to take time off work as they were unable to separate their workdays from their personal lives, and they spent a lot of time trying to manage their schools and attending classes at night and at weekends. In a study by Spyropoulou and Koutroukis (2021), school management team faced the same challenges as others trying to balance new ways of living and working, and dealing with their fears and anxieties.

2.2.3 Methods public schools' management adopted to manage COVID-19 issues

As mentioned before, in the challenges, decisions had to be taken, and the school management team did exactly that. Breen (2021) mentioned that in 2021, most experts concluded that it was after the school year that schools started to function normally. As a result, in an unprecedented setting, educators and policymakers faced terrifying obstacles to ensure that learners received high-quality education.

2.2.3.1 Better hygiene and cleaning practices

To welcome learners and teachers back to schools, managers had to make sure that it was safe for them to do so. Ford and Sopha (2020) stated that school management teams are responsible for preventing and controlling infectious diseases in schools and protecting learners, teachers, and the public by ensuring the most effective cleaning and disinfection practices are used. Ministry of Education issued hygiene guiding principles for schools during the COVID-19 pandemic (DoE, 2020). Since COVID-19 is transmitted through contact with an infected person and droplets, maintaining a clean and hygienic environment is essential (WHO, 2020). Particularly in the case of younger children, who may not fully comprehend the necessary safety measures. To implement a proactive cleaning policy, the school administration had to hire cleaning staff. As a result, the cleaning staff was required to wear the appropriate protective gear for each job to work safely (DoE, 2020). The school administration had to make it a priority to get rid of books, unnecessary materials, and other items that had been unused for a long time. So that the school can be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected before it reopens. Additionally, locate a reputable local business that can provide sufficient hygiene supplies like hand disinfectants, contactless water and soap distributors, no-touch trash cans, tissues, and other items. There was an emphasis that door handles, staircase rails, and other high-touch areas, such as reception areas, communal spaces, conveniences, and meeting rooms, are frequently cleaned and inspected to help ensure the highest levels of cleanliness and hygiene. According to SAnews (2020), schools will be required to sanitize classrooms before each school day begins. Before entering classrooms, learners will be required to clean their hands.

2.2.3.2 Screening

When the schools' premises were cleaned and fumigated, it was confirmed that teachers and learners were ready to return to school. Therefore, upon returning to school, they had to go through deep screening to ensure that they did not have COVID-19 and that it was safe for them to be at school. SAnews (2020) mentioned that temperature checks would be conducted, and learners or staff with elevated temperatures would be quarantined and tested. The school management team prepared a room where those who presented with high temperatures would isolate themselves while at school. To ensure the health and safety of learners and teachers, schools are provided with a Standard Operating Procedures booklet that serves as a guide for all schools (DoE, 2020). Plans for social distance will be included in the booklet. There will be no hand-holding or hugging, and no more than two students may share a desk. Students and educators will be required to wear cloth masks at all times in accordance with the guidelines. The managers made it their mission to see to it that everyone on the school premises followed the procedures to make it safe for everyone. Fricker (2021) mentions that the shift to blended learning after the COVID-19 outbreak was rapid and included rotating classes and access to online, radio and television educational resources. The school management team had to help their learners access all the learning platforms so they would not fall too behind with their school work. Nonetheless, it was not easy for learners from poor backgrounds to adapt to this kind of learning, so the school management had to work around bringing learners to schools for face-to-face learning.

Nchabeleng (2020) says that DBE gave schools options for their timetables. Schools could choose either the platoon timetable, which means that the school runs two shifts each day with the same classes at different times in the morning and afternoon sessions. School management had to choose the best option for their school. To comply with social distance regulations, the school management had to reduce the number of learners in the classroom. For parents, caregivers, and community leaders to become more involved in school life and increase their ownership of local schools, they advocated for community dialogues. Follow the child-friendly COVID-19 standard operating procedures and protocols to keep children, educators, and educational staff safe. Go above and beyond to raise COVID-19 vaccination rates at their schools. Expand the availability of facilities for hand washing and hygiene-promoting activities to all children.

2.2.3.3 Syllabus

When the concern about putting learners back in class ended, it was now time for the management to come up with the best way for their learners to be taught. Therefore, South Africa's basic education department reduced the syllabus's content just for 2020. It provided teacher's with Annual Teaching Plans (ATP) for each subject they needed to follow. The Restoration of the Annual Syllabus (ATP) was released through Circular S13 in 2021. This is intended to support the restoration of learning and ensure that true deep learning remains the official syllabus for all grades (R-12). School departmental heads (DH) had to choose what knowledge is most worthwhile for school education in response to this disease, and this was done according to each school's needs (Ramrathan, 2020). We need to critically ask ourselves which knowledge is most valuable in school lessons during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. When teachers and learners were back in class, and the dust was beginning to settle down, the school management team had to see that learners were being taught and assessed in their respective subjects. The DoE cancelled external examinations, and each school was supposed to set its own question papers according to the content taught and covered in their schools. The school management team had to see that educators set standardized tests and the right cognitive levels.

2.2.3.4 Empirical literature on Methods public schools management adopted

Many researches have shown how COVID-19 has affected public schools and their managers. As a result, many rules were made and adopted by everyone in the education sector to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. In relation to this, Varela and Fedynich (2020) found out that the school management team felt assertive in their preparation to support teachers and learners upon learning of school closures as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 through emotional support. A study by Tria (2020) found that the school management team adopted numerous learning delivery options, such as online learning, but not restricted to face-to-face, blended learning, distance learning, homeschooling, and other forms of learning. In another study by Harris (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly shifted school management team roles towards dispersed, shared and network practices. In relation to this, Harris and Jones (2020) mention that it has been found that school leaders are following the instructions provided by the DoE, including B. Social distancing, intensive cleaning, and carefully coordinating all movements around the school. Study by Okilwa and Barnett (2021) provided school management teams with strategic plans they should follow to protect teachers, learners and staff and slow the spread of Covid-19. Another study by

Karakose et al. (2021) discovered that the school management team contributed to the construction of online learning culture in schools during COVID-19. Another study worth mentioning was done by Robosa *et al.* (2021), which found that teachers gained positive experience despite the stress and burnt out during the pandemic; this was due to their passion, relationships built among themselves, learners, school management team and the fulfillment of their duty.

2.2.4 Possible solutions for effective management of COVID-19 in public Schools

The era of COVID-19 has passed in schools, but it took normality within our public school education systems. However, it has worsened the existing challenges and impacted the quality of post-matric study and tertiary education (Maree, 2021). However, it did not only affect post-matric results but the results of all grades. Therefore, the school management team can take a few lessons from it to cope with viruses that may emerge in the future and the new variants that keep emerging. According to Harris (2020), COVID-19 has rapidly changed how schools do their work. Below, we discuss possible solutions that public schools may implement in their schools to deal with COVID-19 or other viruses in the future.

2.2.4.1 Online learning

According to Robosa *et al.* (2021), for the first time, online platforms, virtual learning environments, social media and numerous group forums were explored and tested for further training during the pandemic. However, even after in-person classes resume, this could be further explored, and these platforms could offer learners additional resources and coaching (Varela and Fedynich, 2020). It could be beneficial for the school management teams to try and implement IT teaching and learning to take place in public schools to prepare learners for whenever a new virus occurs so that they will not be badly impacted. Because of resources, and it might not be easy to implement online learning in public schools. However, Vrasidas (2015) mention that just, because you have the resources doesn't mean you can easily implement ICT. Still, other factors must support it, one of which is staff motivation. The public school management team can start small by encouraging their staff members to teach using WhatsApp or share information with learners. According to Harris (2020), they can recreate the school setting online using digital tools such as Zoom classroom.

Arkorful and Abaidoo (2015) define eLearning as using learning technology to provide virtual access to learning and materials. The importance of internet-based e-learning in 21st-century higher education cannot be overemphasized, especially for today's digital native learners (Bennett *et al.*, 2008). According to Khoza (2019b), due to the widespread use of modern technologies, such as hardware resources and software resources, e-learning enables course content to be delivered online. It is now available. This suggests that provided they have access to hardware and software resources, learners can access course content and information whenever they want, regardless of obstacles like the pandemic.

Therefore, our public school management team should consider reintroducing computers as a subject in schools. This would mean the government would need to expand ICT infrastructure in education and training. Pratt (2020) asserts that ICT refers to information and communications technologies; the infrastructure and parts that make modern computing possible are what it is defined as. He goes on to say that all devices, networking components, submissions, and systems joint are widely accepted to refer to everything that enables individuals and organizations to interact in the digital world. Ertmer and Otterbreit-Leftwich (2019), say that being open to change is a big part of successfully integrating technology because it gives learners opportunities to learn and use the skills of the 21st century. According to Wahab (2020), virtual education environments offer additional learning opportunities where learners can work together, join forces and take accountability for their education at their speed and time. As a result, ICT-immersed lessons foster self-directed learning and a learning environment that is encouraging and motivating for our learners. According to Geng *et al.* (2019), the educator's role shifts to that of a facilitator when moving from a teacher-led environment to a learner-led environment. As a result, remote support may be required.

According to Wahab (2020), there is no doubt that the tremendous advances in technology around the world require a paradigm shift in how we approach educational goals. ICT tools like laptops, projectors, tablets, smartphones, iPads, and interactive whiteboards, to name a few, have been used by many educational institutions. As a result, Ngwacho (2020) suggests that the government should help teachers, managers, teacher trainers, and mentors learn how to incorporate ICT into education. Open educational resource centers and digital learning materials should be available more readily and utilized at all teaching and learning levels. At all levels of teaching and learning,

school management should assist in strengthening ICT-based syllabus delivery and assessment strategies. However, Yunus (2007) believes that teachers need adequate ICT and pedagogy training and support before ICT can be effectively integrated. Staff members' readiness and motivation are essential for the successful implementation of ICT, and their attitude significantly impacts the lives of their learners. This is due to the fact that learners may resort to habitual learning and explanations if staff members do not implement ICT-embedded learning. Yuen and Ma (2002) express similar sentiments, strongly recommending that teaching staff be given more authority and confidence to implement ICT-integrated teaching. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Bank emphasizes the need for online workforce training and support. According to Senzige and Sarukesi (2004), school management should encourage the use of ICT in the education and training of learners with disabilities and special needs and enhance institutional, regulatory, and policy frameworks to encourage the integration of ICT into education. Enhance ICT's security, safety, and ethical use by enhancing e-waste management in teaching and learning.

According to Shava *et al.* (2016), today, children worldwide are exposed to technology devices such as mobile phones and tablets from an early age. The aforementioned observation is supported by a study conducted by Jesse (2015), which shows that, in addition to talking, many have access to mobile phones and use them for texting, browsing social media and other applications. According to Willms and Corbett (2003), it is reasonable to assume that learners exhibit a high level of acceptance and receptivity toward technology, given the rate at which it is incorporated into the educational system. It is safe to assume that learners have a special relationship with ICT. Learners of today are very receptive to mobile technology and anticipate technology-integrated learning. According to Earle (2002), Buabeng-Andoh and Yidana (2014) agree that learners are looking forward to ICT-integrated learning because they can use the Internet to catch up on lessons from home. In order to make learning meaningful and enjoyable for everyone, teachers and school management must have adequate ICT infrastructure and learner support services due to this motivation in learners. From this, we can conclude that educators are essential in successfully implementing ICT-integrated learning and, in return, need support and appreciation (Wahab, 2020).

According to Dhital (2018), the management of the schools ought to provide resources for learners to determine whether they are prepared to take an online course. The school's management should negotiate educational discounts for distance learners with mobile phone providers due to the high cost of internet access. As a result, teachers should consider using flexible approaches to teaching and deadlines to accommodate learners who have limitations or lack reliable Wi-Fi or broadband access. Additionally, teachers should provide instructional support through instructional activities that can assist learners in evaluating their readiness to learn online. According to Johnson (2019), at the local level, teachers are actively working together to improve online teaching methods and develop creative initiatives that push the boundaries of virtual education. Sharing similar experiences among educators, parents, and learners creates unprecedented opportunities for collaboration, creative solutions, and a willingness to learn from others and experiment with new tools (Doucet *et al.*, 2020). To assist and support teaching and learning in an environment that is more interactive and engaging, numerous educational organizations are providing their solutions and tools at no cost. In contrast to traditional classroom teaching and learning methods, online education has allowed for novel approaches to education (Novosad, 2020: 49).

2.2.4.2 Syllabus

The public school's syllabus has suffered a great deal during the COVID-19 pandemic, and it is now time to work towards the future. However, researchers and education scholars, such as Professor Janson, have been trying to figure out a way forward for public schools (Ramrathan, 2020). Cahapay (2020) mentions that the new normal after COVID-19 can be a moment when meaningful, relevant and useful content can be taught. This means that the school management team should work towards a syllabus that is beneficial to their learner, teachers and the community in which they live. Whereas Brennan *et al.* (2022) mention that syllabus must build skills for communal citizenship, address issues critical to the future of society, and generate the knowledge needed in practice. Both researchers emphasize that the syllabus must be applicable, suitable, and receptive to developing readiness in times of disasters, diseases, and emergencies. Therefore, the school management team should ensure that one of the steps to address this gap is to develop a set of attentiveness competencies forming a syllabus goal. One of the syllabus objectives that should be emphasized in the new mainstream syllabus is the development of learners' preparatory skills (Cahapay, 2020). The syllabus may be redesigned considering the new normal era after Corona.

Due to restrictions imposed by COVID-19, the new regular syllabus can also take over content integration (Flannery, 2020). In this way, learners could reflect on what has happened in the past and learn ways of surviving in the future. Not forgetting that schools lost a lot of learners during the pandemic, so the school management team should try to bring those learners back into the classroom. Reddy (2022) inspires community involvement to get learners back in the classroom, using structures such as street committees and churches to assist in the search for missing learners. Start a continuous, comprehensive, data-driven, back-to-school plan to reach learners who have dropped out and assist them with re-enrolment. Aktan (2021) advises that principals use the latest data from the DBE Syllabus Review to revise curricula to encourage recall of learning. This must include the development of a national psychosocial support strategy linked to an early warning system.

Toquero (2020) mentions that educational institutions need to strengthen syllabus practices and make them more responsive to students' learning needs outside of traditional classrooms. Environmental and health courses should be incorporated into high school syllabi. Making the syllabus as adaptable as possible to the demands of the modern world is especially crucial. Since everyone deals with environmental and health issues, integrating fundamental environmental and health courses should be available to all students in schools (Türkoglu, 2019) not just those majoring in science. It is possible to create environmental literacy-focused learning materials for both use in the classroom and dissemination to a broader society. According to Keselman *et al.* (2011), environmental science education programs can produce citizens who are environmentally literate and who can exemplify environmental health concerns for social action. This is done to adapt to the actual issues that the world is dealing with and, as a result, to raise students' awareness and improve their positive attitudes (Ami *et al.*, 2012; Türkoglu, 2019), implement effective environmental education policies, and strengthen educational health practices. According to Keselman *et al.* (2011), teachers may encounter obstacles due to the integration, such as a lack of sufficient knowledge to teach environmental health and pressures from imposed guidelines. Nevertheless, environmental health is highly valued worldwide, particularly in light of the current global pandemic. This project for the syllabus may assist in addressing future environmental issues.

2.2.4.3 Hygiene practices in public Schools

COVID-19 showed us how hygiene was and is still neglected in public schools; this was evident when most public school learners were affected by it. However, school closures, hygiene and health intervention programs, and other school-based intervention strategies are cost-effective ways to stop the spread of infectious diseases. Jatrana *et al.* (2021) stated that assessing the prevalence of hand-washing behavior among adolescents attending schools and its determinants is essential. AlBashtawy (2015) says that schools are among the most important places to spread health education and programs. In terms of hand washing and numerous other hygienic practices, the learners have the opportunity to acquire knowledge, skills, and positive behaviors. Therefore, environmental hygiene practices must be improved at all educational levels (Toquero, 2020). School management must educate learners and raise awareness of societal issues, particularly health-related issues, so learners can become socially responsible. According to Lee *et al.* (2003), the COVID-19 pandemic has been linked to school closures, so environmental hygiene should be a top priority in schools to stop the spread and outbreak of infectious diseases. Teaching learners about infectious disease prevention should also be a part of the syllabus. Learners can be given health management tools, allowing them to follow procedures until good hygiene becomes a school culture. School management must devise a plan to control the virus's source of transmission in order to accomplish the goal (Lee *et al.*, 2003). A school's sustainable environmental framework should be the foundation for effective health and environmental policies.

Many schools deal with the shortage of resources but do not have to go big; they could start small by intruding on the washing of hands regularly within the school premises. Hand washing, as stated by Dajaan (2018), significantly reduces the risk of contracting infectious diseases. Children are particularly susceptible to infections brought on by unwashed hands and exhibit unhealthy behaviors, so hand washing is essential. Learners would become accustomed to hand washing if it were taught as early as kindergarten and primary school. According to UNICEF, children are less likely to contract viruses if they wash their hands with soap after using the bathroom or before eating. Proper hand-washing practices contribute to healthy development by keeping children in school. Hand washing actually increases school attendance by reducing the spread of diseases that could have been avoided, as children are less likely to stay home due to illness. According to Mohammed *et al.* (2016), schoolchildren who are more aware of and practice good hand hygiene also get better grades and take fewer absences and sick days from school.

2.2.4.4 The empirical literature on solutions for effective management of Covid-19

Numerous studies have been conducted to come up with solutions to combat the corona virus and develop plans for the future. The study conducted by Marshall et al. (2020) suggest that during a pandemic, school management teams should be able to provide a clear direction, work collaboratively and communicate effectively with their staff. In another study by Brammer and Clark (2020), COVID-19 put considerable strains on schools in relation to communication with stakeholders, especially teachers and learners, so it is crucial for the school management team to resolve uncertainties during a crisis. Another study by Hanafi *et al.* (2021) suggests that school management team should pay attention to training programs for implementing blended learning for teachers.

Another study by Varela and Fedynich (2020) suggest that school management team need support to effectively establish goals to properly serve teacher and learners from the department and policymakers. Another study worth mentioning was conducted by Bevins *et al.* (2020), which found out that after the COVID-19 pandemic, it cannot just be back to normal for schools; school management teams should start to ask themselves questions about the effects on education, learners' skills and infrastructure for the future. A study conducted by Munastiwi and Heliyon (2021) suggests distance learning, home-based learning, or virtual learning should be considered one of the education systems that should be included in the traditional education system. In relation to this, Rzymiski and Nowicki (2020) discovered that constructing online courses and sharing and promoting e-learning can help learners overcome the chaos of academic education. Another study worth mentioning was made by Saxena and Saxena (2020), which found that school leaders, teachers and support staff must prepare for the continuation of education during the pandemic, including focusing on learner health and working on online and distance learning options.

2.3 SUMMARY OF THIS CHAPTER

This chapter discusses the theoretical frameworks supporting this study under Strategic Management Theory. This was done by addressing the theory in this manner: the theory's historical perspective with which it originated was discussed. The assumptions that founded the foundation of the theory, the prescriptive approach to the theory, the advantages and disadvantages, and the relevance of the theory to the study were discussed. From the literature

review done in this study, it is seen that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused public school management a lot of problems that affected the performance of schools at the end of the year and at the same time, a lot of methods had to be adopted in order to cope with it. Some literature reviews done under this study highlighted the strategies/solutions that can be implemented in public schools in order to prevent viruses such as COVID-19 in the future.

The research approach and methodology used in the study are discussed in the following chapter. Chapter three extensively describes the methodological procedure followed in this study.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

3. INTRODUCTION

Using a qualitative research approach, this study aims to investigate management responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in Petsana's public schools. This chapter discusses the research methodology, transformative paradigm, instrumentation for data generation, and subsequent data analysis in order to accomplish this goal. Phenomenology Research is the method used in this study. This chapter demonstrates how school management perspectives and experiences were examined through qualitative research during the COVID-19 pandemic. Aiding in developing solutions through participant observations to deal with viruses like COVID-19 in the future. It explains the method used to analyze the data, confirms the methods used to generate the data. In addition, the theoretical ideas developed in Chapter two are applied when attempting to respond to the following research question.

How does management respond to the COVID-19 pandemic in public schools?

The qualitative research approach theory is explained briefly in this section. It places the qualitative research approach in its historical context in terms of its advantages for this study, the relationship between the participants and the researcher, the most important aspect of the qualitative research method, how it can be used in this study, and how it fits with the theoretical framework for this study, which is about strategic management. While the second section is the main part of the study, it explains how the participants' data were collected to support the need for qualitative research. Through the use of purposive sampling, a convenient selection method for SMT, semi-structured interviews were used as the data generation instrument in this study to clarify participants, describe the research site, and elaborate on ethical considerations. Data analysis was then discussed. These were carried out to achieve coherence in the readers' minds and respond to this study's aims, research questions, and objectives.

3.1. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section examines the transformative paradigm as the study's research lens and qualitative research as an appropriate method. It is discussed, including where it came from and how it relates to the study. The theoretical framework of this study is also discussed to justify the necessity of the study, the advantages of a qualitative research approach, and its suitability for strategic management.

3.1.1 Research Paradigm as Research Lens

This study is positioned within transformative paradigm. Based on the research philosophy, approach, and choice of research design discussed, this paradigm is suitable for this study. The transformative paradigm is defined as a research framework that emphasizes the experiences of marginalized communities (Jackson *et al.*, 2018). According to Mertens (2005), the fundamental beliefs of the transformative paradigm provide an overall framework for addressing social justice issues and making methodological decisions. The researcher's role is recast in this context as one who wants to challenge the status quo, is a little bit of a provocateur with a little humility, and shares a sense of responsibility. This study's data generation method—interviews—also falls under the transformative paradigm, encompassing more than just the philosophy and research approach. Mertens (2007:213) says that in a transformative paradigm, most methods for gaining insight into the issue must involve community members. Numerous ways could be used to accomplish this, including focus groups, interviews, surveys, and threaded discussions (Romm, 2015:413). To additionally lay out the pertinence of groundbreaking worldview to my study, the components, for example, axiology, philosophy, epistemology and procedure, are made sense of underneath.

3.1.1.1 Axiology of Transformative Paradigm

According to Romm (2016), axiology is a philosophical branch or an assumption of the transformative paradigm that addresses ethical considerations when planning research. It also advocates for human rights, social justice, cultural respect, and morality. It also addresses reciprocity and injustice (Mertens, 2015:81). This means that the axiology of the transformative paradigm respects and defines what is right and wrong in research. According to Phelp (2021), it straddles the line between the particular values that are required for each stage of research, including the treatment of the participants, the data, and the research's intended audience. One

could say that this analysis answered a question about ethical behavior during the research process. That is, the participants' respect for their values must be considered. Consequently, the axiological suspicion scowls at the aimless treatment of mankind's local members. According to Education (2020), doing so fundamentally emphasizes the ethical obligations of researchers to comprehend and respect humanity and its diversity in order to challenge societal colonialism and/or inequality that perpetuate oppressive practices. As a result, the transformative paradigm's axiology is based on the participants' fundamental values, which must be respected with almost complete recognition of humanity and diversity to achieve emancipation.

Value, culture, and diversity were looked at and respected in this study almost as much as the participants' rights and privileges. Mertens (2015:81) asserts that the research community's respect for human rights fosters social justice. This means the study's ethical considerations encourage the participants' social and logical equality. This guarantees the researchers' views and reflections on the study objective. According to Barnes (2019), axiology enables researchers to reflect on and research their values to achieve objectivity and ensure they are appropriate for conducting research studies. This is the reason why this is the case. By ensuring that the participants' consent was given freely and without pressure, respect was shown to them. Additionally, their right to withdraw from the study was protected. This was done because the Transformative Paradigm's axiological assumption is that it is open and believes in the idea of respect and reciprocity (Education, 2020). The study's benefit is the method developed to address pressing social issues in public schools.

3.1.1.2 Ontology of Transformative Paradigm

The view of reality and being that will likely lead to the selection of a theoretical framework in research is referred to as ontology from the general perspective (O'Neil, 2018). Hughes (2021) defines ontology as a presumption about the nature of social reality. Therefore, according to Barnes (2019), the ontology of the transformative paradigm is based on historical realism, which holds that reality exists beyond the mind. According to this ontological assumption, ethnic, social, cultural, and historical factors shape reality (Held, 2019). Since the matter is developed in view of sociality, the analyst needs to fundamentally analyze the issue of sociality, power and legislative issues in the mission for the real world (Mertens, 2015). This means that the experiences of the researchers' and/or participants' communities are crucial to the transformational investigation of a

particular phenomenon. It makes sense to assert that reality is multidimensional based on the above conceptualization. Education (2020) says that this can be broken down into two categories: visible surface reality and otherwise invisible deep structure.

In this study, it is convenient to take note of the reality that molded the social issues, such as challenges that public school management faced during the COVID-19 pandemic in the education sector is politically disposed, sociality implanted, by and large and socially recognizable and socially disagreeable. The use of strategic management, qualitative research, and thematic analysis are thought to have revealed this. In point of fact, as can be seen, these aspects of the assumption are negative. As a result, they must be reshaped through strategic management, thematic analysis and qualitative research as a theoretical process to the nature of reality to guarantee the people's social and political emancipation. This is my position since it is convenient for a researcher to take a position based on how they perceive reality's nature and position (Barnes, 2019).

3.1.1.3 Epistemology of Transformative Paradigm

According to Mertens (2015), the epistemological assumption rests on the relationship between participants and researchers. Understanding the culture and establishing trust between researchers and participants are the goals of this relationship (Maarouf, 2019). Because it seeks to comprehend various versions of reality and power issues, the relationship and trust in the process of knowledge generation is crucial in the transformative paradigm. Understanding and dealing with power imbalances among community members necessitates the development of interactive relationships (Mertens, 2015). From these, it is smarter to say that epistemological suspicion of extraordinary worldview brings up the issue of relationships between the researcher and the participants. According to Chilisa and Merten (2021), the interaction between the participants and the researcher is interactive. This generates transactional and subjective knowledge (Molina-Azorin and Jose, 2020). As a result, this assumption maintains that knowledge is true and must be implemented to transform and/or empower individuals. In this study, the most vital move towards change is to guarantee that information is consistently built between the researcher and participants towards change (Held, 2019). As a result, I am aware that the stakeholders in question are expected to participate in the development of the knowledge necessary to transform public schools' education. According to Zeng *et al.* (2020), the knowledge that benefits society should be built

through consensus this is in line with this. This demonstrates the democratic research process that underpins the transformative paradigm's methodology.

3.1.1.4 Methodology of Transformative Paradigm

In the transformational paradigm, the motivation behind the research is to destroy myths, deceit and misinformation, put individuals into action, and naturally change their own general public (Chilisa, 2019). This study adopts the methods of collecting data and sampling procedures used in qualitative research. Therefore, the transformative paradigm's methodological assumptions are observed and implemented in this study. The study used a qualitative research approach to generate knowledge by involving public school management to address the challenges faced by them in the public education system. In addition, the adoption of semi-structured interviews as a method of data generation was made to discover and reduce the power imbalances already present among the stakeholders. Using thematic analysis investigation was likewise used to interpret the sociality and the social talk of information. This is right because power imbalances in the social relationships involved in planning, carrying out, and communicating the research findings ensure that the process is democratic and equitable (Mertens, 2021). Because the study's methodological assumptions are in support of the research process used, this paradigmatic stance is appropriately inconsistent with the study. However, Chilisa (2019) concurred with my conclusion that in a transformative paradigm, methodological decisions are made to select the approach that will facilitate findings, promote social justice, and alter the status quo through participation in those who would make or live with the change. The methodological assumption is explained in detail below.

3.1.2 Qualitative Research as an Approach for the Study

This study was shaped by qualitative research, which was used as a research method. It is an approach that combines thoughtfulness and comprehension. According to Bhandari (2020), qualitative research combines non-numerical data using various qualitative research procedures such as personal interviews, observational methods, and case studies. The research questions are answered in detail using its methods. As a result, survey and questionnaire participants are asked open-ended rather than closed-ended questions. In qualitative research, researchers place less emphasis on numbers and more on concepts, definitions, meanings, and in-depth descriptions of

things. Its methods do not answer how much of something happens, only how and why it happens (Miller, 2019).

Qualitative research is utilized when researchers want to understand concepts, thoughts, experiences, etc. (Streefkerk, 2019). It is used to understand how people perceive the world, with a focus on preserving rich meaning when interpreting data (Bhandari, 2020). It aims to understand the social world explored and studied by qualitative researchers. Thus, social research attempts to reconstruct the social structures of people's understanding, feelings, communication, or actions. A type of social activity known as qualitative research looks at how people interpret and comprehend their experiences in order to comprehend an individual's social reality (Mohajan, 2018). However, there are many approaches to qualitative research, but they focus on being flexible, preserving the richness of meaning, and interpreting the data (Mohajan, 2018). This allows researchers to examine the meanings that people attribute to their actions and interactions with others (Grossman, 2020). It shows why there is a relational connection by going directly to the source, the people themselves. It indicates the underlying meaning of an action or outcome, usually measured through qualitative research.

3.1.3 Origin of the Qualitative Research Approach

According to Given (2008), qualitative research's origin can be traced back to Immanuel Kant's publication of his *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781. He believed people's perception of the world is based on 'understanding', not just specific experiences. According to Lockyer (2008), others instigated their examination with the development of qualitative approaches in the 17th century. Still, some ancient literature argues that the 20th-century was the beginning of the development of qualitative research. Beginning with the first encounters of early ethnographers, this continuous sequence culminates in the original theoretical and practical considerations that define contemporary qualitative research. According to Vidich and Lyman (1986), the work of the first ethnographers in the 17th century scripts the beginning of qualitative research. Initial ethnographers sought to pin down this diversity with new theories of racial and cultural-historical origins (Locker, 2008), recognizing the limitations of religious (Christian) teachings to account for it. From the 17th to the 19th century, qualitative research was called colonial ethnography. According to Conner (2018), Western explorers, missionaries, and colonial administrators wrote

ethnographic descriptions and analyses later deposited in church or local and national archives. Auguste Comte's comparative methods and theories of the social development of culture and civilization play a central role in this period (Crossman, 2019).

Conner (2018) states that the beginnings of qualitative research can be seen in the early 20th century when the influence of psychoanalysis began to seep into the world of commerce. In 1945, Paul Felix Ruthersfield, the father of qualitative research, showed how psychology could provide a framework for understanding human behavior (Jovanovic, 2011). The researcher developed his ideas in post-war prosperous America. According to Levy (2006), at that time, with bulk manufacturing and plenty of consumer goods, companies instigated to rely on branding for differentiation. Claiming that people don't know why they make a purchase decision, he began to uncover the personalities behind brands and the hidden desires and motivations behind their purchase decisions. It stayed that way until the 1980s, when they started giving clients what they wanted. Qualitative research accounts for 18% of worldwide research expenditure and includes many ideas and approaches in linguistics, social sciences and psychology (Brinkmann *et al.*, 2014). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2008), Paul Felix pioneered conducting interviews and group discussions to ask the key question, "Why? Throughout its history, qualitative research has taken on various meanings. As a result, a wide range of subfields have significantly impacted the growth of qualitative research. Although Chicago School studies in America in the 1920s and 1930s emphasized the central role of qualitative research in social research, a variety of other fields, such as history, medicine, nursing, social work, and communication, also used qualitative research and contributed to the rise and progress of the approach (Baily, 2014).

In summary, I maintain that qualitative research in this study shares with us how school management felt during the pandemic with all the responsibilities that were upon them, such as protecting their staff and learners on the school premises. Therefore, it is appropriate to use Qualitative research to understand what the school management team went through and how they survived the effects of the pandemic at the school. The most important aspects of qualitative research that could be helpful to this study are described in the following section.

3.1.4 The benefits of qualitative research in the study

In this section, I form a concept of qualitative research by questioning it as an agent of understanding how people experience the world. The following subsection discusses qualitative research as an agent for understanding people's experiences.

3.1.4.1 Human experiences and observations

One of the most important features of qualitative research is to provide details about personal understandings and experiences gained through semi-structured interviews to discover subjective meanings and interpretations of people's experiences (Isaacs, 2014). Therefore, it is a technique that focuses on the intangible of people's behavior: emotions, perspectives, and understandings. It is useful for research questions that cannot be answered numerically (Almalki, 2016:290). Qualitative research aims to discover the meaning behind people's behaviour, how people interpret situations, and their perspectives (Regoli, 2019). Furthermore, this study uses participants' understanding and experiences gathered through semi-structured interviews to understand what they had gone through during the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to Miller (2019), data is obtained through observation and interviews with a small number of people. Therefore, this makes data gathering quick and effective. While some research studies require long-term observation to produce results, semi-structured interview sessions can provide useful information within an hour (Rahman, 2017). This means the ideas you want to pursue can be advanced more quickly than other research methods. Baily (2014) mentions that the data collected by researchers utilizing a qualitative research process provides a predictive factor for your project. Furthermore, this advantage also arises when the people involved in the research have very different experiences and perspectives. The qualitative research procedure considers the determination of the decisions people make as the primary information that needs to be collected (Levy, 2006:3). As a result, researcher don't focus on the reasons why people make the decisions they do; rather wants to know the whole story behind every decision so that the whole population or society can benefit from the thinking process.

Brinkmann *et al.* (2014) state that rather than relying on a specific framework to collect and store information according to strict guidelines, this process values the human experience. Consequently, numerous research opportunities must adhere to a particular data collection method, information reporting, and questioning method. Instead of being restricted to a narrow and

frequently self-fulfilling perspective, this approach provides more opportunities to gather crucial clues about any topic. However, with proper preparation, researchers can take advantage of the free structure of qualitative research to decipher an individual's emotional response behind superficial reactions and rational thinking (Atema, 2019). The researcher places a high value on this because the emotional response frequently guides a person's actions or decisions.

3.1.4.2 Qualitative as an open-ended process

Rahman (2020) mentions that one of the main advantages of qualitative research is that it doesn't rely on any particular timeline, format, or questions to produce results. Another advantage of qualitative research is that it does not rely on isolated research (Miller, 2019). This means that the process allows researchers to ask open-ended questions whenever they see fit, as they may have more data to collect. Therefore, the process does not have the same time factor. Bailey (2014) also mentions that qualitative research can last indefinitely until researchers determine there is nothing to learn from participants. However, this unique structure allows researchers to seek out data points they might otherwise miss. According to Gaille (2018), qualitative research makes it possible to collect practical ideas from specific socioeconomic demographics and transform those ideas into data to create valuable content that reflects the experiences of school management that can be used. It provides potential understanding of why attitudes change, which might even lead to a definitive explanation allowing public school management teams to adapt to the perspective shift.

It allows us to understand why emotional reactions occur in the first place, and it also helps social scientists discover information that is often overlooked due to the emphasis on the interviewed portion of the world (Almalki, 2016). Researchers can look for data points that other methods might miss because they often place a greater emphasis on the interview or observation process and have strict deadlines because of this unique structure. Therefore, Atema (2019) states that qualitative research questions are open-ended and dynamic, tapping into respondents' creativity and helping generate more ideas through interaction with respondents.

3.1.4.3 Qualitative research as an affordable and effective research approach

Many researchers have proven how affordable and effective it is to use qualitative research methods. This is supported by Atema's (2019) qualitative research on small respondent groups for fast results at a low cost. Therefore, this can be achieved by interviewing a small group of respondents at various locations and times. Miller (2019) states that semi-structured interviews often rely on a qualitative process of information gathering that is quick, affordable and effective. As a researcher, you can sit down with a few people, ask specific questions, and get answers quickly. This process allows ideas to move forward much more quickly compared to the lengthy research that other methods require (Vaughan, 2021). Because individuals serve as this study's primary source of information, qualitative research is cost-effective and provides a quick and cost-effective method for gathering data.

As a result, qualitative research is one of the least expensive methods for obtaining data from the people being studied. Since smaller sample sizes can be used for qualitative research data collection, studies can conclude more quickly than with other methods (Bailey, 2014). As a result, participants can respond to questions immediately, resulting in information that can be put into use and lead to new ideas. According to Filipowich (2018), qualitative research is adaptable in terms of where and when it can be conducted because it does not require conducting research on a large number of individuals simultaneously. According to Gaille (2018), a lot of qualitative research projects use smaller sample sizes than other research methods so that they can be completed quickly with limited funds. As a result, this gives the researcher faster results so he/she can move forward with their project with the confidence that only good data will be delivered. Because you don't have to recruit as many participants or use as many methods, qualitative research, according to Sheragy (2019), typically costs less than quantitative research.

3.1.5 The key aspects and their application to the study

The study's key qualitative research components and their application are discussed in this section.

Bailey (2014) reveals few notable perspectives on qualitative research. To begin with, it's significant points of people's experiences, exploring and explaining their behavior. It is known for its open-ended questions and for collecting data in a diverse way (Gaille, 2018). Its goal in this study is simple: to deliver individualized value suggestions at the same time. According to Miller (2019), qualitative research captures people's opinions and emotions. Hence, it includes the

environment and community in which the research participants work and live in. The consideration of school principals helps strengthen the study and allows for knowledge and understanding to be discovered regarding the difficulties they experience every day at work. As well as coming up with proficient methods to conquer those difficulties by helping us understand attitudes better, making it easy to maintain understanding and good relationships in the workplace as well as moving with the times (Gaille, 2018). Therefore, participants during data collection are advised to be themselves while answering questions. This research method focuses on gaining an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon and concentrates on the particular issue's how and why (Rahman, 2020). Qualitative research can be used to find new insight that can further these two needs so their communication is as accurate and authentic as possible. Thus, for qualitative research, relations and commitment are the most important factors for the smooth running of a school (Atema, 2019). The study made use of the openness of qualitative research to provide the participants with an opportunity to have their say and elaborate further on exactly how they feel about the problems they had faced during COVID-19, share how they were able to survive during the pandemic and come up possible solutions that may help in the future. The study's research methodology is described in the following section.

3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

The research design is described in this section to demonstrate how the study was planned and structured for data collection. This study adopted a Participatory research design, which is discussed below.

According to Baloyi-Mothibeli (2018:76), every research must follow a systematic process in the generation, analysis and interpretation of “data to advance our understanding of the phenomena we are interested in.” McCombes and Bhandari (2022) state that a research design is a framework for the research methods and techniques researchers select to conduct their studies. As a result, researchers can use this design to improve topic-appropriate research methods and conduct research successfully. However, Creswell (2009:107) states that “a research design is a set of rules and tools used to solve a research problem.” The quality of clearly explaining how the data will be generated and analyzed is represented by the research design (Van Wyk, 2005:82). Kumar (2014:122) mentions that “a research design is a work plan that outlines the methods and

procedures that will be utilized throughout the research process”. In addition, Abutabenjeh and Jaradat (2018) argue that “a research design is a plan in which the researcher selects the study's proposed setup, methods for selecting participants, analyzing collected data, and communicating findings. As defined by Creswell (2009:18), research methodology refers to the "various techniques, methods, and procedures" that have been utilized in the design and execution of research methods. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect qualitative data. I agree with Creswell (2009:16) that “the goal of qualitative research is to gather complete data in a real-world setting so that researchers can better understand the ideas they discuss and transcribe”. As a result, the research site where the study has been granted permission to conduct research is described in the following section for this research's goals. For this study, participatory research design was adopted.

3.2.1 Participatory Research Design

Macaulay (2016) states that participatory research (PR) refers to the gathering of approaches that share a core philosophy of inclusivity and recognize the value of participating in the research process (rather than simply being the subject of research). It includes research designs, strategies, and a framework that employs systematic research in close collaboration with those affected by the problem under study to bring about change and action (Vaughn and Jacquez, 2020). It is intended to include the research's users, beneficiaries, and stakeholders. Participatory research involves individuals who belong to or represent the interests of the people whose research is the focus despite not necessarily having research training. Participatory research contributes directly to the prosperity of people, communities and the environment (Wilson *et al.*, 2018). Research rigor and quality are enhanced by integrating researchers' theoretical and methodological expertise with the practical knowledge and experience of non-academic participants in mutually reinforcing partnerships (Hall *et al.*, 2021).

PR is understood to be a process of inquiry with a deliberate involvement of collaboration between the researcher and the researched for the purpose of education and making a transformative change (Wilson *et al.*, 2018). Vaughn and Jacquez (2020) mention that Participatory research combines education and research, as well as coordinated collaboration, in order to democratize the process of producing knowledge. As a result, this method has been an active participant in the research

process because its advantages have been scientifically evaluated in accordance with the general standards of researchers and experts in the methodological field. Internal and external validity and reliability were also tested quantitatively and qualitatively, and the results were reliable and valid (Breitbart, 2010). Therefore, the most vital goal of participatory research is to find a balance between the interests, benefits, and responsibilities of the participants and the research institutions (Nared and Bole, 2020). Despite their lack of generalizability and replication potential, participant learning and empowerment are frequently the outcomes of qualitative and participatory research. Participatory approaches advocate the active involvement of participants in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of research questions (Hall *et al.*, 2021) and rely on building trust and relationships between researchers and participants.

3.2.2 Relevance of Participatory Research in the Study

Participatory Research (PR) is relevant to this study based on the fact that the challenges are situated to highlight the environmental and social issues which are negatively affecting public school management due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This causes various problems for the stakeholders on the school premises that result in conflict. Using this research design will enable the researcher to work with public school management to understand what they are going through and resolve those issues to empower the stakeholders. Additionally, it gives the participants significant participation and control over the study's major questions and overall design. According to Lucero *et al.* (2018), this will create an environment where all participants can express themselves about the issues that affect them every day and be heard.

Given that participatory research emphasizes common knowledge, personal experiences, and feelings as useful ways of knowing, it is critical to allow the school administration to sit down, discuss, and propose solutions to the pandemic's challenges in public schools. According to Lenette *et al.* (2019), this is therefore regarded as the most efficient method for generating data to take action to address live issues in which the affected individuals are involved as participants through interaction, planning, action, and review. This strategy works well to put into practice the Strategic Management Theory, which shows that people participate in administrative processes for strategic planning.

3.2.3 Description of Research Site

The research was carried out in the Department of Basic Education sector at three public schools: one primary school, one intermediate school and one secondary school in Petsana Reitz. The schools are based in a rural area in the Free State Province. The Department of Basic Education is in charge of government-sponsored educational establishments known as public schools. Umalusi, the Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training grants accreditation to public schools. In order to reduce and increase the rate of illiteracy in South Africa and, consequently, improve overall health in the long run, public schools are particularly focused on increasing the number of five-year-olds enrolled in publicly funded R-Class classes in public primary schools. To produce, print, and annually distribute Reading/Language, Math/Mathematics, and English as the first additional language workbooks to all students in grades R through 9, to improve literacy through recruitment and training. Enhances the learning and education of essential fundamental skills, the quality of mathematics, science, and technology education, and the number of school mathematics and science teachers to increase the number of undergraduate degrees in mathematics and science in all public schools by providing additional learning and teacher support materials. Monitor performance and participation to improve the performance, development, and education of technical secondary schools in the country. It offers general education opportunities from kindergarten to twelfth grade, and many public school programs also include extracurricular activities. The challenges that public school management faces due to the COVID-19 pandemic form the basis of this study's practical component. Examine the strategies that the management of Petsana's public schools used to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic and identify potential solutions for the effective management of COVID-19 in public schools in order to investigate the management's response. This was influenced by the details provided in the following section regarding the research participant selection.

3.2.4 The selection of participants

Mamali (2015:58) defines a sample as “a select group of research participants from the population from which data are generated.” Because all of them were equally affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, convenient and purposeful sampling methods were used to select the departmental

heads and deputy principals. According to Crossman (2018), a purposive sampling method selects a non-random samples based on population characteristics and research objectives. It is referred to as subjective, selective, or judgmental sampling. Because principals are school heads and receive everything before the School Management Team, it is used to select them. According to Lavrakas (2008), a convenient sampling technique is a type of non-probabilistic sampling in which individuals are sampled because it provides a convenient data source for researchers. This approach was applied to them because the departmental heads are the study's main characters and play a crucial supporting role. Participants in the study were informed of the significance of suitability, willingness to participate, and the capacity to articulate experiences and opinions in a thoughtful, eloquent, and expressive manner. The purposeful and convenient methods used in this study enable productive semi-structured interviews to be conducted in order to comprehend what is taking place in schools. The participants' demographics are outlined in the following section.

3.2.5 Composition of the Research Participants

The research participants comprised school principals, deputy principals and department heads from three different public schools of Petsana, with mock names based on their level of experience in leadership positions; the total number of participants was nine: three school principals, three deputy principals, and three departmental heads. The selection of these participants was made in consideration of the wider qualitative research mandate that the method is used to understand people's beliefs, experiences, attitudes, behavior, and interactions (Bhandari, 2020). Mwita (2022) states that research populations should be selected for reasons related to the studied problem. Therefore, the participants' selection was based on the targeted selection. Hence, participants were selected based on the manifestation of experience to elaborate and investigate research phenomena (Patton, 2002). In line with this recommendation, the participants in this study were individuals who were mostly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in schools.

Participants	Contribution	Experience
School Principals	To ensure that the school is managed satisfactorily and in compliance with applicable legislation, regulations and personnel administration measures as	They have teaching experience of 7+ years.

	prescribed. To ensure that the education of the learners is promoted in a proper manner and in accordance with approved policies.	
Deputy Principals	To assist the principal in managing the school and promoting the education of learners in a proper manner. To maintain a total awareness of the administrative procedures across the total range of school activities and functions.	They have teaching experience of 3+ years in the field.
Departmental heads	To engage in class teaching, be responsible for the effective functioning of the department and to organize relevant/related extra-curricular activities so as to ensure that the subject, learning area or phase and the education of the learners is promoted in a proper manner.	They have teaching experience of 3+ years in the field.

Table 1: Research Participants Profiles according to PAM document (2016).

3.2.6 The Researcher and research participants’ relationship

A person can open up to a close friend or someone who shares the same sentiments with them. Gray (2020) states that people with lived experience are individuals who are directly affected by a similar situation, share similar experiences or backgrounds, and draw insights from their experiences to influence systems, research, policies, practices, and programs. Therefore, it can provide information for improvements aimed at addressing the issue. According to Eide and Kahn (2008), research participants and researchers engage in dialogue processes that frequently elicit stories and memories that are remembered and reconstructed in ways that would not otherwise occur when building interpersonal relationships—an essential component of qualitative research. Therefore, the relationship between researchers and participants significantly impacts the quality of the data (Wa-Mbaleka et al., 2019: 1). As a result, the data becomes complete and trustworthy the closer the researchers are to the participants. Anderson (2020:1) states that ethnographic

research involves personal, long-term interactions between researchers and participants. As a result, a qualitative researcher who approaches listening as an exercise and cultivates a slow, organic relationship with participants is considered to be good. Make it clear that participants may be able to provide valuable feedback on their research experience and that researcher may modify research strategies and methods by utilizing their unique perspectives.

George (2022) defines semi-structured interviewing as a hybrid of structured and unstructured interview formats. As a result, according to Thurairajah (2019:132), unlike in an unstructured interview, the interviewer is aware of the questions that will be asked. Flexibility is made possible by the open-ended nature of semi-structured interviews. When questions are asked in a predetermined order, it is simple to compare responses. Semi-structured interviews also employ a conversational approach that establishes relationships between the researcher and participants that can reveal important information. However, some policies warn against dependencies between researchers and participants (Xu *et al.*, 2020) because it may compromise the voluntary consent of the participants. Therefore, when the relationship with research participants is stronger, researchers feel they could help participants make better, more informed decisions. Reise (2019) mentions that conscientious and observant researchers ensure that procedures meet individual requirements. It is important that during the conversation, the research participants be allowed to engage in the discussion. That way, they will be able to come up with solutions to the problem at hand without fear. The next section gives procedures and phases that were followed to gather data.

3.3 DATA GENERATION PROCEDURES

Jamshed (2014) mentions that lived experience is about one's human experiences, choices, presentation and understanding of alternatives and how these factors influence one's perception of knowledge based on one's life. A researcher must speak to people personally if he/she wants to know and understand their world (Angrosino *et al.*, 2007:8). As a result, researcher can learn more about these authors' worldviews by engaging in in-depth discussions with them and listening to what they have to say about it in their own words and interpretations. As a result, semi-structured interviews with required participants were required to generate the data. Bhandari (2020) says there are many different ways to collect data in qualitative research that can be used to get the most

out of active participation and deep data. He also mentioned that one or more data collection methods are used in each of the research methods. As a result, some of the most common qualitative methods are as follows: surveys, secondary research, interviews, focus groups, and observations.

Because this study wanted to know what people say about their own world and how they make sense of it, a place was made for the participants to talk about their experiences, worries, and hopes. “The space assisted in shifting knowledge discovery from primarily external observation and experimental manipulation of human subjects to conversations that humans could understand” (Thusi, 2004:39). I thought that even though conversations are seen as important for understanding how people make sense of their own world, it's just as important to remember that this understanding can be reached if people are encouraged to participate. In light of this, I used semi-structured interviews in this study to get as much participation as possible and collect data. The inquiry posed by the COVID-19 pandemic in public schools: How do public school management respond to its effects? During the semi-structured interview sessions, I was asked to start the conversation. Data and dramatization were produced through the exchange of ideas and intense deliberations recorded by electronic devices.

We held all of our meetings and interviews in different locations. Since different languages were being spoken, we all agreed to speak English because it was the language we were all familiar with. The nature of the research meetings was communicated to all participants in advance, and appropriate ethical research principles were adhered to. The forms were signed, and all participants gave their informed consent. I informed them they were not mandated to participate in the study or answer any questions. At the same time, I had to explain why a tape recorder was used to accurately record the conversations so that they could be later transcribed. Thematic analysis “was used to make sense of the generated data because the participants engaged in verbal deliberations that had different meanings” (Fairclough, 1992:95; 62-85). The taped discussions were transcribed exactly to ensure that no one was misquoted. Participants were consulted after the data were interpreted to ensure that the provided interpretation accurately reflected what they were saying. In addition, the participants were assured that their conversations would remain confidential and that the transcripts would be destroyed after six months.

3.3.1 Data generation process

Mohajan (2018) mentions that for a qualitative research project to be successful, everyone involved in the research needs to consider its wide goals. He further encourages researchers to clarify their goals to the research participants so that they can relate to the research. This means that it is difficult to formulate a practical and effective participatory research project without a clear idea of what the research project is trying to achieve. Thus, the participants and I understand how to research and achieve the research goals of the research. Through individual interviews, I was able to generate data that is useful for the study. The conversation between the researcher and the participants flowed naturally, and I could ask follow-up questions. According to George (2022), it is important for the researcher to be sufficiently comfortable with their topic so that they can come up with follow-up questions spontaneously. This was because, during the interviews, the researcher created a supportive environment in which discussions were encouraged (Marshall and Rossman, 2006). However, Niemann and Brynard (2008) advocate the need to record conversations during the participants' conversations. Therefore, it is recommended that you first obtain the participant's consent and indicate that they have no objections before using any device that collects data. They state that recording such conversations allows people to be heard, especially since their words are transcribed verbatim. In this study, I used a smartphone recorder and other equipment. But I first explained why I had to use such a device and asked permission to use it.

A question was asked during the interview sessions for the participants to engage in the discussion: *How does management respond to the COVID-19 pandemic in public schools?* Participants then freely deliberate on this question. I used the data collection instrumentation in line with the objectives of the study presented in term 1.

3.3.1.1 Look into the challenges faced by public school management due to the COVID-19 pandemic (first objective).

To address this objective, I carried out the following:

Discussion:

The participants added the challenges they faced and other challenges.

3.3.1.2 Consult methods in which public schools' management is adopted to manage the COVID-19 issues (second objective).

Document Analysis:

- I looked at the documents provided by the Department of Education that were meant to guide schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. Found out how they worked out for other schools and did not help others.

Discussion:

- Discussed what the school management team did for their schools that helped during the difficult time.

3.3.1.3 Find possible solutions for the effective management of COVID-19 in public schools (third objective).

Discussion:

- Discussed what the school management team think might help deal with such viruses in the future. Through this intense discussion, the researcher was able to identify factors that could be helpful for other public schools.
- Discussed different people who can make things easy or manageable for managers to improve the situation.

3.4 METHOD OF DATA ANALYSIS

The data in this study were analyzed using thematic analysis. The study used thematic analysis to identify pattern behavior among different rural public school management and pin point how COVID-19 affects public schools. Thematic analysis, according to Maguire and Delahunt (2017:2), “is the procedure of tracing patterns or themes in qualitative data. I used thematic analysis to learn more about the data I had collected. As a result, the recorded data were ready for analysis after being textually transcribed. As a result, thematic analysis enables researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the group or circumstance they are studying. According to Maguire and Delahunt (2017:3), “the objective of a thematic analysis is to identify themes—that is, patterns in the data that are significant or intriguing—and to employ these themes to address the research or make a point.” According to Braun and Clark (2006), it is a method that can reveal or decipher reality's surface. The researcher is able to “see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences discussed by focusing on meaning across the generated data” (Yardley, 2000:221). TA does not focus on locating distinctive meanings and experiences that can only be found in a single data point. Therefore, this approach is a means of determining what aspects of a topic are discussed or written about in a similar manner and making sense of those similarities.

3.4.1 Implementing thematic analysis

To get a sense of the study, Braun and Clarke's six phases of thematic analysis were used in this study. In order to give importance to the data's explanation, examination, and clarification, Wolcott's (2008) steps were combined. However, after reaching theoretical saturation, researchers attempt to sort, classify, and organize the generated data before interpreting it in accordance with Braun and Clarke's recommendations (2006). These phases, according to Nowell, Norris, White, and Moules (2017:04), are the researcher's familiarity with your data, the generation of initial codes throughout the transcript, the search for themes, the review and evaluation of themes, the definition and refinement of themes, and the production of the analysis as highlighted and discussed below:

3.4.1.1 Phase 1: Become familiar with the data

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), in the first step, researchers need to read through the data and foster a common understanding of its meaning. If the researcher wants to do the analysis, they have to generate the data themselves. Researchers need to consider prior knowledge when performing data analysis when generated interactively. “Researchers must dig deep enough into the data to become familiar with the depth and breadth of the content” (Whites et al., 2012:249). This level of immersion usually means that researchers must read the data multiple times in anticipation of active searches for meaning, patterns, etc. Nowell *et al.* (2017: 4) emphasize that researchers ideally read through the data before coding. This is because the researcher's repeated readings form ideas and identify possible patterns.

3.4.1.2 Phase 2: Generating initial codes throughout the transcript

In the second stage, researchers take detailed notes on the ideas found in participants' responses and create “an initial coding structure for as many alternative interesting options as possible” (Thorne, 2000:69). For the clarity provided by Nowell *et al.* (2017:5), I combined these first two of his steps into one to save time. The second phase begins when researchers read the data, get familiar with it, and make a startling list of ideas about what the data is and what makes it interesting. The first code from the data is collaborated on during this phase. By writing notes on the analyzed text, utilizing highlighters and colored pencils to identify potential patterns, and employing sticky notes to classify data segments, researchers can code data.

3.4.1.3 Phase 3: Search for themes

Phase 3 starts after all the data has been encoded and merged. Researchers have “a list of different codes identified in the collected data” (Ando *et al.*, 2014:4). At this stage, the analysis refocuses on a broader thematic level. Instead of codes, various codes are grouped and categorized into potential topics, and all relevant coded data extracts are ordered within identified topics (Aronson, 1994). At this point, researchers begin analyzing the code to see if there is a way to relate these codes, given the degree of heterogeneity in the code that covers the theme.

3.4.1.4 Phase 4: Reviewing themes

Braun and Clarke (2006), state that the fourth part checks how the data fits the identified topic. It starts with researchers creating a set of themes and modifying those themes (Vaismoradi *et al.*, 2016: 101). During this phase, it becomes clear that some issues may not matter, while others may collapse onto each other. Two separate topics form a topic. Other topics may need to be split into separate topics. In addition, researchers should also consider Patton's (1990) two-fold criteria for assessing categories with respect to internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. There should be a flawless and recognizable distinction between subjects in the sense that the data should be meaningful matched within the themes (Yardley, 2000)

3.4.1.5 Phase 5: Defining Themes

“When the researcher has a satisfactory thematic map of data for the final modifications, this phase is completed” (Ando *et al.*, 2014:4). The researcher defines and refines the themes that will be used for analysis at this point, as well as analyzes the data that falls under those themes. Vaismoradi *et al.* (2015:102) “make it clear that defining and refining themes entails determining the fundamentals of each theme, as well as the themes as a whole, and what aspects of the data each theme encapsulates.” According to Bazeley (2009:13), avoiding trying to get a theme to do too much or be too diverse and complicated is essential.

3.4.1.6 Phase 6: Write-up

According to Nowell *et al.* (2017:5), this is the initial phase when the researcher begins the final analysis and has already acknowledged the themes. During this writing stage, the researcher will include data extracts that provide a concise, logical, coherent, non-repetitive, and interesting account of the data within and across themes. The researcher's review should give adequate proof of the subjects inside the information. That is to say, enough information concentrates on exhibiting the ordinariness of the topic (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Themes were compiled to help envision the connections between the various ideas conveyed by the data to facilitate this process. Connecting the themes in which a clear link could be inferred between two or more themes and those in which individual responses were included more than once. It is evident from the foregoing that TA serves as a complement to both qualitative research and strategic management because taking into account factors that influence the participants' cognitive levels of thinking, reasoning,

and action, it makes it possible to interpret and analyze the perspectives expressed in interviews in a variety of dimensions and contexts.

3.5 ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

Before data could be generated, this section discusses the ethical considerations that had to come first when conducting this study.

Cohen *et al.* (2007:133) and Henning *et al.* (2004:96) state that it is essential to obtain permission before entering the research sites or meeting the participants. As a result, all ethical considerations were considered for this study. Before data collection could begin, the District Director of Thabo Mufutsanyana in the Free State Department of Basic Education needed permission for the study. The University of the Free State's General/Human Research Ethics Committee (GHREC) granted the second authorization under the approval number UFS-HSD2021/2066/22. Trust, cooperation, promises, and well-established agreements and expectations were the foundation of this research among all stakeholders. McMillan and Schumacher (2010:250) said, "the participants were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any time and that their participation would be anonymous." The research was conducted individually, and participants' fundamental human rights were upheld at all times (McDonald, 2012:45). Participants were identified and informed about the research's nature and purpose, as well as its procedures and benefits. Participants were given access to the completed and signed consent forms for the relevant field and type of research. The participant's right to withdraw was stated on these forms, and anonymity was guaranteed. The study's participants were treated with respect and kept anonymous. The conditions of anonymity applied "to data collected face-to-face or through participant observation, as well as data collected using cameras, tape recorders, and other data gathering devices like voice recorders" (Opdenakker, 2006:3).

Additionally, this study's participants were assured that the treatment would be open-minded and not subjected to any form of coercion. In contrast, qualitative research relies on individuals speaking about their thoughts and experiences (Streefkerk, 2022). The likely advantages for the participants included a shift away from traditional school and learning management toward the realistic application of a strategic management strategy informed by a liberated workplace. The staff at the school will be able to respect cultural norms as a result of this, and they will be

encouraged to know that everyone can contribute their unique perspectives to the school's progress. Throughout the research process, “the researcher must accept responsibility for maintaining confidentiality” (Baum *et al.*, 2006:6). The researcher was still in charge of upholding the ethical standards of the study. Anonymity must be maintained because the names of the co-researchers and the school where the research is conducted cannot be disclosed. The research findings and results are available to the public in written form. The researcher is responsible for ensuring that each participant has equal access to the information generated by the process and that the nature of the research process, including all personal preferences and interests, was made clear from the beginning. Consequently, I anticipated initiating the best strategy to maximize the study's potential benefits and building positive working relationships through thoughtful planning and discussion. The next section provides an explanation of the topics covered in this chapter in the form of a summary of chapter three.

3.6 CHAPTER SUMMARY

The design and method of the research were discussed in this chapter; a transformative research paradigm was adopted for this study, where I analyzed the advantages and origins of qualitative research as an approach; these were investigated in depth: the relationship between the participants and the researcher: the most important aspects of qualitative research and how it is used in this investigation, as well as the viability of qualitative research in relation to strategic management, which is the theoretical framework used in this investigation. Participatory Action Research (PAR) was also examined as the study's research design and its importance to the study. Participants were also made aware of their rights, confidentiality procedures, and ethical considerations. The selection of participants, clarification of the research site, and unpacking of the semi-structured interview's use as a method for data generation all contributed to the outline of the research design. TA as a data analysis technique was lastly described in detail. The following chapter presents the data presentation, analysis, and interpretation of structured interview data results.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

4. INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on data presentation, analysis and interpretation of the findings. The data was examined based on the concepts provided that establish the aim and objectives with the justification of the theoretical framework in the discussion. This study explores management's response to the COVID-19 pandemic in public schools in Petsana. This was done using the thematic concepts demonstrated in the objectives of the study, which are to look into the challenges faced by public school management due to the COVID-19 pandemic, to consult methods which public school management adopted to manage the COVID-19 issues and to find possible solutions for the effective management of COVID-19 in public schools. Strategic management was considered important in providing strategies for management to respond effectively to COVID-19 challenges in public schools. Therefore, it encourages continuous planning, monitoring, analysis and evaluation of all necessary requirements for the organization to achieve its goals. This chapter focuses on data presentation, analysis, and discussion of the data to achieve this aim. The data presented in this chapter came from the discussions during semi-structured interviews, which were done in alignment with qualitative research as an approach for generation data and critical emancipatory research as a lens through which the study is viewed.

The next section unpacks the identified challenges public school management faced due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.1 THE CHALLENGES FACED BY PUBLIC SCHOOL MANAGEMENT DUE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

In response to the challenges faced by the public school management due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as highlighted in the research objective and literature review, the construct is broken into the following sub-themes, namely: the reduction of the school syllabus, shortage of teachers and absenteeism, and work pressure.

4.1.1 The reduction of the school syllabus

During the process of reopening schools in 2020, there was not much time for teaching and learning because of the rules and regulations that needed to be followed, which took a lot of school time, plus a lot of time was lost during the lockdown. Therefore, when teaching and learning commenced, there was not enough time to go back and teach the content left behind during the lockdown, so the DoE introduced the trimming of the syllabus. Amin and Mahabeer (2021) state that syllabus trimming aims to remove less important and outdated content, identify core and extension parts of the syllabus, and use a flexible format to organize learning. Circular No. S2 of 2020 mentioned that the proposed school revitalization plan basically involves recovering lost time, reorganizing and reducing syllabus content. The trimming of the syllabus is considered to be the reduction of the syllabus in order to protect the remaining school time (Besseling, 2021). Therefore, it was done in order to cover the content that was considered important for the learners and also to be able to assess learners at the end of the year in order for them to go to the next grade. It was also reduced in order to accommodate the new timetable system. This is demonstrated in the participants, statements below in the interviews.

P1- “A huge disruption to school attendance by both learners and teachers. Significant learning losses. Learners had to be assessed on a trimmed syllabus. The school remains challenged to close the gaps from lower grades to subsequent higher grades.

H3- “Poor attendance of learners & teachers due to fear of COVID-19 infections. Trimming of syllabus due to minimum school days. Grades were attending on different days.”

It is evident from the above statements by the participants that because of the challenges faced by the school management team in finding ways to close the gaps in the school syllabus, there needed to be trimming. The trimming of the syllabus was to help close the gaps that the COVID-19 pandemic left in the school’s syllabus. The first caption confirms that in order for learners to be taught and assessed, there needed to be syllabus reduction. Hence, it was done in a manner that would prepare learners with adequate skills to assist them in the following year. The second statement support that the trimming of the syllabus was implemented to accommodate the number

of days that were left in the year and the different schools' timetable during the pandemic. This is in accord with the findings of Reddy (2022), as Chapter Two (2.2.2.2) recorded that most schools followed a sensible schedule, with learners coming to school every other day or every third day. However, reducing the syllabus did not work as effectively as the school management team had hoped. Since a lot of content was left out of the syllabus, that did not help the learners or teachers as it affected the following school year and the performance of the school. It is obvious in the following statements by the participants:

H1- “The challenge I faced was that the syllabus had to be reduced since learners were rotating. We left out many important topics.”

P3- “The subject allocation for teachers increased due to the model syllabus trimming in different subjects, resulting in some of the topics not being taught in lower grades and learners had a backlog in grade 12 as they were to be taught everything. This impacted negatively on the results of the school in grade 12.”

The above statements affirm that many public schools suffered a great deal of content that was not taught. The first caption confirms that important content from the syllabus that was taught had to be left out. Therefore, the second caption supports the first caption that leaving out some content became a problem that progressed to the following year because it had to be covered in the next year. This was a problem for the school management; they had to find a way to incorporate that content into the following year's syllabus. However, the second caption mentions that the school management faced a backlog in grade 12 since they were not taught everything, which affected their school results. Thus, the results of the school were also affected because of the rotational timetable that schools had to adopt. This is demonstrated in the statements below:

D1- “We struggle with managing expanded classes, for instance, in our school, we only had four classes before COVID-19, and during COVID-19, we had nine classes and we still didn't gain some teachers, which meant our learners had to rotate.

P1- “Schools struggled with capacity problems as classes had to be reduced to small numbers to comply with COVID-19 regulations. Having to attend on a rotational basis/timetable was a challenge as learners couldn't keep up with the new arrangement.”

P2- “Learners who progressed to the next grade were not prepared thoroughly and that created a content gap.”

P3- “The timetabling model which the school adopted resulted in most teachers teaching more classes to cater to fewer learners. According to the model, learners were not effectively taught as they were to attend.”

Different schools used different rotational timetables because of the capacity of learners that the schools could accommodate while adhering to the Covid-19 regulations. Therefore, the first and second captions support the above statement that schools struggled to accommodate learners in classes due to complying with the COVID-19 regulations. Hence, they had to reduce the number of learners coming to school every day, and it also shows that it was a challenge for learners to adapt to the timetable rotation arrangement. The first caption also reveals that as much as the number of classes increased in schools, they did not gain any extra teaching posts to help the situation. However, the timetable did not only affect the learners but the teachers as well. The fourth caption reveals that the rotational timetable resulted in teachers teaching more classes to accommodate fewer learners. Also, since learners were attending classes according to the model, learners were not effectively taught. This is supported by Pollock (2020) and Argyropoulou *et al.* (2021) in chapter 2 (2.2.2.6) where they mention that school principals were struggling to create an atmosphere where learners learn and teachers teach. Therefore, if the school managers are unable to create an environment where teaching and learning take place, learners fail. The third caption supports this as it shows that if learners are not taught, they fail and progress to the next grade while not ready for it.

4.1.2 Shortage of teachers and school attendance

According to Matshoba (2020), the South African education system had been struggling with a shortage of teachers before the COVID-19 pandemic. This was because many elderly teachers were taking early retirement. However, the school management teams responsible for ensuring that teachers are at school and learners come to school and are taught. This was shown in the literature of Roger and Spring (2020) in chapter two (2.2.2.4), where they highlighted that there was an anticipated teacher shortage, which became worse with more educators retiring early or switching professions due to COVID-19-related issues in the education system. However, it was

not only about teachers retiring but also teachers being absent from work because of the virus. During the pandemic, teacher and learner absenteeism increased to the roof. Melia (2022) supports the statement that many teachers had been out or absent at school, and the school management team had to help cover classrooms. Teachers were afraid of contracting the virus, and others were at home because they had tested positive for Covid-19. However, parents did not feel comfortable enough to let their children go to school mid-pandemic. This is shown in the statement below:

P1- “A huge disruption to school attendance by both learners and teachers. Some learners have not come back since COVID-19, they got accustomed to being at home and enrolment dropped.”

P2- “The absenteeism of both teachers and learners. Incomplete activities by learners as they were not coming every day. Incomplete pace setters.”

D1- “We struggled with teachers who did not want to touch learners’ books because they feared the transmission of COVID-19 through touching. Other learners didn’t attend school because they had tested positive for COVID-19 and missed a lot of school work. Some staff members tested positive for COVID-19 and had to stay home. Therefore, they could not finish their work for the term.”

H3- “Poor attendance of learners & teachers due to fear of COVID-19 infections.”

It is affirmed by the statements above that numerous public school management teams faced an enormous problem with school attendance from both learners and teachers. The first statement confirms that teachers and learners caused a disturbance at school by not attending, and some learners dropped out of school because they got used to staying at home during the pandemic. Mostert *et al.*, (2021) state that the pandemic caused a disturbance in schools due to the fact that some teachers had underlying health concerns. Whereas, according to Ndamane, (2021) state that 1678 educators’ deaths were reported due to the virus. The second statement indicates that when learners are absent from school, they miss out on the work of the day/week since they do not attend every day, which leads to the syllabus being incomplete. The third statement supports this and highlights that even teachers were absent from work from time to time because of testing positive for COVID-19, resulting in them being unable to complete the syllabus. Therefore, when they were not absent from work, they did not want to touch learners' books. In that way, they were

unable to assess learners properly. The fourth statement shows that teachers and learners were afraid of attending school because of the fear of COVID-19 infections. Nabe-Nielsen *et al.* (2021) mentioned that it was up to the school management team to make teachers and learners feel comfortable during the pandemic and understand their fears and frustrations.

4.1.3 Work pressure

Pressure could be understood as stress that comes with things that need urgent attention and reaction from the school management team. Irawanto *et al.* (2021) refer to work pressure as an urgency to complete work-related tasks at a reasonable and acceptable level within a specified time period. School management teams mid-Covid-19 had to lead a team of people who were scared and traumatized by the pandemic; they had to act strongly for them, support them, listen to their grievances and come up with workable solutions for the effective running of the school that was a lot of pressure for them. During the interviews with the participants, a couple put an emphasis on the pressure they had during the pandemic from the department, teachers, learners and the community. Spyropoulou and Koutroukis (2021), in chapter two (2.2.2.6), mentioned that school management teams could not balance the new normal at schools and deal with their fears and anxieties. This is demonstrated in the statements below:

P3- “Learners were forgetting their PPEs at home or not wearing them properly, which increased the rate of infections, or the school had to offer them with other PPEs.”

D2- “The management has to monitor the intervention programmes to see whether the teachers are implementing the programmes or not, to cover the work lost from the start of COVID-19 due to trimmed syllabus. In monitoring these programmes, the management is under pressure because we have to make time for monitoring the programmes, and sometimes neglect other responsibilities.”

D3- “Ensuring learners, educators, and non-teaching staff are well equipped with COVID-19 regulations and follow them properly. Making sure that teaching and learning is conducive and educators are able to take care of all assessments irrespective of covid 19 regulations.”

H1- “The challenge I faced was that the syllabus had to be reduced since learners were rotating. We left out many important topics. Since the syllabus to be covered per term was reduced last year, we were instructed to recover the syllabus that was not covered last year by incorporating it into this year’s syllabus, which adds more pressure on top of the pressure teachers always have when covering the syllabus. It is a lot of work.”

H2- “The management implemented ICT Education, such as WhatsApp teaching and learning, other learners were not accessible.”

The above statements from the participants show that it is not easy to be a manager, especially during a pandemic. The first caption confirms that while the school management team had to deal with different duties, they also had to deal with learners who had forgotten their PPEs at home, had to offer them new ones, and dealt with those who do not wear them right. It was not easy for the school management team in the primary schools to make small children keep their PPEs on; this was understandable since they could not understand what was happening. The second caption affirms that school managers had multiple duties during the pandemic, such as coming up with programs that would help the school cover the gaps left by the pandemic and implementing and monitoring those programs. As a result, that made them neglect some of their other responsibilities; this placed them under pressure as they did not have much time. This is supported by Brackett *et al.* (2020) in chapter two (2.2.2.6), where he mention that school management team hardly had time for themselves or their families since they had to use all their time at school trying to manage their schools. The third caption shows that on top of everything the school management team had to do; they still needed to ensure that teaching and learning are taking place and that learners are being assessed. They also had to ensure that everyone on the school premises was armed with the Covid-19 regulations in order to be able to follow them. The fourth caption shows that with the school syllabus trimmed, the school management team had to make it a point the content that was left out was covered, which placed pressure on them and teachers because teachers did not want to come to work. It is not easy to push someone to go the extra mile when they are scared of their lifts and would prefer to be indoors. The last caption shows that while the school management team tried to implement the use of WhatsApp in schools, it was not available to other learners for different reasons. This proves what Mpungose (2020), in chapter two (2.2.2.4), meant when he

said that teachers and learners had a negative attitude toward the introduction of online learning because they lacked formal training.

4.1.4 Summary of the challenges

This section can be understood from data collected through semi-structured interviews. The manner in which data was arranged and discussed followed the principles of thematic analysis. The data on challenges described in the previous chapter were organized based on topics and subtopics related to the challenges that impacted public school management in Petsana during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data confirm that the reduction of the syllabus, shortage of teachers and absenteeism, and work pressure continue to be challenges for school management teams in public schools.

4.2 METHODS ADOPTED TO MANAGE THE COVID-19 ISSUES

This section deals with methods the school's management adopted to manage the COVID-19 issues mentioned (see section 4.1). The data were categorized according to how the participants responded to the question; it was coded and discussed in line with the principles of thematic analysis. The participants discovered the following methods: COVID-19 regulations, teamwork among staff members and extra classes.

4.2.1 COVID-19 regulations

Regulations are considered to be a command made and upheld by a person with authority. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the whole country was shut down; this was a way for the government to save people's lives. According to Saadat *et al.* (2020), different countries tried different methods in order to stop the spread of the virus, but the guidelines and regulations took priority, especially in schools. Schools had to take extra precautions because of learners' larger contact network from school and friends. Different schools followed the same guidelines in order to prevent the spread of the virus when schools reopened, and the school management team members were trained to be able to lead in their respective schools. The below statements reveal this:

P1- "Attending the orientation sessions on the regulations governing the management of COVID-19. Likewise, orientation was facilitated for all other stakeholders at the school. Procurement of PPEs was done to ensure that teaching could take place alongside

ensuring the safety of the school community. The school's budget had to be revised to prioritize COVID-19 requirements. In a nutshell, management was fully done in compliance with the regulations as have been announced by the responsible ministry in government(COGTA)”

The first sentence from the statement shows that, indeed, the school management team went through training in order for them to be able to manage the COVID-19 pandemic or infections in their schools. The school management team (SMT) had to orientate all the other stakeholders on the school premises for better management of the virus in the school. The COVID-19 regulations went along with buying PPEs for everyone on the school premises, and funds from the government were provided to schools. The PPEs were brought for teaching and learning to occur because if they were not available at school, the school would have to shut down. Therefore, the statement assures that the school management team complied with the regulations as instructed. This is supported by other participants below:

P3- “The school strictly applied the protocols to COVID-19 and ensured that these were adhered to at all times by everybody within the school premises.”

D1- “Social distancing in a classroom, 1 meter between learners. All staff members and learners would wear face masks covering the nose and the mouth. We sanitized hands every 20 minutes, and then during break time, learners would wash their hands with water and soap before they could eat lunch. If you felt like you had the flu, it was advisable that you stay at home and not come to work.”

D3- “I have ensured that in each class we/I maintain a 30 is to 1 seating arrangement whereby a 1.5-metre social distance is observed and made sure that there is a sanitizing station per class and also made sure that learners are at all times wearing masks. Learners and all staff members also take temperatures daily upon arrival and departure from school. This makes detecting a learner or any staff member with COVID-19 symptoms easy.”

H1- “We followed the rules and regulations like wearing masks at all times and ensuring that learners have their masks on at all times and adhere to the social distance at all times. Classrooms were disinfected every day, and hand sanitisers were made available in every classroom and every entry and exit point on the school premises. Learners were rotated to

reduce the number of learners in classrooms so they could adhere to social distancing. Learners with high risks were permitted to do home schooling, and teachers were encouraged to assist them in every way possible.”

H3- “We obeyed the COVID-19 protocols and regulations such as social distancing. Classrooms were divided into two classes at 25 learners per classroom.”

All the participants above show that all primary and secondary schools adhered to the Covid-19 regulations provided by the government for reopening schools. This was because it was mandatory for them to do so or the officials would shut down the school. The first captions show that everyone on the school premises complied with the COVID-19 protocols. The second captions demonstrate some of the protocols that schools had to follow, such as 1m space between learners at all times, wearing of face masks at all times indoors and outdoors, and sanitization of hands at all times. As a result, it was also advisable for anyone who feels sick to stay at home and go to the clinic to test for COVID-19 rather than come to school after receiving their results. This was done to limit the number of COVID-19 cases on the school premises and avoid closing the school because of many cases. The third participant maintained what the other participants had been saying, but they showed how they kept the 1.5m social distance in the classroom, decreasing the number of learners in the class, and they also had sanitation stations in every classroom. Furthermore, it was their daily routine for the staff and learners to take their temperature in the morning and the afternoon. Therefore, that made it easy for the School management teams to notice if a staff member or a learner has COVID-19 symptoms. The fourth and fifth caption attests to what other participants have said already; they made it a point that their school followed all the rules and regulations given by the government as guidance. Their classrooms were sterilized daily, and hand sanitizers were made available in every classroom. They reduced the number of learners in the classroom so that they could maintain the social distance, and most importantly, those who were high risk were given permission to go home, and their school work would be given to them by their teacher in different ways.

4.2.2 Teamwork among the staff members

During the pandemic, people needed to work together to prevent the spread of the virus and also to protect their loved ones, which required teamwork. Therefore, Waters (2022) describes teamwork as working together towards a common goal. It is considered to be a combined effort of a group to achieve a shared goal most effectively and efficiently. This includes communication, collaboration and coordination between each team member. The whole process of working together is considered to be more efficient because there are more "hands on deck" to complete tasks and solve problems. In a school environment, teamwork is needed because all the stakeholders need one another to succeed. So, all the stakeholders needed one another on the school premises in order to survive the pandemic and win while at it. Therefore, the school management team were the clue holding all the pieces together; the following participants confirm this.

P2- "Maintaining teamwork between the staff members. As mentioned above giving more activities for learners to take home. Motivating staff members to keep a positive attitude and learners."

D2- "The management bought two water tanks for days when there is a water shortage. The tables used in the classroom have been changed to singles, where each learner uses their own table, to promote distance between learners."

These statements show that the school management team worked with their staff members to create an environment where teaching and learning occur. The first caption demonstrates that school managers tried to sustain teamwork in the workplace to make it comfortable for everyone on the premises. If teachers are able to work together with the management, the school will run smoothly. They motivated their staff members and learners to keep a positive mind during the tough times in order to be able to get through the pandemic. The second statement shows that since there was a water shortage in the community, the school management team brought water tankers to try to make the situation easy at school. They also replaced double tables with singles to promote social distancing in the classroom and made teachers feel safe to enter the classroom without fearing a crowded class. This proves that the school management team were listening and working with their staff members to understand what works and what does not. Rose (2021) states that for a team to work effectively, their opinions must be heard, which is what a school management team does. The following statement from the participants shows the results of teamwork.

P1- “Learners were given work to do while at home due to being self-isolated. Educator backlogs were distributed amongst colleagues who were regularly attending. Where specialized skills could not be found, submission dates had to be extended to accommodate colleagues on leave. Where financial muscles allowed, substitute teachers were roped in to take on responsibilities for colleagues with comorbidities.”

P2- “Giving learners more work to take home for the period they won’t be at school.”

P3- “The school utilized the EAs to assist learners with their homework or to assist in class where a particular teacher was absent due to COVID-19 and had to stay at home.”

The statements above demonstrate how effective teamwork is and how it worked for the schools during the pandemic. The school management team included their staff members in decision-making, making it easy for them to follow the instructions given to them. The first statement demonstrates how teachers could help the school management team give learners work while they were at home quarantined; they were also able to share the workload of other colleagues who had to be isolated too. It is only because of good working relationships that people in the workplace would help one another. School management teams were also not too difficult on their teachers since they were able to give them extra days to hand in their submissions. The school management team hired substitute teachers to assist the schools where teachers had to stay at home because of comorbidities; that way, the workload of the teachers was reduced a little. The second statement attests to what the other participants said: the teacher prepared extra work for learners to take home for the duration that they won’t be coming to school; that way, learners would not just stay at home without anything to do. The third one shows that teacher assistants were used to help learners with homework and also help in classes in case a teacher tested positive for COVID-19.

4.2.3 Extra classes

It was discovered in section 4.1.1 that learners lost learning time due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and school management teams had to make a plan to recover that time. This is where the concept of extra classes was introduced from lower classes to grade 12 classes. Therefore, extra classes are

considered to be lessons given to learners outside their normal learning time and with the intention of improving learners understanding of some concepts in their syllabus. However, before the pandemic, this was mostly done in grade 12 classes for teachers to finish their syllabus on time before exams. According to Mchunu (2022), the catch-up plans for reopening school included extra classes to ensure that learners are ready for the examination. The school management team had to see to it that those extra classes programs were happening in their schools and that they are assisting teachers in whatever might hinder them from being unable to hold extra classes. This is demonstrated in the statements below:

P1- “In subsequent grades, extra classes had to be conducted to address the learning experienced in lower grades; this catch-up continues to date. Morning, afternoon, weekend and holiday classes are a regular feature in schools to compensate for the lost time.”

P3- “Extra classes were being held for the grade 12 classes so that the syllabus could be completed.”

D2- “The management has reduced holidays; learners and some teachers come to school on weekends and during school holidays to cover the work lost. The teachers are being rewarded for their extra days to motivate them so that they continue doing the hard work.”

H1- “I have implemented morning and afternoon classes; also Saturday classes for classes that really need attention, like Grade 7 class.”

It is evident from the statements above that extra classes were held, and the school management team monitored them. Therefore, the statement mentions that extra classes were held for grade 12 learners and even the lower classes to catch up with the lost time during the pandemic. These classes were conducted in the morning, afternoon and on weekends; teachers used that time to catch up on the incomplete syllabus. The school management team reduced the school holidays for teachers so that they could cover all the lost time during the pandemic. Therefore, they were rewarded as a form of motivation from the management so that they don't get discouraged from coming to those extra classes and continue to work hard with the learners for better results. There were other learners at some point who could not come to school; the school management team made a plan for school work to reach those learners so that they were up to date with their school work. Tria (2020) mentioned in chapter two that schools did not stick to traditional teaching and

learning but introduced blended and distance learning. This is demonstrated in the statements below:

P2- “Re-enforcement of frequent monitoring and control of both teachers and learners, follow up on the learners who are frequently absent from school. Giving learners more work to take home for the period they won’t be at school. Having WhatsApp groups to keep constant communication with parents.”

H2- “WhatsApp teaching and learning. Learners were circulating; we had to prepare some weekly activities, and learners had to come on a weekly basis to collect work. We were also engaged with WhatsApp.”

H3- “Distance learning was introduced to accommodate teachers and learners who could not attend due to fear of COVID-19 infection.”

The above statements from the participants inform us that school management teams were monitoring the movements of teachers and learners to see who was at school and who was not. The first statement emphasizes that school management reinforced frequent monitoring to follow up with people who were frequently absent from school. In case a learner was absent from school, their parents were informed, and the school management team opened WhatsApp for parents so they could communicate with them. The second statement shows that WhatsApp was also used for teaching and learning during the pandemic. Therefore, learners had open communication with the teachers and school management team through the use of WhatsApp. According to Gon and Rawekar (2017), WhatsApp is a wonderful tool for teaching and learning because both learners and teachers have access to the app anytime and anywhere. They also mention that the app can be accessed through different devices. The third statement shows that even distance learning was introduced when teachers and learners were unable to attend school due to being infected with COVID-19. Through distance learning, learners could stay in the comfort of their homes and study; it even helped prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus to other learners and their school work was delivered to them.

4.2.4 Summary

This section made sense of the arranged data under methods used by public school management adopted in order to manage and deal with the COVID-19 pandemic in their schools. The participants' responses were discussed separately so that each voice could be heard since they were from different schools. This section shows that sub-themes such as COVID-19 regulations, teamwork among staff members and extra-classes are all methods that helped public school management deal with the effect of the virus in their schools without losing anyone.

4.3 POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS FOR THE EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

This section explains data that is responding to the possible solutions for the effective management of the COVID-19 pandemic in public schools in Petsana. This is classified and analyzed under the following subheadings using thematic analysis to make sense of the composition:

4.3.1 Move towards online learning

Online learning is considered to be learning that takes place online as a substitute for the physical classroom. This is supported by Rodrigues (2019: 88) in chapter two (2.2.2.3), where he defines online learning as a “form of instruction that occurs between a learner and an instructor and are held at different times and/or places, using several forms of material.” The COVID-19 pandemic pushed public schools to adapt to different ways of teaching and learning, and that should not only end with the pandemic. School management teams also want their schools to move to a more diverse teaching environment where they would not be badly affected by the virus in the future, just like in private schools. Hence, Hanafi *et al.* (2021), in chapter 2, suggest that school managers should pay attention to training programs for implementing blended learning for their teachers. School management teams are ready for the transformation; however, they need help from the Department of Education. This is illustrated in the statements below:

P1- “The government should come out of this pandemic with valuable lessons learnt around the inequalities in the education system. Some schools weren't heavily affected by the above challenges, at least from the infrastructural point of view, while others were. The 4IR, fully aligned with or embraced, could help schools surmount many of the challenges

highlighted above, e.g., sharing of textbooks could not be a problem as learners would have electronic textbooks in their gargets to name but one.”

P2- “The DBE needs to design a departmental-based network to move towards technology, a network that does not rely on any of the service providers we have. Every learner needs to be pushed towards the digital world.”

The participants seem to be looking forward to the introduction of online learning in public schools with the help of the government. This is supported by what Munastiwi and Heliyon (2021) suggested in chapter two, that online and distance learning should be introduced as one of the education systems in public schools. The first caption mentions that the government should have learnt a valuable lesson from the pandemic because of inequalities in the education system. It further mentions that some schools were more affected than others, and the cause of this was infrastructure, so the government started to move to public schools during the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). That would help schools to deal with the challenges mentioned in 4.1 as there would be no need to shut down schools if a virus emerges; it will also help with the shortage of books as schools would have electronic textbooks.

It would also help with the problem of shortage of teachers because one educator can present a lesson to many learners at different venues. Therefore, Rzymiski and Nowicki (2020) state that creating online classes, sharing information, and promoting e-learning can help learners overcome academic interruption. The second caption states that the DBE should move every learner towards the digital world, no matter the learners’ background. The participant states that the DBE must create networks that are beneficial to teaching and learning online and be sure not to use the current one. Online learning benefits all the stakeholders in the education system as it makes teaching easily accessible to all learners, even when absent from school. However, even if online learning is not achievable for some public schools, something must be done to prevent the virus from spreading across the school and the community. This is highlighted by the statements below:

P3- “Also, the virus should be thoroughly studied before assumptions can be made as certain waves of the virus were not as severe as predicted.”

D3- “Early quarantine and regular testing of people and with development of technology hopefully online learning for all schools which will help in decreasing infections.”

The statements above confirm that the COVID-19 virus was not studied and assessed enough before decisions were taken, especially in the education sector. However, the first statement suggests that in the future, a virus needs to be studied thoroughly before any assumptions are made. The second statement suggests that there be an early quarantine if a virus is deadly and people can spread it within one another. This way, the virus will not be able to spread easily as everyone would be locked in their homes. The participant suggests that there be a regular test of people to see what kind of viruses they suffer from and to be able to deal with them at an early stage. In chapter two, Saxena and Saxena (2020) suggested that the school management team, teachers, and support staff have to focus on the well-being of learners during the pandemic and prepare for the continuity of education, including working on online and remote learning options.

4.3.2 Parental involvement

Li (2022) refers to parental involvement as teamwork between teachers and parents to improve learners’ learning experience and academic presentation. Parents can easily influence their children to do what is required of them than teachers. Hence, their involvement in their children’s education and their attitude towards teachers and the school in general is important. Therefore, parental involvement is considered a secret remedy for improving learners' performance. It involves helping with homework, keeping up-to-date with what is happening at school and academic progress, taking part in parent meetings and participating in the school's extramural activities. However, the participants below share how parents can be involved in their children’s education.

DEPUTY1 - Learners' attendance was not good at all; some parents believed that their children would die at school because of the virus. Some learners quit school altogether.

HOD2- Public schools struggle a lot because there is a lack of parental involvement and resources to enhance education.

Most parents work during the day and do not know what is happening at home or what is happening with their children, while others are busy but can make time for their children. The statements

above highlight how a lack of parental involvement can affect children. The first caption shows that learners were absent from school because their parents were not knowledgeable enough about the pandemic and thought their children might die from going to school. Hence, some learners quit school while at it. However, if their parents were involved in parent meetings, they would have been orientated about what would happen when learners returned to school. The second caption states that public schools suffered a lot during the pandemic since the parents were not involved in their children's education and were not assisting schools in keeping the learners safe from the pandemic at home.

4.3.3 Syllabus coverage

Syllabus coverage is considered an effort made by the school and its stakeholders to ensure the intended syllabus is implemented so that learners can perform well in their subjects. Therefore, COVID-19 made it impossible for the syllabus to be finished because of the reasons mentioned in section 4.2 that could not be avoided. Now it is up to the school management team to see to it that the syllabus that was left out is incorporated somehow into the syllabus so that learners are not disadvantaged in the future. As Reddy (2022) mentioned in chapter two (2.2.4.2), the school management team must devise a back-to-school plan to bring back learners who dropped out of school during the pandemic and also find a way to cover the lost work. School managers have seen a need to revise their learning recovery plans to get better school results. This is demonstrated in the statements below:

P1- "In subsequent grades, extra classes had to be conducted to address the learning experienced in lower grades; this catch-up continues to date. We have intensified the usage of previous question papers to expose learners to the style of questioning in grade 12."

P3- "The DBE should hire more educators to address the challenges of the subject allocation. Syllabus trimming should not apply in grade 11, as these learners and teachers had to double the effort to close the gaps of grade 11 and to complete the grade 12 syllabus."

D1- "In terms of work missed, learners in grade 4 in the current year will be treated with grade 4 work lost for the first two weeks in grade 5, and that is all that can be done"

The statements above provide a clear direction of what the school management team wants to achieve for their schools. The first caption illustrates that the schools still conduct extra classes for lower grades to catch up with the content they missed during the pandemic. So, the extra classes will continue to happen until school managers and the department feel that learners have enough knowledge to help them in the future. Therefore, past question papers expose learners to questioning in grade 12 since learners are not used to writing departmental papers. The second caption suggests that the DBE hires more teachers in order to deal with the subject allocation in schools. This will help unload the burden that teachers are carrying with many classes. Therefore, also suggest that the syllabus should be reduced to other grades in the future but exclude grade 11 classes as it disadvantages learners when they get to grade 12. The grade 12 syllabus ends early in the year because of mid-exams, so catching up with grade 11's work and finishing the syllabus in six months is difficult for both the learners and teachers. The third caption suggests that in case the work is missed, the school should incorporate the work in the first two weeks of the following year. Whereas other participants feel that the lost work should be completed with the continuation of extra classes, other participants think differently. This is demonstrated in the statements below:

H3 –“School calendar should be adjusted to increase the number of hours per learning area to cover the topics that were not done during the COVID-19 period.”

D2-“We have realized what COVID-19 has done to our schools, and something has to give in. It is going to take time and effort to revive from the pandemic. Therefore, I call on to all the stakeholders to take charge and help our future generation become better citizens who are healthy and educated for the best of this country.”

The statements above prove that a lot can be done in public schools to catch up with the lost time. The first caption suggests that the DBE should adjust the school calendar to add more days to the school year and add more school hours for the topics that were skipped during the pandemic to cover the lost work. The second caption mentions that school management teams need to accept and understand that it is going to take time and effort to recover from the effects of the pandemic in public schools. So the participant suggests that all the stakeholders in the education system take charge in helping future generations become educated and healthy citizens. Türkoglu (2019)

supports this in chapter two (2.2.4.2), that basic environmental and health courses should be available to all learners and not just a few.

4.3.4 Summary

This section made sense of the arranged data under possible solutions for the effective management of COVID-19 in public schools in Petsana. The participants' responses were discussed separately so that each individual's opinion could be heard and understood. This was done under the following point: moving towards technology and parental involvement with the conclusion that public school management needs to prepare for online learning that involves parents in their children's education.

4.4 Summary of the Chapter

This chapter executed the principles of thematic analysis successfully. Data generated through PAR was organized and conferred based on the objectives and sub-themes as appears in the literature review. Data related to the challenges that public school management faces as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic were simplified. Data established that school management teams faced challenges such as reduction of the syllabus, shortage of teachers, absenteeism, and work pressure continue to be challenges for the school management team in public schools. This chapter also discussed data under strategies that the management of public schools used to deal with COVID-19 issues as a response to the difficulties and concluded that sub-themes such as COVID-19 regulations, teamwork among staff members and extra-classes are methods that helped with dealing with COVID-19 effect in public schools. In addition, data responsible for coming up with potential strategies for managing COVID-19 in public schools were discussed, and it concluded that sub-themes such as moving towards technology, parental involvement and syllabus coverage are strategies that public school management will need to adopt in order to face viruses such as Covid-19 in future.

The findings, conclusion, and recommendations are the primary focus of the following chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

5. INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the findings of the study as gathered from the above data examination through thematic analysis. The table below summarises the findings. This is followed by the strategies to effectively manage the COVID-19 virus in public schools or viruses that may occur in future. Therefore, the aim of the study remains to explore management's response to the COVID-19 pandemic in public schools in Petsana, South Africa. The findings are arranged in accordance with the objectives of the study. In addition, it discusses the findings with a cross-examination of the literature, the difficulties that public school management faces as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the strategies that public school management used to deal with COVID-19 issues, and potential solutions for COVID-19 management in public schools. In addition, this chapter presents the study's recommendations and conclusion. To investigate management's response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Petsana's public schools, recommendations were made.

5.1 FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The study investigates management responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in Petsana's public schools. The empirical data gathered and presented in Chapter Four and the literature review presented in Chapter Two serve as the foundation for these findings. They are categorized according to the study's objectives, which were further broken down into the appropriate subsections chosen and formulated in accordance with the respective constructs.

Table 2: Thematic representation of findings

Theme based on research objectives	Findings as sub-themes
Challenges faced by public school management due to the COVID-19 pandemic.	Finding 1: Reduction of the school syllabus.
	Finding 2: Shortage of teachers and school attendance.
	Finding 3: Work pressure
	Finding 1: COVID-19 Regulations.

Methods that public school management adopted to manage the COVID-19 issues.	Finding 2: Teamwork among the staff members.
	Finding 3: Extra classes.
Possible solutions for effectively managing COVID-19 and similar viruses in public schools in the future	Finding 1: Moving Towards Online Learning.
	Finding 2: Parental involvement.
	Finding 3: School syllabus.

Table 2 gives a thematic interpretation of the results, using themes to address the research objectives. There were three findings for each of the research objective 1, 2 and 3.

The findings regarding the difficulties that public school management faced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic are discussed in the following section.

5.1.1 THE FINDINGS RELATING TO THE CHALLENGES FACED BY PUBLIC SCHOOL MANAGEMENT DUE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

In this section, the difficulties encountered in achieving the study's first objective were examined separately. The following challenges-related findings were discovered: reduction of the school syllabus, shortage of teachers and absenteeism, and work pressure.

The next subsection focuses on reducing the school syllabus as a challenge to the public-school management team during the COVID-19 pandemic in Petsana.

5.1.1.1 Reduction of the school syllabus

The analysed data above in chapter four (4.1.1) pointed out that the reduction of the school syllabus was a challenge for public schools' management during the COVID-19 pandemic since important topics were left out. For that reason, this problem affected not only the public school management but all the school stakeholders. Through the interviews, it was discovered that the reduction of the syllabus caused multiple challenges for the public school management, such as increased workload and a drop in the school's results. As a result, this concludes that reducing the syllabus in public schools is a challenge for public school management. This justifies the argument of UNICEF (2021) that learners in South Africa are behind with a year's work of where they should be. Therefore, it is up to the school management to see that learners and teachers close the gaps. This is in accordance with various findings in the literature, as mentioned in (2.2.2.2) that learners from

disadvantaged communities suffered a significant loss in learning than in private schools during COVID-19 (Reddy, 2022). It was also revealed that the syllabus was trimmed by 25% in 2020, and the rest of the syllabus was going to be covered in 2021 and 2022. However, this meant that in those years, learners had to cover content worth 125% without an increase in class time (Amin and Mahabeer, 2021). The study thereby revealed that reducing the syllabus in public schools remains a never-ending challenge facing public schools.

5.1.1.2 Shortage of teachers and school attendance

The study revealed that the shortage of teachers and learner absenteeism was a challenge to the school management that required strategic planning. The participants mentioned that during the COVID-19 pandemic, most teachers and learners were absent from school almost every day due to COVID-19 infection, whereby the school management had to find ways to fill in for the teachers and get work to learners so that they would not be behind with their schoolwork. The analysed data above in chapter four (4.1.2) alludes that teachers and learners did not want to be at school and did not feel safe enough to teach and assess effectively. It was discovered that the long quarantine period also affected the staff member's attendance since after testing positive for COVID-19, the next is quarantine for 14 days. Therefore, the findings conclude that there is a shortage of teachers in public schools and the problem of absenteeism. Thus, Roger and Spring (2020), as indicated in chapter two (2.2.2.4), supported this finding that another cause of the shortage of teachers was because older teachers took early retirement and others were requested to stay at home because of their sicknesses. They also state that it was difficult for the school management team to find teachers during the pandemic. Therefore, shortage of teachers and absenteeism are confirmed to be one of the challenges affecting the smooth running of public schools.

5.1.1.3 Work pressure

The study revealed that workload pressure is one of the challenges that public schools suffer from. Through the conversations, it was discovered that the problem did not only come from the COVID-19 pandemic but also from all the responsibilities that they had, such as making sure that their schools were running smoothly, the ever-changing departmental policies during the pandemic, having to fill up for absent teachers, having to monitor the intervention programmes, assuring that learners wear their PPEs correctly and checking if teaching and learning take place in the

classrooms. It was discovered that public school management, due to too much pressure, sometimes neglected some of their other responsibilities. Therefore, for these reasons, it is concluded that workload pressure was and continues to be a challenge to public school management. This result is in agreement with finding as cited in (4.1.3) that prioritizing and balancing the ever-changing policies of the government with the limitations of school buildings, the well-being of learners and staff, and the requirements of the community presented additional challenges for public school management (Fotheringham *et al.*, 2021). It also revealed that it was not always the public-school management who could fulfil all their responsibilities.

5.1.1.4 Summary of the challenges

This section reported on the challenges faced by public school management due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It was discovered that syllabus reduction is a challenge to public schools' management in the education system because of the extra work needed to cover the gaps left by the pandemic. It was also revealed that public schools suffer from a shortage of teachers and a high absenteeism rate due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Lastly, it was discovered that public school management suffers from workload pressure from the pandemic that still affects them even today.

The following section addresses the methods which public school management adopted to manage COVID-19 issues.

5.2 FINDINGS ON METHODS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS MANAGEMENT ADOPTED TO MANAGE THE COVID-19 ISSUES

The findings in this section refer to the methods public schools' management adopted to manage the COVID-19 issues. With reference to the analysed data: COVID-19 regulations, teamwork among staff members and extra classes were adopted. Therefore, each subtopic is discussed separately below.

5.2.1 COVID-19 Regulations

The analysed data established that compliance with COVID-19 regulations were one of the adopted methods by the public-school management teams to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic

in schools. This is supported by Ford and Sopha (2020), cited in chapter two (see 2.2.3.1) that school management teams are responsible for preventing and controlling infectious diseases in schools and protecting learners, teachers, and the public. For that reason, the data revealed that school management strictly followed the COVID-19 regulations provided to them by the DBE to protect everyone on school premises. The study found out the school management attended orientation sessions regarding the management of COVID-19, and when they came back, they orientated their staff members. This is supported by the DoE (2020) cited in chapter two (see 2.2.3.1), which states that the DBE provided schools' management with guidelines for maintaining good hygiene practices during the pandemic. It was discovered through the interviews that the orientation for the staff members and learners encouraged a positive working environment to ensure the smooth running of the school since teachers and learners were able to prepare for school and try to face their fears.

5.2.2 Teamwork among the staff members

The empirical data found that public school management encouraged teamwork among their staff members as one method to manage the COVID-19 pandemic in school. This way, they could get the support they needed from the staff regarding some of the decisions they had to make. The analysed data also revealed that school management motivated the staff to keep a positive mind during the pandemic, and they listened to their staff members when they had input on things. This is supported by Rose (2021), cited in chapter four (see 4.2.2), that for a team to work effectively, their opinion must be heard by the management and acknowledged. It was discovered through the dialogue that the public-school management built relationships with the staff, learners and parents during the pandemic so that they could effectively run the school. This is supported by Waters (2022), cited in chapter four (see 4.2.2), that teamwork involves people working together to achieve a common goal. Therefore, during the pandemic, the common goal was for everyone to be safe from school management, teacher, non-teaching staff, and learners, down to the parents at home. Therefore, teamwork among the staff member was found to be one of the methods adopted by the public school management.

5.2.3 Extra classes

The study found that the facilitation of extra classes was one of the methods adopted by the public school management to close the gaps left by reducing the syllabus. Therefore, it was found that these extra classes were conducted from primary to secondary public school, in the afternoon and on weekends. Mchunu (2022), cited in chapter four (see 4.2.3), supported this, that extra classes were part of the catch-up plans by the DBE to ensure that learners are prepared for their final examination. The empirical data revealed that school management used extra classes to catch up and WhatsApp groups to communicate and give learners work while absent from school. This shows that teaching and learning took place all the time after the reopening in mid-COVID-19. The finding is supported by Gon and Rawekar (2017), cited in chapter four (see 4.2.3), that WhatsApp is a perfect tool for teaching and learning since learners always have their phones with them. Therefore, this concludes that the decision by the school management to adopt extra classes and use WhatsApp as part of the methods adopted was a wonderful idea.

5.2.4 Summary of Methods

This section discussed the findings associated with methods used by public school management adopted in order to manage and deal with the COVID-19 pandemic in their schools. However, it was found that public schools' management adopted COVID-19 regulations to manage the pandemic on the school premises and to keep everyone inside the school safe. They also encouraged teamwork among the staff members. As a result, implementing extra classes to cover the work behind was a success and is still ongoing.

5.3 POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS FOR THE EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT OF COVID-19 IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

This section presents the findings on possible solutions for effectively managing COVID-19 pandemic in public schools.

5.3.1 Moving Towards Online Learning

The study found that online teaching is one of the solutions that school management feels would be a possible solution for the future. However, it was revealed that the schools are ready to move towards learning online but need the DBE to help them with the resources to do so. This is

supported by Munastiwi and Heliyon (2021), cited in chapter four (4.3.1), that schools should move towards introducing online learning and distance learning to the education system in public schools. It was discovered that it does not need to be an introduction to teaching methods but could start with small apps, such as WhatsApp, Facebook and Classroom, since those are easily accessible on learners' phones. Therefore, this is supported by Rzymiski and Nowicki (2020), cited in chapter four (see 4.3.1), that “creating online classes and sharing of information and promoting e-learning can help learners overcome the interruption in their academics.” However, it was found that the school management wanted the DBE to create networks with service providers to support learners with data to connect online. Therefore, that concludes that public schools do need to start moving towards online learning in the future.

5.3.2 Parental involvement

The empirical data found that one of the possible solutions for effective management of COVID-19 is to involve parents in their children’s education. School management feels that learners listen to their parents more than they listen to teachers, and their involvement would help improve their performance at school. Li (2022), as cited in chapter four (see 4.3.2), supports that teachers and parents could improve learners’ academic performance and education experience if they work together. It was also discovered that parents have an influence on their children’s behaviour. This is also supported by Lara and Saracosti (2019) that parental involvement in their children’s schools is the key factor for their children’s academic outcomes. The analysed data suggested that when parents are involved in the school, they might help bring learners who have dropped out back to school and help with learner discipline. If parents are aware of the school's happenings, it will not be easy for learners to be absent since teachers would be aware of their whereabouts, and their parents would be the ones to account for their children missing out on a test or assignment.

5.3.3 School syllabus

The study found that public school management wants the DBE to revise the school calendar to accommodate the content removed during the COVID-19 pandemic. They also feel that the school hours could be adjusted rather than doing the never-ending extra classes. Also, for future reference, they should not reduce the grade 11 syllabus since they must catch up with the work in grade 12,

which causes stress for both the learners and teachers and causes the school results to drop. It was also discovered that school management likes learners to be more knowledgeable about their health and surroundings. This is supported by Türkoglu (2019), cited in chapter two (2.2.4.2), that basic environmental and health courses should be available to all learners and not just a chosen few. This concludes that the syllabus needs to be re-modeled to educate the upcoming generation about health and environmental awareness so that they can better understand when a new virus emerges.

5.3.4 Solutions summary

This section reported on the findings associated with possible solutions for the effective management of COVID-19 in public schools in Petsana. It was found that there is a need for the implementation of online learning in public schools and parents' involvement in their children's education to improve learners' performance in public schools. Also, the school syllabus needs to be modified to accommodate the changes that COVID-19 brought.

5.4 Summary of the findings

This section discussed the findings of the study with the following discoveries: syllabus reduction is a challenge to public school management in the education system because of the extra work that needs to be done in order to cover the gaps left by the pandemic; it was also revealed that public school suffers from a shortage of teachers and high rate of absenteeism due Covid-19 pandemic; and it was discovered that public school management suffers from workload pressure that came with the pandemic that still affects them even today; it was found that public schools management adopted Covid-19 regulation to manage the pandemic in the school premises and to keep everyone inside the school safe. They also encouraged teamwork among the staff members. As a result, the implementation of extra classes to cover the work that was behind was a success and is still ongoing; it was found that there is a need for the implementation of online learning in public schools, involvement of parents in their children's education to improve learners' performance in public school. Also, the school syllabus needs to be modified to accommodate the changes that COVID-19 brought.

5.5 Implication of the Findings on the theoretical farmwork

The implications of the study's findings can be intricately linked to the theoretical underpinnings of Strategic Management, demonstrating the practical application of this framework in the context of public-school management during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Firstly, the challenge of syllabus reduction and the need for extra classes to cover educational gaps underscore the prescriptive approach of Strategic Management, which emphasizes the importance of planning and resource allocation to achieve strategic objectives (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985). The ability of schools to implement additional classes reflects a strategic response that is both deliberate and emergent, showcasing the schools' capacity to adapt their strategies in the face of environmental changes. This aligns with Mintzberg and Waters' concept of 'deliberate strategies' where the intended strategy has to be adjusted to cope with unforeseen circumstances.

Secondly, the issue of teacher shortages and absenteeism due to the pandemic highlights the need for strategic human resource management within the educational sector. According to Fahey (1981), strategic management involves identifying an organization's mission and setting objectives accordingly. In this context, the strategic objective would be to maintain a high-quality education despite staffing challenges. The schools' response could involve strategic recruitment and retention initiatives, which are critical components of the prescriptive approach to Strategic Management, ensuring that the human resource strategies are aligned with the overall strategic goals of the organization.

Thirdly, the increased workload pressures and the management's encouragement of teamwork as a coping mechanism reflect the strategic importance of organizational culture and structure, as suggested by Robinson (2005). By fostering a culture of teamwork, the schools are leveraging their internal strengths to address external pressures, a key aspect of strategic management. This approach is consistent with Robinson's assertion that strategic management enables organizations to become proactive rather than reactive, preparing them to face future challenges more effectively.

Finally, the adoption of COVID-19 regulations and the shift towards online learning represent a strategic response to the external environmental changes, resonating with the prescriptive strategy's emphasis on rational decision-making (Lynch, 2009). The involvement of parents and the modification of the syllabus are strategic initiatives that reflect a comprehensive, analytical process of considering all prospects and threats, as advocated by Lynch. This rational approach to

decision-making ensures that the chosen strategies are consistent with the organization's mission and are likely to yield the best outcomes.

In weaving the study's findings with the Strategic Management framework, it becomes evident that the schools' management has actively engaged in both the science and the art of strategic management, as described by Edwards (2014). The strategic responses to the pandemic's challenges have required a blend of analytical planning and creative problem-solving, demonstrating the relevance and adaptability of the Strategic Management framework in the face of crisis.

5.6 SUMMARY OF CHAPTERS

This section summarizes chapters one, two, three, four, and five that comprise this academic project.

5.6.1 Chapter One: Introductory Background to the Study

The COVID-19 pandemic's effects on Petsana's public school administration are the subject of this chapter, which fills a void and argues that a solution must be developed. This chapter also included a preliminary literature review to further support the study's need. In addition, the research question, goal, and objectives are discussed in this chapter. In relation to the study's use of thematic analysis as a method of data analysis, the transformative paradigm as a research design, the method for generating data, and the selection of participants were discussed. The study's significance and value, ethical considerations, and thesis chapters are all discussed in this chapter.

5.6.2 Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

This chapter discusses the theoretical frameworks supporting this study under Strategic Management Theory. This was done by addressing the theory in this manner: the theory's historical perspective with which it originated was discussed. The assumptions that founded the foundation of the theory, the prescriptive approach to the theory, the advantages and disadvantages, and the relevance of the theory to the study were discussed. From the literature review done in this study, it is seen that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused public school management a lot of problems that affected the performance of schools at the end of the year and at the same time, a lot of methods had to be adopted to cope with it. Some literature reviews done

under this study highlighted the strategies/solutions that can be implemented in public schools to prevent viruses such as COVID-19 in the future.

5.6.3 Chapter Three: Research Methodology and Design

The design and method of the research were discussed in this chapter; a transformative research paradigm was adopted for this study, where I analyzed the advantages and origins of qualitative research as an approach. These were investigated in depth: the relationship between the participants and the researcher, the most important aspects of qualitative research and how it is used in this investigation, as well as the viability of qualitative research in relation to strategic management, which is the theoretical framework used in this investigation. Participatory Action Research (PAR) was also examined as the study's research design and its importance to the study. Participants were also made aware of their rights, confidentiality procedures, and ethical considerations. The selection of participants, clarification of the research site, and unpacking of the semi-structured interview's use for data generation all contributed to the outline of the research design. TA as a data analysis technique was lastly described in detail. The following chapter presents the data presentation, analysis, and interpretation of structured interview data results.

5.6.4 Chapter Four: Data Presentation, Analysis, and Interpretation of Findings

This chapter executed the principles of thematic analysis successfully. Data generated through PAR was organized and conferred based on the objectives and sub-themes as appears in the literature review. Data related to the challenges that public school management faces as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic were simplified. Data established that school management teams faced challenges such as reduction of the syllabus, shortage of teachers, absenteeism, and work pressure continue to be challenges for school management teams in public schools. This chapter also discussed data under strategies that the management of public schools used to deal with COVID-19 issues as a response to the difficulties. It concluded that sub-themes such as COVID-19 regulations, teamwork among staff members and extra-classes are methods that helped with dealing with Covid-10 effect in public schools. In addition, data responsible for coming up with potential strategies for managing COVID-19 in public schools were discussed, and it concluded that sub-themes such as moving towards technology, parental involvement and syllabus coverage

are strategies that public school management will need to adopt in order to face viruses such as Covid-19 in future.

5.6.5 Chapter Five: Findings, Recommendations and Conclusion

This chapter discussed the findings of the study with the following discoveries: syllabus reduction is a challenge to public school management in the education system because of the extra work that needs to be done in order to cover the gaps left by the pandemic; it was also revealed that public schools suffer from a shortage of teachers and high rate of absenteeism due COVID-19 pandemic; and it was discovered that public school management suffers from workload pressure that came with the pandemic that still affects them even today; it was found that public schools management adopted Covid-19 regulation to manage the pandemic in the school premises and to keep everyone inside the school safe. They also encouraged teamwork among the staff members. As a result, the implementation of extra classes to cover the work that was behind was a success and is still ongoing; it was found that there is a need for the implementation of online learning in public schools, involvement of parents in their children's education to improve learners' performance in public school; also there is a need for re-modeling of the school syllabus to accommodate the changes that COVID-19 brought.

5.7 CONCLUSION

The study explored management's response to the COVID-19 pandemic in public schools in Petsana using strategic management to give a good reason for the problem. The process involved looking at the challenges faced by public school management due to the COVID-19 pandemic, consulting methods that public school management adopted to manage the COVID-19 issues and finding possible solutions for the effective management of COVID-19 in public schools. The use of thematic analysis was put forward and effectively made sense of the data generated. From the findings, it was concluded that sub-headings such as syllabus reduction, shortage of teachers and absenteeism, and workload pressure are challenges that school management faced during the pandemic and continue to face as aftereffects. It is also concluded that COVID-19 regulations, teamwork among staff members and extra classes are methods that school management adopted to deal with the virus. Also, it was concluded that online learning, parental involvement and

modification of the school syllabus were the best possible solutions that might help in the future to deal with viruses that may occur.

5.8 RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations that could be made from the study are that public school management must ensure that employees go for counseling and mental support. Because one cannot run away from the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic left many of us in an anxious position; therefore, ensuring mental support such as counseling will greatly impact public schools. Suppose such support is provided to all the stakeholders in public schools. In that case, it will be easy for such schools to develop strategies that will help each school determine pre-measures on how to deal with any viruses that might appear in the future. Also, their roles as managers should remain the same even in the most unpleasant times, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, meaning that as a manager, your role is to ensure that support is provided to co-workers at all times using the tools that make you an effective manager. Therefore, as part of the management team in a public school, the school management team need to make sure that they don't just say they support mental health but also model it to other stakeholders. This will show that they are not only concerned about the school's performance (Pass percentage) but also put self-care and health issues first for everyone involved at school. Most of the time, managers are so focused on getting the work done and meeting deadlines that they neglect self-care.

COVID-19 has shown us the importance of prevention rather than cure; therefore, mental training for leaders, managers and individual contributors should be a priority. Since viruses like COVID-19 have been shown to affect mental health, it's important to get rid of the stigma and learn how to have good conversations about mental health at work. The DBE needs to provide public schools with a sufficient budget to invest in mental health training for all school stakeholders to increase awareness and build mental support. The management team needs to be able to adapt to change. This may necessitate updating school policies and conduct guidelines in response to the pandemic. For instance, you might want to think about paid and unpaid leave, email, and other forms of communication. Make an effort to reframe performance reviews as opportunities for learning and compassionate feedback. Lastly, ensuring workplace accountability should be prioritized;

members need to know they can be held accountable. Thus, employees need to have input in the decision-making at school.

5.9 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The research was performed in three public schools in Petsana due to the methodology used in this study. This study was only performed at public schools in one of the districts in a rural area of the Free State Province, so different results might have emerged in the same Province if more public schools had participated in the study. As a result, the findings are restricted to rural perceptions. If the study had included other Free State public schools, it's possible that provincial results would have been different. As a result, the study's findings could only be applied to public schools in the same rural area as the selected schools.

The suggestions for additional research are discussed in the following section.

5.10 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

This study is mainly concerned with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on public school management in Petsana. In particular, the challenges hindered them from effectively managing their schools, assisting their staff members and getting learners into the school premises during the pandemic. Other educational institutions in the Free State province, such as public schools outside Petsana and public colleges (TVET colleges). As a result, this study might also be carried out in these other educational establishments. In addition, just because the study focuses solely on the management of public schools does not necessarily imply that other stakeholders in the education system do not encounter difficulties. Having said that, the study could be replicated to test and offer solutions for overcoming obstacles in different educational establishments of any educational level or other learning areas.

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Appendix 1

Interview schedule

Research objectives	Interview Questions
1. Challenges faced by public school management due to the COVID-19 pandemic.	What are the challenges you have faced and continue to face as the management of the school due to Covid-19?
	What have you done as the management to deal with these challenges?
1. Methods that public school management adopted to manage the COVID-19 issues.	What methods have you adopted to help you deal with Covid-19?
2. Possible solutions for effectively managing COVID-19 and similar viruses in public schools in the future.	What possible solutions do you think would help in future in case there is a virus like Covid-19?
Do you have any additional information you would like to add to the above?	