



COVID-19 Pandemic in Schools: An Exploration of the Self-Efficacy of Beginner Teachers in Qwaqwa

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ABSTRACT

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, schools in South Africa would have lost a considerable percentage of the annual school curriculum by the end of the lockdown. The Department of Basic Education had to work out plans for curriculum recovery during the COVID-19 pandemic. The proposed plan was to gradual reopening schools using the "Phasing in Approach". This study explored the Self-Efficacy of beginner teachers in Qwaqwa schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. Informed by Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, we used the qualitative research approach and generated data through semi-structured interviews. The telephonic interviews were conducted in two different phases; the first (T1) was in January 2021, and the second (T2) was in August 2021. We interviewed 5 participants of beginner teachers in the Qwaqwa town of the Thabo-Mofutsanyane district. The finding showed that beginner teachers had very high levels of self-efficacy, as they were able to face the challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. Some identified challenges had many classes to teach, and the curriculum coverage was disturbed. On a positive note, the class size was reduced. This study recommended that the Department of Basic Education attend to the issues of overcrowding in schools and the lack of sources, especially in rural schools, as these were the main challenges of beginner teachers. This paper contributes to the existing literature on how beginner teachers' self-efficacy helped them overcome challenges during the pandemic.

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INTRODUCTION

Beginner teachers face many challenges when they first enter the teaching profession. Studies done in South Africa and internationally have shown that beginner teachers face challenges such as lack of school support and not having mentors, which often leads them to resign.¹ Botha and Rens argued that beginner teachers wondered whether they had made the right decision by choosing the career and were

¹ Robert D. Fantilli and Douglas E. McDougall, "A Study of Novice Teachers: Challenges and Supports in the First Years," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 25, no. 6 (August 2009): 814–25, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2009.02.021>.

even meant to be professional teachers.² Beginner teachers are often presented with more work and extra-curricular activities than more experienced teachers and complex learners deal with. As a result of these problems, beginner teachers experience various emotions, some positive but many negatives.³

In the international context, the literature shows that beginner teachers experience the same challenges as beginner teachers in South Africa; Lang highlights that the voices of beginner teachers, including their fears, stresses and successes, need to be heard, and they are crucial to designing a high-quality teacher in the education sector.⁴ In her study, Lang describes that when beginner teachers are not given the necessary support and guidance, they need when they start the profession, they demonstrate a reality shock, which affects them in various ways.⁵ Reality shock in this context is described as the difference between beginner teachers' expectations and the realities, which are the challenges they face in the teaching profession.⁶ This reality shock experienced by beginner teachers is also defined by patterns, such as 'sink or swim', as they do not get the necessary support as they start the profession.⁷ Thus, it is essential to recognise beginner teachers' needs and challenges in their first years of teaching to offer them enough support.

In 2019, a virus called the coronavirus (COVID-19) disease was discovered and spread worldwide in Wuhan, China. The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared Coronavirus a pandemic based on how fast it spread worldwide. South Africa reported its first virus case in March 2020; in April 2020, the number of cases increased drastically. This led to the immediate implementation of a lockdown to reduce the spread of the virus.⁸ With lockdown, and the schools had to close immediately, leading to time lost regarding curriculum coverage. To try and continue with the curriculum, learners in South Africa were provided with learning materials and other online learning resources through radio and television programmes.

Department of Basic Education (DBE) made efforts to decrease the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education by launching the COVID-19 learner Support radio programme in collaboration with the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC). The programme was made to help learners access curriculum support lessons. However, these efforts were insufficient because most learners in South Africa are from disadvantaged backgrounds. The government devised plans for curriculum recovery during the COVID-19 pandemic, but these did not address all the challenges facing teachers and learners. Following the lockdown, there was a gradual reopening of school by the Department of Basic Education (DBE), which has been described as the "Phasing in Approach."⁹ The initial reopening of schools opened during the COVID-19 pandemic caused a lot of anxiety and panic among beginner teachers as they had to face the unknown back at work. The pandemic became a new challenge that beginner teachers faced in the Education sector as it came with many unknowns. With the added challenges that the beginner teachers faced.

One of the aspects that might help beginner teachers overcome the challenges they face in the beginning years is self-efficacy. Bandura defined self-efficacy as the belief that an individual has in

² Carolina S. Botha and Julialet Rens, "Are They Really 'Ready, Willing and Able'? Exploring Reality Shock in Beginner Teachers in South Africa," *South African Journal of Education* 38, no. 3 (August 31, 2018): 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v38n3a1546>.

³ Michau Heyns, "Quality Education : Revival of Staff Induction in Schools," *South African Journal of Education* 20 (2000): 160–68.

⁴ Catherine Margaret Lang, "When Does It Get Any Easier?: Beginning Teachers' Experiences during Their First Year of Teaching.," *Waikato Journal of Education* 7 (2001): 85–97.

⁵ Lang, "When does it get any easier? Beginning teachers' experiences during their first year of teaching." 85-97.

⁶ Yolandi Woest, "Beginner Teachers' Experiences of Transdisciplinary Demands of a School Curriculum," *The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa* 14, no. 2 (November 13, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.4102/td.v14i2.488>.

⁷ Sherrie Michelle Joiner and Jennifer Lynn Edwards, "Novice Teachers: Where Are They Going and Why Don't They Stay?," 2008.

⁸ James H Fowler et al., "The Effect of Stay-at-Home Orders on COVID-19 Infections in the United States," *MedRxiv*, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1101/2020.04.13.20063628>.

⁹ The Head of Education Committee (HEDCOM), "South Africa. Framework for a Curriculum Recovery Plan – Post-COVID-19," April 11, 2020.

their capacity to execute tasks required in that particular moment.¹⁰ Self-efficacy is a primary determinant of teachers' job satisfaction. Self-efficacious teachers can promote learning, handle class discipline, and collaborate with colleagues and families.¹¹ Personality traits (openness, extraversion, and agreeableness), internal locus of control, mastery, self-efficacy, self-esteem, cognitive appraisal (positive interpretation of events and cohesive integration of adversity into self-narrative), and optimism contribute to resilience.¹² This paper argues that self-efficacy helps beginner teachers deal with these challenges. Self-efficacious teachers promote learning, handle daily challenges, and work with their colleagues.¹³ As there is not much available literature on the impact of COVID-19 on beginner teachers, this paper wants to add to the identified gap. Therefore, this paper presents the experiences of beginner teachers experiences and how self-efficacy helped them navigate the impact of COVID-19 in their work environment.

Social Cognitive Theory

Albert Bandura, also known as the father of SCT, was born in 1925. Bandura's SCT has impacted several areas of study, including education, health science, and social policy. The theory has extended from social learning to social cognitive theory.¹⁴ According to Green and Peli, SCT offers individuals a structure for predicting and understanding human behaviour change.¹⁵ SCT is commonly used for behaviour change theories. The principle of SCT is reciprocal determinism, which is the interaction of a person (Cognitive events, Affective events and Biological events), environment (physical surroundings, family and friends and social influences), and behaviour (motor responses, verbal responses and social interactions). Reciprocal determinism is the theory that describes that a person's behaviour, decisions or actions are based on the outcomes of the occasions that have happened in the past. This means that peoples' behaviours are reactions to what has already happened. He further asserted that our behaviour is the action of past events, but the environment is also affected by our behaviour.¹⁶

The person's reciprocal action reveals the interaction between thought, affect and action. A person's expectations, beliefs, self-perceptions, goals and intentions shape and direction their behaviour. Their behaviour affects how people feel, think and believe.¹⁷ In turn, the natural and extrinsic effects of their actions partly determine their thought patterns and emotional reactions. The personal factor also encompasses the biological properties of the organism. Physical structure and sensory and neural systems affect behaviour and impose constraints on capabilities.

The environment's reciprocal action concerns the interaction between personal characteristics and environmental influences. Human expectations, beliefs, emotional bents and cognitive competencies are developed and modified by social influences that convey information and activate emotional reactions through modelling, instruction and social persuasion.¹⁸ People similarly activate different social reactions depending on their socially conferred roles and status. For example, children

¹⁰ Albert Bandura, *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control.*, *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control.* (New York, NY, US: W H Freeman/Times Books/ Henry Holt & Co, 1997).

¹¹ Gian Vittorio Caprara et al., "Efficacy Beliefs as Determinants of Teachers' Job Satisfaction.," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 95, no. 4 (December 2003): 821–32, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.95.4.821>.

¹² Schalk Raath and Anette Hay, "Self-Efficacy: A South African Case Study on Teachers' Commitment to Integrate Climate Change Resilience into Their Teaching Practices," *Cogent Education* 3, no. 1 (December 31, 2016): 1264698, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2016.1264698>.

¹³ Caprara et al., "Efficacy Beliefs as Determinants of Teachers' Job Satisfaction."

¹⁴ Michael G. Green and John A. Piel, *Theories of Human Development* (Psychology Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315662466>.

¹⁵ Michael Green, and John A. Piel, *Theories of Human Development: A Comparative Approach* (second ed.): (Prentice-Hall, Inc, 2009), 20.

¹⁶ Albert Bandura, "Social Cognitive Theory," in *Annals of Child Development*, ed. R Vasta (Greenwich: JAI Press, 1989).

¹⁷ Bandura. "Social Cognitive Theory,"

¹⁸ Bandura. "Social Cognitive Theory,"

with a reputation as tough aggressors will elicit different reactions from their peers than those who are reputed to be unassertive. Thus, people can affect their social environment by their social status and observable characteristics before they say or do anything.¹⁹

The Behavior reciprocal action in the triadic system represents the two-way influence between behaviour and the environment. People's behaviour is formed by observing the people around them and their perceptions of the environment. A person's behaviour is influenced by their capabilities or knowledge, positive and negative reinforcements, self-control, perceived outcomes of performing behaviours and the values placed on those outcomes, and self-efficacy. In the relations of everyday life, behaviour alters environmental conditions and is, in turn, altered by the very conditions it creates. The environment is not a fixed entity that predictably affects individuals.

When movement is controlled, some aspects of the physical and social environment may influence individuals, whether they like it. Behaviour alters environmental conditions and is, in turn, altered by the very conditions it creates, but most aspects of the environment do not operate as an influence until they are activated by appropriate behaviour. The aspect of the potential environment that becomes the actual environment for given individuals thus depends on how they behave (Bandura, 1986). These three reciprocal determinism mentioned above constantly interact with one another.

Self-efficacy was introduced in Bandura's theory as the framework for explaining human behaviour, in which it encourages results of action but not vice versa.²⁰ In self-enhancing or self-debilitating ways, their self-efficacy beliefs positively affect how individuals think. Self-efficacy plays a significant role in self-motivation through goal setting, tasks, and outcomes.²¹ The theory states that individuals participate in activities based on their capability and past achievement. Self-efficacy remains essential because it forms part of Bandura's social cognitive theory as an integral part of SCT.²² SCT is based on the assumption that a person's behaviour is best understood regarding their perception of their social environment. Psychologists have used this approach to help understand the behaviours of humans. This approach assumes that human motivation and action are based on perceived self-efficacy, situation outcome, and action outcome.²³ This means that an individual's outcome at a given task can be based on the abovementioned assumptions.

Social cognitive theory is relevant to this study as it is about people learning their behaviour by observing what others do and that the human thought process is based on understanding personality. Human behaviour is influenced mainly by their environment or internal characters.²⁴ This study explored the self-efficacy of beginner teachers at schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. It linked how the environment and schools influenced the beginner teachers' behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic; thus, Social cognitive theory linked this study's objectives.

Teacher Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is grounded in the social cognitive theory (SCT), which states that people are active agents who influence their environment. People learn desirable and undesirable behaviour by observing others and then reproduce their learned responses to get rewards.²⁵ Many studies have shown that teachers with high self-efficacy are more likely to be open to new ideas and happier with their

¹⁹ Albert Bandura, "Guide for Constructing Self-Efficacy Scales," in *Self-Efficacy Beliefs of Adolescents*, ed. T. Urdan and F. Pajares, vol. 5 (Charlotte, NC: Information Age, 2006), 307–37.

²⁰ Bandura, Guide for constructing self-efficacy scales, 164.

²¹ Melvin M. Mark, Stewart I. Donaldson, and Campbell Bernadette, *Social Psychology and Evaluation*, 1st ed. (New York: Guilford Press, 2011), <https://www.routledge.com/Social-Psychology-and-Evaluation/Mark-Donaldson-Campbell/p/book/9781609182120>.

²² Nancy E. Betz, "Career Self-Efficacy: Exemplary Recent Research and Emerging Directions," *Journal of Career Assessment* 15, no. 4 (November 25, 2007): 403–22, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1069072707305759>.

²³ Green, and Piel, *Theories of Human Development: A Comparative Approach*, 20.

²⁴ Bandura, *Social Cognitive Theory*, 675.

²⁵ Bandura, "Social Cognitive Theory." 627.

jobs.²⁶ The assumptions suggest that the early development of an individual self-efficacy is influenced by two factors: self-observation or self-reflection and responsiveness of the environment to action.²⁷ The behaviour patterns teachers show in a classroom are linked to their beliefs, and teachers who show high levels of self-efficacy are more likely to succeed in their first years of teaching.

In different theories, self-efficacy is the determining factor for an individual's conduct. The Expectancy value theory assumes that an individual could attain a valued outcome that leads to a specific behaviour.²⁸ If individuals believe they can obtain positive results, they will be more likely to repeat that behaviour. Hence, teachers' self-efficacy was the starting point for constructing the conceptual model. In the theory of self-determination, Ryan and Deci have said that an individual's feelings of competence are related to intrinsic motivation levels.²⁹ Bandura referred to self-efficacy as playing a vital role in an individual's motivational process.³⁰ Thus, self-efficacy contributes positively to teachers' motivation levels in their workplace. Hence teachers' efficacy mainly depends on the circumstances they find themselves in; some teachers may feel efficacious about teaching a particular group of learners in a specific setting, while they can also see themselves as less productive in a different environment.³¹ Even in different cultural backgrounds, teacher self-efficacy has been related to motivating learners, classroom management, instruction, and cooperating with parents and colleagues.³²

Impact of COVID-19 on South African Education

After the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic throughout the world, all education institutions in South Africa had to be closed temporarily as this forced the South African government to implement a lockdown in the country to contain the spread of the virus. There have been questions about how learners would make up for the lost time during lockdown since the country's educational system is structured with definitive calendars. It was believed that schools in South Africa would have lost about 14% of the annual school curriculum by the end of the lockdown.³³ To try and continue with the curriculum in 2020, learners in South Africa were provided with learning materials and other online learning resources through radio and television programmes. The DBE had made efforts to decrease the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education by launching the COVID-19 learner Support radio programme in collaboration with the SABC. The programme aimed to provide learners with the necessary help to access curriculum support lessons.

²⁶ Patricia Teague Ashton, "Motivation and Teachers' Sense of Efficacy," in *Research on Motivation in Education: The Classroom Milieu*, ed. Russell Ames and Carol Ames (Washington DC: Academic Press, 1984); Rose M Allinder, "The Relationship Between Efficacy and the Instructional Practices of Special Education Teachers and Consultants," *Teacher Education and Special Education: The Journal of the Teacher Education Division of the Council for Exceptional Children* 17, no. 2 (April 1, 1994): 86–95, <https://doi.org/10.1177/088840649401700203>; Megan Tschannen-Moran and Anita Woolfolk Hoy, "Teacher Efficacy: Capturing an Elusive Construct," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 17, no. 7 (October 2001): 783–805, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0742-051X\(01\)00036-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0742-051X(01)00036-1); Jerry D. Bamberg, "Raising Expectations To Improve Student Learning. Urban Monograph Series." (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 1900 Spring Road, Suite 300, Oak Brook, IL 60521.

²⁷ Bandura, *Self-efficacy: The Exercise of Control*, 3.

²⁸ Allan Wigfield and Jacquelynne S. Eccles, "Expectancy-Value Theory of Achievement Motivation," *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 25, no. 1 (January 2000): 68–81, <https://doi.org/10.1006/ceps.1999.1015>.

²⁹ Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, "Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivations: Classic Definitions and New Directions," *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 25, no. 1 (January 2000): 54–67, <https://doi.org/10.1006/ceps.1999.1020>.

³⁰ Bandura, *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*, 119.

³¹ Megan Tschannen-Moran and Anita Woolfolk Hoy, "The Differential Antecedents of Self-Efficacy Beliefs of Novice and Experienced Teachers," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 23, no. 6 (August 2007): 944–56, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2006.05.003>.

³² Tschannen-Moran, and Hoy, "The differential antecedents of self-efficacy beliefs of novice and experienced teachers." 947.

³³ UNESCO, "290 Million Students out of School Due to COVID-19: UNESCO Releases First Global Numbers and Mobilizes Response," <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/290-million-students-out-school-due-covid-19-unesco-releases-first-global-numbers-and-mobilizes> (UNESCO, 2022).

Due to the uncertainties surrounding the suppression of the pandemic in South Africa and around the world, it was alleged that implementing social distancing and wearing masks should be adopted in South Africa. The government worked out plans for curriculum recovery during the pandemic through the Department of Basic Education.

"Phase in Approach" in the Education sector during COVID-19

In the efforts to try and save the school year and resume teaching and learning during the pandemic, the Department of Basic Education proposed that schools should be opened gradual, which that method was described as the "Phasing in Approach".³⁴ This approach was designed in a way that it should limit the number of learners that are at school at the same time. By limiting the number of learners at school, it was made possible that social distancing could be applied. The schools started the "Phasing in Approach" by allowing grades 12 and 7 back first as they are the exit grades in both primary and Secondary, which was done on May 6 2020. The early return to school for these two grades was that they are the transition grades, and the learners in these grades should have more time in school to cover as much curriculum content as possible. Two weeks later, grades 11 and 8 joined in, and two weeks later, grades 10 and 5 went back to school. This approach continued by allowing two grades to return to school every two weeks until all the grades were finally returned to school by July 15 2020.³⁵ This "Phase in Approach" did not mean that all the learners in each grade were back at school simultaneously. Learners were further subdivided into smaller groups where the rotation or platooning method came in. Learners in each grade had to rotate or platoon (week in and week out) as the number of learners in a class was reduced to a maximum of 20-30, depending on the classroom size.³⁶ Thus the platooning or rotation method ensures that social distancing is effective at schools. All those measures were implemented to try and recover the time of teaching and learning lost during a lockdown.

Ramrathan mentions that another aspect of the "Phase in Approach" was removing the June examination to cover as much curriculum as possible but keeping the preparatory exams for grade 12 learners.³⁷ All these planned interventions for South African schools came in as a way to try and cover the curriculum coverage lost during the lockdown. Furthermore, to save the academic year, removing some parts of the curriculum to accommodate the fewer teaching and learning days' left was a means of choice for the recovery of school education. Other proposals that came with the "Phase in Approach" were that no testing of the curriculum had not been taught, suggesting that teaching to assessment would guide what was being taught. Part of the catch-up programme included using digital platforms for learners and parents to access. In funding the use of digital platforms, some of the mobile network companies within South Africa offered their services by giving zero-rated (no charge) educational and informational websites, proposing that there were widespread possibilities for partnership in making education accessible during and outside of lockdown periods. This shows that Education in South Africa had been affected drastically by the pandemic, and the immediate closure of schools compelled the need to curb the spread of the virus. However, it should not entirely deny learners access to teaching and learning. Thus, the curriculum needed an opportunity where teachers could continue to teach learners openly, effectively, correctly and without any limitations.³⁸

³⁴ The Head of Education Committee (HEDCOM), "South Africa. Framework for a Curriculum Recovery Plan – Post-COVID-19."

³⁵ The Head of Education Committee (HEDCOM), South Africa. Framework for a Curriculum recovery plan – post-COVID-19. April 11 2020

³⁶ The Head of Education Committee (HEDCOM), South Africa. Framework for a Curriculum recovery plan – post-COVID-19. April 11 2020

³⁷ Labby Ramrathan, "School Curriculum in South Africa in the Covid-19 Context: An Opportunity for Education for Relevance," *Prospects* 51, no. 1–3 (October 6, 2021): 383–92, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-020-09490-1>.

³⁸ Mahaye Ngogi Emmanuel, "The Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on South African Education : Navigating Forward the Pedagogy of Blended Learning," 2020, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340899662_The_Impact_of_COVID-19_Pandemic_on_South_African_Education_Navigating_Forward_the_Pedagogy_of_Blended_Learning.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study used a case study design. The qualitative case study methodology provides tools for researchers to study complex phenomena within their contexts. Yin (2003:67) stated that a case study design should be used when: (a) the focus of the study was to answer "how" and "why" questions; (b) so that the researcher cannot manipulate the behaviour of the participants; (c) when the researcher wants to cover related conditions that are relevant to the study; or (d) when boundaries are not clear.

Study site

The study occurred in the rural town of Qwaqwa, the Eastern part of the Free State Province in South Africa. It falls under the Maluti a Phofung municipality in the Thabo- Mofutsanyane district. Qwaqwa is a rural homeland known as Phuthaditjhaba, situated around Witsieshoek, near where the Free State, KwaZulu-Natal, and Lesotho come together—initially labelled as the homeland for the South Sotho-speaking people of South Africa during the apartheid regime.³⁹ According to Gardiner, places considered homelands are the poorest in South Africa, which are now categorised as rural areas; thus, Qwaqwa is regarded as a rural town from the above definitions.⁴⁰ A study by Tsotetsi and Omodan (2022) found that the economic development of Qwaqwa is not equal and stable. Farmlands surround the rural community; however, they lack the people and resources to use these farmlands.

Study population

As this study formed part of a bigger research project, the project had 47 participants who were beginner teachers from the Thabo Mofutsanyane district. These beginner teachers are the ones who are in their first three years of teaching. Out of the 47 that answered the survey for the bigger research project, only 14 participants took part in the interviews. The bigger research project had three (3) master students as a researcher, and the 14 participants were shared amongst the three students for them to conduct interviews. The 14 participants from the research project were from both the towns of Qwaqwa and Bethlehem; for this study's purpose, the author only focused on the Five (5) participants she interviewed as they were from Qwaqwa.

Sampling method

This study formed part of a bigger research project on the induction programme piloted in the Thabo Mofutsanyane district of the Free State. The Department of Basic Education (DBE), Free State Department of Basic Education (FSDoE), in collaboration with the Flemish Association for Development Cooperation and Technical Assistance (VVOB), University of the Free State (UFS) and Ghent University, funded by The Vlaamse Interuniversitaire Raad University Development Cooperation (VLIR-UOS), roll out **an induction model field test** for the first-year graduates of the teacher education programme in the Free State Province, mainly in the Thabo-Mofutsanyane district. The project was about professional identity and how it strongly relates to teacher retention.

The FSDoE invited schools that participated in the test field in Bethlehem and Qwaqwa towns only for beginner teachers and mentors to attend a workshop for an induction programme. From the workshops in Both Qwaqwa and Bethlehem, the purpose of the induction programme was explained, and people who were willing to participate in the programme filled out the consent forms.

In the invitation to schools, it was explained that beginner teachers are teachers in their first three years of teaching and have been appointed in post level one by the Department of Basic Education. The sampling method was purposive, as the researchers wanted beginner teachers in the Thabo-Mofutsanyane district. From the session held both in Bethlehem and in Qwaqwa, 47

³⁹ Chitja Twala, "Resistance and Conformity in the QwaQwa Homeland, 1975–1990," *SADET The Road to Democracy in South Africa*, 2010, 1980–90.

⁴⁰ M Gardiner, "Education in Rural Areas. Issues in Education Policy No. 4, Centre for Education Policy Development (CEPD).," 2008. http://www.cepd.org.za/files/CEPD_Issues_in_education_Education_in_rural_areas.pdf

participants filled out consent forms. Of the 47 participants, only 14 participants were interviewed among the three master students, and this study only interviewed five participants who were from Qwaqwa. The study had participants from Qwaqwa who were the closest to the researcher. This paper is the result of the analysis of these interviews.

Data collection method

The original plan was to have semi-structured interviews that were going to be done face to face with the participants. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the plan was revised to comply with the COVID-19 pandemic rules and regulations. Thus the interviews were done over the telephone because of the national lockdown that was put in place. However, the telephone interviews came with a shortfall as the researcher could not observe the participants' facial expressions, cues and gestures, which are critical to the exercise. The telephone interviews took place in two different phases, with the first phase (T1) being done in January 2021 and the second phase (T2) being done in August 2021. The first round of interviews was to get insight into the experiences of beginner teachers in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The second round of interviews was done to find the background of beginner teachers with COVID-19 now that it was towards the end of the year and the national lockdown restrictions were being lifted in different stages. The telephone interviews helped get more insight from the respondents as they allowed open-ended questions.

Data analysis

The researcher used thematic analysis for the semi-structured interviews, which helped to describe the data in detail. The thematic analysis involves presenting issues based on the themes, making it possible to describe the data in detail. The thematic analysis gave a rich and detailed account of the data, which included a representation of a preliminary list of the themes from the data. This included re-reading the data to check if the themes the researcher identified were linked with the respondents' answers and the research questions. This paper reports on the respondents' responses to the following four questions, which highlighted their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- How did the COVID-19 pandemic (and the lockdown) impact your experiences as a beginning teacher?
- What are the challenges/opportunities that you, as a beginner teacher, experienced due to the COVID-19 pandemic?
- Have you, as a beginner teacher, been provided support from the district and school during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- How has COVID-19 affected your interaction with your mentor/supervisor at school?

Ethical consideration

The researchers asked for the Department of Basic Education's authorisation to do the research, and ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethics committee in the Faculty of Education at the University of the free state. The ethical clearance number is **UFS-HSD2019/1371/2110**. The respondents were given consent which included the information that they could withdraw from the study at any time and that their identity in the study was going to be confidential. The interviews were conducted outside the respondents' regular work hours and were at a time that was convenient to them.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are divided into four main themes from analysing of the data. The themes included the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on beginner teachers' experiences and Challenges experienced due to COVID-19 pandemic, opportunities experienced due to COVID-19 pandemic and the support structures available to beginner teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on beginner teachers' experiences

The participants' responses showed that the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted their experiences as beginner teachers. They mentioned that the pandemic disturbed the whole curriculum coverage as they could not use teaching aids as part of curriculum coverage. Also, the time was limited to cover up the curriculum as the schools were closed for an extended period. They ended up having more classes to teach as learners were divided into smaller groups to accommodate social distancing in the classroom. In the words of one participant, *"The time was minimal, and the resources as well, because we were told to remove every teaching aid from the wall."* Another participant commented, *"Well, yes, it did influence me, so we had to teach more classes; we had to do much work because classes were sub-divided"*. Similarly, another participant added, *"It affected my experience because, with the type of learning arrangement that has been made, learners are being rotated, so there's much content being lost from last year to this year because we are still using the same system. So, I can say that COVID-19 affects us as educators, and I think learners are also affected."*

The findings on the negative impact of the pandemic on education agree with previous research, which found that schools in South Africa would have lost about 14% of the annual school curriculum by the end of the lockdown.

Challenges experienced due to the COVID-19 pandemic

The response from participants indicated that they experienced many challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges included limited resources for the learners as they did not have textbooks. In most schools', learners share textbooks as there are a limited number of textbooks for every learner. This is a challenge as each learner is supposed to have their textbooks. However, this challenge was amplified during the pandemic as the learners used to share their textbooks with classmates. During the pandemic, they could not share textbooks anymore. One participant commented, *"The challenges we experienced as beginner teachers due to COVID-19 was limited resources"*. Another participant added, *"We have a shortage of textbooks. When we have a shortage of textbooks, when we go and look at the print, the machine is not working. So we had lots of challenges during COVID-19."*

Another major challenge came from the foundation phase, as these younger children would forget to put their masks on and sanitiser their hands. Words from one participant, *"The challenges were the... Especially with the learners, Wear a mask and sanitise"*. Also, the teachers could not finish the whole curriculum as it had to be trimmed down because of the pandemic. Another participant commented, *"The only challenge is the ones of the curriculum, of being unable to cover the curriculum on time."*

During the second round of interviews(T2), the participants mentioned that the challenges they faced toward the end of the year, which was in August, as they tried to use social media as a form of doing the work with their lesson was not having access to reliable network connectivity and also that fact that they had to buy internet data from their pockets. One participant responded, *"We have these WhatsApp groups that we normally give these learners activities. And I had to use my own money to buy data so that I can still teach these learners even when I'm at home."* Another participant added, *"Sometimes you run out of data, you have to download things. The data, like, the Wi-Fi connection at the school, is very slow."*

Also, one participant mentioned that they had to set their tasks and examinations to assess the learners' posed as much work on top of the workload they already had. The participant stated that, *"Since COVID-19, we had to set our internal papers. You know, that's much work on its own."* This was done because the curriculum was trimmed, and teachers had to assess learners based on what they were taught in class.

One participant felt that the pandemic rubbed them a chance of having the interviews for this research face to face, *"I think it's also affected us because we cannot do face-to-face interviews – as you are doing now – we are connecting telephonically."*

The findings show that there were many challenges presented by the pandemic in the public schools, as resource issues became a more significant challenge now that learners could not share textbooks or any other school material. Even though there is not much literature to support the findings from this study but it is evident that schools in rural areas with little resources suffered the most during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Opportunities experienced due to the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic brought not only negatives and challenges to the school system but also impacted the experiences of beginner teachers in a way that they had fewer learners in class. Thus, overcrowding issues were a relief even though they came at the expense of learners having to stay at home unsupervised due to the school rotation system. The pandemic has allowed teachers to have less crowded classes with a maximum of 25 learners in a class compared to prior COVID-19, where classes went all the way to 80 learners. One participant mentioned, *"It was an opportunity for me to help those learners who are struggling because, you know, public schools are overcrowded."* With fewer learners, it became easier for beginner teachers to identify and help struggling learners.

Another opportunity was the use of technology at schools. Since beginner teachers could not meet face to face with the subject advisors or attend workshops, they were exposed to the use of technology to attend those workshops and meetings virtual. Extract from two participants illustrates the following, *"I think the opportunities are we're getting familiar with using technology because our workshops are now virtual, and we're getting used to working with computers and everything."* And *"an opportunity that I found was technology because as new teachers we are technologically advanced. So, Zoom was used."*

With the overcrowding issues in South African public schools, the findings showed that the COVID-19 pandemic provided the schools with a temporary solution to this problem as the class size was small due to observing social distancing. Literature also supports the claims that South African public schools face overcrowding issues.⁴¹ The use of technology in schools was another positive thing that was introduced due to the pandemic. Teachers had to do their paperwork administration electronically and held virtual meetings with their learning facilitators. However, schools in rural areas do not usually have access to technology like those in urban areas, which is generally caused by a lack of resources and infrastructure. In a study conducted by Dube, he argued that schools in rural areas had a more significant challenge when transitioning to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic due to a lack of resources and training for teachers to administer such.⁴² At the same time, schools in the cities had few challenges regarding the transition because, typically, learners in those schools were used to technology in their everyday learning. Dube further opposed the measures to fight COVID-19, which resulted in the isolation of some sections of the population purely because they are in deprived communities with inadequate access to network connectivity and electricity, which is an essential part of successful online teaching and learning.⁴³

Support structures available to beginner teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic

Two out of five participants indicated that they did not receive support from the school and district, while three claimed they received support from both schools and districts. The participants that did not receive any form of support had these comments; *"Not really. We did not get any support from the district or the Department due to COVID-19"*. And *"Well, I did not see any support from the district because, as I mentioned before, they didn't give us extra stuff to help us with learners."* The three

⁴¹ Joyce West and Corinne Meier, "Overcrowded Classrooms – The Achilles Heel of South African Education?," *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 10, no. 1 (April 30, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v10i1.617>.

⁴² Bekithemba Dube, "Rural Online Learning in the Context of COVID 19 in South Africa: Evoking an Inclusive Education Approach," *Multidisciplinary Journal of Educational Research* 10, no. 2 (June 15, 2020): 135, <https://doi.org/10.17583/REMIE.2020.5607>.

⁴³ Dube, "Rural online learning in the context of COVID 19 in South Africa, 135-157.

participants that received support from the schools or the district had these words to say, "Yes, we were given masks; obviously, we had meetings, the SMT would regularly update us on COVID-19, so yes, we were supported". Another one said, "Oh, the only support we got from the schools was those giving us extra time to try to cover up." And "Yes, from the school, I did."

The findings showed that some participants received support from their schools and district during the uncertain times of the pandemic. At the same time, other participants claimed they did not receive help from the schools and the district during the pandemic. They just relied on themselves to figure things out and do what was expected. The literature showed that the Department of Basic Education supported learners during the pandemic through online learning and providing study material. Help to learners was also offered through the use of radio stations and television programmes. The programme was made to help learners access curriculum support lessons.

Interaction with a mentor during the COVID-19 pandemic

Two out of five participants' responses showed that the COVID-19 pandemic did not affect their interactions with their mentors or supervisor. Every time they had to have an exchange, they had to follow the COVID-19 protocols, like wearing a face mask and keeping a social distance. Extract from two participants illustrated the following

"It has not really changed anything; it's just that we wear masks, and then we social distance."

"Yes, we had the meetings, but now not in a small room, in the hall now."

While some of the participants reported that the pandemic affected their interactions with their mentors as they could not have face-to-face meetings like before and could not hold meetings regularly like they used to. They only had meetings when it was urgent:

"It's affected us; we cannot have face-to-face meetings."

"We no longer do more visits, or face-to-face meetings, so we only meet when it's urgent."

"We're used to the face-to-face meetings and stuff, so that had to change, yes".

Findings show that some beginner teachers' interaction with their mentors in schools was not affected by the COVID-19 pandemic as long as they observed social distancing rules and regulations, while others were affected as they could not meet face to face with their mentors or have their regular meetings. The fact that some participants could not meet with their mentors could also be regarded as one of the negative impacts that the pandemic presented to the beginner teachers, as mentorship forms part of the components that helps beginner teachers to transition well into their new work environment. Chester supports the previous report by stating that a mentoring programme intends to provide beginner teachers with an efficient support structure that helps them succeed, better understand their professional responsibilities, become familiar with the school and refine their teaching practices.⁴⁴ There is not much literature on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the South African education system and how it impacted beginner teachers' interactions' with mentors.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

During the COVID-19 pandemic, beginner teachers were faced with many challenges introduced by the pandemic. Due to the high levels of their self-efficacy, they could handle the challenges presented to them. These challenges included limited resources as the schools in rural areas lack resources such as textbooks, access to internet connection and limited classrooms as the number of learners in a class was reduced. Secondly, due to the lack of teaching and learning time because of the lockdown, schools were closed for weeks, impacting the curriculum coverage. Thirdly is beginner teachers' lack of support from the schools (mentors or supervisors) and the district. Based on the above-identified challenges, this study recommends that the Department of Basic Education should address the issue of resources

⁴⁴ Mitchell D. Chester, "Guidelines for Induction & Mentoring Programs: Providing Comprehensive Support to Prepare and Retain Effective Educators and to Develop Leaders." (Massachusetts, 2015).

faced by schools in rural areas. These schools should be provided with enough classrooms, teaching and learning materials and access to the internet connection. Another recommendation would be to find a way to recover the lost curriculum by implementing strategies to bridge the gap that COVID-19 created in terms of curriculum coverage. Finally, beginner teachers should be provided with mentorship at the school level and also support in the form of workshops from the district level. This study was only limited to the Thabo-Mofutsanyane district; hence its results cannot explain the nature of beginner teacher self-efficacy in other districts. Another limitation was the COVID-19 pandemic; this limited the interactions with the participants as the researchers could only do phone call interviews. Participants might not have disclosed all the information about their experiences as the interviews were conducted over the phone.

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