South African Women Leading Rural Schools During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Challenges and Resilience

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Abstract

Since the arrival of COVID-19, schools have been confronted with complex problems, and the burden on women principals in rural schools has been enormous. - The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly increased the workload of women principals, affecting both their work and home life." This study sought to explore how the leadership roles of female principals in rural primary schools have been influenced during the COVID-19 pandemic. This qualitative study focused on women principals leading rural primary schools in South Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic, utilizing critical feminist theory for analysis. The study collected data through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Women principals' leadership was impacted by a lack of trust, insufficient resources and resistance presented by parents, teachers, and staff members directly and negatively affected the women principals and became an obstacle in pursuing their duties. - The shortage of infrastructure caused learners to attend school intermittently due to new timetabling models introduced to accommodate social distancing. The absence of e-learning amenities made it difficult for rural learners to receive education."The absence of e-learning amenities made it difficult for the rural learners to receive education. Further and future research should be conducted in other provinces to compare the experiences of female principals.

Keywords: COVID-19, women principals, rural areas, critical feminist theory, empathy, assertiveness, self-directed learning.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic forced South Africa to close schools and colleges unexpectedly, leading to unprecedented challenges for educational institutions, especially in rural areas." The pandemic struck when the country was least expecting it and was not prepared for its effects. Institutions of learning throughout the country were interrupted (Grint, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2020; Kaul et al., 2020) causing challenges for learning institutions with unmitigated experiential hardships (VanSlyke et al., 2020), which generates variations for rural schools. The pandemic among other things drew attention to inequalities that exist within the education sector especially in rural areas, disparities in connectivity, and access to digital devices (Harris & Jones, 2020; Ramrathan, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has augmented the hole between metropolitan students and rural learners (Dube, 2020; United Nations, 2020). Likewise, Emmanuel (2020) asserts that the lasting harm includes that a few students may completely dropout of school even after the pandemic has come to an end.

Although literature has debated leadership in times of crisis, including COVID-19, it has not investigated lived experiences of women school leaders in rural areas during the COVID-19 pandemic especially in South Africa. Lived experiences of women principals can aid understanding on the ways to realise the available abilities of women by recognising the challenges they face, putting the spotlight on enablers, and sharing the best practices utilised to become successful leaders (Javadi et al., 2016). Women are still considered as not fitting for leadership positions compared to men and their leadership skills, achievements in inspiring their followers, and reaching organisational goals are being compared to their male counterparts (Hejase et al., 2013). A study conducted by Chandler (2011) showed that women's leadership approaches proved to be more transformational, participative, and inclusive than those of their male peers. Schools are facing intricate challenges since the emergence of COVID-19 and the pressure on women principals in rural schools is massive.

The history of apartheid in South Africa has led to the oppression of women in all spheres of society from a gender perspective (Moodly & Toni, 2017). Even with the many interventions that were put in place since the demise of apartheid in South Africa, actual transformation remains a challenge in schools that are in rural areas (Omodan, 2020). It is contended that rural circumstances generate extra and unique

challenges for rural school principals (Dube & Puleng, 2020). Rural circumstances involve large learner/teacher ratios, inadequate resources, less qualified teachers, and poor school management (Du'Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Sinyosi & Potokri, 2021). South African rural schools are more characterised by poverty. Nevertheless, no individual person should suffer the consequences caused by their unfavourable circumstances. The rural settings increase the severity of challenges facing women who lead schools in the rural areas especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has come with additional challenges that women principals have to contend with while they are still battling with the challenges of being women, coupled with challenges of being a woman principal in a rural school. Thibaut and Van (2020) attested that in many ways, both at work and at home with an elevated workload, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted women principals more intensely than men, hence this study obtained data from women principals.

Research has shown how communities in which women principals live influence their accomplishment of leadership functions (Moyo et al., 2020), particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The patriarchal perspectives guarantee that the man is the innate leader of the family and that their decision-making role obviously stretches into the public space. Despite many initiatives throughout the years, the circumstances of women who lead schools remains unaltered (Gabster et al., 2020). Difficulties confronting women who lead schools talk to the effects of socio-cultural components on women leadership. In South African communities it is believed that only men can lead schools and women are meant to follow (Du'Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Sinyosi & Potokri, 2021). This frame of mind creates an unpleasant experience for women who lead schools especially during times of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic where many adjustments have been required. Women who lead schools find it challenging to effect changes in their schools because of biases which exist in their societies (Ramos, 2020). They find themselves undervalued because they must work harder to prove to their societies that they are competent as leaders (Mittal & Singh, 2020). Sometimes high recognition given to a woman principal who excels is a way of saying that she was not expected to succeed or have the capacity to do that much (Ramos, 2020) – often a woman principal's success is justified by stating other reasons, not leadership skills, as a reason for her success.

The challenges faced by women principals in rural areas have not been investigated in recent years; as a result, to present what it is like to be a woman

principal in a rural area we have drawn from available older sources. Compared to principals from urban areas, women principals in rural areas face distinctive difficulties (Preston et al., 2013). Preston et al. (2013) summarised the challenges. Firstly, to carry out a principal post in a rural school, it is helpful to possess a certain kind of alliance with the school network which is looking for a school principal. Having this personal chronicled connection to the school network is especially useful when women principals need to manage pressures that occasionally spill into the school from community influence (Dube, 2020). Despite women making up most of the rural educators, they are in the minority as rural principals. Rural principals often encounter hiring limitations and lack professional advancement, administrative help, getting hold of educators across specialised areas, and resources when compared to urban areas. Of course, rural principals are perceived by both the staff and school community as instructional specialists in every single branch of knowledge, an incredibly oppressive and hefty standing to keep up. Additionally, rural principals at times wrestle with parental participation, are exposed to gender discrimination, and when entrusted to carry out change, are expected to lead the school community through the process (UN, 2020). The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic brought about so many changes that the women principals had to effect to facilitate effective teaching and learning. Leadership in rural schools is versatile, place-cognisant, and relationship reliant. The needs of learners, parents, and community call for a leader who is conversant about educational policies yet responsive to the unique needs, perceptions, and culture of that community (Mittal & Singh, 2020). Rural life generates unusual conditions for women who lead schools in the rural areas (Ramos, 2020). Efficient rural leadership is tied in with adopting ways that are receptive to real factors of an individual rural community.

It is against this background that this study aims to answer the question: How has the leadership role of female principals in rural primary schools been influenced during the COVID-19 pandemic? As the paper progresses, a theoretical framework is explained followed by literature review, methodology and methods used in the study and presentation of findings and interpretation. Lastly, the main arguments of the study are presented in the conclusion.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

The critical feminist theory model has been adopted to critically analyse the challenges that were experienced by female principals in pursuing their leadership role in rural primary schools during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Critical feminist theory is one of the several theories that was conceived from critical race theory in acknowledgment of different sorts of unjust treatment that continue to affect women principals (Geisinger, 2011). Moyo and Perumal (2018) argued that critical feminist theory makes it easier to grasp power imbalances in the sense of gender inequality, discrimination, and women's oppression. Critical feminist theory facilitates the understanding of power imbalances related to gender inequality, discrimination, and women's oppression." The theory encourages the comprehension of intense disparities in characteristics according to sexual orientation imbalances (Moyo & Perumal, 2018; Potokri, 2015). "In various educational environments, critical feminist theory disrupts the status quo. It achieves this by investigating the personal experiences of women who lead schools in rural areas during the COVID-19 pandemic." Geisinger (2011) outlined seven tenets of critical feminist theory. Geisinger (2011) outlined seven tenets of critical feminist theory, and for this research, the three most important tenets of critical theory are taken into account: tenets of critical feminist theory: (1) In our society, gender oppression is prevalent – meaning that it is typical, normal, and embedded in society, often making it hard to be aware of, and found in almost all contexts as well as that of COVID-19; (2) In order to understand the determination of gender inequality, experiential knowledge of women who lead schools or their distinctive voices is justifiable, sensible, and significant, and these distinctive voices are often established by way of storytelling and counter-narratives; (3) In order to question policies and behaviours that have an effect on women who lead schools, history and social perspectives need to be considered.

Female School Leadership Contextualised

Women who lead schools are confronted with many difficulties in the execution of their duties and seem to face many difficulties in their endeavour to provide successful leadership (Choge, 2015). They also face numerous challenges from family, society, and in the workplace itself.

Social and Family Problems

Women in school leadership roles are shouldering a significant portion of domestic responsibilities due to school and childcare center closures, alongside long-standing gender inequalities in household duties (Ramos, 2020; UN, 2020)."The movement limitations, at home isolation, school and day-care centres closure, and the expanded dangers of looking after older family members have placed extra burden on women principals (Power, 2020; Ramos, 2020; Thibaut & Van, 2020). Additional time spent at home due to restrictions has likely led to increased caregiving and routine household chores, such as cooking and cleaning." (Allen et al., 2020; Gabster et al., 2020; Power, 2020; Ramos, 2020). Satisfying these demands would be hard for some women, particularly for those that are required to keep working, the women principals (Ramos, 2020). Qadir (2019) stated that a study found that while 93% of the spouses upheld the wives' professions, just 27% of the women had organised courses of action with respect to the division of daily family unit undertakings and 10% of the respondents got no help at all from their spouses.

Gender Stereotypes in Educational Workplace

While gender disparities in many levels have been on the plans of social research and activism for a long time, gender disparities in organisational leadership have been unfortunately disregarded (Qadir, 2019). For many decades, women who lead schools have endured segregation, debasement, mistreatment, and all types of cruel treatment by virtue of their social convictions and practices (Choge, 2015). Notwithstanding, oppression of women in the working environment has affected their headway in positions that get higher cultural acknowledgment amongst men (Qadir, 2019) much the same as the situation of women principals.

Challenges Faced by Rural Schools During the COVID-19 Pandemic

While recognising the advancement the nation has made, insufficient consideration has been given to rural education, which requires redress. The Coronavirus and the execution of web-based learning have amplified the difficulties faced by rural learners and educators. The South African rural areas as of now face huge obstructions to high student attainment and work under unfavourable policy environments.

Rural learners come across extraordinary difficulties in acclimatising to a novel form of life and learning, the last experienced by the overwhelming utilisation of online learning. Many learners in rural settings have faced isolation from the teaching and learning process due to the lack of access to devices, limited electricity availability, and a shortage of qualified teachers capable of facilitating web-based learning.". Emmanuel (2020) underpinned the possibility that rural learners would not achieve much from online learning because of the absence of some essential luxury innovations in rural areas. This study explores the mitigation strategies employed by female principals in rural schools to support the educational aspirations of rural learners. "Rural learners and educators are denied helpful information, training, and skills development which are the basics for community advancement, personal development, and the battle against COVID-19 and women principals are affected in the same way (Dube, 2020). These issues pose disadvantages to rural learners, who receive education in a conventional classroom arrangement with an educator monitoring learning at proximity. Learners in rural areas are directly affected by the pandemic – as indicated by the United Nations (2020), that because of the effects of COVID-19 learners from family units in the least fortunate quintiles are less inclined to finish essential and lower optional schooling than those in the most fortunate quintiles. This study explores how the leadership roles of female principals in rural primary schools have been influenced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Methodology

The study was located within the qualitative approach allowing researchers to investigate phenomena in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings that people assign to them (Aspers & Corte, 2019). It utilised the interpretive paradigm due to its exploratory nature which provides a perspective on a situation and to analyse the situation to gain insight into how a specific group of individuals makes sense of their situation or the phenomena they come across (Nieuwenhuis, 2016). As a result, the phenomenological design was most suitable for this study because it is both a theory and a method in a sense that its worldly-wise and philosophical nature is based on the lived experiences of persons; while as a method, its philosophical depiction puts forward vital and creative thoughts in the way people acknowledge their surroundings (Koopman, 2015).

Purposeful sampling was used to select seven female school principals of public rural primary schools, who led and managed schools during the COVID-19 pandemic to answer the research question: How has the leadership role of female principals in rural primary schools been influenced during the COVID-19 pandemic? The number of chosen participants fell within the accepted number of participants for a qualitative study and signified an adequate number to be able to obtain rich and detailed data in respect of the research question. Qualitative enquiries enable researchers to conduct in-depth studies, which offer detailed narratives (Yin, 2016). The aim was not to gather large amounts of data, therefore the current study only had seven participants. Given the goal to collect detailed descriptive data that aids the researcher in comprehending the participants' understanding of knowledge and social reality (Nieuwenhuis, 2016), Semi-structured interviews were conducted, involving open-ended questions, followed by further probing and clarification, with each interview lasting between 45 minutes and 1 hour 15 minutes." Document analysis was used to substantiate data collected during the individual semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was used to recognise themes, or significant or interesting trends in the data, and then use these themes to answer the research question (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Lincoln and Guba's (1985) parameters were used to achieve trustworthiness, that is, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Steps were taken to ensure that ethical measures were adhered to during the study process. Firstly, approval was obtained from the University of Johannesburg Faculty's Research Ethics Committee then the Department of Education. Participants were made aware of what was expected from them and given consent forms to sign before fieldwork began (Agunloye, 2019).

Results and Discussion

The study aimed to explore how the leadership roles of female principals in rural primary schools were influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic.". Semi-structured interviews and document analysis were used to gather information. We created an understanding of the participants' thoughts, perspectives, and experiences during the semi-structured interviews after careful analysis and scrutiny of the collected data. After coding and classifying the data, we identified five themes to interpret the findings.". Thus, 'challenges encountered by women principals in rural primary schools during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic' was a major theme with 'resistance, shortage of resources, absenteeism and learner drop-out, e-learning and online meetings' as subthemes. The following key is used to present

the discussion of the themes to protect the identity of the participants: P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, and P7.

The findings of the study are presented and interpreted in this section. The emergence of COVID-19 has posed numerous challenges to women who lead education in the rural primary schools.

Resistance

The data revealed that some staff members were undermining the leadership of the women principals by refusing to perform their duties. P2 stated:

> When they (support staff members) were supposed to be at work, I got a call from them saying, 'We will not work because the school is not fumigated', even though they were supposed to work outside the school building.

Some teachers were coming to school without wearing masks. P2 stated:

> It is not permissible to attend school without a mask but teachers were coming without wearing masks. Most of the teachers used to return home solely to fetch their masks, which they claimed to have forgotten. Then I explained that you are not permitted to enter the school unless you have a mask, as per school policy.

Teachers were reluctant to attend virtual meetings. P4 elaborated:

> Now we have a meeting this time. ... I know some they were so hard but I am glad this time, we have a meeting, I know some of them were difficult, but I am glad I was able to quickly learn how to use the Zoom meeting. Others (teachers), on the other hand, said ma'am, let us try the call conference meeting instead of the Zoom because the Zoom is too difficult for us.

Some teachers were not cooperative in executing instructions as directed by the circular from the department. P4 elaborated:

> When I frown at people because they refuse to do as I suggest, it does not sit well when we start doing this COVID-19 thing because there have been some disagreements between some of the stakeholders. For example, when you come up with this thing and say department now says we must do this thing, they say no, we cannot.

Teachers were refusing to teach grades/phases they had not specialised in. P5 made the following comment:

> There was a lot of disagreement and confusion, a lot of opposition, teachers saying they would not be able to teach the senior phase because they were not trained to teach, and it presented a challenge to me as a leader because successful teaching and learning had to happen in the classroom.

The data revealed that some teachers did not want to report for duty. P6 continued and explained that she felt intimidated by the act of the teachers of refusing to enter the school premises:

> Some teachers were just coming in to sign the time register, while others were just following and were hesitant, so I can say I was intimidated because as a principal, you start thinking these people are being paid to come into the school, but they do not want to get inside.

Women who lead rural schools are frequently isolated and treated by their educators and staff as instructive specialists (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). In this way, amid times of crisis such as COVID-19 they are anticipated to find solutions to the issues caused by the crisis as professionals. Women who lead schools in rural areas are not accepted by other school staff members, with most staff questioning some aspects of the capacities of women principals to lead (Ndebele, 2018). Hence, it is difficult for women principals to get support from individuals in the school community. Male dominance may be a created culture in South Africa among individuals of school staff and, specifically, the male dominated SMT (Ndebele, 2018). Women who lead schools are seen not only by men as unskilled and unenthusiastic but also by women teachers (Ndebele, 2018). Women habitually do

not support fellow women, instead they often prefer a male principal over a woman principal. Sexual orientation stereotypical comments that are made around choices taken by women principals claim that choices taken by women are not authentic (Choge, 2015). Sometimes there is resistance in executing decisions of women principals.

Shortage of Resources

Despite the remarkable changes in South Africa after the new dispensation in 1994, many rural schools continue to face significant challenges in education (Khumalo & Mji, 2014). Du'Plessis and Mestry (2019) asserted that South African rural schools are lacking satisfactory infrastructure and facilities –primary schools especially are in an unsatisfactory state. Infrastructure plays a crucial role in the learning and teaching process. This is because the school's infrastructure allows students and teachers to access a broad variety of learning and teaching tools, programmes, and facilities (Khumalo & Mji, 2014). Few classrooms imply too many learners sharing a classroom and numerous schools do not have the specified offices for secure, beneficial, and effective schools (Du'Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Sinyosi & Potokri, 2021).

There was overwhelming evidence that rural primary schools are lacking enough classrooms to cater for their learner enrolment while observing the social distancing requirement. P1 stated that "Since the number of classrooms, we have is insufficient to accommodate all the learners in accordance with the social distance criteria, some must be at home while others are at school".

Keeping teachers at school during breaks and afternoons when they are not in class teaching has become a problem because of inadequate space. P5 described how difficult it is to provide space for teachers to do their administrative duties and to enjoy their meals:

> Remember, with our small infrastructure, we had to have that our staffroom has a large number of teachers, 40 or so, and you cannot hold them all in one spot, so you have to deal with them when they say, 'where are we going to sit during breaks, where are we going to sit when we are not in class, where are we going to sit to prepare lessons?'.

Conducting staff meetings was hindered by the lack of infrastructure as the available infrastructure could not cater for social distancing requirements. P7 elaborated:

> At the school we do not have a hall, we do not have enough classrooms, and we do not have a class that can fit all the teachers with social distancing and daily prayer, so we stopped doing that and stopped holding meetings according to our schedules.

The documents I analysed showed that staff meetings and subcommittee meetings were not held during the time of COVID-19, only a few Schools Governing Body (SGB) meetings were held. My analysis of the SGB minutes shows that the meetings that were held mainly addressed COVID-19 related challenges.

The shortage of teachers in the school made the principals' work of leading the schools difficult. P2 described how difficult it is to lead successfully if the school runs short of teachers:

> However, the problem of human resources may find that the teacher-to-learner ratio has already changed to 1:20 in the classroom, but the teachers may not be able to afford to teach as many classes because the learners were split into various groups.

The reduced class sizes because of the COVID-19 regulations created a need for an additional number of teachers as the number of classrooms per grade doubled or even tripled. P4 voice this concern:

> We do not know about those big groups because, like I said, we don't know where are you going to find teachers who will fit into all of those classes if you have ten classes in grade six; let us say in the morning that now it is Mathematics in class 6A, and that they should have another teacher who teaches Mathematics in class 6D, then it is a problem.

There was a sense of dissatisfaction amongst teachers arising from the fact that they had to teach grades or phases they had not specialised in. P5 elaborated:

To us, the lack of human resources and personnel presents many problems, and even though we were able to explain to teachers the season in which we were in, justice was not being served in classrooms because teachers were uncomfortable with what they were doing.

Teachers with comorbidities increased the shortage of teachers as they were permitted by the employer to work from home while learners were at school. P6 stated:

Then you wonder what is going to happen with the learners in the classroom because this comorbidity has lasted more than 20 days and I am not having a replacement, I do not have more teachers to fill in the gap, and then you wonder what is going the happen with the learners.

The documents I analysed showed that some teachers were teaching subjects they had not done in their teaching qualifications.

Leaders in rural schools stay subject to changeable and unsustainable workloads because of government budget directions which support schools with greater enrolments (Pendola & Fuller, 2018; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Rural principals frequently face contracting constraints and require expert guidance, regulatory support, teacher recruitment in specific levels. Of course, rural principals are seen by both the staff and school community as masterful directors that have knowledge of all school related issues, which is an almost impossible reputation to live up to.

The data revealed that rural primary schools sometimes run without water. P2 explained that on some days the school was dismissed early before the normal knockoff time because of the shortage of water: At some stage learners were released to go home because there was no water.

The sentiment was confirmed by P5; "Other parents demanded that the school be closed because it did not comply with COVID-19 because the toilets were in poor condition and there was a water shortage."

However, amid the time of COVID-19 the women principals in rural schools were expected to create arrangements to decrease the spread of the Coronavirus and make educating and learning successful and effective in their schools with small or no resources. Rural school principals are frequently stretched across multiple roles and have far less authority than their urban counterparts. (Pendola & Fuller, 2018). Wieczorek and Manard (2018) estimated that rural principals are still expected to attain more with less and take a more prominent role in administration obligations even as they grapple with the COVID-19 pandemic.

The problem of the shortage of water was evident in the documents that I analysed, whereby the schools had to find the means to acquire water so that they could comply with the COVID-19 requirement of washing hands.

Absenteeism and Learner Drop Out

Attendance in a broad sense refers to going to or being present at school (South African Schools Act 84, 1996). Mafa (2018) opined that absenteeism has a negative impact on student achievement. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on learners in rural areas is evident, as demonstrated by the United Nations (2020).", that because of the impacts of COVID-19 learners from family units within the lower quintiles are less certain to finish essential schooling than those within the higher quintiles. The COVID19 pandemic has increased the gap between urban and rural learners (Dube, 2020; United Nations, 2020). Emmanuel (2020) opined that one of the lasting damages includes that some learners may permanently drop out of school after the Coronavirus pandemic has ended.

Some parents did not allow their children to attend school due to their fear of contracting COVID-19."P1 elaborated:

> 'Some parents refused to send their children to school because they were afraid of the virus. They believed that bringing their children to school would expose them to the COVID-19 virus. That's why they were afraid to send them to school.'"A lack of clarity in the school's timetable resulted in a high level of absenteeism and learner dropouts. P2 explained:

> There was a high rate of absenteeism on the part of the learners;

learners were confused because there was platooning; they were rotating, and as a result, they were confused; most of the learners forgot their days; some even dropped out.

Because of being unsure about the safety of learners in schools some parents temporarily withdrew them and some permanently withdrew them from the school. P4 elaborates: "Parents were not happy, and they withdrew their children entirely; some of them simply kept them at home to see what was going on at school."

The documents that I analysed showed that the learners completed a five-day cycle in two weeks, meaning in every two weeks each group of learners attended only five days of schooling, resulting in less teaching and learning hours available for each group of learners.

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a decline in the total learner enrolment of the schools. P7 stated:

Well, we were able to keep our learners in school, but the number has decreased slightly since the beginning of last year. You know that this pandemic has come with many obstacles, but the greatest success is that we were able to keep our learners safe from all the sorts of things that happened in the community.

Learner absenteeism and learner drop-out was evident in the documents I analysed, and a high level of absenteeism was more prevalent in the Foundation Phase (grades R-3).

E-learning and Online Meetings

Some learners did not have access to television and radio to access lessons. P2 elaborated: "Since I live in a deep rural area, most of the learners' parents are from Mozambique, and they do not have access to televisions so that they can watch educational programmes, and some of them do not even have radios." Teachers also lacked the skills to connect to virtual meetings.

P2 stated: "Even the staff members faced challenges in holding meetings because of COVID-19 and some colleagues were not used at holding meetings

through the internet or technology, even the sub-committee meetings became difficult to conduct."

Network coverage often disrupted virtual meetings, causing them to disconnect at any given time."given time. P3 explained:

> Most of the meetings have not been conducted, very few virtual meetings have been done, and so virtual meetings, as I said before, is sometimes not easy to connect especially on the Microsoft Teams. You connect to the workshop and listen for a few minutes, and you are cut off because of poor network.

P5 also found herself forced to learn to use technology as meetings were now conducted virtually. She confirmed:

> We use circulars to interact with colleagues. We used to have meetings together, but now I must learn a lot about how to use the gadgets as we know them, and because we are in the Fourth Industrial Revolution, it is imperative that we turn to technology because now we must hold meetings virtually, so I am now learning a lot professionally.

The shortage of gadgets and lack of access to data made it unfeasible to implement e-learning."P6 elaborated:

> That is how they (teachers) can work from home, but for us in rural areas, it is difficult because we do not have facilities and often, we complain about data, so it is simply impossible to go soft. The only way this teacher can work from home is to plan lessons and send them to school so that the teacher can present them.

The pandemic drew attention to imbalances that exist inside the educational system, particularly in rural areas with the disparities in networks and access to gadgets (Harris & Jones, 2020; Ramrathan, 2020). Garcia and Weiss (2020) and the United Nations (2020) confirmed that teachers have been less than optimally prepared to teach during the pandemic due to inadequate support services, including a lack

of professional development about how to incorporate computers into teaching. COVID-19 and the execution of e-learning have expanded the complexities that are confronting women principals who lead schools within the rural areas (Dube, 2020) as rural schools are characterised by lack of fundamental infrastructure and resources. Palvia et al. (2018) suggested that e-learning, in conjunction with connections to online message boards, chat rooms, and video conferencing, enables asynchronous as well as synchronous instruction conveyance methods.

Conclusion

The qualitative study was designed explore how the leadership roles of female principals in rural primary schools have been influenced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Lack of trust and resistance to change presented by parents, teachers, and staff members directly and negatively affected the women principals and became an obstacle in pursuing their duties as leaders of institutions. The shortage of infrastructure and of teachers caused learners to attend school for less days because of the new timetabling models that were introduced to cater for the social distancing requirement. The shortage of water also caused learners to miss their allocated learning times as schools could not function without water, as washing hands is a requirement. Fear of the pandemic resulted in some learners dropping out of school and missing the completely academic year. The absence of e-learning amenities made it difficult for the rural learners to receive education.

There was clear evidence that rural primary schools lacked sufficient classrooms to accommodate the enrolment of learners while maintaining the necessary social distancing. Since there was insufficient room for teachers during breaks and afternoons when they were not in class, it became a frustrating issue for the women principals' leadership. The lack of facilities made it difficult to hold staff meetings because the existing infrastructure could not accommodate social distancing requirements. There was a shortage of specialised teachers in the rural primary schools, making it impossible for women principals to lead successfully during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study recommends that the department of basic education establish a women principals' camp once a year. The women principals' camp should concentrate on bringing together women principals and provide an open forum for them to share their perspectives, both positive and negative. It may also include

motivational speakers to help the women principals stay motivated and programmes that are aimed at improving women's leadership so that they can endure even the worst of times.

The department of basic education should provide internet connections and technological equipment to rural learners and teachers to enable remote teaching and learning to take place during times of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. The emergence of COVID-19 has proved the present methods of teaching as less effective because of the social distancing requirements, which prohibit learners from attending school daily. It has necessitated those learners to have their own devices and internet connections to allow teaching and learning to take place at home and to stay connected with their teachers for guidance on their learning activities. Therefore, further, and future research should be conducted in other provinces to compare the experiences of female principals.

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