



UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA  
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA  
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA

# **Challenges experienced by special education and learning support educators during the COVID-19 pandemic**

by

**MPHO PRINCESS MTHEMBU**

Submitted in fulfilment in accordance with the requirements for  
the degree

**PHILOSOPHIAE DOCTOR**

**(Learning Support Guidance and Counselling)**

in the

Department of Educational Psychology

Faculty of Education

University of Pretoria

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**PRETORIA**

JULY 2024

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my grandmother, Puleng Nelly Mthembu.

I can never find adequate words to thank you for everything that you have  
done for me.

I will always be appreciative of your love, support, and unwavering desire  
for the best for me.

I love you.

## DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I, Mpho Princess Mthembu (student number 18109081), declare that the thesis, which I hereby submit for the degree Philosophiae Doctor at the University of Pretoria in the Department of Educational Psychology, is my own work and has not previously been submitted by me for a degree at this or any other tertiary institution.


  
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The author, whose name appears on the title page of this thesis, has obtained, for the research described in this work, the applicable research ethics approval. The author declares that she has observed the ethical standards required in terms of the University of Pretoria's Code of ethics for researchers and the Policy guidelines for responsible research.



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To whom it may concern

The thesis entitled, "Challenges experienced by special education and learning support educators during the COVID-19 pandemic" has been edited and proofread as of 09 May 2024.

As a language practitioner, I have a basic degree in languages, an honours degree in French, and a master's degree in assessment and quality assurance. I have been editing, proofreading, carrying out reference control, and technically formatting documents for the past 13 years.

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## ABSTRACT

This study aimed to pinpoint the unique challenges faced by special education teachers and learning support educators in Gauteng amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Four secondary research questions guided the inquiry: (1) What were their primary concerns during this time? (2) What strategies did they employ to tackle these challenges? (3) What were the most significant barriers to effective communication and collaboration among special education teachers, learning support educators, students, and parents during the Covid-19 pandemic? (4) How did the shift to remote and hybrid learning environments during the Covid-19 pandemic affect the instructional methods and support strategies used by special education teachers, and learning support educators? The main research question focused on identifying the specific obstacles encountered by these professionals during the pandemic. This research was conducted as a single exploratory case study within a qualitative research framework. The study explored the challenges experienced by ten participants through qualitative questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and a focus group discussion. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was employed to interpret the participants' subjective experiences.

The study drew on two theoretical frameworks: the Conservation of Resources Theory and the Coping-Competence-Context Theory. The findings revealed several challenges faced by the participants, including a lack of resources, work-life balance issues, difficulties in implementing COVID-19 regulations, inadequate online teaching skills, low motivation and self-efficacy among teachers, the need to adapt teaching styles, communication issues between teachers and learners, teacher burnout, and stress; challenges in the implementation of the Screening, Identification, Assessment Support policy; challenges in the creation and implementation of the Individualised Education Plan.

These challenges affected both the personal and professional lives of the educators, impacting their well-being, teaching quality, and the learning outcomes of special school students. This study sheds light on the profound impact of the pandemic on special education, and emphasises the need for targeted support to address these challenges effectively.



A framework was developed from this study which will assist special education teachers and learning support educators in managing challenges more effectively and strengthening their resilience during times of crisis. The framework derived from this research shows that the participants in this study faced many obstacles during the COVID-19 pandemic, but their capacity to overcome these obstacles suggests that they had resources available to help them navigate their way through through these obstacles. Recommendations made from this study include enhancing teacher training for online pedagogy, providing psychological support, improving communication with parents, and promoting curriculum flexibility. Proper resource allocation, workshops, and online counselling are emphasised to address the challenges faced. Future research should involve school management teams and mainstream schools to better understand special education challenges. This study contributes to understanding how SETs and LSEs cope during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating their resilience and resourcefulness. It underscores the need for comprehensive support systems and adequate resources to help educators manage their roles effectively in adverse conditions.

**Keywords:** Special education; Special education teachers; Learning support educators; COVID-19; Corona Virus; Pandemic; Special schools; Inclusive education; Online learning; Online teaching.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- ❖ Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- ❖ Coping-Competence-Context Theory (3C Model of Teacher Stress)
- ❖ Conservation of Resources (COR)
- ❖ Coronavirus-2 (SARS-COV-2)
- ❖ Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19)
- ❖ Department of Education (DoE)
- ❖ District-based support teams (DBST)
- ❖ Education White Paper 6 (EWP6)
- ❖ Full-service schools (FSS)
- ❖ Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)
- ❖ Individualised Educational Plan (IEP)
- ❖ Information and Communication Technology (ICT)
- ❖ Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)
- ❖ Learning Support Educators (LSE)
- ❖ Learner with Special Educational Needs (LSEN)
- ❖ Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)
- ❖ School-based support teams (SBST)
- ❖ Screening Identification Assessment and Support (SIAS)
- ❖ Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome-Associated Coronavirus (SARS-COV)
- ❖ Special Education Teacher (SET)
- ❖ Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)
- ❖ United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)
- ❖ UNICEF
- ❖ Universal Design for Learning (UDL)
- ❖ World Health Organization (WHO)

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication .....	i
Declaration of originality .....	ii
Ethical clearance certificate .....	iii
Ethics statement .....	iv
Declaration from the language editor .....	v
Acknowledgements .....	vi
Abstract .....	vii
List of abbreviations .....	ix
List of tables .....	xviii
List of figures .....	xix
CHAPTER 1 GENERAL ORIENTATION OF THE STUDY.....	1
1.1 Framing the study .....	1
1.2 Preliminary literature review .....	2
1.3 Rationale for undertaking this study .....	5
1.4 Purpose statement.....	7
1.5 Research questions .....	8
1.5.1 Primary research question.....	8
1.5.2 Secondary research questions .....	8
1.6 Clarification of key concepts.....	9
1.6.1 Coronavirus .....	9
1.6.2 COVID-19.....	9
1.6.3 Pandemic.....	10
1.6.4 Special Education Teacher in the South African Context.....	10
1.6.5 Learning Support Educator in the South African Context.....	10
1.6.6 Special Schools in South Africa .....	11
1.7 Research paradigms.....	12
1.7.1 Meta-theoretical Paradigm: Interpretivism.....	12
1.7.2 Methodological Approach: Qualitative.....	13
1.7.3 Brief Outline of the Research Design .....	14
1.7.4 Data Analysis.....	15
1.8 Theoretical framework .....	15
1.8.1 Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory .....	16
1.8.2 The Coping-Competence-Context Theory .....	17
1.9 Role of the researcher.....	18

1.9.1 Data Collection .....	18
1.9.2 Data Analysis and Management .....	18
1.9.3 Transcribing and Analysis of the Data.....	19
1.9.4 Reporting on the Findings from the Data .....	19
1.10 Ethical considerations .....	19
1.11 Assumptions of this study.....	20
1.12 Outline of subsequent chapters.....	21
1.13 Conclusion.....	22
CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW .....	23
2.1 Background .....	23
2.2 Introduction .....	25
2.2.1 The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Teaching.....	25
2.3 Achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4: education in the face of COVID-19 .....	26
2.4 Special education teaching in South Africa.....	27
2.5 Challenges and impacts of Inclusive Education in the context of COVID-19 .....	30
2.6 The role of a Learning Support Educator (LSE) in south africa .....	32
2.6.1 Withdrawal of the Learner.....	33
2.6.2 Learning Support as a Collaborative Role .....	33
2.7 The role of a Special Education Teacher (SET) in south africa .....	34
2.8. The COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on support strategies.....	34
2.8.1. Challenges in Implementing the Screening, Identification Assessment and Support Policy Document during the COVID-19 Pandemic.....	35
2.8.2. Challenges in Implementing and Following the IEP during the COVID-19 Pandemic.....	36
2.9. Distance education as a mode of teaching for learners with special needs .....	38
2.10. A lack of digital resources in schools during the COVID-19 pandemic.....	40
2.10.1. Challenges to Educators' Professionalism during the COVID-19 Pandemic .....	40
2.10.2. The Integration of an Online Code of Ethics for Educators in the COVID-19 Era.....	41
2.10.3. Challenges in the Implementation of COVID-19 Regulations in the Classroom .....	43
2.10.4. The Impact of COVID-19 on Teacher Stress and Well-being.....	44
2.10.5. Increased Teacher Workload Challenges in Online Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic.....	46
2.10.6. Teachers' Insufficient Online Teaching Skills during the COVID-19 Pandemic .....	48
2.10.7. Teachers' Lack of Motivation and Self-Efficacy during the COVID-19 Pandemic.....	51
2.11. Challenges in communication and collaboration among special education teachers, learning support educators, learners and parents during the Covid-19 pandemic.....	54
2.11.1 Teacher and Parent Communication Challenges during the COVID-19 Pandemic.....	54

2.11.2. Teacher and Parent Collaboration Challenges during the COVID-19 Pandemic.....	55
2.11.4. The Unavailability of Parents during the COVID-19 Pandemic .....	58
2.11.5. Challenges in Teacher-Learner Communication during the COVID-19 Pandemic.....	59
2.12. The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) .....	61
2.13. Understanding teacher burnout in the context of educational disruption during the COVID-19 pandemic.....	63
2.14. Social isolation’s impact on teacher interactions during the COVID-19 pandemic .....	64
2.15. Challenges of balancing work and home life during the COVID-19 pandemic .....	65
2.16. Coping strategies utilised by teachers to cope with the challenges that they encountered during the Covid-19 pandemic.....	66
2.17. Theoretical frameworks that were utilised in this study .....	67
2.17.1. The Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory .....	67
2.17.2. The Coping-Competence-Context Theory .....	70
2.17.3. The Coping Pathway in the Coping-Competence-Context Theory .....	71
2.17.4. The Competence Pathway in the Coping-Competence-Context Theory.....	72
2.17.5.The Context Pathway in the Coping-Competence-Context Theory.....	73
2.18. An integration of the two theoretical frameworks.....	74
2.18.1. The Relationship between the two Theoretical Frameworks: explaining the above diagram	76
2.19. Conclusion .....	79
3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY .....	81
3.1. Introduction.....	81
3.1.1. Epistemological paradigm .....	81
3.1.2. Meta-Theoretical Paradigm: Interpretivism .....	81
3.1.3. Axiology .....	86
3.1.4. Methods and Methodology .....	86
3.2. Methodological paradigm .....	87
3.2.1. Qualitative Research Approach.....	87
3.2.2. The Advantages of Using a Qualitative Research Approach .....	88
3.2.3. The Disadvantages of Using a Qualitative Research Methodology .....	88
3.3. Research methodology.....	88
3.3.1. Research Design .....	88
3.4. Selection of cases and research participants .....	92
3.4.1. Purposive Sampling .....	92
3.4.2. The Advantage of Using Purposive Sampling for this Study .....	94
3.4.3. The Disadvantages of Using Purposive Sampling for this Study .....	94

3.4.4.	Demographics of the Participants .....	95
3.4.5.	The Participants' Biographical Information .....	95
3.5.	Data generation and documentation .....	98
3.5.1.	Semi-Structured Interviews.....	98
3.5.2.	Demand and Resource Qualitative Questionnaire .....	100
3.5.3.	Focus Group Discussion .....	105
3.6.	Data Saturation .....	108
3.7.	DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION .....	108
3.7.1.	Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).....	109
3.7.2.	Analysis of Data Using IPA.....	113
3.7.3.	Researcher Objectivity Through a Reflective Journal .....	114
3.7.4.	Transcriptions.....	114
3.8.	Methodological norms to ensure quality criteria.....	115
3.8.1.	Credibility .....	115
3.8.2.	Transferability .....	116
3.8.3.	Dependability .....	116
3.8.4.	Confirmability.....	117
3.8.5.	Authenticity.....	117
3.9.	Ethical considerations.....	118
3.9.1.	Ethical Approval .....	118
3.9.2.	Anonymity and Confidentiality .....	120
3.9.3.	No Harm to Participants.....	120
3.9.4.	Ethical Challenge Encountered by the Researcher in this Study .....	120
3.10.	Conclusion of the chapter .....	121
4.	PRESENTATION OF RESULTS AND DISCUSSION .....	122
4.1.	Purpose of the study .....	122
4.1.1.	Stage 1: Multiple readings of the data, and making notes .....	123
4.1.2.	Step 2: Transforming the notes gathered from the data into emergent themes.....	124
4.1.3.	Stage 3: Seeking relationships and clustering themes from the data.....	124
4.2.	The three data collection phases followed in this study.....	125
4.3.	Theme 1: Mental health challenges experienced by the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic .....	126
4.3.1.	Sub-theme 1: Stress and anxiety experienced by the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic.....	126
4.3.2.	Summary of Theme .....	128
4.4.	Theme 2: Teaching and learning style utilised during the COVID-19 pandemic .....	129

4.4.1.	Summary of Theme .....	131
4.4.2.	Sub-theme 2.1: Online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic .....	131
4.4.3.	Summary of the Sub-Theme .....	132
4.5.	Theme 3: Communicating with the parents of learners during the COVID-19 pandemic	133
4.5.1.	Summary of Theme .....	134
4.6.	Theme 4: Coping strategies utilised by the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic	134
4.6.1.	Summary of Theme .....	136
4.7.	Theme 5: Workload experienced by the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic....	136
4.7.1.	Summary of Theme .....	138
4.8.	Theme 6: Implementing COVID-19 regulations in the classroom during the COVID-19 pandemic .....	138
4.8.1.	Summary of Theme .....	142
4.9.	Data collected from the Conservation of Resources Questionnaire (Section 2 of this chapter).....	142
4.9.1.	Themes from section 2: Conservation of Resources Questionnaire.....	143
4.9.2.	Demand Questions.....	144
4.9.3.	Summary of Theme .....	146
4.10.	Theme 2: Mental health challenges experienced by the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic .....	147
4.10.1.	Extracts from the data to support the information in Figure 4.3 .....	148
4.10.2.	Summary of Theme .....	149
4.11.	Sub-theme 2.1: Feeling anxious during the COVID-19 pandemic .....	149
4.11.1.	Extracts from the data to support the information in Figure 4.4 .....	150
4.11.2.	Summary of Sub-Theme.....	151
4.12.	Theme 3: Lack of motivation to teach experienced by the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic.....	152
4.12.1.	Extracts from the data to support the information in Figure 4.5 .....	153
4.12.2.	Summary of Theme .....	154
4.13.	Theme 4: Shortened syllabus due to the COVID-19 pandemic .....	154
4.13.1.	Extracts from the data to support the information in the above pie chart .....	155
4.13.2.	Summary of Theme .....	156
4.14.	Theme 5: Implementing COVID-19 regulations in the classroom during the COVID-19 pandemic .....	157
4.14.1.	Extracts from the data to support the information in Figure 4.7 .....	158
4.14.2.	Summary of Theme .....	160
4.15.	Theme 6: Working with the parents of learners during the COVID-19 pandemic to meet the academic needs of the learner .....	160

4.15.1. Extracts from the data to support the information in Figure 4.8 .....	161
4.15.2. Summary of Theme .....	163
4.16. Theme 7: Online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic .....	164
4.16.1. Extracts from the data to support the information in Figure 4.9 .....	165
4.16.2. Summary of Theme .....	166
4.17. Theme 8: Maintaining a work/life balance during the COVID-19 pandemic .....	166
4.17.1. Extracts from the data to support the information in Figure 4.10 .....	167
4.17.2. Summary of theme.....	168
4.18. Theme 9: teaching practical subjects to special needs learners during the COVID-19 pandemic .....	168
4.18.1. Extracts from the data to support the information in Figure 4.11 .....	169
4.18.2. Summary of Theme .....	170
4.19. Theme 10: overall health and well-being of the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic .....	170
4.19.1. Extracts from the data to support the information in Figure 4.12 .....	171
4.19.2. Summary of Theme .....	172
4.20. Theme 11: support systems utilised by the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic	173
4.20.1. Sub-theme 1: Personal support system during the COVID-19 pandemic.....	173
4.20.2. Extracts from the data to support the information in Figure 4.13 .....	173
4.20.3. Summary of Theme .....	174
4.21. Section 3: focus group discussion.....	175
4.21.1. Theme 1: lack of resources in schools during the COVID-19 pandemic .....	175
4.21.2. Summary of Theme .....	175
4.22. Theme 2: adhering to the SIAS policy document during the COVID-19 pandemic.....	176
4.22.1. Summary of Theme .....	176
4.23. Theme 3: online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.....	176
4.23.1. Summary of Theme .....	178
4.24. Theme 4: coping strategies utilised by the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic	178
4.24.1. Summary of Theme .....	179
4.25. Theme 5: reflecting on the lessons learnt by the participants from the experiences that they had during the COVID-19 pandemic.....	179
4.25.1. Summary of Theme .....	180
4.26. Theme 6: a lack of focus on special schools during the COVID-19 pandemic.....	180
4.26.1. Summary of Theme .....	181
4.27. Theme 7: workload experienced by the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic....	181
4.27.1. Summary of Theme .....	182



4.27.2.	Sub-theme: Re-planning of lessons as an addition to the workload that the participants had during the COVID-19 pandemic .....	182
4.27.3.	Summary of Theme .....	183
4.28.	Theme 8: current existing classroom challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic .....	183
4.28.1.	Summary of Theme .....	184
4.29.	A discussion of the themes linked to the literature review .....	184
4.29.1.	Theme: mental health challenges experienced by the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic (Section 2.10.4 in Chapter 2).....	185
4.29.2.	Theme: Learning and Teaching Support Material Utilised by the Participants During the COVID-19 Pandemic.....	187
4.29.3.	Sub-theme: Online Teaching and Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic.....	190
4.29.4.	Theme: Communicating With the Parents of Learners during the COVID-19 Pandemic (Section 2.11.1) .....	192
4.29.5.	Theme: Coping Strategies Utilised by the Participants to Cope with the Challenges Experienced during the COVID-19 Pandemic (Section 2.16) .....	193
4.29.6.	Theme: Workload Experienced by the Participants during the COVID-19 Pandemic (Section 2.10.5) .....	194
4.29.7.	Sub-theme: Re-planning of Lessons as an Addition to the Participants' Workload during the COVID-19 Pandemic.....	196
4.29.8.	Theme: Lack of Motivation to Teach Experienced by the Participants During the COVID-19 Pandemic (Section 2.10.7) .....	196
4.29.9.	Theme: Working with the Parents of Learners During the COVID-19 Pandemic to Meet The Academic Needs of The Learner .....	197
4.30.	Theme: having a work/life balance during the COVID-19 pandemic .....	198
4.31.	Theme: teaching practical subjects to learners with special needs during the COVID-19 pandemic .....	198
4.31.1.	Theme: Overall Health and Well-being of the Participants During the COVID-19 Pandemic.....	199
4.32.	Conclusion .....	199
5.	FINAL CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	201
5.1.	Introduction.....	201
5.2.	Summary of chapters .....	202
5.2.1.	Chapter 1: General Orientation of The Study .....	202
5.2.2.	Chapter 2: Literature Review .....	204
5.2.3.	Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology.....	205
5.2.4.	Chapter 4: Presentation of the Results and Findings.....	207
5.3.	Answering the research questions .....	212
5.3.1.	Secondary Research Question 1.....	213

5.3.2.	Secondary Research Question 2.....	216
5.3.3.	Secondary Research Question 3.....	218
5.3.4.	Secondary Research Question 4.....	220
5.3.5.	Primary Research Question.....	221
5.4.	Framework designed from the study .....	226
5.5.	Contributions of the Study .....	227
5.6.	Recommendations.....	228
5.6.1.	Recommendations for Practice.....	228
5.6.2.	Recommendations for Further Research .....	231
5.6.3.	Recommendations for Policy .....	233
5.7.	Limitations of the study.....	233
5.7.1.	Small Sample Size .....	234
5.7.2.	Data Collection .....	234
5.7.3.	Scheduling the Focus Group Discussion.....	235
5.7.4.	Online Interviews and the Online Focus Group Discussion .....	235
5.7.5.	Scope .....	236
5.8.	Concluding remarks.....	236
Appendix A: Turnitin Report .....		308
Appendix B: Research Approval Letter .....		309
Appendix C: Ethics Approval Letter .....		310
Appendix D: Informed Consent Letter to Participants.....		311
Appendix E: Informed consent letter to the principal/s .....		314
Appendix F: Interview Questions.....		316
Appendix G: Examples of interview transcripts and coding .....		317
Appendix H: Teacher stress qualitative questionnaire .....		322
Appendix I: Examples of questionnaire transcriptions and coding .....		353
Appendix J: Focus group discussion questions .....		356
Appendix K: examples of focus group discussion and coding .....		357
Appendix L: example of researcher journal notes.....		342

## LIST OF TABLES

<b>Table 1.1 Research design .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Table 3.1 Characteristics of the interpretivist paradigm .....</b>	<b>85</b>
<b>Table 3.2 Biographical information of the participants in this study .....</b>	<b>97</b>
<b>Table 3.3 The interview process using IPA (Smith et al., 2009).....</b>	<b>113</b>
<b>Table 4.1 Outline of the three data collection processes in this study .....</b>	<b>125</b>
<b>Table 4.2 Overview of themes elicited from the questionnaires .....</b>	<b>143</b>

## LIST OF FIGURES

<b>Figure 1.1 Research paradigms</b> .....	12
<b>Figure 1.2 The Coping-Competence-Context Model of Teacher Stress</b> .....	17
<b>Figure 2.1 An illustration of the interconnectedness between the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory and the Coping-Competence-Context Theory that underpinned this study</b> .....	75
<b>Figure 2.2 The link between the demand aspect of COR and the coping pathway of the 3C Model of Teacher Stress</b> .....	77
<b>Figure 2.3 The relationship between the coping pathway of the 3C Model of Teacher Stress and the resource aspect of the COR Theory</b> .....	77
<b>Figure 2.4 The relationship between resources and competence</b> .....	78
<b>Figure 2.5 The relationship between resources, competence and context</b> .....	79
<b>Figure 4.1 Overview of the themes elicited from the interviews</b> .....	126
<b>Figure 4.2 Participants' workload during the pandemic</b> .....	144
<b>Figure 4.3 Participants' mental health challenges</b> .....	147
<b>Figure 4.4 Participants' level of anxiety during the pandemic</b> .....	150
<b>Figure 4.5 The participants' lack of motivation to teach</b> .....	152
<b>Figure 4.6 Participants' experience of the syllabus being shortened due to the pandemic</b> .....	154
<b>Figure 4.7 Implementing COVID-19 regulations in the classroom</b> .....	157
<b>Figure 4.8 Working with parents during the pandemic</b> .....	161
<b>Figure 4.9 Online teaching during the pandemic</b> .....	164
<b>Figure 4.10 Participants' work/life balance during the pandemic</b> .....	167
<b>Figure 4.11 Teaching practical subjects to special needs learners during the pandemic</b> .....	169
<b>Figure 4.12 Participants' overall health and well-being</b> .....	171
<b>Figure 4.13 Participants' personal support system during the pandemic</b> .....	173
<b>Figure 5: A framework for addressing challenges and enhancing resilience in special education during a crisis</b> .....	225

# CHAPTER 1 GENERAL ORIENTATION OF THE STUDY

## 1.1 FRAMING THE STUDY

The COVID-19 pandemic has been an enlightening experience for Africa, a vulnerable continent burdened with poverty, high rates of infectious diseases, weak healthcare systems, and the winter season Influenza (flu) (Shabir & Aijaz, 2020). The outbreak of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) has had a profound impact on people worldwide (Ahadolu Agency, 2020; Du Toit, 2020). However, Africa has faced similar health-related challenges in the past, such as Ebola, HIV/AIDS, and Malaria. According to Kapata et al. (2020), Africa had some level of preparedness to tackle the issues arising from COVID-19. Moreover, thanks to their previous experiences with health-related diseases of this magnitude, those in Africa were better able to adapt to living and working with the illness (EdTech Hub, 2020). Following the World Health Organization's declaration of COVID-19 as a global pandemic, South Africa had to act swiftly to contain the spread of the virus.

The Coronavirus and Influenza present in similar ways as they both affect the respiratory system. Both these viruses can be transmitted in the same way, for example, through physical contact with an infected person, as well as through the release of droplets either through coughing or sneezing. Moreover, the prevention of spreading both the Coronavirus and Influenza is the same (practising good hygiene through the washing of hands, as well as practising measures such as sneezing or coughing into a tissue). Due to their similarities, identifying which of the two an individual has is much more complicated and confusing (World Health Organization, 2020b).

On March 23, 2020, South African President Mr. Cyril Ramaphosa declared a 21-day nationwide lockdown, effective from March 26, 2020 (Spaull & Van der Berg, 2020). However, this initial 21-day period was extended to eight weeks, during which public gatherings, school attendance, and non-essential commercial activities (except for food and medicine sales) were strictly prohibited. With the outbreak of COVID-19, there was an urgency to limit physical contact between people to contain the spread of the virus. One of the most significant changes that were implemented to slow down the spread of the virus was the closure of schools globally (Huang et

al., 2020). As such, in-person teaching activities were indefinitely halted (UNESCO, 2021). Schools worldwide had to resort to conducting classes online, which proved to be a great challenge for many schools (Xie et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic created a stressful situation, and pressured the education system at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels (Schleicher, 2020).

However, the online teaching strategies employed by some schools revealed that there were inequalities and vulnerabilities present within the education system worldwide (Wahab & Manpreet, 2020). These inequalities, as highlighted by the pandemic, showed that the virus also reduced education opportunities for vulnerable children, youth, and adults (United Nations Policy Briefing, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected everyone regardless of their nationality, income, gender, or level of education (United Nations, 2020). However, the consequences of the pandemic have not been the same for everyone as the most vulnerable people have been the group most impacted by the pandemic (Azavedo et al., 2020; Schleicher, 2020). This study focused on special education teachers and learning support educators in Gauteng. In particular, it looked at the challenges that they experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **1.2 PRELIMINARY LITERATURE REVIEW**

Emergency measures such as the closure of schools, social distancing, quarantine, and travel restrictions were implemented by many countries due to the rapid spread of the Coronavirus (Orgilés et al., 2020; van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). The focus of this study was on special education teachers. Schools were identified as one of the major risks that contributed to the spread of the virus due to the close interactions that occurred between children of school-going age (van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). It is for this reason that the closure of schools was thought to be an effective way to control the spread of the virus (Cauchemez et al., 2009; Halder et al., 2010). School closures were initially instituted on February 16, 2020, in certain regions of China, where the COVID-19 virus was first identified. Subsequently, by March 2020, an additional 46 countries had implemented school closures, either partially or entirely, due to the spread of the virus.

In South Africa, the decision to close schools became imperative following the revelation that the offspring of the initial COVID-19 patient attended a school in Hilton, KwaZulu Natal, even though these children tested negative for the virus (Macupe, 2020). The closure of schools was mitigated with a shift to online education. The Department of Basic Education implemented schooling through television, e-learning, and other online methods to ensure that learning continued to take place. However, this approach to learning was questionable considering inclusive education and how these methods of learning were planned to accommodate learners with disabilities (Kamga, 2020).

The term 'inclusion' was first globally used in the special education context. This was articulated in the Salamanca Statement of 1994, which proposed that the integration of children with disabilities might be effectively achieved through inclusive schools. Considering this perspective, the current study explored the influence of online learning on inclusive education given the intricate relationship between inclusion and special education, as highlighted by Rodriguez and Garro-Gil (2014).

According to Kamga (2020, p. 56),

[South Africa is] party to the International Covenant on Economic and Social, Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (African Charter), the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (African Children's Charter) and the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

These policies are important as they indicate that all children have a right to basic education. This is enshrined in the South African Constitution, as well as numerous policy instruments. Therefore, to ensure that all learners had access to basic education during the COVID-19 pandemic, later in the year 2020, the government introduced rotational learning where learners would attend school every second or third day of the week (Mlisana & Jacobs, 2021).

However, the rotational learning timetable did not fully meet the learning needs of the learners. According to a media briefing report given by the Minister of Basic Education, Angie Motshekga, on the 24<sup>th</sup> of August 2021, schools had lost 50-75% of their 2020 academic year due to the lockdown that was caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Department of Basic Education, 2021). The closure of schools presented

limited learning opportunities, especially for learners who did not have access to technological devices to participate in online learning. This lack of resources contributed to learners forgetting the content that they had learned in class before the closure of schools (Reddy et al., 2020).

In July 2020, South Africa was under level three (3) of lockdown, and only learners in Grades 6, 7, 11, and 12 were permitted to attend school. It was only on the 31<sup>st</sup> of August 2020 that all learners in all grades were permitted to attend school (Shepherd et al., 2021). At the time of this study, learners across the globe have returned to their classrooms, with teachers being expected to make this return to the physical classroom a smooth process (Collie, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic changed the learning system, forcing schools to either implement online learning, distance education, flexible learning, or correspondence learning (Rasmitadila et al., 2020). The aftermath of the pandemic was evident when teachers returned to the classroom by the end of the year 2020 and into 2021. Teachers were expected to adapt to schools implementing drastic measures to prevent the spread of the virus, as well as simultaneously helping learners to adapt so that a smooth and stable learning environment could be created for them. However, the shift from face-to-face teaching to sudden online teaching left learners with disabilities and other special needs confronted with more extreme barriers to learning. An example of this was not having the specific learning materials that could accommodate their learning needs to ensure that optimal learning occurred (Cullinane & Montacute, 2021). These barriers further included the unavailability of necessary physical support to ensure that these learners had access to the internet, and that they had someone who could be with them, and assist them physically to use the internet to learn (United Nations, 2020).

Although the educational community aimed to create and implement measures to ensure that learning continued to take place during the COVID-19 pandemic, learners mostly had to rely on their own resources to learn remotely. These resources included adequate Wi-Fi connection, radio, and television.

Even before the pandemic, not all learners had the same access to resources such as laptops, tablets, and the internet; and the pandemic only widened the chasm of inequality (Fry-Bowers, 2020).



Teachers furthermore had to transition in a matter of hours or days from teaching classes in person to a new pedagogical method of delivering their lessons to their learners online (Gudmundsdottir & Hathaway, 2020; Schleicher, 2020). This caused teachers stress, as most of them were not prepared or trained for this unexpected change in teaching format (Trust & Whalen, 2020). In schools where digital learning was used before the pandemic, the transition was easier. However, the transition to online teaching was more challenging for schools that had not previously introduced digital methods of teaching and learning into their classrooms (Bubb & Jones, 2020; Kaden, 2020).

### **1.3 RATIONALE FOR UNDERTAKING THIS STUDY**

Literature to date focuses on how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected teachers and learners in mainstream schools (KIX COVID-19 Observatory, 2021; Parker & Alfaro, 2021; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). There is, however, a paucity of research on how this pandemic affected special education schools, specifically focusing on the challenges that special education teachers, and learning support educators experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although the government implemented various ways of learning to ensure that learners continued to learn despite the challenges of the pandemic, these implementations were not sufficient to accommodate learners with disabilities. Most of the initiatives implemented relied on equipment such as computers, tablets, radio and television, and online portals, which were not always easily accessible to all learners (McClain-Nhlapo, 2020). Moreover, virtual classes require access to the internet, which requires data (Pinilla-Roncancio, 2015).

Online learning poses a challenge for learners with special educational needs. According to a study conducted by de la Varre et al. (2014), students with special educational needs showed a lack of willingness to complete their schoolwork when using an online platform for teaching and learning. This was due to them experiencing low levels of motivation to learn; technology problems; an unwillingness to complete their schoolwork because there was a lack of contact and time from their teachers; and due to a lack of parental involvement in their learning. For online learning to be successful for children with special educational needs, there needs to be parental support. This concerns parental support towards learning, as well as using

technological devices and accessing learning platforms (Petretto et al., 2020). Children with special educational needs should be accommodated so that they can complete learning tasks and assessments. They also need accessible learning material (Conderman et al., 2017). Online learning further requires that children with special educational needs have access to technological devices that they can use to access learning. This includes computers, as well as a reliable internet connection (Bakaniene et al., 2023). However, according to studies conducted by Hughes (2013), Parish et al. (2010), and Balistreri (2019), children with special educational needs are more likely than typically developing children to come from low-income households. This may mean that they may not have access to a computer or even a reliable internet connection (van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). This could make it challenging for them to participate in online learning.

The COVID-19 pandemic was a traumatic experience for the whole world. Despite this trauma, special education teachers and learning support educators did not stop teaching and assessing, even though they were faced with sometimes insurmountable challenges (Aizawa et al., 2021).

The closure of schools resulted in a loss of teaching and assessment time. Therefore, different models were proposed to ensure that teaching would continue to take place after the hard lockdown period. These proposed models had to continue providing a learning environment that was respectful, welcoming, inclusive, and supportive. This needed to be done while also adhering to strict COVID-19 precautions to ensure that the spread of the virus was limited (Department of Basic Education, n.d).

The initial model suggested to address the requirements of various schools involved alternating days of school attendance per week. This meant that learners would take turns attending classes during the week. The learners could either attend classes in groups or specific grades during the week. Another proposed model was platooning, which is when there are two teachers and learners using the same school building, for example, two teachers occupying the same classroom but at different times of the day (Hood, 2010). Lastly, another model known as the bi-weekly model was proposed, where a group of learners from a specific grade would attend school on alternative weeks.

As a researcher with a vested interest in the field of special needs education, the objective was to delve into the instructional practices employed by special needs and learning support educators amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the corresponding challenges they encountered. Additionally, the researcher endeavoured to comprehend the diverse array of challenges reported by the participants in this study, and to ascertain the impact of these challenges on these educators. The researcher further sought to investigate the strategies that the participants adopted to navigate the obstacles posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The principle of educational equality emphasises the acknowledgment and accommodation of diverse learning needs (Faubert, 2012). Hence, even in the face of extraordinary circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the central concern remains the individual requirements of learners within the education system. The distinctive contribution of this study lies in its examination of the challenges encountered by special education teachers and learning support educators. This is complemented by an in-depth analysis of the various strategies they employed in adapting their teaching methodologies to ensure uninterrupted instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### **1.4 PURPOSE STATEMENT**

The purpose of this exploratory case study was to investigate and give an in-depth description of the challenges that special education teachers and learning support educators in Gauteng experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. On the 8<sup>th</sup> of April, 2020, the Centre for Child Law (51) engaged with the Directorate of the Department of Basic Education, and Inclusive Education to find out what measures had been taken to ensure that schools were ready to welcome their learners with disabilities back after the lockdown. There were also enquiries regarding the support services that were put in place to support the parents and caregivers of these learners. On the 8<sup>th</sup> of May, 2020, the Directorate presented a document that was meant to address these issues. However, the document did not give clear and solid answers regarding what had been done to ensure that schools would be ready to accommodate learners with special needs and disabilities, as well as support them while they were at home because of the pandemic (Kamga, 2021).

This observation highlights the pre-existing difficulties associated with the implementation of inclusive education during the COVID-19 pandemic. It also demonstrates the lack of readily available strategies from the Department of Basic Education to ensure the continuous learning of students with disabilities. Consequently, teachers were confronted with a range of challenges while endeavouring to provide instruction amid the pandemic.

Hence, the purpose of this study was to identify and examine these challenges; analyse their impact on special education and learning support educators, and investigate the pedagogical practices that effectively supported special needs education during the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of this study was to also identify how the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted the provision of support services to learners with special needs, and to develop a framework that would address the challenges that special education and learning support educators experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how they were able to navigate their way through these challenges. Furthermore, this study aimed to raise awareness regarding the intricate nature of teaching learners with special needs in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This study was guided by the following research questions.

### **1.5.1 Primary research question**

What were the specific challenges encountered by special education teachers and learning support educators in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?

### **1.5.2 Secondary research questions**

- What were special education teachers' and learning support educators' main concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What strategies did special education teachers and learning support educators employ to navigate the challenges they faced in their educational settings during the COVID-19 pandemic?

- What were the most significant barriers to effective communication and collaboration among special education teachers, learning support educators, students, and parents during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- How did the shift to remote and hybrid learning environments during the Covid-19 pandemic affect the instructional methods and support strategies used by special education teachers and learning support educators?

## **1.6 CLARIFICATION OF KEY CONCEPTS**

### **1.6.1 Coronavirus**

The Coronavirus is an infectious respiratory virus that broke out in Wuhan, China in 2019. Signs and symptoms of the Coronavirus include respiratory symptoms such as shortness of breath, fever, and a cough. Coronavirus is a term given to a group of viruses belonging to the family of Coronaviridae. This is a virus that infects both animals and humans. Human coronavirus can cause a mild disease that is like the flu, whereas more severe cases of the virus can cause Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) (WHO, 2020). More serious cases of the virus lead to pneumonia, SARS and in some cases, death (World Health Organization, 2020b). Effective measures that were put in place to curb the spread of the virus involved the wearing of face masks, using sanitizers, as well as practising social distance (Baloran, 2020). Symptoms of the Coronavirus include fever, fatigue, coughing, sneezing, aches and pains, a sore throat, headaches, shortness of breath, and in some instances, diarrhoea (World Health Organization, 2020b). This study used the definition provided in the above-mentioned paragraphs when referring to the Coronavirus.

### **1.6.2 COVID-19**

The Coronavirus was named in 2019 by Chinese researchers. The International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses (ICTV) named the Coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, and the disease as COVID-19 (Cui et al., 2020). Therefore, COVID-19 is an acronym for the Coronavirus where CO stands for Corona, VI stands for the virus, D for disease, and 19 for the year in which the virus was first discovered, being 2019 (UNICEF, 2020).

### **1.6.3 Pandemic**

According to Rewar et al. (2015), a pandemic refers to a disease that has extended over a large geographic area. A pandemic is an epidemic that occurs worldwide, and which affects a large population of people, often claiming the lives of many people (Grennan, 2019).

A pandemic is a result of a large-scale outbreak of an infectious virus or disease that increases the fragility of health and death rate across a wide geographical area, and can cause significant social and political disruptions (Madhav et al., 2017). The World Health Organization (WHO) declares a pandemic when there is an outbreak that affects a large number of people across the world or at various international borders (Ducharme, 2020; WHO, 2020a). With reference to this study, 'pandemic' refers to the COVID-19 pandemic, which had profound effects on the healthcare, education, and global economy of South Africa.

### **1.6.4 Special Education Teacher in the South African Context**

This refers to a teacher who works with children and youths who have one or a combination of mental, physical, or emotional disabilities. The duties and roles of special education teachers vary according to the grade, and the type of disability of the learners that they teach (Feng & Sass, 2010). In this study, a special education teacher is a teacher who is responsible for the educational needs of children who have a wide range of disabilities. These children require various services, such as modifications and specific accommodations made to their educational experiences. A special educational teacher must thus have knowledge of the different types of disabilities, and the specific types of needs and support that children with a specific disability have (American Academy of Special Education Professionals, 2006).

### **1.6.5 Learning Support Educator in the South African Context**

A learning support educator is a specialised teacher who provides academic interventions to a small group of learners who are experiencing barriers to learning at the school level (Dreyer, 2013; Kriel & Livingston, 2019). In a school that practises inclusive education, a learning support educator is also responsible for guiding mainstream teachers on how to support learners in the classroom. They are also

responsible for collaborating with other education support staff in the provision of support for a learner (Dryer, 2013). In this study, a learning support educator is seen to have the task of providing support to learners who experience barriers to learning. These educators intervene academically by extracting a small group of learners from the mainstream classroom (Dreyer, 2013; Kriel & Livingston, 2019). A learning support educator plays a proactive role in the process of identifying learners with barriers, and then they share their knowledge and skills with teachers in the mainstream classroom. This promotes the process of working together with the teacher. Through this support, the parents of the learner can begin to provide support to children with disabilities (Dreyer, 2013). After identifying a learner with a barrier to learning, a learning support educator provides support services to the learner once every two weeks or three times a week in the form of school visits. This means that learners with barriers to learning receive specialised intervention from the learning support educator. A learning support educator specifically focuses on providing support in numeracy and literacy subjects (Nel et al., 2016).

#### **1.6.6 Special Schools in South Africa**

This refers to schools that provide an education that has been specifically designed in its instruction to meet the diverse needs and abilities of special needs learners (Tremblay, 2007). Special schools are ‘special’ because they are a distinct place for education where the focus is not only on individuals with disabilities, but on diverse learners (Cook & Schirmer, 2003). Special schools are specially designed to provide an Individualised Educational Plan (IEP) to meet the needs of a child with a disability (Pullen & Hallahan, 2015). According to the Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) policy document, a special school is “equipped to deliver a specialised education programme to learners requiring access to high-intensive educational and other support either on a full-time or part-time basis (Department of Basic Education, 2014, p. 10). A learner is placed in a special school based on the classification of their disability, which is made by a healthcare practitioner using accepted diagnostic criteria (American Psychiatric Association, DSM-5 Task Force, 2013). The SIAS document states that different domains of specialised support are provided in special schools. Special schools can provide general and mental health support; as well as neurological and neurodevelopmental support pertaining to disorders such as



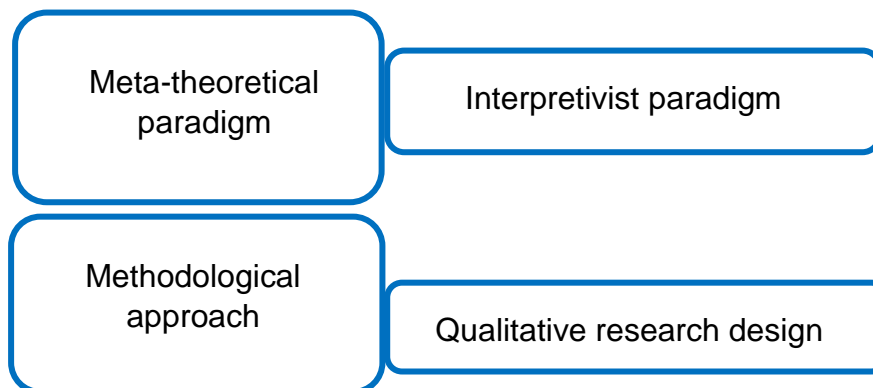
epilepsy, and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), to name a few (Department of Education, 2014).

## 1.7 RESEARCH PARADIGMS

An outline of the research paradigm is presented in Figure 1.1, which represents the meta-theoretical and methodological paradigms applied to this study. These paradigms are discussed in more detail in the sections to follow; and a detailed overview thereof is also presented in Chapter 3 (Sections 3.2.1 and 3.3.1).

**Figure 1.1**

*Research paradigms*



### 1.7.1 Meta-theoretical Paradigm: Interpretivism

Interpretivism is concerned with understanding the experiences of people, such as those of the participants in this study. The epistemology used to gather the subjective experiences of these teachers was an interpretivist paradigm. This was deemed appropriate for this study as the core of this paradigm is understanding the in-depth individual experiences of people (Daymon & Holloway, 2011; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Interpretivists take on a relativist ontology wherein a single phenomenon can be understood from multiple perspectives rather than there being one, single truth about a phenomenon that can be understood through a measuring process (Pham, 2018). Researchers using the interpretivist paradigm want to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being investigated by understanding the phenomenon in its context of occurrence instead of trying to understand the whole population (Creswell, 2007).



Interpretivists should understand that multiple interpretations may develop among people, and therefore a researcher using this paradigm should understand the diversity in how individuals see and experience their world (Hammersley, 2010). The interpretivist paradigm was well-suited for this study as it sought to explore and understand the challenges encountered by participants amid the COVID-19 pandemic. An assumption was made in this study that the participants would share the challenges that they individually experienced, and that this would allow for the researcher to interpret these challenges from a subjective perspective. This would imply giving a subjective meaning to the different challenges that each of the participants experienced during the pandemic.

### **1.7.2 Methodological Approach: Qualitative**

Every research endeavour necessitates a disciplined, systematic, and clearly articulated approach to yield the most pertinent and meaningful outcomes (Haradhan, 2018). “Methodology refers to the theoretical justification of the research in a chosen discipline including principles, axioms, beliefs and models” (Hameed, 2020, p. 9). Qualitative research is employed by researchers when the research questions demand responses that cannot be quantified. It is utilised to gain insights into the opinions, beliefs, behaviours, and experiences of individuals, thus enabling a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Bismah et al., 2018).

The qualitative methodological approach is grounded in the principle that reality is inherently subjective, varying for everyone, and heavily influenced by their unique experiences (Basit, 2010). Qualitative research involves engaging with individuals or groups through interactive and immersive methods, such as observations and interviews. It entails immersing oneself in the contexts of the participants, attentively observing their behaviours, and acknowledging how their specific contexts shape their experiences and perceptions of life (Krauss, 2005; Omona, 2013). Qualitative research is inductive in nature, and the researcher explores the meanings provided by individuals about the phenomenon being investigated (Levitt et al., 2017). Qualitative research enables a researcher to be highly involved, and to also gather rich details about the experiences of the individuals in relation to the focus of the research (Creswell, 2009). This research approach collects data in a non-numerical manner,

where the researcher seeks to interpret meaning from the data to understand the phenomenon being investigated (Punch, 2013).

The qualitative research method places a great emphasis on how people make sense of, and interpret their everyday experiences with the aim of understanding the social reality of people (Haradhan, 2018). It makes use of resources such as journals, interviews, and diaries to obtain, analyse, and interpret data (Zohrabi, 2013). According to Polkinghorne (2005), qualitative research is exploratory in nature as it aims to explain 'how' and 'why' a particular social phenomenon operates in the way that it does in a specific context. Qualitative research aims to observe and interpret the perceptions that people have of different events, and it does this within the natural setting of the individual (Gentles et al., 2015).

The primary objective of this study was to provide a comprehensive description and gain deeper insights into the diverse challenges encountered by special education teachers amid the COVID-19 pandemic. To achieve this aim, a qualitative research methodology was employed, as it served as a guiding framework to address the research questions posed in this study.

### 1.7.3 Brief Outline of the Research Design

Table 1.1 provides a summary of the research design applied in this study. A more in-depth discussion of the components in the table will follow in Chapter 3.

**Table 1.1**

*Research design*

<b>RESEARCH DESIGN</b>	
<b>Research design</b>	Single descriptive case study.
<b>RESEARCH CONTEXT</b>	
<b>Research site</b>	Interviews and questionnaires: School setting and the home of participants (after school/working hours). Focus group discussion: Online.
<b>Selection of participants</b>	Purposive sampling.
<b>Data collection methods</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Stress questionnaire.</li> <li>- Semi-structured interviews.</li> <li>- Online focus group discussion.</li> </ul>

	- Researchers field notes.
<b>Data documentation</b>	- Audio recording (for interviews and focus group discussion). - Questionnaire.
<b>Data analysis</b>	- Interpretive phenomenological analysis.
<b>Quality criteria</b>	- Credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability.
<b>Ethical considerations</b>	- Informed consent, voluntary participation, no harm to participants, anonymity, and confidentiality.

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**My role as the researcher.**

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### 1.7.4 Data Analysis

This study utilised three data collection methods, namely, a stress questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and a focus group discussion. The data collected were analysed from an inductive perspective using interpretive phenomenology.

The decision was made to analyse the data inductively because the aim was to gather rich and thick descriptions of the phenomenon in this study. Interpretive phenomenological analysis gives participants the freedom to give personal accounts of how they experienced the phenomenon being investigated, and how they make meaning of their experiences. This data analysis method worked well for this study due to the focus being on the challenges experienced by the participants, and therefore the participants could give detailed accounts about the individual challenges that they experienced because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Utilising interpretive phenomenology to analyse the data enabled an exploration of the challenges experienced by the participants (Smith & Osborn, 2007), aiming to comprehend these challenges from the participants' perspectives.

### 1.8 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was guided by the following theoretical frameworks.

### **1.8.1 Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory**

According to Hobfoll (1989, 1998), the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory is a stress model that includes the environmental and cognitive views of how stress is a direct consequence of resource loss. The underlying thought of the COR Theory is that individuals strive to protect and attain the resources that they have, and that they experience stress when there is a threat or loss of these resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

The COR Theory was developed from resource and psychological theories of stress and human motivation. Social scientists who study stress have observed that a person's resources help them to be protected against any potential negative life events that they may experience. Resources may include, for example, self-efficacy and emotional support provided by family and friends (Schwarzer & Knoll, 2007). According to the COR Theory, stress is comprised of a combination of the subjective perceptions that people have about an event, and how that event requires resources that are over and beyond the resources available to the individual (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004).

According to Hobfoll et al. (2018), there are four principles of the COR Theory. The first principle states that losing resources is more impactful than gaining resources. Resources can be classified into different categories such as object resources, for example, a car; condition resources, such as employment; personal resources, such as a person's personality traits; and lastly, energy resources, such as knowledge and money. The impact and severity of losing resources rests on the speed of the impact of the loss, as well as the length of time that the impact remains noticeable.

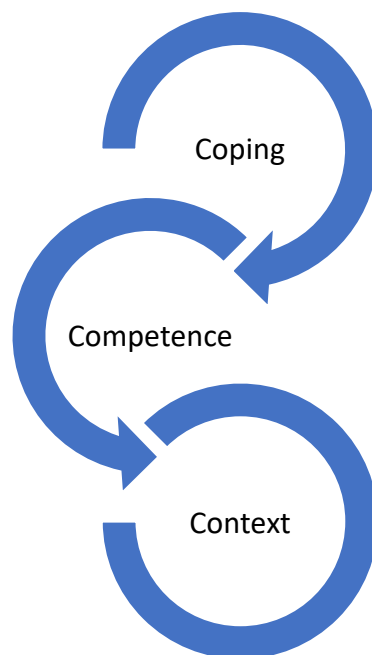
The second principle states that for people to protect themselves against losing any resources, recover from losses or gain resources, people must invest in their resources. The third principle states that resource gain is important when there is resource loss. This means that when there is a higher number of resources that are lost, the resources gained become more important and also gain value. The fourth principle states that when resources are exhausted, individuals go into a defensive mode to preserve a part of themselves that becomes irrational. Going into a defensive mode allows the individual to wait for help, and as they are waiting for help, the stress diminishes (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

## 1.8.2 The Coping-Competence-Context Theory

Another significant theory that was applicable to this study is the Coping-Competence-Context Model of Teacher Stress, which is presented in Figure 1.2.

**Figure 1.2**

*The Coping-Competence-Context Model of Teacher Stress*



According to Herman et al. (2020), the Coping-Competence-Context Theory, also known as the 3C Model for Teacher Stress, can be explained in the following way.

The 'Coping' pathway includes the individual characteristics that teachers possess, such as their interpersonal skills, coping skills, as well as the way in which they think. These all have a direct influence on how a teacher will respond to stress and stress-inducing events. This pathway distinguishes between meta-cognitive aspects of coping, such as one's mindset, and mindfulness, as well as the different coping strategies that one utilises to cope with stress. This pathway also focuses on the perceptions that teachers have about their ability to cope with stress using self-perceived coping skills and strategies.

The 'Competence' pathway concerns experiencing stress due to classroom practices, such as classroom management skills. According to this pathway, when teachers are

stressed, it affects their teaching practices, e.g. the interaction they have with their learners. This interaction then affects the ways in which the learner behaves, which will also result in the teacher experiencing more stress. The 3C Model for Teacher Stress states that stress moderates the effects of classroom practices on the behaviour of learners. Lastly, the 'Context' pathway focuses on school system policies and practices that contribute to teacher stress. These include practices such as administrative support, standardised tests, and systematic policies, which all contribute to teacher stress and burnout (Ryan et al., 2017).

## **1.9 ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER**

The role I played as the researcher in this study is discussed below.

### **1.9.1 Data Collection**

As the researcher in this study, it was my role to collect the relevant data for this research. The data were collected through a questionnaire, interviews, and a focus group discussion. These three data collection processes generated large amounts of data, and the data were analysed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

### **1.9.2 Data Analysis and Management**

Qualitative research has always been labelled as impressionistic, and influenced by the researcher's bias (Buckner, 2005). It is thus important that a researcher reflects on their interpretation of the data gathered to establish the level of their subjectivity as this influences the analysis and interpretation of the data. As a researcher, it was important for me to understand my own attitude, beliefs, and biases. This allowed me to ensure that when I analysed the data in this study, I did so by keeping a focus on the study, and the experiences of the participants (Patnaik, 2013). A researcher must therefore go into a process of critically analysing how his/her own experiences may or may not have influenced the research process (Dowling, 2006).

During the data analysis process, I had to constantly be aware, assess and reassess my own influence and contributions towards the data gathered. This process allowed me to reflect on how I was analysing the data so that I could be aware of my subjective influence on the findings of the study. Through this process of reflection, I was able to report the findings from the participants' perspectives instead of my own.

Qualitative research requires the researcher to put themselves in the shoes of the participants, to see the world from their perspective. In analysing and managing the data, the researcher must always be true to the participants by reporting the true accounts of the participants as expressed by them. As a researcher, it was thus my role to hear the voices of the participants so that I could interpret and report on these in an accurate way (Sutton & Austin, 2015).

### **1.9.3 Transcribing and Analysis of the Data**

It is the role of the researcher to decide not only how to transcribe the data, but also how much of the data they want to transcribe (Hammersley, 2010).

In conducting this study, my role as a researcher was to transcribe the audio-recorded data from the interviews, as well as the focus group discussion. I resolved to methodically engage with the recorded content of each conducted interview, meticulously transcribing the dialogues verbatim, and capturing the essence of each interviewee's discourse in its entirety.

The same was done for the focus group discussion recording. It was unnecessary to transcribe the data from the questionnaire as this is inherently an instrument that requires written responses. All of the data collected for this study were analysed using IPA.

### **1.9.4 Reporting on the Findings from the Data**

My role as the researcher was to report on the findings gathered from the data collected. This required me to present the findings as well as their interpretation (Fink, 2000).

## **1.10 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

A researcher is an important instrument in the research process that may either lead to the success or failure of the study being conducted. It was thus important that the researcher create a sense of trust and safety with the participants so that they could feel free to share their experiences about the phenomenon being investigated (Creswell, 2014; Fontes & Plummer, 2010). To create such an environment during the interviews and focus group discussion, the participants were informed about the following:

1. The purpose of the study.
2. They could request to see the results of the study if they wanted.
3. That to protect their privacy none of their personal details, or those of the school where they taught, would be mentioned.
4. That they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point without justification or punishment from the researcher.
5. The duration of the interviews, questionnaires, and focus group discussion.
6. That the interviews and focus group discussions would be recorded, with their consent.

The participants gave consent to participate in the study before the interviews were conducted. The relationship between myself, as the researcher, and the participants was built from the start of the conversations that I had with the participants. Some of the interview questions were challenging for the participants to answer, so there was always an aim to practice empathy towards the participants as they shared their individual accounts of the phenomenon being explored. The participants were also informed about the benefits of sharing their own experiences about the phenomenon, and how these could impact research in education.

### **1.11 ASSUMPTIONS OF THIS STUDY**

This study is based on the following assumptions:

- The psychological effects of the pandemic have had a direct influence on special needs teachers' teaching, and the interventions provided by learning support educators.
- In dealing with the challenges that the pandemic has caused, special needs teachers and learning support educators have developed an arsenal of skills and strategies to be used in future crises.
- A significant portion of special education teachers and learning support educators may not have been adequately equipped or trained to effectively utilise online teaching strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is about the specific needs and characteristics of the learners in their classes.



- The COVID-19 pandemic affected the provision of support services for learners with special needs.
- The COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on the communication, and collaboration between teachers of learners with special needs, their parents, as well as the learner.

## **1.12 OUTLINE OF SUBSEQUENT CHAPTERS**

### **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

Chapter 2 consists of a comprehensive literature review pertaining to the challenges experienced by special education teachers and learning support educators in Gauteng during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology**

In Chapter 3, the researcher discusses the research methodology process followed in this study, including the research design, selection of participants, and the data collection methods used. The researcher will also discuss the Interpretive Phenomenology Analysis (IPA) employed to analyse the data, as well as the ethical considerations adhered to. Lastly, the quality criteria utilised to ensure the safety and trustworthiness of the study will be explored.

### **Chapter 4: Results Gathered from the Study**

Chapter 4 describes the results of the IPA conducted, and identifies the themes and sub-themes generated through an in-depth analysis of the data.

### **Chapter 5: Findings of the Study**

Chapter 5 reflects on the findings presented in Chapter 4. These findings are compared to the literature review presented in Chapter 2, as well as the research questions answered. The contributions and limitations of the study are also discussed. The chapter then brings the thesis to a close with concluding thoughts.

## 1.13 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Chapter 1 framed the context of the study by providing an overview of the literature pertinent to the study. The chapter then highlighted the importance of this research by discussing the problem statement, as well as the rationale thereof. The purpose statement was then discussed, followed by the research questions that guided this study. A concise overview of the research methodology underpinning and guiding this study, specifically, the interpretive paradigm, was discussed. The key concepts were clarified, and the qualitative research methods and procedures used in collecting, analysing, and interpreting the data were discussed. The two theoretical frameworks that this study was guided by were disclosed, as well as the significance of the study, and the assumptions made. Chapter 2 provides extensive, in-depth descriptions of the challenges experienced by special education teachers and learning support educators during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 BACKGROUND

The Coronavirus was first apparent in animals in the 1920s. It first appeared in chickens as an acute respiratory infection. This was reported in North America, and the virus was known as the IBV. Then, in 1940, two new variants of the virus were reported. These variants caused murine encephalitis (JMV), and hepatitis (MHV) in mice (El-Sayed & Kamel, 2021).

There were no reports of humans having the Coronavirus until the 1960s, when a substantial number of children developed upper respiratory tract infections, which were caused by the virus. In 1961-1962, two human corona viruses were collected; these were identified as B814 and 229E. These variants of the virus caused a common flu-like symptom. Then, in 2003, a Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak emerged in China, and four other countries. This SARS was then identified as the SARS-COV (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome-Associated Coronavirus). Other human coronaviruses that have been identified to date include HCoV NL63, which was discovered in 2003; HCoV HKUI, which was discovered in 2004; MERS-CoV, discovered in 2012; and lastly, the SARS-CoV which was discovered in 2019 (Nath & Aditya, 2021).

On the 31st of December 2019, the country office of the World Health Organization (WHO) in China reported a collective number of pneumonia cases in Wuhan, China. On the 7th of January 2020, the plague that contributed to these cases was identified as a new Coronavirus (2019-nCoV) (Wang et al., 2020). A respiratory syndrome called Coronavirus-2 (SARS-COV-2) emerged, and it caused an infectious disease called the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) (Lai et al., 2020). The virus spread around the world in less than three months, and was one of the biggest viruses to ever affect human beings (Du Toit, 2020). On the 11th of March 2020, the WHO declared it a pandemic due to the widespread of the Coronavirus (World Health Organization, 2020a).

The Coronavirus spreads from one person to another through respiratory droplets that are produced when one coughs and/or sneezes (World Health Organization, 2020a). The virus can also be transmitted through close contact with an individual that has the

virus; as well as being exposed to droplets and bowel movements, or oral transmission. The virus can be contracted through the nose, mouth, or eyes, where after it enters the lungs (Shin et al., 2020).

According to the WHO (2023), there are four variants of the SARS CoV-2. Firstly, there is the Alpha variant, which is also identified as B.1.1.7. This was the first variant of the Coronavirus, and it was identified in November 2020 in the United Kingdom. The Beta variant, also identified as B.1.351, B.1.351.2, and B.1.351.3, of SARS-CoV2 was first reported in South Africa in December 2020. The third variant to be discovered was the Gamma variant. This variant was also identified as P.1, P.1.1, and P.1.2, and was first detected in NIID Japan in January 2021. The last variant is known as the Delta variant. The Delta variant can also be identified as B.1.617.2, AY.1, AY.2, AY.3, AY.4, AY.5, AY.6, AY.7, AY.8, AY.9, AY.10, AY.11, AY.12 or the Indian variant, and this was first detected in India in 2020. The Delta variant was identified as the 'variant of concern' in June 2021 as it was responsible for the Second Wave in India, as well as the Third Wave in South Africa, and the United Kingdom (Nath & Aditya, 2021). The Alpha and Gamma variants were of concern at the time of this study.

The Coronavirus affects both the upper and lower respiratory tract. The normal symptoms of the virus are a runny nose; loss of taste and smell; congestion of the nose; shortness of breath; chest pains; diarrhoea; headache; and a sore throat (Wu et al., 2020). More complex symptoms of the virus include pneumonia, throat pain, as well as severe distress in the respiratory system (Hafeez et al., 2020).

The preventative measures taken to curb the spread of the virus are: washing hands with soap or spraying hands with hand sanitizer after touching surfaces; maintaining a one-meter distance between persons; wearing a facemask that covers the nose and mouth; wearing a face shield that covers the eyes, nose, and mouth; individuals covering their mouths when coughing; and self-isolating for 14 days if an individual has caught the virus or is showing symptoms of the virus (Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019).

## 2.2 INTRODUCTION

### 2.2.1 The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Teaching

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic was abrupt and unforeseeable, and any measures that were taken to halt the spread of the virus during the pandemic had to be implemented with urgency. Serious and emergency measures had to be implemented to make the necessary adjustments to teaching during the pandemic (Agusta et al., 2022). On the 15<sup>th</sup> of March 2020, the president of South Africa, Mr Cyril Ramaphosa, declared the COVID-19 pandemic a national disaster. A lockdown was implemented, and schools were closed. However, the expectation was that teaching and learning would continue to take place from home (Soudien et al., 2021).

Between the 6<sup>th</sup> of April and the 11<sup>th</sup> of May 2021, Shepherd et al. (2021) conducted a study that revealed that about 500 000 young learners had fallen off the education radar because of the COVID-19 pandemic (Magadla, 2021). Researchers and policymakers have claimed that these learning losses widen the knowledge gap needed to access tertiary education and employment, that there will be an increase in social inequality, and that it may also damage the global economy (Economist Leader, World Bank, 2021). The learning loss that has emerged because of the pandemic has resulted in children missing out on weeks and, in some instances, months of schooling (UNESCO, 2020; Vegas, 2021). According to UNESCO (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic created a shock and radical wave in the education system, where 1.6 billion young, school-attending people were disrupted from having contact schooling.

The COVID-19 lockdown pandemic resulted in a new status quo, where the routines practised in schools were suddenly removed. These routines, which had provided assurance, consistency, and predictability in the outcomes of education were disrupted, leaving learners and educators with uncertainty (Adu et al., 2022).

When the schooling system temporarily closed due to COVID-19 measures, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) was then required to inform the public about the alternative measures that would be put in place to ensure that the education system stayed functional during the pandemic (Soudien et al., 2021). In the middle of April 2020, the DBE, with the support of the National Education Collaboration, put in place a COVID-19 response programme.

According to Soudien et al., (2021), there was a multi-media learner support programme that was publicised by the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) on three national, as well as eight regional radio stations. However, Individualised Education Plans (IEP) are essential for learners with special needs (Kargin, 2007). It was for this reason that it was not possible to cater to learners with special needs through television broadcasts.

Curriculum support lessons, particularly those focusing on subjects such as mathematics, English First Additional Language, accounting, physical science, and life sciences for Grades 10, 11, and 12 were placed online. The support lessons were also provided for Early Childhood Education.

The Department of Basic Education (DBE) uploaded study material on its website. This included material such as workbooks for the intermediate phase, revision books for Grades 10 to 12, as well as additional material for special needs groups, and those learners who were repeating a grade. Parents were also provided with information on how to help their children learn. Psychosocial resources were included, which incorporated guidelines for special needs schools. Educators were also supported through WhatsApp feeds that provided them with information on how to manage the learning challenges that were experienced by their learners during the COVID-19 pandemic. Consultations were also held with teacher unions and the DBE on any issues that arose during the lockdown (Soudien et al., 2021).

### **2.3 ACHIEVING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL 4: EDUCATION IN THE FACE OF COVID-19**

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is an inter-governmental plan that aims to act on behalf of the people, the planet, and prosperity in general. It comprises 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that are consolidated, intact, and that balance three facets of the SDG (economic, environmental, and social). Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) focuses on education. Education is regarded as an independent goal that has seven targets (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2015). SDG 4 aims to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”

(UNESCO, 2017, p. 7). According to UNESCO (2017, pp. 11-13), the seven targets of the agenda which must be achieved by the year 2030 are:

Target 1: By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes.

Target 2: By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education.

Target 3: By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university.

Target 4: By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship.

Target 5: By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations.

Target 6: By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy.

Target 7: By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and nonviolence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and culture's contribution to sustainable development.

SDG 4 is “dedicated to the achievement of quality education, aiming to ensure inclusive and equitable education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all” (Parker & Alfaro, 2021, p. 5). Unfortunately, the effect of COVID-19 will have adverse consequences on reaching SDG 4 as set out by the Sustainable Development Agenda (Balingit, 2021; OECD, 2020).

## **2.4 SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHING IN SOUTH AFRICA**

Special schools were created because, in the past, individual differences and learning styles were not as understood as they are today. Moreover, many years ago,

educators did not have the correct resources at their disposal to teach learners with special needs (Jenkinson, 1997), thus necessitating the creation of such schools.

According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 20 (US Department of Education, n.d), special education is an instruction that has been designed to meet the learning needs of learners with disabilities. Special education is conceptualised as 'special' because it has a different placement in education where the focus is not only on learners with disabilities, but on diverse learners. Special education consists of various teaching practices that have been specifically designed to meet the needs of learners who have special needs (Cook & Schirmer, 2003).

Following the Apartheid era, compulsory education for all children was introduced in South Africa, where all schooling practices that promoted segregation were eliminated (Maher, 2009). A new section on the rights of people with disabilities was introduced into the Constitution of South Africa. This new section outlined the government's new policies for a "single, undivided education system for all learners including those with disabilities in the hopes that inclusive education would provide a cornerstone for an integrated and caring society" (Department of Education, 2001, p. 10). The Education White Paper 6 (EWP6) (Department of Education, 2001) was designed to transform emergencies in the South African education system by creating and using a curriculum that was more flexible to meet the diverse needs of all learners. Furthermore, it was created to strengthen teachers' skills in teaching diverse classrooms; and to develop district-based support teams to offer support where needed (Muthukrishna & Schoeman, 2000), thus allowing for special needs learners to join mainstream schools. However, it has been over a decade since the creation of the Education White Paper 6, and most school-going learners living with a disability are still separated from other learners by being placed in 'special' schools for learners with disabilities (Donohue & Bornman, 2014).

During a pandemic, like COVID-19, educators play a significant role in the learning process of their learners. In this scenario, educators had to establish partnerships with the parents, caregivers, and the community to mitigate learning loss and the socioemotional damage to child development. This was also to ensure that an inclusive approach was implemented by all (Anand & Lall, 2022). However, learners were accustomed to face-to-face learning in a classroom setting, where the teacher



delivered a lesson at a face-to-face level. Special needs educators work with learners with various needs. Some learners are physically disabled; have sensory impairments; autism, or speech difficulties (Pedroso et al., 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the order in which the world functioned. It also resulted in the psychological well-being of people being heavily affected. The effects that the pandemic has had, and continues to have on people is an important area of focus (Holmes et al., 2020).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, educators, as well as other teaching staff were faced with challenges such as adapting to new health regulations, and repeated and extended lockdowns. They further faced unwanted media attention in the teaching profession at a time when educators were trying to adjust to the new 'normal' of living under the COVID-19 regulations. Educators also had to design the curriculum and implement pedagogical skills that would accommodate teaching on an online platform during the pandemic (Brooks et al., 2022). Educators had to spearhead online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, they had to organise instructional components such as the different tools that they would use to teach; they had to structure instructional time when using these tools; and they also had to be aware of the social and psychological factors that affected their motivation to work (Rasmitadila et al., 2020).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was ambiguity amongst special needs educators about what to teach, and how to teach it (Zhang et al., 2020). Special needs educators were faced with the difficulties of finding virtual strategies that could be implemented on an online platform and which accommodated learners who have special educational needs. It is because of this that learners with special educational needs suffered the most academically during the pandemic (Jalali et al., 2020). School closures presented administrators, heads of schools, as well as educators with the unprecedented task of discovering how to best teach and support learners who are in special schools and require specialised learning support (Frederick et al., 2020).

As special needs educators were preparing to transition to an online platform for teaching and learning, there were many factors that were unknown to them. These included how they would provide quality instruction and access to learners with a disability; how long it would take for schools to physically re-open; how they would

ensure keeping to the mandate of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA); and how they would provide support for the unique needs of their learners, as well as their parents during the COVID-19 pandemic (Glessner & Johnson, 2020).

## **2.5 CHALLENGES AND IMPACTS OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19**

Galevska and Pesic (2018) state that an inclusive school is a school that provides equal opportunities for both learners with special needs, and those without special needs in the same classroom. These learners attend an inclusive school according to their level of ability, regardless of any physical or mental developmental disorders with which they might be living (Dapudong, 2014). The aim is to enable all children to be integrated into a school where they are placed in regular classes, and are supported in their learning as they participate in everyday educational activities (Hardy & Woodcock, 2014; Haugh, 2016). This requires accessibility that supports the needs of learners with special needs, as well as creating a safe and comfortable space in which all learners can learn, as stipulated in the Education White Paper 6 (Asri et al., 2021).

Inclusive education also provides learners with special needs the opportunity to make friends with other learners through all of them learning in one environment. This helps them to be able to participate fully in society while also receiving an education (Hornby, 2015). Kucukera and Cifci-Tekinarслан (2015) explain that this will help learners with special needs to feel like they are a part of the community, and it will help build their self-potential in both an academic and non-academic space. The National Department of Education, education departments from different provinces, District-Based Support Teams (DBST), Full-Service Schools (FSS), ordinary schools, and special needs schools have been identified as the structures that are responsible for implementing inclusive education (Department of Education, 2001).

Although inclusive education has been well accepted in recent years, its acceptance does not necessarily mean that it is implemented in the classroom. Inclusive education does not include special classrooms or placing all children with disabilities in mainstream schools. Inclusive education begins with the assumption that all children have the right to be taught in the same schools, and in the same classrooms (Cobley, 2018; UNESCO-IBE, 2016). According to Snell (2003), educators agree with the idea

of inclusive education, but at the same time believe that learners with disabilities should be placed in separate classrooms. Bornman and Rose (2010) state that a lack of resources, and support, and the negative attitudes in societies about disabilities contribute to the difficulty of creating inclusive schools in South Africa.

This is not isolated to South Africa as Frankel et al. (2010) argue that many other countries have struggled to implement inclusive education policies in practice. They further explain that the most effective way for inclusive education to be implemented successfully is through educators receiving adequate training and support, and adopting a positive attitude towards inclusive education. De Boer et al. (2011) identify educators as key players in the implementation of inclusive education. Educators need to know how to identify barriers to learning; the different ways of addressing these barriers through curriculum differentiation; classroom methodologies; and the different forms of assessments that they need to conduct with their learners (Schoeman, 2012).

However, Bagree and Lewis (2013) state that educators are not often trained to teach learners with learning disabilities. In support of this, Mahlo (2011) reveals that educators feel that they are not adequately trained in inclusive education, and that they need intensive training to be able to support learners with special educational needs in their classrooms. The challenge of teaching special needs learners was further compounded by the measures taken to continue learners' education despite the COVID-19 pandemic. With schools being physically closed, access to essential resources for learners with special educational needs was compromised. This was especially the case as some parents of learners with special educational needs were unlikely to have the resources that would replicate their children's education at home (Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, all learners were barred from their educational institutions. This had a profoundly negative effect on the learning outcomes of learners, particularly those from marginalised groups whose basic foundational learning is not strong to begin with (Ahmed, 2020). It should be noted that inclusive education has a direct impact on the values and practices of the educational system in its entirety (Artiles et al., 2006).

This study does not focus on the challenges experienced by general classroom educators. It focuses on the challenges experienced by Learning Support Educators

(LSE), and Special Needs Educators (SET). It is often assumed that an LSE and an SET have the same role to play when it comes to providing support to learners with barriers (Woolfson et al., 2007). However, this is not the case, and since this study focused on the challenges experienced by LSE and SETs, it is important to first outline the role of these professions before addressing the challenges experienced by them.

## **2.6 THE ROLE OF A LEARNING SUPPORT EDUCATOR (LSE) IN SOUTH AFRICA**

The transformation towards inclusive education implies that there needs to be a change in the way that diversity is understood. Inclusive education therefore has a direct role in how Learning Support Educators (LSEs) view their role in schools. Learning support has thus shifted from a problem-focused approach to an approach that focuses on providing the support that children need so that they can participate fully in the classroom (Bornman & Rose, 2010).

An LSE is tasked with the role of providing support to learners experiencing barriers to learning (Dreyer, 2013). LSEs provide academic support to learners by removing them from the mainstream classroom and placing them in small groups in a class where they will receive support from the LSE (Dreyer, 2013; Kriel & Livingston, 2019). LSEs play an active role in the school system because they identify learners with learning barriers and then share their knowledge and skills with educators in the mainstream classroom to provide the kind of support needed for each learner (Dreyer, 2013). Learners who require support from LSEs receive this support bi-weekly, and sometimes three times a week (Nel et al., 2016). An LSE provides support sessions that primarily focus on either literacy or numeracy. Learning support is different in that the kind of support that a learner receives focuses specifically on what the learner is capable of doing. Thus, it provides a space where a learner is given an opportunity to succeed as they receive academic intervention from an LSE. Learning support also provides a space where learners' self-esteem can be enhanced (Kriel & Livingston, 2019).

According to the literature, there are two main methodologies for providing learning support. The first method is known as 'withdrawal', which comprises removing or pulling a learner out of the classroom to provide individual support to them (Mulholland & O'Connor, 2016; Takala & Ahl, 2014). The second method involves co-teaching, where LSEs work together with the general teacher in the classroom, allowing for

support to be provided immediately to the learner while the learner is in the classroom (Butt, 2016; Forlin & Rose, 2010).

### **2.6.1 Withdrawal of the Learner**

When a learner is withdrawn from the classroom, they are taken to receive learning support in a specialised classroom. Travers (2006) states that learning support is offered to learners in mainstream schools by LSEs, who then identify and support the learner according to his/her needs. This process thus involves remediating the learner on a one-on-one individual basis.

Mulholland and O'Connor (2016) further clarify that in such cases, the process of withdrawing the learner from the classroom enables support to be provided in a room dedicated to that purpose. According to Takala and Ahl (2014), the process of withdrawing a learner from the classroom is exclusively the work of an LSE, who works with learners on a one-on-one basis where the provision of support may be more intense and therapeutic. The classroom context does not provide the opportunity for focus to be placed solely on one learner (Travers, 2006). When the LSE withdraws the learner from the classroom, they develop an Individualised Educational Programme (IEP) that is aimed at achieving the required results.

LSEs provide support that is based on adapting the curriculum according to the ability of each learner. They implement inclusivity by adapting the curriculum and ensuring that learners who need it are referred for individualised support (Bruggink et al., 2014).

### **2.6.2 Learning Support as a Collaborative Role**

LSEs play a collaborative role with educators in mainstream schools, assisting them in adapting the curriculum and fulfilling their role. Travers (2011) explains that LSEs teach with the general teacher in one classroom in order for in-class support to happen (Bornman & Rose, 2010; Boyle et al., 2011). However, Wilson et al. (2007) state that providing learning support should not be done solely by the LSE. They emphasise that learning support should be an approach practised by the whole school. Therefore, LSEs need to deliver the relevant information and support to general educators so that they can, in turn, provide support to learners that goes beyond the classroom (Sanahuja-Gavalda et al., 2016). LSEs are also responsible for collaborating with learners' parents to come up with the most suitable plan for the learner.

## **2.7 THE ROLE OF A SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER (SET) IN SOUTH AFRICA**

A teacher in a special education classroom is known as a Special Education Teacher (SET). Their role involves working with a specific number of disabled learners in a special education setting. A SET may be tasked with the role of developing a curriculum; having meetings with learners' parents; and conducting pre-and post-tests with learners where the teacher uses group standardised tests. SETs will also be involved in the annual meeting held by the Individualised Education Planning Committee to discuss the progress that has been made by each learner, as well as to plan the IEP for the next year. SETs will also be involved in the triennial evaluation process, the aim of which is to identify whether or not a learner still presents with the conditions that he/she was initially admitted to the school with, and if the condition is still in existence, as well as the type of modifications that need to be made for the learner. An SET is also responsible for monitoring the IEP, modifying it, and implementing any accommodation strategies indicated in the IEP.

The following paragraphs will discuss the challenges experienced by special needs educators and learning support educators during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **2.8. THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND ITS IMPACT ON SUPPORT STRATEGIES**

Support services, as defined by Makhalemele and Nel (2021), are the assistance provided by different stakeholders to accommodate a range of learning needs in various schools. The nationwide lockdown due to COVID-19 led to the closure of all schools, significantly hindering the provision of learning support for learners with special needs (Kamga, 2020). According to the Department of Basic Education, RSA (2020), the lockdown disrupted the education and support services for learners whose learning impairments required assistance from support teams like the School-based Support Team and other structures. Research also indicates that during the COVID-19 pandemic, no measures were taken to ensure that learners with barriers received the necessary support when education transitioned to online platforms, despite their reliance on additional support (Dube, 2020; Kamga, 2020). Shepherd and Mohohlwane (2021) highlight that one of the effects of COVID-19 was the dropout of many learners with diverse needs due to the insufficient support provided. Shifting to a remote and hybrid model of teaching and learning during the Covid-19 pandemic

had adverse implications for different support strategies that special education, and learning support educators utilised when supporting their learners with special needs.

### **2.8.1. Challenges in Implementing the Screening, Identification Assessment and Support Policy Document during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The Screening Identification Assessment and Support (SIAS) policy document was developed by the South African Department of Education (DoE, 2014). This policy was created as a framework for the standardisation of the procedures to be followed when screening, identifying, assessing, and supporting learners who need additional support to participate in school.

The SIAS policy is aimed at improving the access that vulnerable learners have to quality education. This includes learners who attend mainstream schools and are failing due to any barriers that they may be experiencing. The policy is also aimed at learners who are living with disabilities, where the disability becomes a barrier to the learner receiving education. Lastly, the policy is also aimed at helping children of compulsory school-going age who are out of the school system or have never been enrolled in a school because of a disability that they have.

The SIAS policy document was developed as a strategy to implement inclusive education (Republic of South Africa Department of Basic Education, 2014). Based on this, South African teachers are required to follow the process of screening, identifying, assessing, and supporting learners when implementing inclusive education. Based on the focus of this study, it is important to identify the challenges that were experienced by LSEs and SETs when implementing the SIAS policy during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The national lockdown presented challenges to the way in which learning support was provided in schools to learners with diverse needs (Kamga, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic reduced the support services provided to learners with special needs by specialists, such as speech and language therapists, psychologists, and special needs educators (Petretto et al., 2020). However, the main goal of educating learners with special needs is to ensure that they are integrated into the community by providing them with effective, and equal educational services through special schools and inclusive education. This can be achieved only if learners continue to receive special



needs support according to their IEP (Friend & Bursuck, 2012; Hornby, 2015; Turnbull et al., 2013), even during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. Unfortunately, learning activities for children with special needs were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which required them to conduct learning from their homes (Yunita et al., 2021). However, the COVID-19 pandemic posed a risk to special needs learners as it focused on the use of distance education as the main instrument of instruction (Schaeffer, 2020; Toquero, 2020). This mode of instruction was difficult for many learners, but especially so for learners with special needs.

### **2.8.2. Challenges in Implementing and Following the IEP during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Special education aims to ensure that all learners, regardless of ability or disability, have access to a relevant and inclusive learning environment. It tailors services, accommodations, and teaching strategies to meet the diverse needs of students with various disabilities, including mental, physical, sensory, emotional, and developmental impairments (Sharma, 2023). One of the most critical educational strategies for children with special educational needs is the Individualized Education Program (IEP), which is widely used in schools globally (Elder et al., 2018; Timothy & Agbenyega, 2018). The IEP is a written document outlining the educational needs and services for students with special educational needs (Walter-Thomas, 2000; Tran et al., 2018).

According to Varmar (2008), IEPs include detailed information such as the child's disability, current educational performance, annual goals, required special education services, and the learner's participation levels with peers without disabilities. They also outline the plans for delivering necessary services, methods for measuring the learner's progress, and the learner's ability to access general education based on their disability.

The IEP is a crucial document, as highlighted in the IDEA. Under IDEA, it is specified that the services and support programs required by learners with special educational needs must be detailed in the IEP (Siegel, 2020). IDEA safeguards the IEP by ensuring that the support processes outlined in it are followed. The IEP's purpose is to formalize the decisions made by a multidisciplinary team concerning the educational needs and service programs required by children with special education needs (SEN) (Walther-Thomas et al., 2000; Tran et al., 2018). Fu et al. (2018) emphasize that educators are



pivotal in the successful implementation of an IEP. Special education teachers can develop an IEP based on the learner's requirements and integrate it into the classroom. Teachers working with learners with special needs must be knowledgeable about IEPs and proficient in implementing them to meet each child's needs effectively (Ruble et al., 2011).

When an IEP is implemented, learners with SEN gain access to the special education system and receive structured interventions or assistance to support their learning (Kauffman et al., 2018). Establishing a positive, cooperative relationship between special education teachers and parents is essential for the successful implementation of an IEP (Groh, 2021). Research by Grskovic and Trzcinka (2011), and Sacks and Halder (2017) indicates that weak collaboration between parents and teachers of learners with special needs poses a significant challenge to the effective implementation of an IEP.

A study by Cimen, Ozturk, and Eretay (2010) found that special education teachers rarely receive support from parents during the IEP preparation stage, and parents showed little interest in the IEP implementation process. Conversely, Mitchell et al. (2010) identified that schools often do not prioritize the role parents can play in planning and implementing the IEP. The study revealed that schools frequently disregard parents' opinions, believing that only special education teachers (SETs) have a comprehensive understanding of the special education system. Additionally, the study found that SETs often failed to provide sufficient information to parents of learners with special educational needs, leading to a lack of parental involvement in the creation and implementation of the IEP.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, learners with impairments and learning challenges who rely on specialised education and support systems were among the most affected populations. These learners were unable to receive the specially planned teaching and related services specified in their IEPs due to school closures and the shift to distance learning (Sharma, 2023). The pandemic made it difficult for special needs and learning support educators to follow the plans outlined in the IEPs, leading to delays in assessments, challenges in providing appropriate accommodations, and modifications to academic objectives (Sharma, 2023). Additionally, the pandemic created significant obstacles in implementing IEPs. Special education teachers (SET)

and learning support educators (LSE) faced challenges such as insufficient time to adapt IEPs to the pandemic context and a lack of resources to effectively implement the plans (Akcin, 2022).

## **2.9. DISTANCE EDUCATION AS A MODE OF TEACHING FOR LEARNERS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, schools had to resort to using different modes of teaching and learning as emergency remote teaching (Agusta et al., 2022). Emergency teaching is a term that describes a temporary transition of learning from a face-to-face level to an online method of teaching and learning, which results from a crisis (Silvhiany, 2022). This method is termed 'emergency teaching' as it provides quick access to teaching and learning. Distance education can be split into two forms: synchronous and asynchronous. Synchronous learning occurs when learners interact with the teacher directly using online videos or other online tools where there is direct interaction on the online platform. Asynchronous online learning is indirect learning that occurs when a teacher sends learning material to learners via email or other platforms where the learner can engage with the material at their own pace and time (Ogbonna et al., 2019).

When a decision is made to teach using the distance education platform, there usually has been extensive thought put into making such a decision. Being able to implement distance education requires that there be thorough research that is conducted on the teaching practices, methods of assessments, as well as a specific online platform to ensure that distance learning takes place. However, none of this was done when the COVID-19 pandemic commenced. Instead, schools resorted to using technology that they were already familiar with, or that was at their disposal to ensure that they could continue to teach at a distance (Glessner & Johnson, 2020).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, countries had to measure whether the resources that they had would be able to accommodate distance learning and teaching. They also had to measure the level of inequality that existed between different schools, and how this would impact each school's ability to continue with teaching and learning with the

closure of schools, as well as how much of the academic year had already been lost due to the pandemic (ECLAC-UNESCO, 2020).

The facilitation of learning is different, and distance learning for learners with special needs is an option. However, because children with special needs have different levels of development than children without special needs, distance education can thus be an opportunity to continue learning during the pandemic. Nonetheless, this is only if they are provided with access to technology and all the information that they require to make learning possible (Karasel et al., 2020). However, Zaheer and Munir (2020) state that distance education lacks learner and teacher interaction, and the physical absence of a teacher makes building a relationship with a learner difficult. Meanwhile, Dube (2020) highlights that online learning favours privileged learners, and thus widens the gap between the poor and rich instead of uniting the world in fighting against COVID-19.

Another challenge with distance education for children with special needs is that the children's psychomotor, affective, and cognitive aspects are affected when learning is conducted online. Attention span is one of the challenges faced by children with developmental or learning disabilities (Ferretti, 2019). Therefore, learners' attention-related problems are an obstacle for them if they are expected to benefit from distance education, especially that which comes in the form of television broadcasts (Kuzu et al., 2022).

The learning strategies applied by the teacher during online or distance learning have an impact on the learning methods used, as well as the learning objectives of the teacher. With distance learning, educators are required to be more creative when designing learning methods that still achieve their learning objectives (Yunita et al., 2021). Educators used strategies such as verbal triggers, classroom rules, and symbol reinforcers to get the attention of their learners in the classroom. However, distance education deprives educators of opportunities to use hints when giving instructions, modelling, and physical assistance, which are much needed with special needs learners. SETs thus found it challenging to collaborate with their learners via a computer through distance education (Kuzu et al., 2022).

## **2.10. A LACK OF DIGITAL RESOURCES IN SCHOOLS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

The shift to online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the digital divide that exists between and within schools and countries (World Bank, 2020). A digital divide refers to the gap that exists between those individuals who can access different forms of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), and those who cannot (Pather et al., 2020).

According to Jantjies (2020), the digital divide that currently exists in South Africa can be classified under three factors. The first is access to hardware, which refers to the specific tools that provide access to the digital world. Secondly, the digital divide exists in South Africa because there is a lack of understanding of such digital technology and how it functions. This refers to the knowledge and skills that individuals lack when it comes to utilising ICT. Lastly, another factor that causes the digital divide in South Africa is internet affordability as many do not have the funds to buy the data required to have access to education.

With the switch to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, many learners were at a disadvantage because they could not afford data, which is needed for them to be able to engage in online learning. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed that online learning should be made a necessity across the world, instead of it being regarded as a luxury (Moonasamy & Naidoo, 2022).

### **2.10.1. Challenges to Educators' Professionalism during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

According to the South African Council for Educators (SACE, 2024), teacher professionalism refers to educators' obligation to provide their learners with quality education using the appropriate skills and knowledge. The professionalism of educators also rests on their attitude towards and ambitions for their job (Agusta et al., 2022). This also includes their ambitions to develop professionally through furthering and deepening their skills and knowledge (Sigurður, 2014). Educators are leaders in the classroom and, as such, they must demonstrate control in the classroom. Educators must also make use of various teaching methods that suit the needs of each of their diverse learners (SACE, 2024).

The COVID-19 pandemic made the task of teaching increasingly demanding and challenging. Educators had to adapt to new life norms, and habits of teaching that accommodated the pandemic (Hassan et al., 2021). Educators had to aggressively learn the importance of online learning, as well as how to meet the learning needs of their learners on such a platform (Hassan, 2017).

According to Sockett (1993), teacher professionalism is fixed to five components: (1) Teacher character; (2) Commitment to continuous improvement and change; (3) Subject knowledge; (4) Pedagogy; and (5) Participation in educational activities outside of the classroom. The COVID-19 pandemic affected and challenged all five components, thus challenging the professionalism of LSEs and SETs. Firstly, a teacher must always present a professional character and show commitment to teaching, regardless of any weaknesses and shortcomings that may be presented with the job. Secondly, educators are required to change and improve in their ability to use the technological platform, especially as this was their main teaching platform during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thirdly, a teacher must always demonstrate knowledge of the subject that they teach, and this remained true even during the pandemic. Fourthly, a teacher must always demonstrate pedagogical knowledge, and during the pandemic, this had to be demonstrated on an online platform. Lastly, educators are required to improve on their weaknesses, such as using an online platform to ensure that teaching and learning continue despite the pandemic (Hassan, et al., 2021). Professional development is essential for online educators as it assists them to develop and grasp new teaching pedagogies, and gain crucial teaching competencies (Atmojo, 2021; Silvhiany, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic therefore challenged educators because it measured the level and adaptability of their skills to continue to provide learning that was of good quality even under the COVID-19 regulations (Hassan, 2017).

### **2.10.2. The Integration of an Online Code of Ethics for Educators in the COVID-19 Era**

Every profession requires a code of conduct as this regulates the actions of the different stakeholders within that profession (Haris et al., 2021). According to Abidin (2014), ethics refers to a philosophical discipline that is concerned with the way that humans behave, and their moral decision-making process. Ethical issues related to

the online context affected distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is thus necessary to integrate online learning with teacher ethics so that the rights of educators and learners remain uncompromised (Farrow, 2016; Saputra & Al Siddiq, 2020).

The behaviour of educators is governed by (a) Personal values; (b) Professional ethics; as well as (c) Legal procedures. Educators should understand their professional code of ethics according to these three components (Mariyana, 2010). A professional code of ethics is a guideline that stipulates the duties and activities of a specific profession, and how those must be adhered to.

A professional code of conduct is required: (a) To protect the profession according to the policies that have been established by the governing body for that profession; (b) To maintain the stability of the profession by making sure to minimise disagreements between professionals and the implementors of the code of conduct; (c) To protect practitioners of the profession from wrongful practices; and (d) To protect learners from any practices that may be unlawful (Mariyana, 2010).

Teaching requires a code of ethics because educational activities should always be carried out professionally (Anwar, 2020). A professional code of ethics guides educators by providing clear standards regarding how they should behave, which is based on the agreed values and morals of the teaching profession (Haris et al., 2021). These values are then clearly indicated in the educational services provided, as well as the activities in which a teacher engages (Afandi, 2011).

Educators are responsible for teaching learners how to be kind and respectful. This should be reflected in how the learners behave online. Educators are tasked with the role of promoting moral development, and must combine ethics with cognitive, social, and emotional aspects, even across an online platform (Stoesz & Yudintseva, 2018). It is also the responsibility of the teacher to teach digital citizenship to his/her learners. This can be done effectively through modelling ethical uses of technology regularly where learners are provided with equal opportunities to access the digital space. Educators are also tasked with the role of developing the digital literacy skills and behaviours of learners, where they are taught how to take responsibility for their behaviour on an online platform (Farrow, 2016; Jesús et al., 2019; Saputra & Al Siddiq, 2020). It is educators' responsibility to teach learners how to use digital media in safe

ways, as well as how to avoid cyberbullying (Farrow, 2016). However, because COVID-19 was unforeseen and immediate action was taken to curb the spread of the virus, educators did not get the time or opportunity to teach their learners how to conduct themselves when using technology.

### **2.10.3. Challenges in the Implementation of COVID-19 Regulations in the Classroom**

According to UNICEF (2020), schools play a vital role in the health and safety of teachers and learners during the pandemic. As schools reopened, and face-to-face classes resumed during the COVID-19 pandemic, there had to be certain measures and precautions implemented to prevent the spread of the virus.

One of the many restrictions that were imposed was social distancing. According to Abel and McQueen (2020), and Aminnejad and Alikhani (2020), social distancing refers to maintaining a physical distance from other people. In preventing the spread of COVID-19, the education team (teachers, learners, principals, and other teaching and learning staff members) had to maintain a certain physical distance from one another (Rotnitsky et al., 2022).

However, research conducted by Abel and McQueen (2020), and Xie et al. (2020) indicates that social distancing has had negative effects on the mental health of learners as learners reported experiencing anxiety, loneliness, and depression. Learning from home was a challenge as it limited the interaction that learners had with their teachers, classmates, and friends (Wyse et al., 2020).

Teachers identified that their learners were socially isolated because of the shift to online learning due to the pandemic (Flack, 2020). Some primary school teachers reported that because their learners were socially isolated due to social distancing, their learners' academic performance was severely affected.

Another COVID-19 regulation that had to be adhered to was the wearing of a face mask in public spaces. According to Spitzer (2021), this was an easy rule to implement in school, and made controlling the spread of the virus easier. However, according to Esposito et al. (2021), several disadvantages come with wearing a face mask. This is particularly true for young children who have respiratory diseases and, as such, wearing a facemask can be challenging for them.



Wearing face masks also presents problems for learners with special education needs. Face masks hide a significant portion of an individual's face; they interfere with verbal and non-verbal communication; and they may block any facial expressions, such as smiling, between a learner and a teacher. This could thus affect the teacher-learner relationship (Spitzer, 2021; Vergara et al., 2022).

#### **2.10.4. The Impact of COVID-19 on Teacher Stress and Well-being**

Work stress, also known as occupational stress (Shukla & Srivastava, 2016), occurs when the abilities of employees are not aligned with the requirements and resources of the job that they currently occupy. According to Gujral (2013), work stress refers to job demands that exceed job resources. This leads to the employee facing circumstances that are not favourable.

Welch (1996) stated that special needs educators fall under the category of neglected professionals. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, special needs educators were already identified as one of the at-risk groups for stress and burnout (Brunsting et al., 2014). According to Kaufhold et al. (2006), as well as McKay (2016), special needs educators experience an insurmountable level of stress due to the nature of their jobs (Fitzpatrick, 2022).

Moreover, special needs educators experience stress due to (a) A lack of assistance with administration duties (Strydom et al., 2012); (b) Role burden (De Stasio et al., 2017); and c) Feeling that learners are not learning from the efforts that they put into teaching them (Kristiana et al., 2018).

McCarthy (2019) defines teacher stress as a discrepancy between the demands and pressures of being an educator, and their ability to cope with these demands. Teaching is a stressful profession that involves experiencing negative emotions such as anxiety, depression, and frustration (Kyriacou, 2001). Common stressors that educators experience are low student motivation, and behaviour problems (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018); pressure to introduce a new curriculum (Putwain & von der Embse, 2019); their work relationship with their colleagues (Erdiller & Doğan, 2015); and workload pressure (Austin et al., 2005).

Educators' workload has historically been identified as the primary cause of stress for them (Marko, 2015). Educators face numerous challenges in their day-to-day duties,



such as working under tight time constraints, supporting the needs of diverse learners, and managing the classroom. Such challenges were further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Polok et al., 2020). Teacher stress during the COVID-19 pandemic has been largely influenced by the transitioning of teaching from a physical space to a virtual teaching and learning platform (Dhawan, 2020; Glessner & Johnson, 2020; Klapproth et al., 2020). Educators' experiences of stress and their coping strategies during COVID-19-induced distance teaching were documented. Educators had to adapt to virtual teaching methods at a very fast pace (Bubb & Jones, 2020), and this sudden shift to online teaching significantly impacted the use of technology in schools (Patel et al., 2020) due to it being thrust upon them so suddenly.

The stress experienced by educators involved adapting to online learning and teaching; managing their work, as well as their personal responsibilities; and dealing with fear about the security of their job, as well as fears about their future because of the COVID-19 pandemic (Lin, 2019; Ahorsu et al., 2020). Stress affects both teachers' professional and private lives, which can lead to a decrease in their life satisfaction (Ferguson et al., 2012; La Torre et al., 2019).

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, there was already a focus on the mental health of educators due to the demands that the profession places on them. Scientific research reveals that the teaching profession has a history of educators experiencing high levels of professional dissatisfaction, depression, stress, and burnout (Jensen et al., 2012; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015). Educators experience these emotions because of the workload that comes with being a teacher, as well as the growing use of technology in the classroom (Garrick et al., 2018). For an individual to reach a level of job satisfaction, the psychological, physiological, as well as environmental conditions of their workplace need to foster positive feelings towards the work that is being done in that organisation (Aziri, 2011). This will help to ensure that productivity rates in the workplace increase, and that workers' sense of well-being is maintained.

Bliese et al. (2017, p. 390) define stress as "a condition or event in the situation, the person's reaction to the situation, or the relationship between the person and the situation." According to Cowan et al. (2011), an individual identifies something as being stressful based on his/her ability to cope with it. Considering this, the changes brought about by the pandemic have led to educators experiencing many uncertainties

and stress, and these have jeopardised their well-being (Gadermann et al., 2021). The mental health of educators also affects their performance at work, and may result in educators not being able to teach effectively (Al Lily et al., 2007; Spilt et al., 2011).

A Teacher Stress Survey conducted by researchers from Yale University reported that since the beginning of the pandemic, the level of stress experienced by educators has increased. The Teacher Stress Survey was released at the end of March 2020, and it received over 5000 responses from educators in just three days of being conducted. The survey revealed that when educators were asked to indicate which common emotions they experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, they indicated feeling sad, overwhelmed, anxious, worried, and fearful (Brackett & Cipriano, 2020). Another team of researchers from Yale University also identified that educators were (a) concerned about the health of their learners and colleagues; (b) stressed about how they were going to balance work and life, especially since they would be teaching from home; and (c) concerned over the need to provide the basic service required of them, and for which they were being paid (Brackett et al., 2020).

When teachers experience stress, it can also lead to them experiencing a decrease in life satisfaction, as well as a decrease in their career satisfaction, which may cause them to have lower work commitment and work satisfaction (Ferguson et al., 2012; La Torre et al., 2019). During the pandemic, educators also experienced depression, anxiety, and disturbances in their sleeping patterns due to the increase in their workload.

#### **2.10.5. Increased Teacher Workload Challenges in Online Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Educators are expected to create their lesson plans, design experiments, and create tests, exams, and assignments. They are also expected to mark their learners' work. Content preparation and the delivery thereof to learners requires that educators carefully select and then arrange the content in a way that will meet the individual learning needs of their learners. Educators must constantly be conscious of the psychomotor skills, as well as cognitive and affective skills of each of their learners when preparing the content to be taught in class. With face-to-face teaching, educators are able to manipulate the learning situation. However, with online learning, they have no control over what is happening with learners over the screen (Adigun et al., 2022).

On average, according to Walker (2018), educators work 53 hours or more per week, and a large portion of the work that they do is done at home. An increase in educators' workload during the pandemic was not only caused by the new teaching format, but also by the constant communication that had to occur between the teachers, parents, and learners during this period (Petraikova et al., 2020). According to Austin et al. (2005) and Marko (2015), workload has been identified as one of the main sources of teacher stress. Other challenges that educators face include time constraints that are imposed on them to cover the curriculum; supporting the diverse needs of the learners that they teach; as well as classroom management challenges (Polok et al., 2020).

Prior research has further indicated that most educators leave the teaching profession because of exhaustion and a lack of confidence in their teaching skills (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015). These challenges were further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic as educators experienced high levels of exhaustion, and a lack of confidence in the teaching skills required during this period (Gadermann et al., 2021). Research conducted in other countries by Ozamiz-Exterbarria et al. (2020) and McIntyre et al. (2020) confirm that there has been an increase in stress and emotional exhaustion among educators because of the COVID-19 pandemic. A study conducted by De la Fuente et al. (2020) has also shown that the relationship that exists between educators and their learners can also be a source of stress for the learner. Furthermore, how a teacher behaves will predict and influence the emotional well-being of learners, as well as their dedication and commitment to their schoolwork. Therefore, the well-being of educators must be safeguarded as it has both a direct and an indirect impact on the learners that they teach.

According to Bettini et al. (2018), educators face high demands when it comes to providing instruction to their learners. Moreover, special needs educators report that they struggle to construct lesson plans and deliver instruction when they must do so for many grades and subjects. Children with special education needs require structure, repetition of activities when learning, Individual Education Plans (IEP), classroom management practices, and the use of materials to ensure that teaching and learning occur. Thus, adapting to online learning became a challenge for special needs educators (Demir et al., 2022). This highlighted a lack of online teaching skills.

### **2.10.6. Teachers' Insufficient Online Teaching Skills during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The opportunities offered by digital technology go beyond time and space during a crisis (Agusta et al., 2022). Therefore, during the COVID-19 pandemic, online learning became a necessity. Teaching learners using an online platform due to emergency conditions is different to teaching learners who choose to conduct their learning on an online platform outside of emergency reasons such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Faridah et al., 2021; Juanbe et al., 2020).

Integrating technology into the instructional process can enhance teaching and learning (Doolittle & Hicks, 2003). However, for educators to successfully use technology, they need to master the knowledge and skills required to integrate it into the classroom (Garba et al., 2015). "Educators must have specific knowledge of pedagogy, content and technology, as well as an understanding of how these elements interact to teach in a virtual environment" (Moore-Adams et al., 2016, p. 334). Online teaching and learning is demanding as there are different phases to it. According to Abdous (2011), online teaching and learning involves three processes: preparing, planning, as well as designing lessons. All three processes happen before, during, and after the presentation of lessons.

Special needs educators were challenged with what is termed 'role swing' as they had to transition from a traditional, face-to-face classroom environment to teaching and learning in a virtual classroom environment (Adigun et al., 2022). Educators have thus shifted from being 'performers' in the classroom to being 'guiders' in a virtual classroom, and this has been a challenge for them (Kebritchi et al., 2017). Special needs educators experienced more significant challenges with the use of technology to continue teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic because their learners could not independently type or even use a computer (Turner, 2020).

Technology provides a completely different landscape for how learning occurs, what learners learn, and where they learn. Moreover, technology assists educators and learners to access specialised materials that go beyond a hard copy textbook as it comes in multiple formats (Agusta et al., 2022). Electronic learning, also known as e-learning, refers to the application of digital media such as virtual classrooms, computer-based learning, and network-based learning (Lin et al., 2017). According to

Moore-Adams et al., (2016), online learning involves virtual learning, distance learning, and remote learning where learning is conducted on a virtual platform, and where communication only occurs using technological resources.

E-learning can be done through different formats such as pre-recorded classes, live classes, videos, simulations, and games (Jimola & Ofudu, 2021). Digital learning cannot replace face-to-face learning, however, it is an indispensable tool that was of great use during the COVID-19 pandemic when face-to-face classes were suspended. Digital learning is easily applicable to subjects with content that is flexible, whereas subjects that are more practical need traditional face-to-face learning (Lin et al., 2017).

Teaching using an online platform is different from traditional face-to-face teaching and is not a simple process to implement. Educators thus found this experience to be challenging (Glessner & Johnson, 2020; Young & Donovan, 2020). The physical closure of schools meant that learners with special educational needs did not have access to crucial resources, and this resulted in their learning being compromised (Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020). Online learning during the pandemic was demanding as it required that parents be more involved in their child's learning process, especially for children with a disability (Borup et al., 2014). This is due to the shift in the role that parents had to take on as they became the primary educational support for their child's educational activities.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, online teaching and learning was not a common experience for educators and learners. In most cases, educators and learners had limited to no experience with an online platform (Depuydt, 2021). However, all of this changed because of the pandemic.

Educators have always been ascribed the role of being the primary source of information for learners (Kuehn, 2019; Luthra & Mackenzie, 2020), however, the COVID-19 pandemic transformed the role of the teacher. The transition from physical to online instruction required that educators tailor their lessons to the educational needs of their learners. School districts had to design an IEP for each of their learners. This plan indicated the individual needs and objectives of each learner; their current academic performance level; educational goals; as well as the special educational services that the learner needed (Young & Donovan, 2020). Implementing online learning posed various challenges for educators and learners in both mainstream and

special needs classes (Asri et al., 2021). One of these challenges was that a significant number of educators, learners, and parents had little to no access to resources such as laptops, which were essential to ensuring that online teaching and learning took place (Mukute, et al., 2020). Another challenge was educators' lack of knowledge and skills in using an online platform to facilitate the teaching and learning process (Joshi et al., 2020; Klapproth et al., 2020). Educators may have felt demoralised when facing this challenge.

Educators' perception regarding the use of technology, as well as how comfortable they are in using it, may influence their interest in using online platforms to teach. This may further be influenced by a lack of access to digital devices, financial constraints, lack of internet connectivity, and an interrupted supply of electricity (Adigun et al., 2022). Teachers' skills in this domain can affect whether they perceive the virtual space negatively or positively (Quezada et al., 2020).

Moreover, a lack of time, resources, and support are further barriers to the use of online teaching (Pittman & Gaines, 2015). Educators experienced difficulties in finding virtual strategies that would fit an online curriculum for learners with special educational needs. As a result of this, learners with special educational needs suffered the most educational consequences during the pandemic (Jalali et al., 2020).

Surveys conducted in South Africa (Czierniewicz et al., 2020), Austria, Germany, and China (Zhang et al., 2020), revealed that educators were expected to facilitate their teaching online within a short period of time, not giving them enough time to transition from teaching physical classes to online classes (Graham et al., 2019; Gurley, 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic revealed that there was a lack of skills among educators, especially when it came to distance education and online teaching. However, educators took it upon themselves to address this challenge by making use of the skills that they had already developed during their careers to teach their learners during the pandemic (KIX COVID-19 observatory, 2021). Despite finding a way to work through these challenges, it is still vital that educators acquire Information Communication Technology (ICT) skills as these are needed in emergencies such as those presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Training that caters to advanced ICT skills has therefore been identified as a necessity in teaching (Schleicher, 2020). Educators need to be skilled in using technology, and



transforming curricula into online material, thus using the internet. They must be able to use PowerPoint lessons, and they need to know how to use platforms and programs like Google Classrooms, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams (Kundu & Bej, 2021). Online methods of teaching not only require training, but also adapting to the changes inherent in these methods. These methods thus require a specialised pedagogy with which most educators are unfamiliar (Mudi, 2020).

Special needs educators reported that when providing instruction using an online platform, they encountered difficulties in being able to adequately provide special education services, especially to learners who had multiple or more significant disabilities (Smith, 2020). Many learners with disabilities require a more structured learning environment, as well as additional resources such as physical, occupational, and speech therapy (Schaeffer, 2020). Educators were further challenged when they had to provide online instruction to learners who were deaf or had visual impairments (Alsadoon & Turkestani, 2020; Chowdhuri et al., 2012; Tandy & Meacham, 2009).

Online inclusive teaching involving educators is structured according to the typology of special needs. Special needs educators thus had to manage various cases of special needs from severe disabilities to specific learning difficulties (Parmigiani et al., 2021). Special needs educators therefore had difficulties in implementing learning materials that would match their learners' learning needs based on the disability with which each of the learners presented. Educators were also not able to fully understand how to apply the principles of inclusive education on an online platform (Center on Online Learning and Students with Disabilities, 2016). Supporting learners with special needs using an online platform is therefore a challenge when there is a lack of online platforms that are compatible with assistive technology (Hills, 2020).

#### **2.10.7. Teachers' Lack of Motivation and Self-Efficacy during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

According to Harmer (2007), motivation refers to an individual's internal drive to want to achieve a particular goal. Teacher motivation in education is related to factors such as teaching practice, teachers' psychological fulfilment, student motivation, and educational reform (Han & Yin, 2016). Dornyei and Ushioda (2011) state that teacher motivation can be understood from two dimensions: the teacher's motivation to teach,

as well as their motivation to stay in the teaching profession. This means that teachers need to feel motivated in order to stay in the teaching profession.

Bandura (1994) states that self-efficacy affects how an individual feels about themselves, how they behave, and how motivated they feel regarding different situations. Teacher self-efficacy therefore refers to the confidence that a teacher has about their ability to promote children's learning.

According to Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2010), teacher self-efficacy refers to an individual educator's beliefs about their ability to organise, plan, as well as execute instructional activities with learners in a manner that will ensure that the educational goal is achieved. Educators with high teacher self-efficacy have greater self-esteem, and this has been shown to improve teacher performance, and reduce burnout (Kan & Yel, 2019).

Adebomi et al. (2012) evaluated the self-efficacy of teachers and found that the job satisfaction of teachers is directly linked to their self-efficacy, and that a combination of these two aspects leads to high job commitment. Adebomi et al. (2012) concluded that teachers with high self-efficacy will ensure that they try all instructional approaches to ensure that they provide adequate learning experiences for their learners. Lee et al. (2011) added that the self-efficacy of teachers is highly influenced by a lack of resources such as technology, a lack of support from the school and district, as well as heavy workloads.

The COVID-19 pandemic challenged teacher motivation and self-efficacy because educators had to transition from a familiar process of teaching and learning to an unfamiliar one. This left them feeling uncertain about their ability to teach their learners to the best of their ability (Rodriguez et al., 2021).

#### **2.10.8. The Adaptation of Teaching and Learning Styles for Online Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

While special needs educators are can teach and present different concepts, explore, and expatiate on a construct during face-to-face instructional delivery, such a style of teaching is rarely accommodated in online instructional delivery (Junco, 2014; Jita, 2018). The methods required to support learners with special needs often include having close, physical contact, and frequent interaction with the learner (Fitzpatrick,



2022). The techniques applied in special education are designed to enhance the academic success of the learner. These techniques facilitate rapport building and relationships, the use of learning aids, continuous assessment of learners' level of comprehension, as well as the measurement and management of disruptive learner behaviour (Hopman, et al., 2014).

Content preparation and delivery requires a careful selection of content and an arrangement of the content in such a way that it meets the individual needs of learners (Adigun et al., 2022). Educators must be aware of the affective, cognitive, and psychomotor skills of their learners when they prepare educational content. During face-to-face teaching and learning, educators can manipulate the learning situation. However, this is not the case when teaching on an online platform (Adigun et al., 2022).

A learning style refers to how a person learns (Grasha, 1996). Learners have different learning styles, and during the COVID-19 pandemic, they may have been exposed to instruction methods and resources that did not suit their learning styles (Jimola & Ofudu, 2021). Some learners learn through memorising and visualising, while others learn through visuals and hearing; reflecting and acting; or through reasoning logically and intuitively (Karthigeyan & Nirmala, 2013). During the pandemic, special needs educators were faced with the challenge of not being able to adequately provide special education services for learners with disabilities. This was further challenging to do in cases where there were learners with multiple or significant disabilities (Smith, 2020).

Many learners with disabilities are challenged by an online learning schedule because they need a more structured approach to learning where they get to interact with the teacher, and their peers (Smith, 2020). This becomes a further challenge when the learner has a disability that requires that he/she receive services such as occupational, speech, or physical therapy (Schaeffer, 2020). Educators are further challenged when they must provide instruction to learners who have visual or hearing impairments on an online platform (Alsadoon & Turkestani, 2020; Debevc et al., 2011; Tandy & Meacham, 2009). Learners with visual impairments may be challenged by online instruction when there is a lack of screen readers, and learners with hearing

impairments may be challenged by online instruction when there is a lack of a sign language interpreter (Smith, 2020).

## **2.11. CHALLENGES IN COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION AMONG SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS, LEARNING SUPPORT EDUCATORS, LEARNERS AND PARENTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

The following sections will discuss the myriad factors that acted as barriers to effective collaboration and communication between special needs teachers, learning support educators, and learners during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **2.11.1 Teacher and Parent Communication Challenges during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Communication, defined as the act of sending or receiving messages—whether directly or indirectly, through written, spoken, or nonverbal means—is essential (Usman, 2013). The COVID-19 pandemic significantly altered communication styles. The need for physical distancing created barriers to natural communication (Eskanderi et al., 2022). Effective education in schools relies heavily on communication between parents, teachers, and learners. Such communication fosters an understanding of learners' issues, increases parental support for education, provides effective counseling and guidance, and ultimately boosts learners' motivation and success (Ozmen et al., 2016). Consequently, strong parent-teacher relationships are crucial for enhancing schools as learning environments and addressing the needs and expectations of learners (Olcer & Kocer, 2015; Schussler, 2003).

Due to distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic, collaboration between educators and parents was extremely important to ensure that learning continued to take place (Mustafa, 2020; Kritzer & Smith, 2020). Distance education requires that parents cooperate with educators and learners (Rasmitadila et al., 2020). The transition to parents or family overseeing children's education may have further been challenging as they may have had work and/or housework to see to as well, resulting in them neglecting their children's education (Cai & Wang, 2020). Families may have also felt overwhelmed due to reasons such as the lockdown, losing their jobs and

income, as well as not being able to sufficiently meet the educational and daily needs of their child (Akoğlu, & Karaaslan, 2020; Fry-Bowers, 2020).

Establishing a clear two-way communication process between a learner with a disability, their parents, and the teacher is a challenge (Adigun et al., 2022). Studies conducted by Prino et al. (2014), Osisanya et al. (2015), and Rajić et al. (2017) have shown that in a classroom setting for learners with special educational needs, the teacher communicates with the learners at a level that meets the children's behaviour as well as their communication demands. The unique communicational needs that these learners have are then applied to their IEP for teacher-student interactions, which may either be verbal or non-verbal communication. These communication styles are, however, largely characterised by face-to-face teaching and learning (Adigun et al., 2022). Online learning and teaching include a lack of face-to-face relationship, and it also reduces a sense of community between educators and their learners (Barbour & Harrison, 2016; Toppin & Toppin, 2016).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, special needs educators emphasised that communicating with parents was challenging. This was because not all parents had access to smartphones or social media accounts (Toquero, 2021). Educators needed to communicate with the parents of their learners so that they could encourage them to build their child's confidence. This was also done to remind the parents to keep their children's education as a priority despite the crisis faced due to the pandemic. Educators were also required to remind and encourage parents to strengthen the relationship that they had with the school community (Daniel, 2020). This was vital as communication between educators and learners can improve the learning experience of a learner.

### **2.11.2. Teacher and Parent Collaboration Challenges during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Teachers are exposed to various challenges, and these make it difficult for them to effectively meet all the needs of their learners (Narinasamy & Mamat, 2013). Inclusive schools are comprised of a combination of skills and knowledge from both teachers, and the parents of a learner (Kampwirth, 2003; Friend & Cook, 2007). Ainscow and Sandill (2010) indicated that for a school to be an inclusive school, there needs to be a collaboration between teachers and parents.

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA, 1975), the Education of the Handicapped Act Amendments (EHAA, 1986), as well as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments (IDEA, 1997) state the importance of the collaboration between teachers and parents to achieve the implementation of successful special education practices.

Collaboration is "a style for direct interaction between at least two co-equal parties voluntarily engaged in shared decision making as they work towards a common goal," Friend and Cook (2003: 5). Over the past thirty years, it has been evident that effective collaboration among educators, other school personnel, and the families of children is essential to providing both learners with and without disabilities with the educational supports and services they need (Friend & Cook, 2007). Murray and Mereoiu (2016) suggested that schools may be less successful in teaching learners if they understate or misrepresent the significance of working together with other professionals and the families of their learners.

According to Olivos et al. (2010), collaborating with general education teachers, special education teachers, and other professionals in schools shows equality amongst them, and makes it possible to provide access to a variety of facilities, resources, and opinions that help improve the education services for learners with special needs. Teachers need to collaborate with parents so that there is efficiency in the decision-making process about the best teaching and learning practices that should be implemented for the learner. Teacher and parent collaboration will also ensure that learning is optimised for the learner. This which will lead the learner to reaching their full potential (Lee et al., 2008; Reed, et al., 2012).

Education experts have been interested in the relationship between teachers and parents of learners with special needs for decades (Dawson et al., 1987; Dubis et al, 2015; Azad et al., 2016). However, research conducted in this field demonstrates that parent-teacher communication is challenging. One of the factors contributing to the collaboration challenge between parents and teachers was the use of technology to support learning during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The challenges in teacher-parent collaboration and communication have also been attributed to the stress that parents experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, parents were also worried about how they could assist in the

learning process of their children. Therefore, stress and worry were thus also identified as contributors to the collaboration and communication challenges that existed between teachers and parents, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Another cause to the challenge in teacher-parent collaboration and communication was because of the use of technology by parents during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **2.11.3. Parents and the Use of Technology to Support Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Parents were challenged when using technology to support learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been reported that many parents felt insecure when they were suddenly expected to take on the role of the teacher when it came to their children's education during the COVID-19 pandemic (Reeves, 2021). Also, many parents felt that they did not receive adequate support from their children's schools in terms of navigating online learning (Lau & Lee, 2020). Parents were worried that with the COVID-19 pandemic and online learning, their children would be socially isolated, and that the everyday interactions that helped their children to develop socially and emotionally had been cut off (Dong et al., 2020). Parents were also challenged with the idea of routine. Their children had developed an everyday school routine and parents now found it challenging to create new routines that their children could follow at home (Bhamani et al., 2020). With the implementation of online teaching, special needs educators had to rely on parents and caregivers to be facilitators of their children's learning (Schuck & Lambert, 2020). Parents had to become partners with educators to ensure that learning took place, however, this was a challenge as most parents had never been trained in behavioural and learning strategies before. This not only posed a challenge to the parents, who had to become educators themselves, but it was also a challenge to the special needs educators who had to teach the parents educational strategies to implement in teaching their children at home.

Turnbull et al. (2015) explain that during online learning, parents transform into educators, and this requires that there be collaboration and sharing between educators and parents as this facilitates better learning outcomes for children (Smith, 2016). Although special needs educators were aware of their learners' needs during the distance education imposed because of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was harder to be in tune with their learners' needs at all times. For this reason, parents were then

required to take on more responsibility in making sure that the learning needs of their children were met (Petretto et al., 2020). For the education of learners with special needs to continue, parental involvement was thus a necessity (Warner et al., 2015).

Studies conducted by Feng and Cavanaugh (2011), Lee and Figueroa (2012), as well as Makrooni (2019), have demonstrated that it is possible for learners to succeed with learning on a virtual platform. However, learning on an online platform requires that parents take on a new and unfamiliar role, thus placing more responsibility on them to ensure that their children actively participate in online learning. In this scenario, parents are also tasked with an increase in the instructional responsibilities for the learning of their child (Liu et al., 2020). Parents often struggle with understanding the role that they must play in their children's online learning (Boulton, 2008). Their struggles are also connected to the different challenges that they may experience in this area. This may be compounded by parents dealing with other challenges such as their own mental health, parenting stress, and general worries (Rousoulioti et al., 2022).

#### **2.11.4. The Unavailability of Parents during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Time is an important factor in parents being able to assist their children to be successful at online learning. The COVID-19 pandemic not only placed teachers under extreme pressure but also significantly affected parents. During this time, parents had to balance their work-life responsibilities while managing their children's education through distance learning. This situation led to increased stress, heightened fear, and time management challenges for parents (Garbe et al., 2020).

However, a survey conducted by the New York Times revealed that time spent assisting children with online learning was not equally distributed amongst parents. The survey revealed that, of 2 200 parents of children who were 12 years old and younger, fathers played a more prominent role in supporting children's online learning than mothers (Gewertz, 2020). During COVID-19, parents not only struggled to support each other in assisting their child with online learning, but also struggled to devote their time to the overall learning process of the child (Reeves, 2021).

A questionnaire given to 3 275 Chinese parents who had children in early childhood education in 2020 found that most parents did not have time to assist their children

with learning on an online platform (Dong et al., 2020). Similar results were found in a survey given to Pakistani parents (Bhamani et al., 2020). Many parents also felt that they did not have the proper education to help their children learn on a virtual platform (Dong et al., 2020; Lian & Yoon, 2020). As such, parents were not always able to assist their children, and in some cases, this led to parents contacting educators after school hours (Boulton, 2008).

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a change of expectations from both educators and parents in terms of the role that they should each play when it comes to the learner. Due to the pandemic, educators and parents were hindered from meeting in a school setting to communicate regarding learners, and because they could not meet face to face, they resorted to communicating using technology. However, the use of technology only placed both parties in an unfavourable position to communicate their expectations of each other clearly (Balkar et al., 2022). An inability to reach parents, their insensitivity, and their inability to use technology may prevent successful teacher and parent communication (Demir & Ozdas, 2020).

#### **2.11.5. Challenges in Teacher-Learner Communication during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

In most cases, non-verbal communication occurs unconsciously, and automatically without teachers being aware of the messages that they have communicated non-verbally to their learners (Sutiyatno, 2018). According to Pan (2014), and Bambaerero et al., (2017), 65% of what can be communicated verbally, is communicated through non-verbal language. Okon (2011), states that non-verbal communication establishes an organizational tone for the classroom, strengthens emotional ties between participants in the learning process, and enforces cognitive learning. Communication methods like synchronous and asynchronous discussion forums may not be the most effective in an online setting, and participants may be reluctant to use them (Meletiou-Mavrotheris et al., 2021). Technology is somewhat restricted when it comes to non-verbal communication, even while it can help with learning (Khan & Réhman, 2015). When it comes to online learning, the absence of non-verbal clues could be problematic. In the context of online education, it is extremely difficult to convey non-verbal cues such as eye contact and emotional exchange (Korochentseva & Terekhin, 2021). Non-verbal communication was particularly hampered during the COVID-19



pandemic because teaching and learning was done from a distance, and teachers also had to wear face masks once in-person teaching resumed (Năznean, 2022). This was a challenge because for teaching and learning to be effective, vocal communication is essential. For there to be effective communication, both the teacher and the learner must be able to transmit and receive messages with accuracy. Effective communication makes reference to the ability of teachers and learners to be able to send and receive messages from each other (Năznean, 2022).

The wearing of face masks posed a significant challenge for teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic, as masks concealed facial expressions and negatively impacted interpersonal communication (Dragomir et al., 2021). Face masks cover the lower part of an individual's face, requiring listeners to focus on the speaker's eyes to interpret non-verbal cues (Năznean, 2022). Effective communication is crucial for the success of distance education, which is characterized by physical separation (van Rooyen, 2010; Ghamdi et al., 2016). However, online learning often experiences lower levels of participation in peer and learner communication, as well as in collaborative learning (Peimani & Kamalipour, 2021).

Communication and collaboration between teachers and learners during the COVID-19 pandemic was also a challenge as it had to be done online, and some learners did not have any tools that could ensure that they were able to receive the online communication. The purpose of communicating with learners using an online platform during the pandemic was to engage them in teaching and learning, as was the case with the traditional face-to-face method of teaching and learning. However, the purpose was not met, especially for learners in rural areas and those who are affected by poverty (Lieberman et al., 2020).

With specific reference to this study, special education educators and learning support educators experienced challenges when interacting with learners during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is because some of their learners with speech and communication impairments found it difficult to express themselves in a virtual learning environment (Balatucan et al., 2022). Strengthening connections with learners with special needs was difficult to establish during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is because communicating with these learners relies on the use of body language, eye contact,



and other interactions that occur at a face-to-face level (Long, 2021). However, this challenge could be addressed by the Universal Design for Learning.

## **2.12. THE UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING (UDL)**

Children with disabilities in the African continent face various barriers in the education system (ACPF, 2011). Despite inclusive education being developed in South Africa to redress the issue of exclusion in the education system, there is another issue, a lack of educators' skills in adapting the curriculum to meet the diverse needs of learners (Chataika et al., 2011). This highlights the need for a framework that educators can use to gain the skills required to cater to learners with diverse needs.

The term 'Universal Design refers to a "movement in architecture and product development that aims to make places and things more accessible to individuals with disabilities" (American Institutes for Research, 2010, p. 1). In 1997, a group of architects came up with seven principles in universal design that have influenced environmental design, communication, and products. These are: (1) "Equitable use", (2) "Flexibility in use", (3) "Simple, intuitive use", (4) "Perceptible information", (5) "Tolerance for error", (6) "Low physical space", and (7) "Size and space for use" (Center for Excellence in Universal Design, 2024).

Adaptations to structure make it possible for various people to make use of a particular place. For example, ramps and curbs make it easier for elderly people, and people with disabilities (making use of a wheelchair) to move around. Whereas captions on a television show will be of assistance to a person who is deaf or hard of hearing. Everyone benefits from a design when it incorporates the needs of various users, and this has come to be known as universal design. The Universal Design was then extended to education by focusing on understanding how information is processed in the brain, and thus structuring the curriculum in a way that will accommodate the various learning needs of learners.

The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a set of principles that are used to design a curriculum that provides all individuals with the opportunity to learn (American Institutes for Research, 2010; National Center on Universal Design for Learning, 2014). It was created to serve all learners regardless of their background, ability, disability, gender, age, and culture. UDL provides an outline for designing methods,

materials, assessments, and goals that will reach all learners, including those with diverse needs. The goal of the UDL is not only to have learners gain knowledge and skills, but to help learners master the art of learning (National Center on Universal Design for Learning, 2014).

The UDL is different from other curriculum design processes because it specifically focuses on meeting the diverse needs and skills of learners. This UDL is an approach to learning that aims to address and redress barriers to learning, particularly the barrier of an inflexible curriculum, and one that places all learners under a one-size-fits-all umbrella (Caine & Caine, 2011). Such curricula become barriers to learners with disabilities, as well as those who find that the curriculum does not meet their learning needs. The UDL provides a blueprint that recommends flexible instruction materials, techniques, and strategies that will qualify educators to meet the diverse needs of their learners.

To ensure that all learners are educated effectively, the UDL proposes 3 organising principles: (1) All learners should be provided with multiple ways to interact and engage with each other, and the curriculum, and they must be able to articulate the things that they have learned. (2) The curriculum should be represented in various formats, including media. (3) Learners should be provided with multiple ways to ensure that they are engaged with the curriculum and that they are also kept interested and motivated to engage with it (Rose & Meyer, 2002).

The philosophy of the UDL is aimed at shifting from social and educational bias to equality, where all learners get access to effective learning. The UDL is democratic because it values every learner, and it also states that every learner deserves to receive an education regardless of their circumstances (Fitzgerald & Laurian, 2016). The UDL is a framework that addresses the need for a flexible curriculum, it lowers barriers to learning, and it also enables learners with various needs to be included in the learning process. This is the primary aim of inclusive education (Brand et al., 2012).

The sudden changes in teaching and learning have affected the interaction, empathy, cheerfulness, and playfulness of learners. These are the core foundations of teaching and learning in special schools, and these have become strange to learners with special educational needs (Adigun et al., 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic further affected different occupations in different ways. It was thus important to investigate how the pandemic affected teaching specifically (Haizheng et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic created new challenges for educators as it highlighted existing inequalities within the education system (Cipriano et al., 2020).

Despite efforts to ensure that teaching and learning continued to take place during the COVID-19 pandemic, serious challenges were encountered by special needs educators in ensuring equal access to education for all learners (Akbulut et al., 2020).

### **2.13. UNDERSTANDING TEACHER BURNOUT IN THE CONTEXT OF EDUCATIONAL DISRUPTION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

Burnout is conceptualised as a psychological response to work-related stress which affects an individual's physical and emotional health (Hayes et al., 2020). Significant change, a lack of job efficacy in response to the change, as well as coping strategies that are no longer effective may lead to burnout. Maslach and Jackson (1981, p.399), define burnout as “a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job”. According to Maslach et al. (2001, p. 399), burnout is a result of three elements: “(1) Depersonalisation, where a person responds in a detached manner towards the job; (2) Lack of self-efficacy, where an individual feels a lack of achievement about their job; and (3) Exhaustion, where an individual feels emotionally and physically depleted.”

Pietarinen et al. (2013) highlight that there is a social side to burnout. Three symptoms are identified which are: (a) Exhaustion, which is characterised by a lack of emotional energy due to feeling overwhelmed because of work. (b) Cynicism, which presents through detachments to the job, and the teaching community. (c) Burnout due to a lack of teacher and pupil interaction. Shifting teaching to an online platform was also identified as a major cause of teacher burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic. This level of burnout was directly linked to the attitudes that educators had towards the use of technology to facilitate teaching and learning (Wang, 2021). This shift required educators to augment their professional development in the use of technology and learn how to navigate online platforms to facilitate their teaching process (Agusta et al., 2022).

## **2.14. SOCIAL ISOLATION'S IMPACT ON TEACHER INTERACTIONS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

Humans are naturally social species, and it is in their nature to interact and form relationships with other people. According to Hämmig (2019), social isolation is understood as an objective phenomenon that is experienced by individuals. It is characterised by a lack of social interaction and social ties (Primack et al., 2017), and social disconnectedness (Cornwell & Waite, 2009). During isolation, there may have been a blurring of boundaries between one's professional and family life (Vaziri et al., 2020). Social isolation is also understood to be a social experience that is characterised by a lack of engagement with others (Primack et al., 2017); loneliness (Cacioppo et al., 2014), or the discrepancy that individuals perceive to exist between their actual relationship versus their ideal social relationships (Hajek & König, 2019).

The social isolation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic created an objective physical isolation because the interaction between the individual and the world outside the household was prohibited. This social isolation also created a subjective experience of isolation (Filho et al., 2021).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, it was mandatory that there be physical distance between people to slow down the spread of the virus. Educators were thus isolated from their colleagues because they had to work from home. However, according to Langher et al. (2017), isolation from colleagues was identified as a factor that increased stress and burnout for special needs educators even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, this intensified the stress that special needs educators were exposed to (Fitzpatrick, 2022).

The measures undertaken to curb the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as social distancing and lockdown, had a significant effect on the social relationships of individuals, thus leaving them feeling lonely and isolated (Smith & Lim, 2020). At the most basic level of teaching lies connection. Educators connect with their learners, other educators, parents, and the community in which they teach. These connections are academic, professional, personal, and emotional, and they are also the foundation for education (Glessner & Johnson, 2020). This connection was disrupted during the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the year 2020, the home, as well as the working environment changed drastically for educators. The coping strategies that educators used before the COVID-19 pandemic, such as “making time for family and friends” (Richards, 2012, p. 309), attending church (Byrd, 2017), and going on a staff outing (Clement, 2017), were no longer possible. In cases where they were possible, they had to be conducted on an online platform. This was different to what educators were accustomed to.

The imposed social isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic created an opportunity for families to be confined to one space, and to spend more time together while also providing support to one another (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2020; Stanley & Markman, 2020). This support helped family members to manage stress effectively (Donato et al., 2021; Zhou & Yao, 2020). Nevertheless, this isolation contributed to an increase in educators experiencing stress.

The teaching profession that is grounded in interaction (Jones, 2017), while the pandemic diminished the physical interaction between educators and their learners. Educators also typically rely on the moral support they receive from their colleagues in the school building. This support includes the sharing of ideas and knowledge about the teaching profession.

Online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic cut educators off from this interaction with their colleagues (Hargreaves, 2021). Educators stated that being isolated from their fellow educators was a challenge during the pandemic as they often collaborated with their fellow educators, and were accustomed to having personal communication with them (Toquero, 2021). Although educators stated that they could use social media to communicate with their fellow educators, they sometimes experienced intermittent connections at home when they lost internet connection, and the signal was not always stable (Toquero, 2021).

## **2.15. CHALLENGES OF BALANCING WORK AND HOME LIFE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

The high work demands that educators have been exposed to because of the pandemic are further increased when working from home and looking after those with whom they share a household (International Labour Organization, 2020). Educators had the double challenge of having to simultaneously monitor their own children’s

learning while at home, and teaching classes online. This was detrimental to their mental health and wellness (Cousik, 2022; Kraft et al., 2020).

In teaching from home in the space shared with their family members, and due to the high demands of their jobs during the pandemic, educators may have experienced a lack of satisfaction in the relationships with those in their households (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2020). This may have caused negative communication and behaviour to arise (Overall et al., 2021). Working from home also resulted in educators not being able to balance their work, as well as providing support to their own children during the COVID-19 pandemic (Anand & Lall, 2022; Prime et al., 2020).

## **2.16. COPING STRATEGIES UTILISED BY TEACHERS TO COPE WITH THE CHALLENGES THAT THEY ENCOUNTERED DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

Coping strategies are voluntary cognitive and behavioral responses that people use to respond to internal and external pressures, and they are triggered by stressful circumstances (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Scholars such as Algorani and Gupta (2023), have indicated that there are different coping strategies such as the approach, and avoidant coping methods which are intended to confront or evade a difficult situation. While avoidance and emotional suppression-based coping techniques lead to less desirable outcomes, problem-focused coping strategies, focus on planning how to handle the specific problem, and are more helpful in lowering mental health difficulties.

According to Kipps-Vaughan (2013), offering teacher wellness programs in classrooms is a beneficial strategy for reducing teachers' stress, burnout, and absenteeism. This will assist teachers to feel more self-efficacious, content with their work, and at ease in the classroom. Teachers will also be more competent, happier, and capable of attending to the needs of their learners. The following are strategies advised by physiological stress management experts Cooley and Yovanoff (1996), that teachers can utilise to cope with the stress that they experience which may arise from various factors such as the Covid-19 pandemic. These are, progressive self-regulatory relaxation, which enables one to achieve a deep state of relaxation; aerobic exercise, which is any activity that increases heart rate, such as jogging or swimming;

and biofeedback, which measures and controls mind-body processes in addition to muscle relaxation are some strategies that can be used to manage stress.

Teachers can use various stress-reduction methods, including self-analysis, exercise, back massages, and brain rewiring (which involves changing cynicism into optimism). However, they must understand the sources of stress to implement effective strategies to cope with the stress (Nomtshongwana et al., 2023).

## **2.17. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS THAT WERE UTILISED IN THIS STUDY**

The present study was underpinned by two theoretical frameworks, namely, the Conservation of Resources Theory (COR), and the Coping-Competence-Context Theory (3C Model for Teacher Stress). The ensuing sections provide an in-depth analysis of these theoretical frameworks.

### **2.17.1. The Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory**

The Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory was developed in the 1980s and 1990s by Stevan Hobfoll. This theory provides a framework for how to understand the process involved when one experiences, copes with, and becomes resilient against chronic and traumatic stress (Hobfoll, 1989, 1998). The COR Theory specifically focuses on how people respond to stress (Hagger, 2015). It addresses stress from a holistic perspective in situations where common interventions for stress that focus only on the individual are not applicable. The central principle of the COR Theory is that the work environment should be incorporated into the processes of coping with stress (Hagger, 2015). According to the COR Theory, stress occurs when: (a) There is a threat of important resources being lost; (b) When important resources are lost; and (c) When there is a failure to gain important resources amidst significant efforts to do so (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

The COR Theory holds that individuals are motivated to protect the resources that they have (conservation), and that they also want to gain new resources (acquisition). Common resources that are universally valued among people include health, well-being, self-esteem, a sense of purpose in life, and family (Hobfoll et al., 2018). In the workplace, a resource is considered to be anything that can help an employee to fulfil their job. However, the weight and value assigned to different types of resources may



vary from person to person. Resources are thus a fundamental part of helping an individual to identify whether an event is stressful or not (Halbesleben et al., 2014).

The COR Theory also aims to understand stress and its relationship to the supply and demands of resources that exist within an individual and their society. Resources can be scarce, and when there are circumstances where there is a loss of resources, especially those that are essential, then an individual will experience stress. According to this theory, resources are thus predictors of how an individual will cope with stress, but are also the essential elements that can cause stress (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

Bettini et al. (2020) clarify that resources can be classified under three categories, which will be described below. The resources discussed will be contextualised to fit the professional roles of the participants in this study (learning support educators, and special education teachers).

Physical resources are tangible resources, for example, instructional material that can assist educators with their pedagogical content knowledge (Jackson & Makarin, 2016). These resources are important, especially in circumstances where educators face teaching challenges due to a shortage of instructional material (Grossman & Thompson, 2008; Siuty et al., 2016). Internal resources are resources such as knowledge and skills, which can support educators in managing the demands of their job (Brownell et al., 2014). Although measuring the knowledge of a teacher has been proven difficult to do, qualifications are taken as a measure of knowledge (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Henry et al. (2011) add that experience also contributes to knowledge, and that the longer a teacher teaches, the more knowledge they will have. Social resources are classified as resources such as administrative support and collegial support. Administrative support helps educators by reducing their workload, while collegial support helps them to learn about instruction, as well as the curriculum (Jackson & Bruegman, 2009). According to the COR Theory, individuals, by their very nature, always aim to preserve, protect, and build resources. Individuals are always seeking to create a pleasurable and successful world for themselves. This theory also states that individuals experience stress when they are confronted with events that threaten the loss of their resources (Hobfoll, 2001).

The first principle of the COR Theory focuses on the primacy of resource loss, claiming that losing resources is more psychologically harmful than gaining back lost resources.



What this means is that when an individual encounters a loss at work, this loss will have a far greater impact than if they were to gain a resource (Halbesleben et al., 2014). The COR Theory states that losing resources is not only more powerful than gaining resources but, the loss of resources affects people more rapidly, and this goes on for a prolonged period at an increasing speed (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

Studies conducted by Hobfoll (2001), and Halbesleben and Buckley (2004), indicate that when there is a loss of resources in organisations, individuals within that organisation will experience some form of strain or stress because of the lost resources. Therefore, they state that losing resources is far more impactful than gaining resources. Resources can be objective resources, such as tools that are used in the workplace; condition resources, such as employment; energy resources, such as knowledge and money; as well as personal resources such as an individual's skills and personal characteristics. In this study, the LSEs and SETs lost the resource of having physical classes with their learners due to the pandemic.

The second principle of this theory states that individuals must invest in resources to protect themselves against a loss of resources; recover from losing their resources; and gain new resources (Hobfoll, 2012). People invest in resources so that they can cope with any future resource loss that they may experience (Ito & Brotheridge, 2003; Vinokur & Schul, 2002).

The third principle states that when the threat of losing resources is high, gaining other resources becomes significant as the resources gain value. Moreover, those with greater resources will not be significantly affected by a loss of resources as they have many resources that they can use to gain new resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

The fourth principle clarifies that when individuals' resources are exhausted and overstretched, the individual may become defensive as a strategy to protect the self, often resulting in aggressive and unreasonable behaviour. It was envisaged that this last principle would tie in with, and explain the emotions experienced by the participating special needs educators as the literature indicates that educators were stretched beyond measure trying to teach during the pandemic (Hobfoll et al., 2018). When individuals obtain and retain either personal, social, or material resources, this creates a feeling of being able to meet stressful challenges (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

The COR Theory can also be identified as a motivational theory as it hypothesises that individuals use their resources strategically to meet and fulfil their job demands (Alarcon, 2011; Halbesleben et al., 2014). Motivational Theory, which is central to COR Theory, explains an aspect of human behaviour based on the evolutionary need to gain and conserve resources for human survival (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Therefore, the COR Theory not only predicts stress, but also aims to understand how people are motivated after having experienced stress or strain (Hobfoll, 2001). Employees in the workplace are motivated to continue working for a company when the resources that they need to fulfil their job demands are balanced. However, employees with low resources in the workplace may feel less motivated to continue working because of the demands of the workplace and how they outweigh the resources provided to get the job done (Bettini et al., 2020).

This study focused on the teaching challenges experienced by learning support and special needs educators in Gauteng during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, this theoretical framework was selected as it was assumed that the challenges experienced by the participants in this study were mostly resource-driven. It is further posited that these challenges arose due to the COVID-19 pandemic, necessitating schools to provide adequate resources to educators to maintain their motivation and productivity under such circumstances.

With the challenges that special education and learning support educators experienced during the pandemic, they had to implement certain strategies in order to cope. These will be explored below in terms of the Coping-Competence-Context Theory.

### **2.17.2. The Coping-Competence-Context Theory**

Given that a stress questionnaire was employed as one of the data collection methodologies in this study, the researcher found it pertinent to integrate a coping theory into this study.

The Coping-Competence-Context Theory, also known as the 3C Model of Teacher Stress, is grounded on three previous theories: Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Theory; Crum et al.'s (2013) Stress Mindset Theory, as well as Jennings and Greenberg's (2009) Prosocial Classroom Model.

This theory focuses on the critical role of teacher competence, which comprises classroom management skills; leadership qualities; school policies; and the climate in terms of how these determine the stress levels of teachers (Herman et al., 2023). Specifically, the 3C Theory of Teacher Stress, as posited by Herman et al. (2020), delineates three interconnected pathways culminating in teacher stress. These components are designated as: (1) Coping; (2) Competence; and (3) Context, collectively constituting a comprehensive framework for comprehending the intricate interplay of diverse factors that contribute to teacher stress. The decision to include the 3C Theory of Teacher Stress in this study was made based on the literature, which identifies teaching as a stressful profession, as well as the fact that educators were already experiencing stress even before the COVID-19 pandemic. This study thus aimed to describe and understand the level of stress experienced by educators during the pandemic; how the stress affected them; and the different coping strategies that they utilised to cope with the stress that they experienced.

### **2.17.3. The Coping Pathway in the Coping-Competence-Context Theory**

The different ways in which teachers manage stress fall under the umbrella of coping. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984, p. 141), coping refers to “all of the cognitive and behavioural efforts, constantly changing, expended by one person to manage the internal or external demands perceived as consuming or exceeding his resources.” Coping thus refers to a technique that an individual uses in response to a stressor or stressful event. The way in which a teacher copes with stressful working conditions is important as it will affect their psychological well-being (Gustems-Carnicer & Calderon, 2013; Talbot & Mercer, 2019).

The coping component of the Coping-Competence-Context Theory focuses on the individual characteristics of the teacher, such as their thinking abilities and people and communication skills (Herman et al., 2020). This component also includes the perceptions that educators have of their coping skills and the strategies they use to cope with life events. The coping pathway focuses specifically on the personal characteristics that individuals possess, and how these can contribute to how they respond to stress (Herman et al., 2020).

Prior research has revealed that coping skills moderate the effects of stress on educators, as well as their behaviour. How well an individual copes with an event

influences their level of stress (Chan, 1998; Kyriacou, 2001). In a case where two teachers are stressed, one of the teachers may have a high coping strength, while the other may have an inadequate coping strength. The outcomes of these two teachers will be different because they have different coping capacities (Herman et al., 2018; Richards, 2012).

A study conducted by Herman et al. (2020) has revealed that educators who expressed high levels of stress did not foresee unfavourable teacher and learner outcomes. The authors further detail that educators who reported that they were experiencing both high levels of stress and low levels of coping experienced negative outcomes with their learners. This indicates that although a teacher may be experiencing high levels of stress, if they have high levels of coping ability, then the stress that they are experiencing will not affect them and the work that they do. Educators who view stress negatively have identified that they lack the internal resources to meet external demands, whereas educators who view stress positively have identified that they possess the internal resources to meet external demands (Elliott, 2021).

The 3C model of Teacher Stress states that the coping pathway acts as a shield or a buffer between stressful experiences, and the outcome of these. According to this theory, coping thus focuses on an individual's problem-solving skills, mindset, and how mindful they are (Herman et al., 2023).

#### **2.17.4. The Competence Pathway in the Coping-Competence-Context Theory**

The competence component focuses on the link that occurs between stress and classroom practices, particularly how educators manage their classrooms. Stress affects educators' ability to interact with their students. This factor influences student behaviour, leading to misbehaviour, which in turn affects the stress levels experienced by educators (Herman et al., 2020). This is illustrated in a hypothesis put forth by Jennings et al. (2009) regarding the burnout cascade. They explain that when educators experience stress, they may react harshly towards students, and this may cause students to escalate their negative behaviour. This is a cyclical process because the negative behaviour exhibited by learners can further exacerbate the stress experienced by educators. The cycle of stress will then continue as there will be

ineffective classroom management enacted by the teacher, as well as challenging behaviours from students.

The competence pathway addresses the ability of the teacher to manage his/her classroom. Teachers' failure to manage their classrooms can cause them further stress. If a teacher is harsh or inconsistent in the way that they practice behaviour management in their classroom, this may lead to learners becoming disruptive, and this may in turn cause teachers stress. Competency factors that may contribute to teacher stress include, but are not limited to problematic learner behaviour and attitude, learner-teacher interaction, as well as how well the teacher manages his/her classroom (Ouellette et al., 2018).

#### **2.17.5. The Context Pathway in the Coping-Competence-Context Theory**

The third component of the theory is context, which focuses on the school where teaching and learning take place; the school system policies, and the school practices that contribute to educators experiencing stress. School policies refer to the procedures used by the district, as well as the job duties, salary, and leave. Alternatively, school-level practices refer to things such as administrative support, standardised testing, influential contextual stressors, and systemic policies, which have an impact on teacher stress, burnout, and attrition. Both school practices and policies have a direct impact on teacher stress (Ryan et al., 2017).

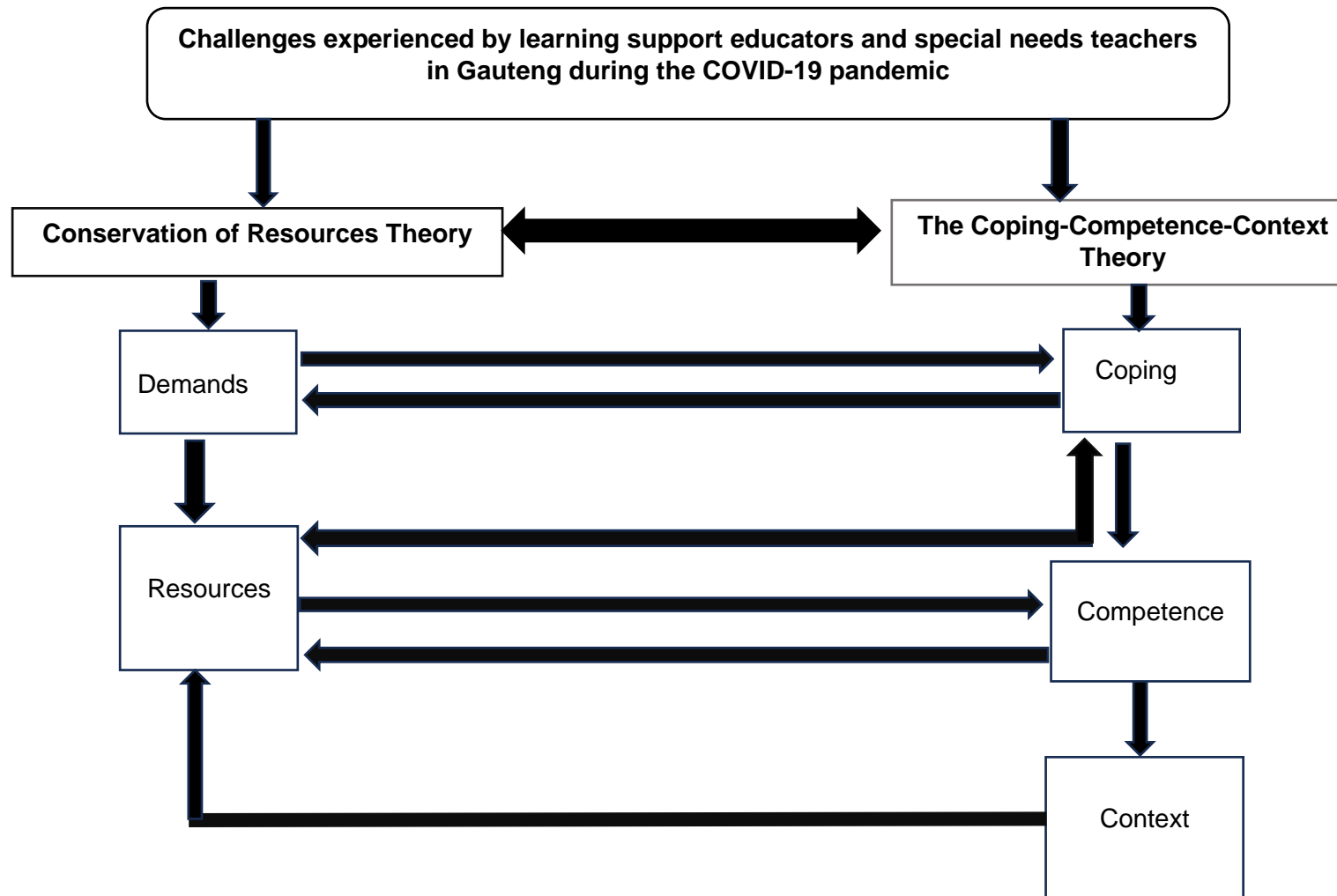
The selection of the 3C Model of Teacher Stress as the theoretical framework for this study was based on its suitability for analysing the collected data, particularly the data pertaining to the teacher stress questionnaire. The data analysis process involved identifying the areas where the participants experienced stress, as well as identifying the various coping strategies employed to address the stressors resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. The 3C Model of Teacher Stress provided a comprehensive framework that allowed for a nuanced exploration of the complex interplay between coping, competence, and context in relation to teacher stress.

## **2.18. AN INTEGRATION OF THE TWO THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS**

Figure 2.1 below illustrates the relationship between the two theoretical frameworks that guided this study.

**Figure 2.1**

*An illustration of the interconnectedness between the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory and the Coping-Competence-Context Theory that underpinned this study*



### **2.18.1. The Relationship between the two Theoretical Frameworks: explaining the above diagram**

This study was underpinned by two theoretical frameworks, namely, the Conservation of Resources Theory (COR), and the Coping-Competence-Context Theory (3C Model of Teacher Stress).

The decision to use two theoretical frameworks was based on wanting to have one theory that focused on teacher stress, and another theory that would identify the different factors that contribute to teacher stress. This was important for this study because it focused on the challenges experienced by SETs and LSEs in Gauteng during the COVID-19 pandemic. In conducting this study, an assumption was held that the participants would have experienced challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and that these challenges may have caused them stress.

The two theoretical frameworks used in this study also provided a holistic understanding of what causes teacher stress, and how to cope with it. This holistic perspective accentuates the importance of probing how the classroom environment contributes to educators' vulnerability to stress, the range of coping strategies at their disposal in response to stress-inducing situations, and their overall ability to direct these challenges within their professional roles. This investigation was essential for delineating the multifaceted nature of teacher stress, and for creating interventions tailored to enhancing resilience among educators.

#### *2.18.2. Demands (COR Theory) and Coping Pathway (3C Model of Teacher Stress)*

The COR Theory focuses on using resources sparingly to ensure that there are enough resources to meet the job demands of a particular workplace or organisation (Alarcon, 2011; Halbesleben et al., 2014).

This theory focuses on two aspects, namely, demands and resources, as illustrated in the diagram above, and as already discussed in previous sections of this chapter.

The coping pathway of the 3C Model of Teacher Stress focuses on the characteristics and skills that teachers have, and how these can be used by teachers to cope with stress arising from their workplace.



**Figure 2.2**

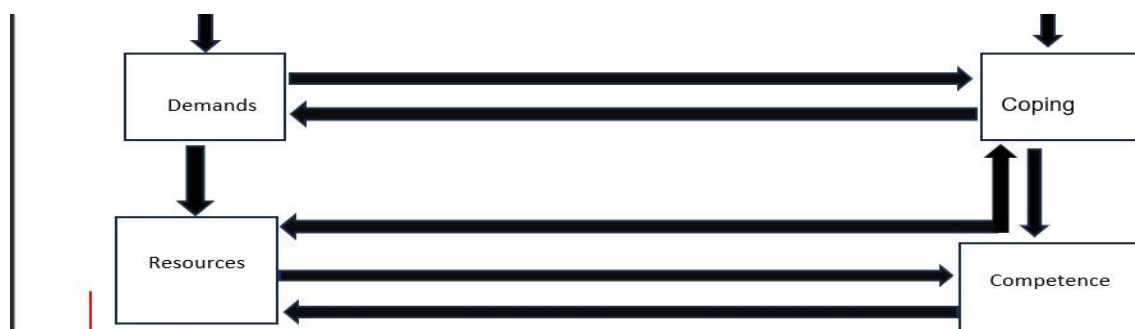
*The link between the demand aspect of COR and the Coping Pathway of the 3C Model of Teacher Stress*



The link between the demand aspect of the COR Theory and the coping pathway of the 3C Model of Teacher Stress is illustrated in the above diagram. This shows us that when teachers are faced with a high-demand job, they will feel stressed, even though they may have inherent coping characteristics and skills (internal resources) to cope with the demands of their jobs (Herman et al., 2020). Alternatively, how they cope with the stress arising from difficult work challenges is also largely dependent on the level of job demands placed on them. Thus, there is a bi-directional relationship between teachers' job demands, and how well they cope with these demands, which may result in them feeling stressed (Hagger, 2015).

**Figure 2.3**

*The relationship between the coping pathway of the 3C Model of Teacher Stress and the resource aspect of the COR Theory*



The above diagram shows the relationship between the coping pathway of the 3C Model of Teacher Stress and the resource aspect of the COR Theory. This illustrates that for teachers to cope with the different challenges that they are exposed to in the workplace, they need to have resources at their disposal (Brownell et al., 2014; Jackson & Makarin, 2016; Grossman & Thompson, 2008; Siuty et al., 2016).

The COR Theory states that individuals have internal resources, such as knowledge and skills (Brownell et al., 2014). However, how well individuals cope with stressful

situations is influenced by them being able to identify these resources within themselves, and then using the resources to cope with the stress that they are experiencing. Thus, this also illustrates the fact that there is a bi-directional relationship that exists between individuals' ability to cope and the resources at their disposal.

### 2.18.3. Resources (COR Theory) and the competence pathway (3C Model of Teacher Stress)

**Figure 2.4**

*The relationship between resources and competence*



It is presumed that human behaviour and culture are organised according to the attainment and presentation of resources. Resources are characterised as either being internal or external to the individual (Holmgreen et al., 2017).

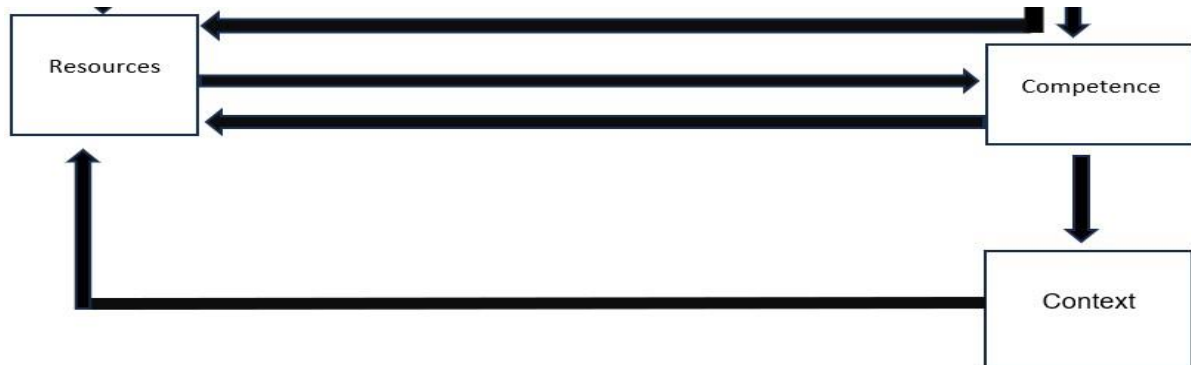
The above diagram shows the relationship between the resource aspect of the COR Theory and the competence pathway of the 3C Model of Teacher Stress. In relation to this study, this means that the resources that exist in the workplace (schools) have a direct influence on teachers' competence to do their job. When teachers are exposed to sufficient resources in the workplace, they will then feel competent to do their job. The converse is also true as a lack of resources may cause teachers to feel incompetent in doing their job. Resources such as hope, vigour, and self-efficacy are classified as internal resources as they can be found within an individual (Holmgreen et al., 2017).

There is therefore a bi-directional relationship between teachers' competence, and the resources available in the workplace. A lack of resource will result in teachers feeling incompetent to do their job, whereas sufficient resources will enable them to feel competent and capable of doing their job.

#### 2.18.4. Resources (COR Theory), and Context (3C Model of Teacher Stress)

**Figure 2.5**

*The relationship between resources, competence and context*



The above diagram illustrates the relationship between the context pathway of the 3C Model of Teacher Stress and the resource aspect of the COR Theory.

The context pathway, as already discussed in previous sections, refers to the school practices and policies that a particular school abides by (Ryan et al., 2017). These can be classified as social resources in the COR Theory. A school that does not have a system of laws in place for employees to abide by can cause stress for teachers.

This discussion has thus shown the importance of integrating the two theoretical frameworks, and how the different aspects within both these theories addressed the focus of this study.

## 2.19. CONCLUSION

This chapter provided an extensive literature review of the challenges experienced by learning support and special needs educators in Gauteng during the COVID-19 pandemic. A holistic approach was taken to address these challenges, extending beyond teaching difficulties to encompass the personal struggles faced by the participants during the pandemic. This research was grounded in an integrative theoretical framework comprising the Coping-Competence-Context Theory alongside the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory. A comprehensive literature review established a pronounced correlation between these theories and the empirical challenges documented by LSEs and SETs during the COVID-19 epidemic. Specifically, the review illuminated that a significant proportion of these challenges

were attributable to shortages in critical resources, and the level of job demands experienced by educators during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, it clarified that the stress experienced by these educators can be understood from the perspective of the Coping-Competence-Context Theory.

This theory suggests that a multi-layered understanding of stressors in educational settings requires a holistic approach, accentuating the interaction between individual coping mechanisms, education competence, and the contextual dynamics of the classroom.

The following chapter will explore the research design and methodology aspects of this research.

## **3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1. INTRODUCTION**

Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology applied in this study. The meta-theoretical paradigm on which this study was based is discussed, as well as the advantages and disadvantages thereof. The research design, research process, and the selection of participants for this study are then explained. This chapter also provides a detailed overview of the data collection methods, the data analysis, and the quality criteria relevant to this study. This chapter concludes by discussing the ethical considerations that were adhered to throughout the study.

#### **3.1.1. EPISTEMOLOGICAL PARADIGM**

To understand the epistemology of this study, it is first necessary to define the concept of a paradigm. The American philosopher Thomas Kuhn (1962) first used the term 'paradigm' when referring to a philosophical way of thinking. The etymology of the term 'paradigm' can be found in the Greek language, where it means pattern (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). From an educational perspective, the term is used to describe a researcher's worldview (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). A worldview refers to the school of thought, a set of shared beliefs, or thinking that informs the meaning of data (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Rehman and Khalid (2016, p. 51) further explain that a paradigm is a "basic belief system and theoretical framework with assumptions about the ontology, epistemology, methodology, and methods." Therefore, a paradigm is composed of several components, namely, ontology, epistemology, methodology, and methods (Scotland, 2012). The meta-theoretical paradigm that guided this study will be explored next with specific focus on the ontology and epistemology inherent in the interpretivist paradigm, while also clarifying their relevance to this study.

#### **3.1.2. Meta-Theoretical Paradigm: Interpretivism**

"Ontology and epistemology are to research what 'footings' are to the house: they form the foundations of the whole edifice" (Grix, 2004, p. 59). Ontology is a branch of philosophy that focuses on the assumptions that individuals make about a phenomenon (Scotland, 2012). It studies existence, and assists in conceptualising what is real when it comes to the social phenomenon that is being investigated

(Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Ontology refers to “the nature of our beliefs about reality” (Richards, 2003, p. 33). In relation to this study, ontology was important as the research focused on the challenges experienced by special education and learning support educators during the COVID-19 pandemic. The ontology of this study aided in understanding the different experiences of the participants (Scott & Usher, 2004).

The term ‘epistemology’ is derived from the Greek language, where the term ‘episte’ means knowledge, and ‘logos’ means theory (Grbich, 2007). Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that focuses on studying the nature of knowledge, and the different processes through which knowledge can be acquired and tested (Gall et al., 2003). This study followed a qualitative research approach, and the epistemology of the qualitative approach is interpretive. According to Grix (2004), interpretivism is a response to the over-powering and dominant approach of positivism. The interpretive approach rejects the idea that there exists a single, verifiable reality that exists independently. Guba and Lincoln (2005, p. 204) state that the interpretive ontology is anti-foundationalist as it “refuses to adopt any permanent, unvarying standards by which truth can be universally known.” Interpretivism acknowledges that multiple realities exist because reality is socially constructed according to the experiences of individuals (Morgan & Sklar, 2012). Interpretivism is concerned with in-depth factors that are related to a particular context. It describes humans as different and separate from their physical context as they have in-depth meaning and cannot be understood and explored in the same way as the physical world (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020).

The interpretive paradigm holds that multiple realities exist. According to this paradigm, the behaviour and actions of individuals can be explained from various perspectives. This is because meaning is constructed through the contexts and social interactions in which people find themselves (Creswell, 2014; Mukherji & Albon, 2010).

When individuals interact with each other in a society, they ascribe meaning to the different social phenomena that they experience. Interpretivism therefore also considers culture and circumstances, and how these can influence how a person makes meaning of reality (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). Interpretivism focuses on generating findings that show depth and insight into a phenomenon (Mukherji & Albon, 2010). The goal of a researcher using interpretive epistemology is to understand the

different interpretations that individuals ascribe to a phenomenon with which they have interacted (Rehman & Khalid, 2016).

Research that utilises an interpretive paradigm focuses on understanding a phenomenon from a small group of participants so that it can obtain a deep understanding, and produce an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon from this group of participants (Basit, 2010). Therefore, research employing an interpretive epistemology focuses on understanding a social phenomenon from the context and perspective of the participants who are either experiencing, or have experienced the phenomenon being investigated.

Researchers using an interpretive epistemology mostly collect qualitative data, thus employing an inductive approach to the data analyses. This involves the exploration of patterns within the data. These patterns are used to formulate overarching themes, contributing to the development of a theory that clarifies the phenomenon being explored (Rehman & Khalid, 2016). When analysing qualitative data, researchers using the interpretivist paradigm can have confidence that the theory used for a particular study is derived from the data collected (Grix, 2004). Researchers using the interpretive paradigm not only describe objects, but they understand humans, objects, or events by placing them in their contexts (Lan, 2018). This is because at the core of the paradigm, interpretivism states that understanding the meaning that individuals ascribe to their experiences is the foreground to understanding social phenomena (Jansen, 2010).

Therefore, a meta-theoretical paradigm can be considered as a collection of assumptions, propositions, and concepts that guide how research is conducted (Mack, 2010). The advantages and disadvantages of using the interpretivist metatheoretical paradigm will be discussed below, furthermore justifying the decision to use it in this research.

#### *3.1.2.1. The Advantages of Using Interpretivism*

Through this paradigm, the researcher was able to interpret the various challenges shared by the participants and make sense of their experiences. Additionally, the researcher identified the differences in each experience, aligning with one of the characteristics of this paradigm, which acknowledges the existence of multiple realities

(Creswell, 2014; Mukherji & Albon, 2010). Therefore, the interpretive paradigm was deemed relevant for the study as it allowed for the accommodation of the multiple perspectives gathered from the participants (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). Interpretivism considers the context in which research is conducted as being valuable and important when interpreting the data. The interpretive perspective states that reality is socially constructed, and that meaning can be found within a specific context. Therefore, the goal in this study was to explore a phenomenon experienced by special education and learning support educators in different special needs schools in Gauteng (Willis, 2007).

#### 3.1.2.2. *The Disadvantages of Using Interpretivism*

The interpretivist paradigm has been criticised for being ‘soft’, and it has also been said that it cannot produce information that is generalisable to larger populations. Researchers utilising this paradigm are deeply immersed in their data collection process. It has thus been argued that it lacks objectivity because the data collected may be largely influenced by the researcher’s bias and knowledge (Grix, 2004). Generalisability is thus compromised when conducting research using the interpretive paradigm. This is because the interpretive paradigm aims to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon within its context rather than generalising the results of a phenomenon to other people in other contexts (Cohen et al., 2011). Mack (2010) thus states that the ontology of interpretivism is subjective, and research outcomes are thus affected by the researcher’s interpretation of the data gathered. This interpretation is, in turn, influenced by a researcher’s own belief system, ways of thinking, or culture (Lan, 2018). The next section will present the characteristics of the interpretivist paradigm and how they relate to this study.

#### 3.1.2.3. *Characteristics of the Interpretivist Paradigm*

The following table (Table 3.1) explains the characteristics of research located within the interpretivist paradigm, which suited the nature of this study.



**Table 3.1**

*Characteristics of the interpretivist paradigm*

CHARACTERISTICS	RESEARCH LOCATED WITHIN THE INTERPRETIVIST PARADIGM
ELEMENTS OF THE INTERPRETIVIST PARADIGM	RELATED TO THE PRESENT STUDY
<p>1. The social world can only be understood from the perspective of an individual.</p>	<p>A single case study was used in this study. The perspectives of the participants were a true representation of the focus of this study, and they provided meaningful data. The researcher was aware that to understand the experiences of an individual, information must be derived directly from those who have experiences of the phenomenon.</p>
<p>2. Interpretivism can accommodate multiple versions of perspectives of the truth (De Vos et al., 2011).</p>	<p>The researcher used the experiences of the participants in this study to construct and interpret an understanding, which was generated from the data collected.</p>
<p>3. Interpretivism aims to include rich accounts of a phenomenon. The findings cannot be generalised to different contexts (Bhattacharjee, 2012).</p>	<p>The data gathered and analysed could not be generalised to another context considering that it was dependent on a specific context (special schools) and the viewpoints of special education teachers (Saunders et al., 2012).</p>
<p>4. The right context will provide vital information.</p>	<p>The contexts for the participants of this study were the same (special schools or full-service schools), but the participants' perspectives varied. However, everything was viewed and understood based on the specific context (Flick, 2009).</p>
<p>5. The researcher and the subjects are "engaged in interactive processes in which they intermingle, dialogue, question, listen, read, write and record research data" (Kivunja &amp; Kuyini, 2017, p. 8).</p>	<p>The process of collecting data using interviews, questionnaires, and a focus group discussion required that the researcher engage in a dialogue with the participants. The researcher asked the participants questions, listened to their responses, and wrote down any observations that were made as they were responding (reflective journal). The interviews and focus group discussions were also digitally recorded. Therefore, there was an inevitable connection between the researcher and the participants in this study.</p>

When conducting research, it is important that researchers are aware of, and also implement the different ethical principles that they need to adhere to when conducting research. The following section discusses the axiology of conducting qualitative research.

### **3.1.3. Axiology**

Axiology concerns the philosophical approach involved in making the right decisions (Finnis, 1980). It focuses on the ethical principles that a researcher needs to take into consideration when proposing to conduct research (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Axiology involves a researcher evaluating what may be the wrong or right way of conducting themselves when carrying out research. It considers the value that is ascribed to the different processes of research, the participants, as well as the audience who will read the study report. Axiology attempts to critically examine questions that are related to goodness, value, and correct conduct (Hiles, 2008). The aim of axiology is to make researchers aware of the importance of prioritising the values of those who will be participating in the research, ensuring that the participants are always respected (Bredenbach & Jacobsson, 2016). According to Kivunja and Kuyini (2017, p. 28), Axiology addresses the following: “How shall I conduct the research in a socially just, respectful and peaceful manner? How shall I avoid or minimise risk or harm, whether it be physical, psychological, legal, social, economic or other?” The axiology of this study was put into practice through adherence to all the ethical considerations of conducting qualitative research.

### **3.1.4. Methods and Methodology**

Methods refer to specific tools that a researcher uses to collect and analyse data (Rehman & Khalid, 2016). However, methodology is “an articulated, theoretically informed approach to the production of data” (Ellen, 1984, p. 9). Methodology is concerned with critically analysing the data production techniques of a study to identify if they correlate with the phenomenon being investigated. In other words, methodology refers to the plan, process, and action that informs a researcher’s choice of methods to use for a study. Methodology is also concerned with guiding a researcher towards deciding on the type of data they require for their study, as well as the tools that will be appropriate and necessary to obtain this data (Rehman & Khalid, 2016). The methodology utilised in interpretive epistemology is the qualitative research

approach. The methodological paradigm that this study followed will be discussed next.

## **3.2. METHODOLOGICAL PARADIGM**

### **3.2.1. Qualitative Research Approach**

Qualitative research applies to phenomena that cannot be examined using quantity. Rather, it aims to understand a phenomenon from the perspective of those experiencing it (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). Qualitative research aims to gain a deep understanding of a phenomenon by conducting an in-depth exploration thereof, producing high-quality findings (Biggam, 2008).

Creswell (2014) describes qualitative research as an approach that is used to understand the meaning that individuals attach to their experiences. Qualitative researchers use phenomenological practices that allow them to understand the subject of the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Moreover, qualitative research focuses on the use of multiple methods that involve interpretation and taking a naturalistic perspective in understanding a phenomenon (Aspers & Corte, 2019).

Fick (2009) echoes the sentiments above, and further adds that qualitative research is concerned with understanding phenomena from an internal perspective. Therefore, the most suitable way to conduct this study was through a qualitative research methodology since it involved understanding the individual challenges of the participants in this study (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative research focuses on inquiring about the social world through non-numeric methods as the methodology uses words, conversations, and narrative analyses (Jackson et al., 2007; Punch, 2013). This methodology is fluid in how it gives the researcher an opportunity to use multiple methods to collect data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) in order to understand a phenomenon better, which is known as crystallisation (Ellingson, 2011).

In this study, multiple sources (triangulation) were used to collect data. This included a focus group discussion, semi-structured interviews, and a Conservation of Resources qualitative questionnaire. This allowed the researcher to obtain rich, in-depth data on the participants' experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; McMillan & Schumacher, 2014; Sutton & Austin, 2015). The advantages and disadvantages of using a qualitative research methodology will be discussed below.

### **3.2.2. The Advantages of Using a Qualitative Research Approach**

Denzin and Lincoln (1994, p. 2) state that qualitative research is “multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter.” The qualitative research approach allows researchers to understand the individual voices, perspectives, and meanings that people ascribe to events and experiences (Richardson, 2012). This allowed the researcher in this study to understand the individual voices, perspectives, and meanings that the participants of this study ascribed to the challenges that they experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **3.2.3. The Disadvantages of Using a Qualitative Research Methodology**

The disadvantage of using the qualitative research approach is that because it is used to understand the interactions and experiences of a specific group of people, under a specific context, issues of replicability may arise. This is because the findings gathered from studying people in a specific context may not be replicable to another group of people who are experiencing the same phenomenon in a different context (Cohen et al., 2011).

Qualitative research often focuses on using a small number of participants when collecting data. This makes generalising the collected data to a greater population difficult (Harry & Lipsky, 2014; Thomson, 2011). However, the aim of this study was not to be able to generalise the findings of this study. In the following sections, the research methodology of this study is discussed.

## **3.3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

According to Creswell (2016), research methodology relates to the research processes involved in conducting a study. This section focuses on the research methodology of this study according to its various components. The discussion will first concentrate on the research design underpinning this study, followed by an exploration of the advantages and disadvantages of this research design.

### **3.3.1. Research Design**

“A research design is a logic that links the data to be collected and the conclusions to be drawn to the initial questions of a study” (Rowley, 2002, p. 18). A research design is a plan that the researcher uses to guide the collecting, analysing, and interpreting

of data for a phenomenon that they have observed (Yin, 2006). This study utilised a single, exploratory case study research design.

### 3.3.1.1. *Single, Exploratory Case Study Research Design*

According to Sturman (1997, p. 61), “A case study is a general term for the exploration of an individual, group or phenomenon.” The aim of a case study is to provide a thick description of an individual, a phenomenon, or a case with the goal of identifying structures and forms of order (Mesec, 1998). Case studies also focus on the context in which a phenomenon occurs (Starman, 2013).

Stake (2005) states that a case study focuses on a particular case to be investigated, as well as the tools used to do so. In other words, the researcher selects a phenomenon (case) that they intend to explore (Flyvberg, 2011). Moreover, a case study usually focuses on a small group or a small number of cases.

The selection of a case in a study is crucial. Cases are selected based on the research questions, accessibility, resources, and the time available to collect data for the study (Rowley, 2002). Case studies do not use generalisations because they focus on a specific group, and thus the findings gathered from one group will not be generalisable or transferable to another group (Starman, 2013). Yin (2003) states that a case study research design should be considered under the following circumstances: (a) When a researcher’s study aims to answer ‘how’, and ‘why’ questions. (b) When the behaviour of those who will be participants in a study cannot be manipulated, (c) When a researcher wants to cover the context of a phenomenon because there may be a reason to believe that it affects the phenomenon being investigated, and lastly (d) When there is no clear boundary between the phenomenon and the context in which the phenomenon occurs. In this study, case study research allowed the researcher to understand the challenges experienced by the participants. However, in understanding a case study as a research design, it is important to discuss what is meant by the term ‘case’ in case study.

According to Creswell (2007), and Hyett et al. (2014), a case is known as a bounded system because the phenomenon (case) being investigated or explored is bound to a specific context and time. The case being investigated can be on a specific activity, process, event, group of people, or even an individual (Schurink & Auriacombe, 2010). Therefore, a case is “a unit of human activity embedded in the real world” (Gillham,

2000, p. 1). The researcher investigates a phenomenon as it is bound by time or context. The researcher does this using various data collection methods, during a specific period (Yin, 1994, 2003). The researcher contextualises the case within its larger context, but the focus remains on the case or phenomenon it is illustrating (Creswell, 2007). Case studies in qualitative research place importance on a detailed context-based analysis of a condition or events, and their relationships. Case studies enable researchers to understand a phenomenon in relation to the context in which it occurs (Schurink & Auriacombe, 2010). A researcher must then decide on the kind of case study they will use which aims to answer the research question. The type of case study selected is also based on the purpose of the study (Patnaik & Pandey, 2019). There are different types of case studies found in qualitative research. The type of case study used is based on the focus of the study.

Yin (2009) states that case studies can be categorised as exploratory, explanatory, and descriptive. Stake (2005) states that case studies are categorised as collective, instrumental, and intrinsic. Taherdoost (2021) adds that case studies can also be prospective, and retrospective. This study used an exploratory case study research design, which focuses on answering 'what' questions (Patnaik & Pandey, 2019).

When choosing to use a case study research design, the researcher must consider whether to use single or multiple case studies to understand the phenomenon being explored (Gustafsson, 2017). A single case study is like a single experiment (Taherdoost, 2021), and is used when the case being explored is extreme or has something special to reveal (Rowley, 2002).

A single case study is used when a researcher wants to investigate a single phenomenon or a single group of people (Yin, 2003). The researcher decided on a single, exploratory case study research design because (a) The case in this study is a unique phenomenon, this being the COVID-19 pandemic (b) The single case study research design was chosen because the phenomenon under investigation had not been accessible to researchers before (Ozcan et al., 2017). The discussion will now proceed to examine the advantages of using a single case study as a research design for this study.

### 3.3.1.2. *Advantages of Using a Case Study*

According to Ozcan et al. (2017), the advantages of using a single case study design are as follows:

- (1) Researchers can gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon being investigated, and they can do so from various perspectives. In this study, the researcher was able to gain an in-depth understanding and appreciation of the different perspectives of the participants.
- (2) A single case study allows the researcher to gain access to the phenomenon in ways that other people cannot. This study allowed for access to the professional, as well as the personal challenges experienced by the participants due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- (3) The case being investigated may be of a rare phenomenon, and as such, multiple cases of the phenomenon may not be available, thus a single case is enough to build a new theory. The case that this study investigated was that of the COVID-19 pandemic. When the research on the pandemic was initiated, it was still a relatively rare phenomenon as it had just begun.
- (4) Case studies consider the past, present, and future (Kabir, 2016). They also consider the individual as well as the interactions of the individual. Case studies can also utilise different research methods as selected by the researcher (Taherdoost, 2021). This study considered the participants' individual interactions by identifying the different challenges they experienced, and how these experiences were particularly influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The disadvantages of using a case study research design will be discussed below.

### 3.3.1.3. *Disadvantages of Using a Case Study*

According to Taherdoost (2021), the disadvantages of using a case study are as follows:

- (a) Case studies can be complex, and time-consuming to conduct. In this study, using this research design was time-consuming as there were three data collection processes.



- (b) There is also no limit to the amount of data that one can collect when using a case study research design, and this may be challenging for researchers as they may not know when to stop collecting data; This was not a challenge that the researcher encountered while collecting data for this study. The challenge encountered was not having enough participants from which to collect data. Therefore, the researcher had to continue searching for participants for this study to be able to generate enough data for all three data collection phases of this study.
- (c) Case studies run the risk of over-interpreting and over-generalising issues. This was not a challenge encountered during the data analysis in this study. Throughout the analysis, the focus remained on highlighting each of the individual challenges experienced by the participants due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the paragraphs to follow, the cases and the selection of participants in this study are discussed.

### **3.4. SELECTION OF CASES AND RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**

Data gathering is an important aspect of research because the data gathered will contribute to the understanding of the theoretical framework of a study (Bernard, 2002). It is therefore crucial that the decision of how the data will be collected, as well as from whom the data will be collected for a study is prioritised (Tongco, 2007). According to Reybold et al. (2012, p. 1), “Researchers do not just collect data; they decide who matters as data.” In selecting the participants of this study, this study used the purposive sampling method.

#### **3.4.1. Purposive Sampling**

Purposive sampling, also known as judgment sampling, is a sampling technique where participants are selected due to the qualities that they possess (Etikan et al., 2016). Purposive sampling is a non-random sampling technique, and it has no underlying theories or a specific, set number of participants. In purposive sampling, the researcher has a topic of focus, and then he/she decides what must be known about the topic. The researcher then searches for participants that have knowledge of, and experience with the topic (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Therefore, the people



selected to participate in the study are those who have rich information on the topic being investigated (Patton, 2002).

Reybold et al. (2012, p. 242) further state that “purposive sampling is a strategy for accessing appropriate data that fit the purpose of the study, the resources available, the questions asked, and the constraints being faced.” It is important to further note that although a researcher may identify people who can be participants in his/her study, the participants identified must be available and willing to participate in the study.

According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010), purposive sampling is a method of selecting participants for a study based on them meeting a criterion or criteria. The researcher initially aimed to conduct this study using a sample size of 18 participants. However, only ten participants were able to form part of the cohort for this study. For this study, a total of 10 participants who were learning support and special education teachers in the Gauteng province were purposefully selected. The schools selected for participation in this study had to meet the following criteria: (a) Be a school that caters to learners with special needs, (b) Be situated within the Gauteng province.

Once ethics approval was received from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria, the researcher started telephonically contacting the schools. The researcher was then given the contact details of the principals of the schools by the administrators, who asked that contact be made to request permission to conduct the study using teachers at the school. The researcher contacted the principals, and they requested that all the relevant documents that pertain to the study be sent to them.

The research proposal was sent to the principals so that they could fully understand the premise thereof before giving consent for the study to take place in their school. They were then provided with a letter that indicated the details of the data collection process. The letter had an attached consent letter that the principals could sign if they understood and agreed to the research being conducted at their schools. The researcher also sent the principals the ethics approval letter for this study. The schools responded to the request to participate in the study telephonically or electronically. When the schools contacted the researcher (telephonically or through email), they had already identified and selected the teachers who could participate in this study. The

schools provided the researcher with the contact details of the potential participants. Contact was made with them to provide them with further details about the study, as well as to schedule a date and time when the data collection process could take place.

On the day of the data collection, the participants were provided with a consent letter. The letter provided the participants with all the necessary information regarding the data collection process, and also indicated the ethical standards that the study would adhere to. Once the participants had read through the consent letter, they then were asked to sign the letter as a way of acknowledging that they understood what the study was about and that they gave their consent to participate in the study.

The study will now explore the advantages and disadvantages of using purposive sampling to select participants for this study.

### **3.4.2. The Advantage of Using Purposive Sampling for this Study**

The advantage of using the purposive sampling technique was that it enabled the researcher to involve only those teachers who had the necessary knowledge and experience required to understand this phenomenon.

### **3.4.3. The Disadvantages of Using Purposive Sampling for this Study**

According to Andrade (2021, p. 88), “The more purposive the sample is, the more limited the external validity will be.” This is a noteworthy drawback that requires further discussion as it led to a potential bias in the research.

#### *3.4.3.1. Limitation in terms of the number of participants in this study*

This study involved a sample size of 10 participants. This is a small sample size, and thus poses a limitation to the study. However, sample sizes in qualitative research tend to be small so that the phenomenon under investigation can be understood in depth from those who have been selected to participate in the study (Hong & Cross Francis, 2020). Qualitative samples are purposive, meaning that the participants are chosen based on the assumption that they can provide rich and detailed information that will be relevant to the focus of the study (Vasileiou et al., 2018). There are no numerical rules in qualitative research (Guest et al., 2006) that clearly guide a researcher on the definition of a properly sized sample (Lichtman, 2010; Kindsiko & Poltimäe, 2019; van Rijnsoever, 2017). Therefore, a sample size is considered

sufficient only if it can answer the research questions and assist with the purpose of the study (Mocănașu, 2020).

#### 3.4.3.2. *Limitation in terms of the geographical location of the participants of this study*

All of the participants in this study were from schools in the Gauteng province. Although it was the researcher's intention to focus only on educators from schools in this area, this is also a limitation because the findings of this study are valid only within the borders of the Gauteng province.

### 3.4.4. Demographics of the Participants

It is important to provide the biographical information of the participants in this study to avoid any assumptions being made, and to reinforce that these challenges are common regardless of age, race, or gender (Li, 2017). The participants were selected based on the criteria that they had to either be a special needs or a learning support educator, and that they also had to be teaching at a school that caters to learners with special needs.

Providing detailed biographical information about the participants of this study could enhance the study's reliability by facilitating a comprehensive understanding of the participants' backgrounds. This, in turn, would make it easier for other researchers to apply the results of this study by replicating the biographical data.

### 3.4.5. The Participants' Biographical Information

#### 3.4.5.1. *The use of pseudonyms in this study*

Researchers working with qualitative data need to keep the identity of their research participants hidden. This requires the removal of any information about the participants that may lead to the identification of the participant or the organisation for which they work. When a researcher does this, they then use what is known as a 'pseudonym'. A pseudonym is a false name (Heaton, 2022) given to a person with the intention of hiding their real identity.

In this study, the names of the participants were removed, and they were rather assigned the labels P1, P2, and so forth. The 'P' was an abbreviation for the word 'participant', and the number (1-10) was assigned based on the number of people participating in this study (10). The number was randomly assigned to each participant.

#### 3.4.5.2. *Types of schools at which the participants worked*

It is important to understand the school context of the participants. The participants in this study were either from a Learner with Special Educational Needs school (LSEN), or a Full-Service School (FSS). According to the Screening Identification Assessment and Support (SIAS) policy, a special school is a school that is “equipped to deliver a specialised education programme to learners requiring access to high-intensive educational and other support, either on a full-time or a part-time basis (Department of Education, 2014, p. 10).

Learners in special schools receive support that is based on their needs. This support can range from an adapted curriculum and assessments, to specialised learner and teacher support materials, and specialist teachers (DoE, 2014). The type of specialised support that is needed by a learner will determine the school in which the learner is placed. Learners should be placed in schools that meet their educational needs (van der Linde, 2019).

An FSS, according to the Department of Basic Education (2010), is a school that aims to provide quality education to all the learners at the school by meeting all of their learning needs. The aim of an FSS is for all learners to reach a level of success and to experience equity and equality; and it also promotes social justice. FSSs promote inclusivity, and are integral to an inclusive society.

#### 3.4.5.3. *The participants’ gender*

There is a perception of teaching being a woman’s job in South Africa (Moosa & Bhana, 2018; Petersen, 2014), reinforced by the fact that the majority of teachers are female (Davids & Waghid, 2020). The researcher deliberately chose to only focus on females in this study because, as indicated by Throndsen and Turmo (2012), female teachers are more student-centred and supportive than male teachers, and females are more caring and patient with learners (Lazarus, 2019). Educators in the special needs field require patience, care, and support to work with learners. It is for these reasons that a decision was made to only include female participants in this study.

Table 3.2 provides a summary of the participants’ demographics.

**Table 3.2**

*Biographical information of the participants in this study*

Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Age	Number of years as special/learning support educator	Location of School in Gauteng	Type of special school
P1	Female	White	44	26	Johannesburg	Special needs school
P2	Female	White	Chose not to specify	Chose not to specify	Johannesburg	Special needs school
P3	Female	Black	56	14	Benoni	Full-service school
P4	Female		59	30	Boksburg	Special needs school
P5	Female	Coloured	30	7	Boksburg	Full-service school
P6	Female	White	33	10	Vereeniging	Special needs school
P7	Female	White	62	16	Pretoria	Special needs school
P8	Female	Indian	31	7	Boksburg	LSEN (Learners with Special Educational Needs) school
P9	Female	Black	30	7	Boksburg	Full-service school
P10	Female	White	Chose not to specify	Chose not to specify	Chose not to specify	Special needs school

### **3.5. DATA GENERATION AND DOCUMENTATION**

Qualitative data comprises both nominal and non-numerical data, which is not shown through numbers, but rather shown through words or sentences (Taherdoost, 2021).

The researcher must pay attention to detail when collecting data to ensure that they gain appropriate results from the data. This will decrease the chances of gathering insufficient and inaccurate findings from the data (Kabir, 2016). According to Olsen (2012), although a good data collection method helps to plan good research, it does not guarantee the overall success of the research project.

Data collection methods are divided into two main categories: primary and secondary data collection (Taherdoost, 2021). Data that has not yet been published and is first-hand information is known as primary data. To obtain primary data, this study utilised three different data collection methods, which will be detailed below.

#### **3.5.1. Semi-Structured Interviews**

A semi-structured interview is a data collection method that is designed to elicit subjective responses from people who are regarded as experienced or knowledgeable about the phenomenon being explored (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). The questions in a semi-structured interview focus on the responses given by the participants, and it is these responses that constitute the structure of the interview. During a semi-structured interview, participants are free to answer the questions in any way that they wish, and then the researcher has an opportunity to ask probing questions in response to their answers (Bartholomew et al., 2000). Bryman (2015) states that because individual semi-structured interviews allows researchers to ask probing questions, this results in participants giving in-depth responses, which provides rich data.

Interviews are conducted using an interview schedule or questionnaire. The questionnaire consists of pre-determined questions, which are followed by probing questions. In a semi-structured interview, the researcher must ask open-ended questions to elicit unstructured responses. This will help generate a discussion between the researcher and the participants (Irvine et al., 2013). The researcher asks the participants questions in a systematic order. However, the questions are semi-structured, meaning that they allow the researcher to slightly diverge from the script of the interview questions (Irvine et al., 2013).

It is important to probe the participants' responses to enable them to elaborate and provide as much data as possible (Berg, 1989). The researcher conducted 10 individual interviews with the participants in this study. The duration of each interview was between 30 minutes and an hour.

#### *3.5.1.1. Formulation of the interview questions*

The interview questions used in this study were developed by the researcher and her supervisor. The questions focused on asking the participants about their teaching methods during the COVID-19 pandemic; how, and if they implemented online learning; the coping strategies that they implemented during the pandemic; the challenges that they experienced when implementing the COVID-19 regulations; as well as the emotional and well-being challenges that they experienced because of the pandemic. The researcher conducted a total of seven interviews with some probing questions (depending on the response given by each participant).

#### *3.5.1.2. The advantages of conducting semi-structured interviews*

According to de Leeuw (2008), the advantages of conducting face-to-face semi-structured interviews are as follows:

- (a) Since the researcher is physically present during the interview, there is a structure to the interview.
- (b) During the interview, there is verbal and non-verbal communication taking place, and it is easier for a researcher to see the non-verbal cues when they are physically present during the interview.
- (c) The researcher also gets the opportunity to explain the interview questions to the participants should they find them to be complex. The researcher can do this through probing. Being physically present to conduct the interviews allowed the researcher an opportunity to clarify the questions that the participants did not understand during the interview session.
- (d) Should the participants experience any discomfort during the interview due to the questions asked by the researcher, the researcher is able to offer support or give the participants a break.

### 3.5.1.3. *The disadvantages of conducting semi-structured interviews*

Semi-structured interviews are time-consuming. The process of preparing to conduct the interview, conducting the interviews, and then analysing the data is labour-intensive (Newcomer et al., 2015). Semi-structured interviews can be conducted on a face-to-face basis, as a written questionnaire, or even in a virtual space (Fontana & Prokos, 2007). In this study, the semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face.

In light of this, one of the other disadvantages of conducting face-to-face semi-structured interviews is that the physical presence of the researcher may be intimidating to some participants, and this may hinder their ability to answer the questions truthfully. When asked sensitive questions, the participants may feel inhibited in answering (Kabir, 2016). This challenge was addressed by creating a comfortable setting with the participants before conducting the interviews. A calm and professional demeanour was displayed, which helped make the participants feel at ease when asked sensitive questions (Neuman, 2014). Conducting face-to-face interviews can be time-consuming (Kabir, 2016), and expensive in terms of travel costs (Neuman, 2014). To combat this possible financial challenge, the researcher ensured to set aside enough money for petrol so that she could travel to the schools to collect data. Another disadvantage of using semi-structured interviews to collect data is that the researcher's bias may influence the findings of the study. The researcher minimised bias by maintaining objectivity and reducing any personal judgments during the interviews. The questions that the participants were asked during the interviews can be found in Appendix F.

### **3.5.2. Demand and Resource Qualitative Questionnaire**

A questionnaire can be utilised for different purposes, although it is commonly used to collect quantitative data. It can, however, also be used to measure variables such as facts, behaviour, and preferences (Kabir, 2016). When intending to use questionnaires researchers must include detail in planning and preparing the questions (McGuirk & O'Neill, 2016). When using a questionnaire, researchers need to reflect on the objectives of the study, consider other existing information sources, as well as think about the ethical implications linked to the culture of the context in which the data will



be gathered. The content covered by the questions in the questionnaire must relate to the broader research question of the study (McGuirk & O'Neill, 2016).

Researchers need to be clear about the purpose of each question asked, as well as how the participants must answer the questions. Lastly, researchers must be cognizant of the extent to which participants may be willing to disclose information, and that some people are limited by culture and context when it comes to sharing information. The researcher must ensure that the participants will understand the questions asked, and that they have the knowledge to answer the questions (Babbie, 2013). The Conservation of Resources theoretical framework that guided this study will be briefly discussed below, and how it was used to formulate the questions in the questionnaire of this study (refer to Appendix H).

#### *3.5.2.1. The Conservation of Resources Theory*

The questionnaire used in this study was constructed based on one of the theoretical frameworks that underpinned this study, namely, the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory (see Section 2.15.1). This theory focuses on how the work environment, through the resources that it lacks, has a direct influence on an employee's level of stress. According to this theory, resources can be classified as physical resources (those that exist in the environment), and internal resources (those that exist within the individual/employee).

#### *3.5.2.2. Developing the questionnaire using the COR Theory*

The questionnaire designed for this study included a total number of 65 questions. The first section of the questionnaire had 30 questions, which focused on the demand aspect of the theory, and the different demands that the participants were exposed to because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The second section of the questionnaire had 35 questions, which addressed the resources aspect of the theory, where the questions addressed the issue of the availability of resources in schools during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The first principle of the COR Theory states that the loss of resources affects employees more than gaining resources would (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). This principle was used to formulate questions that addressed how the COVID-19 pandemic caused schools to lose resources.

The second principle of the theory focuses on how individuals (employees) need to invest in resources so that they can be protected against losing resources. This principle was used to formulate questions regarding the resources that the teachers did not have, and how they thought having these resources may have assisted them in navigating through the challenges that they encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The third principle of the COR Theory indicates that the resources gained by employees (educators in the context of this study) become more important when resources are lost (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Questions that were constructed for the questionnaire based on this principle focused on the skills that the participants already possessed, and how they were able to utilise these skills when confronted with a loss of resources caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The fourth principle of the COR Theory focuses on the individual resources (Brownell et al., 2014) that participants have, and, in this context, how these resources were overstretched and overused because of the lack of resources due to the pandemic. Questions constructed based on this principle addressed the emotional well-being of the participants, and how this was compromised because of a lack of resources due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the following section, clarification is provided on how the questionnaire was piloted before its distribution to the participants.

#### *3.5.2.3. Pilot testing the questionnaire*

After formulating the demand and resource questions, the next step involved ensuring the questionnaire's alignment with the intended investigation. Additionally, the researcher undertook an assessment to confirm that the questionnaire's questions were meticulously developed, structured, and easily understandable for the participants (Olthof-Nefkens et al., 2021). The researcher then administered the questionnaire to two individuals who taught learners with special educational needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. These individuals were asked to articulate any thoughts, ideas, and suggestions they may have had about the questionnaire. All the comments provided by these individuals were written down, and they were used to make changes to the questionnaire. The final questions were then developed by the researcher and research supervisor.

The pretest of the questionnaire was conducted to assess its reliability and ensure that it effectively investigated the intended aspects (Hu, 2014). The following paragraph discusses the administration of the questionnaire to the participants in this study.

#### *3.5.2.4. Administration of the questionnaire*

In this study, the questionnaire was administered using a face-to-face, paper and pencil format. The reason for this was to ensure that the participants completed the questionnaire, and that they could ask questions (if they had any) or gain clarification on any of the questionnaire questions.

The participants completed the questionnaires after the researcher had conducted individual interviews with them. The questionnaire had a total number of 65 questions, and it took the participants 30-35 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

#### *3.5.2.5. Using a questionnaire to collect qualitative data*

Using a quantitative data collection method in qualitative research requires content validity. Content validity, according to McKenna et al. (2004), refers to the extent to which the questions in a questionnaire reflect the topic under study. The researcher can ensure content validity in qualitative research by using direct communication with the participants (Ricci et al., 2018). McKenna et al. (2003) explain that the questionnaire should consider and reflect the participants' perspectives and experiences

During the construction of the questionnaire items, careful consideration was given to formulating questions that were important to the participants involved in this study. This approach facilitated a focused exploration of key areas within the scope of this study (Ricci et al., 2018). By applying this methodology in constructing the questionnaire, the researcher was able to generate items for the questionnaire based on the reality of the participants rather than the expectations of the researcher. This approach enabled a thorough exploration of all important aspects related to the research focus, ensuring nothing crucial was omitted (Doward et al., 2009). The questionnaire used in this study can be found in Appendix H.

### 3.5.2.6. *Advantages of using a questionnaire*

According to Taherdoost (2021), the following are the advantages of using a questionnaire to collect data:

- a) Questionnaires afford the researcher the opportunity to collect a large amount of data from a large sample size. The length of the questionnaire was 65 questions. This allowed the researcher to collect a large amount of data, even though it was only collected from a small sample of people (10).
- b) Questionnaires are highly structured: the questionnaire used in this study was highly structured, as it was developed using the COR Theory.
- (c) They are cost-effective. Printing out copies of the questionnaire was inexpensive. Questionnaires may also save the researcher time. This was not the case in this study as a substantial amount of time was invested in formulating the questions for the questionnaire. Therefore, this mentioned advantage was not applicable to this study. However, administering the questionnaires to the participants was not time-consuming as they completed the questionnaire immediately after their interview, and it enabled the researcher to quickly capture that data in its entirety.

### 3.5.2.7. *Disadvantages of using a questionnaire*

Questionnaires pose a challenge in terms of obtaining adequate data regarding the thoughts, feelings, and emotions of the participants. They may also involve human errors, resulting in participants not understanding certain aspects (Taherdoost, 2021). Questionnaires can also yield illegible answers, and wrong answers are prevalent when administering questionnaires (Pandey & Pandey, 2015). The researcher mitigated the possibility of human error by using clear language when structuring the questions of this study. Since the questionnaire was administered in a face-to-face setting, the participants were able to ask for clarification of questions that they did not understand as they were completing the questionnaire. Thorough processes were followed to ensure the reliability and validity of the research instruments.

In the following section, the analysis and interpretation of the data in this study will be discussed.

### 3.5.3. Focus Group Discussion

A focus group method was also used to collect data for this study. Focus group discussions are an extension of the interview process, and comprise a facilitator and participants discussing a selected topic (Gundumogula, 2020).

The goal of a focus group discussion is to provide insight into the topic being studied (Collins & O'Brien, 2003). As with any data collection tool, participants are selected based on the experience and knowledge that they have about the topic of discussion, and their potential to contribute to the study (Barrows, 2000).

When selecting the venue for a focus group discussion, the researcher must select one that will be easily accessible, comfortable, and appropriate for the participants (Gundumogula, 2020). Researchers should also make sure that the venue selected to host the focus group discussion is free from any noise or disturbances. All the participants of the focus group discussion should be informed about the date and time of the focus group discussion in advance so that they can plan their attendance accordingly.

Different authors have their own thoughts and ideas about the size of a focus group discussion. Krueger (1994) states that a focus group should be composed of a minimum of three participants, and a maximum of 12 participants. Whereas Von Seggern and Young (2003) state that a focus group should comprise four to five participants. The focus group discussion for this study was conducted online using Blackboard Collaborate Ultra. As a student from the University of Pretoria, the researcher had free access to Blackboard and did not have to pay to use the platform. The decision was made to use this virtual space to conduct the focus group discussion due to its easy accessibility and the option of recording sessions without time limitations, ensuring full recordings of the discussions. Each focus group discussion lasted for one hour, with a total of two focus group discussions conducted. The focus group comprised one SET, and two LSEs. These participants were specifically selected to participate in a focus group discussion because they provided very informative and detailed information when completing their questionnaire.

During a focus group discussion, the researcher facilitates the discussion through a series of open-ended questions. These questions are planned and prepared

beforehand, and the facilitator also plans opening remarks and any other materials that they will use to make the discussion successful (Gundumogula, 2020). When conducting a focus group discussion, the facilitator must always be cognizant of the role that he/she plays in the discussion taking place. When a facilitator is highly involved in the discussion, this can cause the data gathered to be biased. Alternatively, low engagement from the facilitator may cause the participants to deviate from the topic at hand. Therefore, the facilitator must ensure that he/she plays a balanced role when facilitating a focus group discussion (Krueger, 1994).

The commonly used method to capture the information gathered from a focus group discussion is audio or video recording. However, permission to record the discussion must be requested from the participants beforehand (Gundumogula, 2020).

The participants of the study were also provided with consent letters, which indicated that the focus group discussions were going to be recorded. Therefore, the participants of this study were made aware that the discussions from the focus group were going to be recorded for data analysis, and transcription purposes. Another data collection method that was used in this study was the Conservation of Resources Questionnaire that the participants had to complete. The questions for the focus group discussion are expounded below (also see Appendix J).

#### 3.5.3.1. *Formulating the questions for the focus group discussion*

The focus group discussion questions were semi-structured, and focused on addressing the challenges that the participants encountered, and the different forms of support that they were exposed to during the COVID-19 pandemic. There was a total number of six detailed questions posed, and the researcher also asked some of the participants a probing question based on the responses that they gave.

#### 3.5.3.2. *The advantages of conducting a focus group discussion*

According to Marelli (2008), the advantages of conducting a focus group discussion are as follows:

- (a) Focus group discussions allow the researcher to collect in-depth information from several people at the same time. Although only one focus group discussion was held in this study, it yielded rich and sufficient information that contributed immensely to the data gathered. When engaging with the questions

asked during the focus group discussion, the participants were able to individually give meaningful and significant accounts of their experiences..

- (b) They save time because the information is gathered in multiple ways in one or two sessions. The focus group discussion for this study was held over one session, at a time that was convenient for the participants.
- (c) They are flexible. Unfortunately, due to time limitations and the limited number of participants available for engagement in this study, this flexibility was not fully realised in this research.
- (d) Participants are empowered as they have a voice while participating in the discussion. This was particularly true for the participants who were part of the focus group discussion because each of the participants was able to freely share their thoughts and experiences. They were also able to learn from each other's experiences of challenges during the pandemic.

#### 3.5.3.3. *The disadvantages of conducting a focus group discussion*

According to Marelli (2008), the disadvantages of conducting a focus group discussion are as follows:

- (a) Since focus group discussions are conducted in a group setting, some participants may be reluctant to speak in a group setting. In the case of this study, this was not a challenge that was encountered. Each of the participants in the focus group discussion was very vocal and willing to share their experiences.
- (b) Focus group discussions can be time-consuming, and the data gathered may be challenging to transcribe. This was not a challenge encountered in this study. The focus group did not go beyond the time set aside for it, and transcribing the data was not challenging as the participants' voices were audible.
- (c) Organising a focus group discussion can be time-consuming, and difficult to accomplish. Since the participants were from various parts of Gauteng, the discussion was conducted on an online platform as they all had access to the internet. This made accessing and participating in the discussion easier for the participants.



- (d) Analysing the data collected from a focus group discussion can be time-consuming. Analysing the data for the focus group discussion was time-consuming, but the researcher adhered to a meticulously planned schedule, allocating dedicated time for transcribing the recorded discussion. This strategic planning helped with organisational efficiency and facilitated the completion of the task.

The demand and resource qualitative questionnaire used to collect data in this study will be explored next.

### **3.6. DATA SATURATION**

Before the data collection process begins, it is important that a researcher be aware of data saturation. Data saturation is a crucial concept in qualitative research that confirms the validity and rigor of the study (Sebele-Mpofu, 2020). Hennink et al., (2017: 15) define saturation in two forms, code and meaning saturation, these being the stage where “no additional codes are emerging” and where no “further insights” are originating from the data. When a researcher is collecting data, they get to a point in the data collection process where they ask themselves if they have collected sufficient data which answers the phenomena that the study is investigating (Saunders, 2018).

In collecting data for this study, the researcher had to always analyse whether or not they had collected sufficient data for this study, and if so, the researcher than had to make a decision to stop collecting data for the study. Enough data in this instance refers to when the same codes or information is appearing more frequently, with no new information appearing in the data set Urquhart (2012)

### **3.7. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION**

The data collected for this study was analysed inductively. In such analyses, the researcher is not concerned with having the data neatly fit into an existing coding frame. Inductive data analysis is driven by the data. Deductive data analysis, alternatively, is driven by a theory. Analysing data deductively may provide a better analysis of some parts of the data, but it does not produce a thick description thereof (Braun & Clarke, 2006).



The analysis of data in qualitative research is inductive. It involves the researcher immersing themselves in the data to familiarise themselves with it, understanding it, analysing it, identifying patterns and ideas, searching for a relationship that may exist between the data, and then presenting the information in a well-written piece of work (Kawulich, 2004; Mc Millan & Schumacher, 2014). Cohen et al. (2011) further state that data analysis involves transcribing, coding, organising, categorising, and merging data into specific themes and categories.

### **3.7.1. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)**

Phenomenological research begins when a researcher is curious, and they then turn their curiosity into a research question (Finlay, 2012). Researchers using phenomenology as a research design explore the conscious perceptions that individuals have about a phenomenon. This is done to understand their perspective and the meaning that they assign to their experience of the phenomenon (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2013).

Phenomenology is ideal to use when the goal is to gather deep, emotional experiences of a phenomenon directly from those who have lived through it (Kafle, 2011). Using the phenomenology research design requires the use of inductive data collection methods such as interviews and discussions, where the perspectives of the research participants will be represented (Lester, 1999). Researchers using phenomenology are more concerned with gathering first-hand descriptions of a phenomenon than trying to resolve the experiences of people (Eddles-Hirsh, 2015). Phenomenology not only focuses on individuals who have experienced a specific phenomenon, but on the interrelationship between people who have experienced a phenomenon and the meaning that they ascribe to it (Merriam, 1998).

According to Husserl (1970), research using a phenomenological design seeks to describe a phenomenon. The description given is free from any hypothesis or preconceptions that a researcher may have (Groenewald, 2004). According to Eagleton (1983, p. 55),

To arrive at certainty, anything outside immediate experience must be ignored, and in this way the external world is reduced to the contents of personal consciousness. Realities are thus treated as pure 'phenomena', and the only absolute data from where to begin.

Researchers using phenomenology as a research design must thus be open to forming a new understanding of a phenomenon (Finlay, 2012). Phenomenology places an emphasis on the world as lived by an individual, meaning that there is no separation of the world or reality from the person (Lavery, 2003). Moran (2000, p. 4) describes phenomenology as:

[A] practice rather than a system, the attempt to get to the truth of matters, to describe phenomena in the broadest sense as whatever appears in the manner in which it appears, that is as it manifests itself to consciousness to the explorer.

Phenomenology aims to gather information beyond description, and to look for the meaning embedded in human experiences (Webb & Welsh, 2019).

One of the key characteristics of phenomenological research is the rich, detailed descriptions of the phenomenon being investigated. When reporting their findings, researchers using phenomenology should always present 'how' the participants experienced the phenomenon, and they should do so without having any preconceived ideas about the phenomenon.

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), according to Smith et al. (2009, p. 1), refers to "a qualitative research approach committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences." Human beings know how to make sense of the experiences they have, and as such, the accounts that they give of their experiences reflect their ways of making sense of that which they have experienced (Smith et al., 2009). Willig (2013, p. 87) states that IPA "is the version of the phenomenological method that accepts the impossibility of gaining direct access to research participants' life worlds." With that being said, the aim was to gain access to the life worlds of the participants of this study through the researcher fully immersing herself in their worlds during the interview stages of the data collection process. The researcher was able to suspend any bias about the phenomenon through bracketing (Alase, 2017; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Moustakas (1994, p. 85) highlighted that as researchers, we must "set aside our prejudgements, biases and preconceived ideas about things." This process is known as bracketing, where a researcher brackets themselves away from the issue that they are investigating to capture the essence of a phenomenon. IPA was used to investigate the challenges experienced by the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was done by gaining an insider

perspective of the phenomenon, while also being aware of, and acknowledging the fact that the researcher was the primary analytical tool in the data collection process (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith & Osborn, 2015).

According to Smith et al. (2009), IPA requires that the researcher take on a dual role in that they are making sense of the participants, as well as how they make meaning of the experiences that they have. On the one hand, the researcher is like the participants, trying to make meaning of their experiences. On the other hand, the researcher is not the participant, but is only able to access the information that the participants provide about the phenomenon being investigated (Smith et al., 2009).

#### *3.7.1.1. Potential bias of using IPA*

The aim of IPA is to explore how individuals make meaning of their experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). This is a positive aspect of IPA because it explores the diversity in the lived experiences of individuals, and it offers individuals an opportunity to narrate their lived experiences (Chan & Farmer, 2017; Smith, et al., 2009). However, IPA is biased in that it takes the narratives provided by individuals about a phenomenon as being the truth. These narratives have the potential to be biased because they are all based on the participants' perspectives of a phenomenon (Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011), and not what may be the actual truth about a phenomenon.

#### *3.7.1.2. The advantages of using IPA*

IPA allows multiple participants who have experienced the same phenomenon to give their own narrative about the phenomenon without having their stories distorted (Alase, 2017). This was the aim of this study. However, researchers must then describe what they have identified to be common among the experiences shared by the participants regarding the phenomenon being investigated (Creswell, 2012). Once the data were analysed, it was possible to identify the participants' different challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. The most important aspect of IPA is the ability to make sense of the lived experiences of the participants, and to allow a researcher to truly explore the phenomenon (Alase, 2017). Analysing the data from an IPA perspective provided a meaningful understanding of the lived experiences of each participant. This approach offered a comprehensive exploration of the study's focus.

### 3.7.1.3. *The disadvantages of using IPA*

Although phenomenology requires that researchers separate the past knowledge that they have about a phenomenon, Walsh (2003), and Finlay (2008) argue that researcher influence on a phenomenological study is inevitable and can only be resolved by the researcher through critical self-awareness. The researcher in this study had limited knowledge of the different challenges that were experienced by SETs and LSEs during the COVID-19 pandemic. This lack of knowledge ensured that the researcher did not have any influence on the study as the pandemic was still a new experience for all, and no one could claim that they had any prior knowledge or experience of it.

Creswell (2013) states that one of the ways to collect data using IPA is through in-depth interviews. During interviews, the researcher brackets any preconceptions that he/she may have about the phenomenon being investigated in the interview process (Alase, 2017). Bracketing is essential when collecting data through interviews so that participants can fully express themselves in their own terms (Smith et al., 2009). Interviews conducted using IPA must be conversational. This allows the research participants to be open about their lived experiences, and then also develop a relationship with the researcher (Alase, 2017).

Another disadvantage of using IPA is that it is time-consuming (Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Smith & Shinebourne 2012). For researchers to rigorously use IPA, they need to carefully plan, execute, and engage in a constant dialogue with the participants throughout the research process. Therefore, it is the onus of the researcher to search for participants who can give rich accounts of the experiences that they have had with the phenomenon being investigated (Miller & Barrio-Minton, 2016).

The participants in this study were knowledgeable and had experience with the phenomenon being investigated, and the researcher was thus able to gather rich data from them throughout all three data collection processes. The following table illustrates the process of using IPA when conducting interviews.

**Table 3.3**

*The interview process using IPA (Smith et al., 2009)*

<b>Interview steps</b>	<b>The interview process followed in the study</b>
A researcher using IPA should conduct semi-structured, and unstructured interviews with as many as 25 participants, but not less than two participants.	This study conducted interviews with 10 participants. The questions for the interviews were semi-structured.
The interview process should only include one participant per interview.	Only one participant was involved in each interview.
The site and date for the interview should be left up to the participants to decide.	The researcher worked around the participants' availability, and scheduled the interview times according to their schedule.
The researcher should use different technological devices to collect the data. Where necessary, the researcher could use a notepad and pen to make notes during the interviewing process.	The researcher utilised a voice recording device to ensure a recording of everything that the participants said.

### **3.7.2. Analysis of Data Using IPA**

According to Creswell (2013), data analysis using IPA should follow the following steps: Before analysing the data, the researcher needs to give a full description of their own experience of the phenomenon being investigated. By doing so, the researcher avoids the influence of his/her own experiences of the phenomenon on the experiences of the participants. A full description of the researcher's experiences is provided in a reflective journal (Appendix K). Secondly, the researcher should develop a set of significant statements that can be used as a foundation to help in understanding the phenomenon that they are investigating. Although the researcher did not have any significant statements regarding the phenomenon that this study investigated, the researcher had foundational information about the COVID-19 pandemic. This helped when trying to understand the challenges experienced by the participants. The third step is for the researcher to then take the significant statements provided by the participants and group them into large groups of information, which can be classified as themes. When analysing the data for this study, the focus was on identifying significant information that provided insight into the phenomenon being

explored. This information was classified according to themes that addressed the research questions in this study. The fourth step involves the researcher writing a description of what the participants said about their experiences of the phenomenon. This is known as a ‘textual description’. Here, the researcher should provide the statements directly from the data as expressed by the participants. This was done in this study by presenting extracts of the participants’ answers in Chapter 4, which focuses on analysing the data collected.

Lastly, the researcher should “write a composite description of the phenomenon where they incorporate the structural and textual descriptions” (Creswell, 2013, p. 194). The final write-up, which includes structured, textual descriptions of the data, will be done in Chapter 5 of this study. The chapter will now discuss how objectivity was retained throughout the data collection process through the use of a reflective journal.

### **3.7.3. Researcher Objectivity Through a Reflective Journal**

Objectivity refers to a set of techniques used by researchers to help them minimise their own subjectivity in their research so that the research findings reflect the experiences of the participants, and not those of the researcher (Khatwani & Panhwar, 2020). Objectivity was retained in this study by acknowledging the thoughts and ideas that the researcher had about the research topic. These ideas were written down in the researcher’s reflective journal. This assisted the researcher in being conscious of these thoughts and ideas, allowing her to separate them from the data during the analysis phase. Notes extracted from the researcher's journal are available in Appendix L. The following section will explore the process of transcribing the data collected in this study.

### **3.7.4. Transcriptions**

Transcriptions involve transforming recorded audio into written form so that it can be used to analyse a phenomenon (Duranti, 2006). Transcribing recorded audio to a written format is time-consuming and can often take between three to eight hours to do (McMullin, 2021).

Transcription is not a mechanical process where each word uttered by a person is transcribed. This is because written text is different from the spoken word in terms of syntax, grammar, and word choice (Davidson, 2009). The transcriber must constantly

choose what, and what not to include in the transcription. The transcriber must also make the subjective decision to correct mistakes, and to edit out repetitions and grammatical errors made by the person being recorded (McMullin, 2021).

Lapadat, (2000, p. 206) explains it by stating that “spoken language is structured and accomplished differently than written text, so when talk is re-presented as written text, it is not surprising that readers draw on their knowledge of written language to evaluate it.” Nonverbal cues such as laughter and a change in the tone of voice may also alter the meaning of what the individual is saying.

It took the researcher one hour to transcribe each of the voice-recorded interviews, and three hours to transcribe the focus group discussions. In the following section, the quality criteria that guide researchers when conducting research is discussed.

### **3.8. METHODOLOGICAL NORMS TO ENSURE QUALITY CRITERIA**

The quality of the data collected in this study was enhanced using a quality criterion developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Guba and Lincoln (1985) modified the concept of trustworthiness in research by introducing the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and authenticity to “parallel the conventional quantitative assessment criteria of validity and reliability” (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 3). A comprehensive explanation of the criteria follows.

#### **3.8.1. Credibility**

According to Tobin and Begley (2004), credibility focuses on how the researcher has clearly demarcated the experiences of the research participants when presenting the data collected. The data collected in this study form an accurate representation of all the information shared by the participants during the data collection processes. The participants’ experiences were clearly documented, ensuring that no information was overlooked.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) established that researchers can ensure that their study is credible by using triangulation when collecting data, persistent observation of the participants, as well as engaging with the participants for a prolonged period. This study used data triangulation as the data were collected using semi-structured



individual interviews, a qualitative questionnaire, and a focus group discussion. Using triangulation allowed the researcher to gather sufficient data for this study.

Credibility was ensured in this study by carefully planning how it would be conducted. This was done through the selection of appropriate participants, the use of different data collection methods, and the materials that were used as data (reflective journal, audio recordings). A detailed account of the data, how it was analysed, and the findings of this study will be provided in Chapters 4 and 5.

### **3.8.2. Transferability**

Transferability refers to whether the findings of a study are generalisable to other contexts beyond those that the study was initially collected for (Tobin & Begley, 2004). Researchers cannot know how and to what their findings may be applied and transferred. Therefore, a researcher must provide thick descriptions of their findings to enable transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This study did not aim to obtain generalisable findings because the number of participants was small (10), and thus could not be said to be a representative of a population of educators. However, in Chapter 5 of this study, thick descriptions of the gathered data have been provided. This information may be used to assess to what extent the findings of this study may be transferable to another context.

### **3.8.3. Dependability**

Researchers must write their research report in a way that will ensure that the reader is able to trace the exact processes that the researcher engaged in as they were conducting their research. Tobin and Begley (2004) state that researchers can achieve dependability by ensuring that their research is logical, traceable, and well-documented. Dependability also refers to how stable the data gathered for one study will be over time under different conditions. It is therefore very important for researchers to state the criteria that they used in selecting the participants of their study so that the results of the study can be assessed when transferred to other contexts.

The dependability of this study was ensured by providing detailed discussions of how the questions for each data collection method were formulated. An overview of the COR theoretical framework and its utilisation in formulating the questionnaire was



provided. Additionally, in-depth information on the analysis of the data using IPA was included. Furthermore, the selection of participants in this study based on specific criteria was discussed.

#### **3.8.4. Confirmability**

To ensure the confirmability of a study's findings, the researcher is required to demonstrate that the findings did not surface from any predispositions that the researcher had, but that the findings were gathered from the data itself (Stahl & King, 2020). According to Guba and Lincoln (1989), the confirmability of a study is only established when credibility, transferability, and dependability are all achieved. Koch (1994) stipulated that researchers should always include information about why they decided to use a specific methodology and data analysis method throughout their study so that anyone reading the final report of the study can understand why and how decisions about the study were made.

Throughout this study, the researcher has justified the decisions taken, and listed the advantages and disadvantages of these decisions as applicable to this study.

#### **3.8.5. Authenticity**

Researchers must be honest and transparent in reporting on data, and must not hold any bias towards their own study (Tracy, 2010). Authenticity also requires that a researcher presents all the findings, showing the participants' different perspectives on the topic under study (Lincoln et al., 2011).

In this study, authenticity was ensured through the researcher having discussions with her supervisor regarding the results that were expected to be gathered from analysing the data. Open discussions were also had about the different challenges that the researcher encountered when analysing the data. The researcher's supervisor guided her on how to represent the findings so that they would be a true reflection of the data gathered, would be fair, and would be free from any personal bias. The researcher also remained authentic to the findings by ensuring that all the responses of the participants of this study were captured in their true and raw form, thus showing that the data collected was a true reflection of what the participants said, and that the data was not tampered with.

### **3.9. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

“Research must take into account the effects of the research on participants, and act in a way to preserve their dignity” (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 52).

Human subjects must always be protected through the application of ethical principles when conducting research. Ethical considerations are particularly important in qualitative research because of the depth that is involved in this type of research (Arifin, 2018).

In conducting this study, the researcher was guided by the following ethical considerations.

#### **3.9.1. Ethical Approval**

Ethics in research are concerned with the protection of the rights and interests of the research participants (Resnik, 2020). Research ethics are important as they set out clear guidelines that have been put in place to ensure that the researcher abides by certain rules or moral behaviour (Rule & John, 2011).

Before data could be collected for this study, the researcher first had to be granted ethical approval from the ethics committee at the Education Faculty of the University of Pretoria (refer to Appendix C). Ethical approval was applied for, and received once the ethics committee had reviewed the application and deemed it ethical. The researcher could then begin to contact prospective participants.

This study was awarded the ethical clearance number EDU196/21. The following information is important in the completion of an ethics application at the University of Pretoria: (a) Where and for how long the data gathered will be stored, (b) A secondary data clause used by the University of Pretoria in all the data collection documents to be sent out to the participants of a study, and (c) Voluntary participation in the study. These aspects are discussed below.

##### *3.9.1.1. Storage of data*

In the ethics application form, it was indicated that the data gathered for this study will be stored in a safe, locked cabinet in the supervisors’ office at the Groenkloof campus

of the University of Pretoria. Only the supervisor and the researcher will have access to the data. The data will be stored for a maximum of 15 years.

#### 3.9.1.2. *Secondary data clause*

The University of Pretoria requires that the secondary clause in the ethics application form be included in all the research collection documentation. This is so that those participating in the research are aware that the data that has been collected from them is now the intellectual property of the University of Pretoria, and may be used in future secondary research studies.

The researcher also applied to the Gauteng Department of Education, and permission to collect data from the schools was granted (refer to Appendix B).

#### 3.9.1.3. *Informed consent*

Informed consent is a prerequisite when conducting research with identifiable participants (Koshy, 2010). The researcher can enable informed consent by discussing the purpose, scope, and process of the proposed study with the potential participants (American Psychological Association, 2017).

De Vos et al. (2005, p. 315) explain that informed consent is a “mechanism for ensuring that people understand what it means to participate in a particular research study so that they can decide in a conscious, deliberate way, whether they want to participate.” In this study, the participants were all above the age of 18, and they were given an informed consent letter that gave a detailed description of what the study would concern. This was given to the principals of the school (refer to Appendix E), as well as the participants (refer to Appendix D), who were requested to sign the attached form if they agreed to participate in the study. This happened before the data collection process began.

#### 3.9.1.4. *Voluntary participation*

The research participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point if they felt the need to do so, even after signing the informed consent form (Maree, 2013). This information was provided to them in their consent letter. They needed to know that their participation in the study was voluntarily.

### **3.9.2. Anonymity and Confidentiality**

The participants' identities should remain hidden, especially when writing up the results of a study. Creswell (2008) states that researchers can incorporate anonymity through: (a) Masking the individual names of the participants (b) Assigning pseudonyms to the participants, as well as the research sites, (c) Withholding providing descriptions that would lead to the participants and their research site being identifiable. The anonymity and confidentiality of the research participants were not revealed at any stage of conducting this study. Privacy and confidentiality when conducting the interviews, and in the interview environment, were managed carefully (Arifin, 2018).

In this study, the researcher used pseudonyms to protect the identities of the teachers. They were identified as P1, P2, P3 and so on until 10 as there were 10 participants in this study. Merriam (1998, p. 219) stated that the responsibility of producing an ethical study “that has been conducted and disseminated in an ethical manner rests with the individual researcher.” In conducting this study, the researcher was also guided by personal values and ethics to conduct the study in a moral way. Consent to record the interviews and the focus group discussion was obtained from the participants.

### **3.9.3. No Harm to Participants**

The researcher must ensure that the participants will not be exposed to any physical or psychological harm or danger because they participated in the study (Babbie, 2005; Strydom, 2011). No harm was done to the participants in this study. The researcher navigated the written and audio-recorded data confidentially. As discussed above, pseudonyms were used when reporting the findings of this study to ensure that the participants remained unharmed by this research.

### **3.9.4. Ethical Challenge Encountered by the Researcher in this Study**

The researcher encountered an ethical challenge when it was time to collect data for this study. The study was conducted during the peak times of the COVID-19 pandemic, and there were concerns about how data would be collected from the participants in this study during a time when the entire world was living through a life-threatening virus.

This presented several challenges and delays when collecting data for this study. The researcher was also challenged with securing enough participants to participate in this study because (a) Research was being conducted on a sensitive topic (COVID-19 pandemic), and (b) The world was still living through the COVID-19 pandemic at the time, and there were COVID-19 regulations that we all had to adhere to. The researcher came to the realisation that not many educators were comfortable enough to share their experiences of the challenges that they encountered during the pandemic. However, the researcher was eventually able to find participants who met the set criteria for this research (teaching in special education, particularly at a school in Gauteng).

### **3.10. CONCLUSION OF THE CHAPTER**

Chapter 3 outlined the methodology used to carry out this research. The interpretive philosophy that was utilised guided the researcher in understanding the subjective challenges experienced by special education teachers in Gauteng during the COVID-19 pandemic. A single case study design was a feasible choice since this study explored 10 teachers in six schools. Qualitative data collection methods such as semi-structured interviews, a semi-structured questionnaire, and focus group discussions were used in this study. The data gathered led to an extensive interpretive phenomenological data analysis process that revealed the main themes and sub-themes of this study. The researcher employed a specific qualitative criterion to ensure that the findings of this study were trustworthy.

The results and findings of this study, based on the processes employed in this chapter, are reported in Chapter 4.

## 4. PRESENTATION OF RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to describe the challenges experienced by learning support and special education teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) research design was used to describe the challenges that were experienced by the participants. The analysis and interpretation of the data were drawn from the semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and focus group discussions conducted with the participants.

When analysing data using IPA, the researcher is required to completely immerse themselves in the data collected with the aim of trying to understand what the participants are expressing about the research topic (Kafle, 2011; Webb & Welsh, 2019). IPA thus aims to provide clear evidence of how the participants made sense of their experience with the phenomenon being investigated. IPA also involves documenting how the researcher made sense of the data collected from the participants (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

According to Smith et al. (2009), when a researcher analyses data they should always ask themselves (a) Are there any connections across the different cases (data sets)? (b) How does a theme that appeared in one case help to illuminate another case? And (c) Which themes were dominant?

During the data collection stage of this study, a thorough introspection and analysis of the data were conducted to identify the sentiments expressed, as indicated by Smith et al. (2009).

Firstly, the participants in this study all come from different schools. The researcher thus had to analyse the data to identify if there were any similarities in the challenges that they experienced during the pandemic, even though they all came from different schools. This was a strength for this study because it allowed the researcher to gather differentiated data, each data set representing the uniqueness of each of the experiences of the participants. The schools that each of the participants came from also shaped these experiences.

Once the data were grouped into different themes, the researcher was then able to identify similarities and differences in the participants' experiences.

Analysing the data according to the different themes provided the researcher with an opportunity to understand the individual experiences of each of the participants, and to understand how their experiences were different based on the school from which they each came. This also then enabled the further identification of any dominant themes in the data. These were able to provide answers to the research questions of this study.

This study followed the following guidelines provided by Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) on how to conduct an IPA.

#### **4.1.1. Stage 1: Multiple readings of the data, and making notes**

In this first stage of the analysis, the researcher listened to the audio recordings of the interviews and focus group discussion. The data were then transcribed into a Word document. The data collection documents were focused on separately. The individual interviews were transcribed first, then the focus group discussion, and lastly the data from the questionnaires were analysed.

To ensure that all the information provided by the participants was captured correctly, the researcher printed out transcriptions from the interviews and focus group discussion so that they could be thoroughly analysed (Noon, 2018; O'Neal & Hayes, 2020; Willig, 2013). Once this was done, recurring themes and patterns were identified in the dataset. The researcher noted these themes and patterns in the left margin of the paper with the transcriptions on it. All keywords, phrases and patterns that related to the topic of the study were identified.

At this point in the data analysis process, the researcher was being led by the data and had not drawn any conclusions about what the data would reveal. The same process was then repeated in analysing the data from the questionnaires.

The researcher then went through each of the transcripts again using a colour system to further make connections between the words, phrases and patterns noted down. Notes were made about any thoughts regarding the data, and these were done in the right-side margin of the transcribed interviews, focus group discussion, and questionnaires.

#### **4.1.2. Step 2: Transforming the notes gathered from the data into emergent themes**

During this second stage of the data analysis, the researcher consulted the transcriptions again (Noon, 2018). Emerging themes were generated based on the connections made from patterns found in the data.

A list of the themes that emerged was compiled. However, at this point of the analysis, no connections between the data had been made. The focus was on what emerged from the data when the transcriptions were being read.

#### **4.1.3. Stage 3: Seeking relationships and clustering themes from the data**

During this stage, the researcher wanted to establish if there were any connections between the themes that emerged in the previous stage (stage 2) (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The researcher went through the data clustered under each theme to ensure that there was no repetition and redundancy in the data. A Word document was then created to display the extracts of what the participants said under each theme.

The steps noted above (steps 1, 2 and 3) were used for the data collected in all three data collection processes (semi-structured interviews, focus group discussion and questionnaire).

Lastly, the themes were grouped according to conceptual similarities that they had, and each theme was then given a descriptive name to indicate what the theme was about (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The researcher then went through the Word document and removed themes that only had a few extracts from what the participants said, thus lacking evidence.

In this chapter, the results of this study are discussed in three sections. Section 1 presents themes from the interviews; section 2 presents themes from the stress questionnaire, and section 3 presents themes from the focus group discussion. Additionally, an external review was conducted by the supervisor to ensure the accuracy and appropriateness of the themes identified in the data analysis process.



## 4.2. THE THREE DATA COLLECTION PHASES FOLLOWED IN THIS STUDY

**Table 4.1**

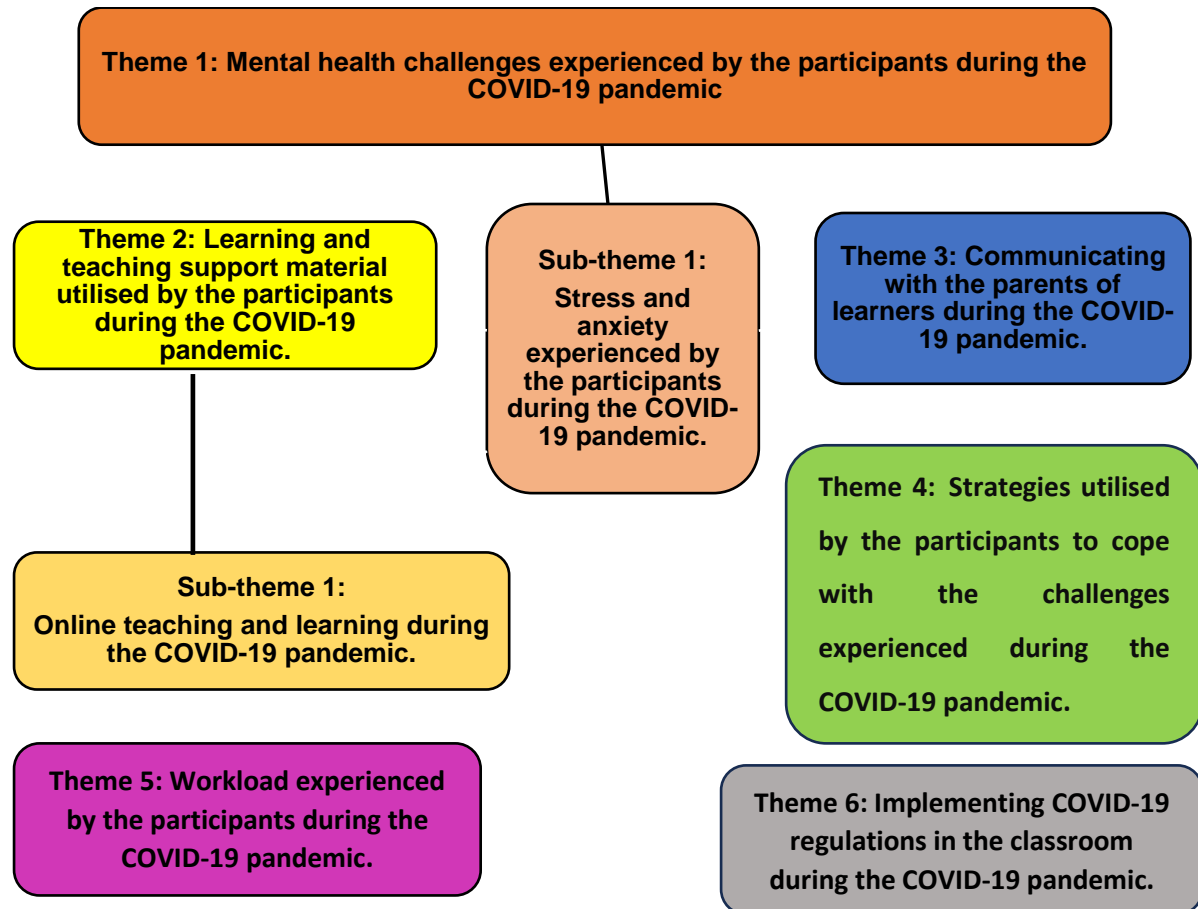
*Outline of the three data collection processes in this study*

Sources of data used for the three phases of data collection
<p><b>Section 1: Interviews</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Verbatim transcriptions from the semi-structured interviews (three special education, and three learning support educators).</li></ul>
<p><b>Section 2: Questionnaire</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Qualitative, Conservation of Resources (COR) questionnaire consisting of 65 questions.</li></ul>
<p><b>Section 3: Focus group discussion</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• One focus group discussion (three participants for the discussion)</li></ul>

Figure 4.1 provides an overview of the themes that emerged from the interviews.

**Figure 4.1**

*Overview of the themes elicited from the interviews*



These themes will be further explored below.

### **4.3. THEME 1: MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY THE PARTICIPANTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

This theme focused on the different mental health challenges that the participants experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### **4.3.1. Sub-theme 1: Stress and anxiety experienced by the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic**

A significant number of the participants expressed that they suffered from anxiety and stress because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is evident in the response given by P1:

*I follow a strict routine. My day has to be planned. So, I was having anxiety attacks, I was depressed because my family is overseas, and they couldn't come and visit. I suffered from terrible anxiety and stomach ulcers. I was severely stressed, and my hair was falling off. It was a lot, but I thank God that the staff here is so close to each other, and we were able to support one another as co-workers. It hurt to not be able to reach out to family and friends, and somehow the kids that I teach ended up becoming my own kids. So, I ended up focusing more on the kids to avoid thinking about my own problems. When our president would have a national address, I would watch him on live streaming using my laptop. I made sure to control what I watched because of my anxiety.*

P1 further added:

*I do not go out; I have not gone out since the start of the pandemic. I have just been communicating with my colleagues, and my dad and that is it. I haven't seen aunts, cousins, and friends... It's not worth it. A lot of people have not been vaccinated. I do not want to give them anything (the virus), and I also do not want them to give me anything. So yes, at the moment it has affected my social life because I stay indoors but this makes me happy because I am a loner, and I enjoy this.*

From the above data, it is evident that P1 experienced anxiety and stress because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and that this had some detrimental effects on her health.

P2 shared her experience:

*I did have times when I was extremely overwhelmed. I hated going out, and I also hated being confined indoors during the hard lockdown. I often wondered when it was all going to end. I went to go visit my sister, and I had to go into isolation at a motel/hotel, and I couldn't open the windows because they were very high in the ceiling. And there was a security guy outside my room, and I had to make a call if I wanted to get out of the room. That was awful.*

The mental challenges experienced by some of the participants extended to physical health challenges, as expressed by P2:

*I also had a heart attack, and then at the end of 2020, and then I had another two. I couldn't see my children; I couldn't say goodbye to people. I have three grown-up sons, and I couldn't visit them. I couldn't hug anyone, and it was just difficult to walk away.*

When addressing the aspect of how the COVID-19 pandemic mentally impacted them, some of the participants focused on the fear that they felt during the pandemic. For example, P3 stated:

*I was scared that people would commit suicide. It was emotionally taxing, and scary when it started. It was like something has crept into our lives and has changed how we normally did things.*

Fear, worry, and internal conflicts were expressed as some of the emotions experienced by the participants. P3 further added,

*I personally, (let me be honest). I was fighting in my mind. I just didn't want to believe. I didn't want the mask. I separated myself from the other staff members because I knew that they were paranoid. In my mind, I just thought that they were paranoid because in my mind COVID did not exist. I thought that even if it did exist it did not require me to wear a mask. So, I was kind of rebellious about it, until they had to enforce wearing of masks at work. They enforced the wearing of masks by saying that if we as teachers do not wear the mask, then how are we going to teach our learners to wear it? So, I had to change my attitude and change my mind. I had to do this for the sake of my learners, and for the sake of what everyone believed. So, I had to do as the Romans do. I also had my own convictions, but I eventually had to succumb to the rules and regulations, and to respect the feelings of others.*

P5 expressed that the COVID-19 pandemic came with a lot of uncertainty:

*I felt anxious over the fact that everything is so uncertain. You are at school the one day, and the next day you are notified of three of your colleagues now have the virus. People that you know also get the virus, and some have passed away due to being infected with the Coronavirus. So, I felt anxious and overwhelmed almost all the time.*

#### **4.3.2. Summary of Theme**

The above data clearly indicates that the participants experienced some mental health challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Stress and anxiety were common feelings that they reported having during this time. This is an important theme as it shows the direct effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the participants' mental health. Although the participants experienced various levels of stress and anxiety, they were all affected by it. The mental health challenges that the participants experienced were negative, and this had a negative impact on their lives.

#### 4.4. THEME 2: TEACHING AND LEARNING STYLE UTILISED DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a shift in the education system and how teaching and learning had to be done. Traditional teaching (before the COVID-19 pandemic) was done on a physical, face-to-face basis. However, the pandemic required that there be a shift away from this traditional method of teaching to an online one. Teachers and learners were no longer able to meet in a physical classroom to learn, but rather had to do so using an online learning platform to ensure that teaching and learning continued to take place. The participants in this study stated that they (in different ways) had to change how they taught during the pandemic. However, because the participants taught learners with special needs, they came across challenges when trying to implement a different teaching style during the pandemic.

The most challenging process that they identified was the use of online learning. They stated that using an online learning system did not accommodate the diversity of the learners in their classroom. They also explained that online learning was difficult to implement in the schools where they taught because they did not have sufficient resources like WIFI, laptops and computers to incorporate online learning.

The views of the participants are expressed below:

*With our children being children with autism, they look at our lips to see what it is that we are saying. So, the masks were a definite no, and we had to use vizers. Children with autism need to see your facial expression, and a mask takes this away. But with a vizer although open everywhere, we could meet our children halfway. A lot of our children could not wear masks. So, it was a matter of practising wearing a mask for two minutes, then the next day three minutes... and this took a while but, some of our kids were still not able to wear the mask. So, we tried making them wear vizers, but the vizers were not good for the children's eyesight. The vizers would get scratched, and with our kids they would take the vizers off and throw them on the floor.*

*A lot of our teachers got COVID, and we sort of realised that okay this is it. We can survive, and life must carry on. We had separated break time so that there were less children in one area (P1).*

P4 had a different experience as she did not have to incorporate much change into her teaching methods during the COVID-19 pandemic, unlike some of the other participants:

*<sup>1</sup>We didn't change much because in teaching you have to be creative since you are dealing with learners that are different, and they do not grasp the learning content at the same pace. When you are teaching, you'll see that some of the learners have grasped what you are teaching them, and then you'll find that there are others that have not grasped the material. Now you will have to use a creative way to teach the one's that did not grasp the content. So, nothing changed except the fact that we had to include the laws of the COVID-19 pandemic because they were not there before. The COVID-19 regulations became classroom rules. Every day before class began, we would go through the regulations with the learner.*

P5 shared that the pandemic affected the amount, and level of content that she had to teach in class:

*We teach using ISP. During the pandemic, the department re-done the ISP so that we could use them to teach our learners. A lower-level ISP was used. Normally we have a lot of content to cover but during the pandemic, there was a decrease in the amount of content that we had to cover in classes.*

In some cases, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, there needed to be significant changes made to how the school functioned, and how teaching and learning took place. This was supported by P2 when she shared that:

*Before the kids came back to school, we had to prepare the school to make sure that everything complied with the COVID-19 regulations. We had to split break times. We had to space our classrooms out, as well as sanitize the school. When the kids came to school some wore masks, but we soon realised that they could not cope with wearing masks, so we introduced vizers. My class spends far more time being outside instead of them being inside the classroom. I minimised desk work and made my subject (life skills) more practical. When I wanted to be physically close to the learner, I had to be aware that I couldn't be because of the COVID-19 regulations. This was very difficult because I was used to working closely, hand in hand with the learners.*

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes are presented verbatim as articulated by the participant

The lockdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic also resulted in learners getting less contact time with the teachers at school. This resulted in teachers having to create a system for the learners to catch up on the teaching and learning time that they lost. P9 explained:

*Basically, we had to dumb down our test questions a lot. We had to ask level 1 and 2 type of question papers. We had to minimise the content a lot. We also had extra classes. It was the teacher's responsibility to organise extra classes. It was the teacher's responsibility to ask the learners to come in for extra classes. The teacher could ask the learners to come in a bit earlier or stay a bit later after school, just to finish off the work.*

#### **4.4.1. Summary of Theme**

The COVID-19 pandemic required a modification of the pedagogical approach to teaching in order to adhere to the pandemic regulations. As evident in the data above, the participants did not receive any training or time to prepare a new method of teaching that would accommodate the pandemic regulations. The abruptness of COVID-19 required the participants to change their way of teaching immediately to ensure that teaching and learning would continue to take place despite the pandemic. Schools had to devise efficacious strategies to ensure that optimal teaching was still taking place. However, they were required to carefully scrutinise their teaching methods given the diverse spectrum of special needs presented by the learners they taught. They had to thus ensure that this still met the learning styles and needs of all their learners.

Teaching and learning style was thus an important theme identified in the data because the participants' teaching and learning style had to change due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, this study sought to identify how the participants were able to do this.

#### **4.4.2. Sub-theme 2.1: Online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic**

The literature in Chapter 1 (see Section 1.2) indicates that online learning was one of the methods implemented by schools to continue teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the fact that they worked with learners with special needs, the participants held a different perspective on online learning:

*We did not have online classes because you cannot teach an autistic child online. This is why we had to re-open schools early. We tried to create videos that we could put on our WhatsApp group, but at the same time a lot of our parents do not have WIFI, and it is not fair for them. Sending lessons and videos on WhatsApp caused more anxiety for us as teachers. We tried sending the children homework, but who was doing the homework? Obviously, it was the parents. So, we scrapped all of that and just figured that we need a more hands-on approach at school (P1).*

Online learning was seen as a challenge by most of the participants of this study, as indicated in the following responses:

*No, we did not have any online classes (P5).*

*We did not have online classes (P2).*

*The school is struggling with internet just for teachers. Some teachers are computer illiterate. No one was prepared for online teaching. I don't remember us as teachers coming together to think of ways that we can implement online teaching. But I remember the Grade 7's started using an app (I forgot the name of it), but they created this app and communication was done through it. Parents were sent messages through the app to come and collect their children's homework packs. It was only the Grade 7s that started this but from Grades R-6 nothing was happening (P3).*

*Nope. Online learning was only implemented in formal, Model-C schools. We township schools did not implement online learning, even when we were at home. When the restrictions were lifted, the pressure was on for us to catch up with work that we had missed from being at home (P9).*

#### **4.4.3. Summary of the Sub-Theme**

Although the literature presented in Chapter 2 (see Sections 2.10.6, and 2.10.8) addresses how schools moved from teaching face-to-face to online platforms, the data presented above shows the contrary. Using online platforms to teach learners with special needs was not done by the schools at which the participants worked at the time of this study. The participants held different viewpoints about the use of online teaching methods to teach learners with special needs. Some of the participants indicated that the only reason why the schools they worked at did not incorporate online learning and teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic was due to a lack of resources. Other participants indicated that using an online platform to teach their



learners was not feasible as the learners presented with different impairments, which also varied in severity. Therefore, using online methods was not going to be applicable for these learners. It was imperative that this study underscore this theme given its significance as it was prominently featured in the literature review (Sections 2.10.5 and 2.10.6). Furthermore, the data provided by the participants addressed and substantiated the points raised in the literature review.

#### **4.5. THEME 3: COMMUNICATING WITH THE PARENTS OF LEARNERS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

Communicating with the parents of learners was a very important process that had to always be adhered to during the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure that effective learning was taking place even though the learners were learning from home. However, achieving good communication between the teachers and parents was possible for some of the participants of the study, whereas it was a challenge for the other teachers. The participants stated the following:

*I have a chat group with the parents of my learners, and I do stipulate the rules, and we also have feedback meetings. If I have a concern, then I am the first to contact the parents to let them know about this. But this also comes with having 25 years of experience in teaching because I know what is best for the child. However, having a rapport with the parent and just getting them to help along the way which is something that I also put in the child's Individualised Development Plan (P1).*

P3 had a positive experience when communicating with the parents of her learners as she indicated that:

*Parents were sent messages through the app to come and collect their children's homework packs. It was only the Grade 7s that started this but from Grades R-6 nothing was happening. It was only after we came back to school that the other grades also started having homework packs. So, a teacher would prepare homework packs for her learners so that they would have work to do at home when they were not coming to school because of the alternating method that we used.*

The COVID-19 pandemic also created an opportunity for schools to reach out to parents. This ensured that parents were constantly updated about what was happening in the school, and it also forged a working relationship between the parents and teachers. P5 indicated:

*What has worked for our school now is that we now have a WhatsApp group for the parents, and we also have a website where work is uploaded, and we have an attendance register. We now have more interaction with the parents. Parental involvement has improved.*

#### **4.5.1. Summary of Theme**

Having clear and reciprocal communication between teachers and the parents of learners was essential during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was to ensure that the teachers were able to send their learners work at home, hoping that the parents of the learners would assist them in completing their schoolwork.

However, there were several challenges with this as presented in the above data. Some of the participants indicated that they were not able to effectively communicate with the parents of their learners. This presented a barrier as they were not able to send work to their learners or keep parents updated on information regarding their children's learning.

This was an important theme identified in this study because the literature review identified that there was a communication challenge between educators and parents during the COVID-19 pandemic (Section 2.11.1). It was imperative that there be consistent communication with the parents of learners during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly those whose children had special educational needs. The unique communicational needs that these learners have are mostly met in a traditional, face-to-face classroom setting, which was not possible during the hard lockdown period during COVID-19 (Adigun et al., 2022). Therefore, communication between teachers and the parents of learners had to continue despite the challenges imposed by the pandemic (Toquero, 2021).

#### **4.6. THEME 4: COPING STRATEGIES UTILISED BY THE PARTICIPANTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

The myriad of challenges that were experienced by the participants required them to develop skills to cope. The participants each expressed that they utilised various support strategies to cope with the challenges that they experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

For the participants, support came in different forms and from different people. P4 received support from her workplace:

*We had a WhatsApp group as colleagues. Even when I got hospitalised, my colleagues sent me messages of encouragement to keep me strong. I also got prayers from the people that I attend church with.*

However, P1 shared a different perspective on how she coped with the challenges that she experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. She stated:

*I coped by smoking (I smoke a lot), I avoided going outside, and I also got rid of my TV. I didn't listen to the radio. I just cut out all forms of social media because of all the false news that were circulating, and these were not good for my mental health. I didn't cope. I took it a day at a time, and that is all that I could honestly do. This was hard to accept because as someone who likes to fix things there was nothing that I could do. One day at a time, one week at a time, lots of communication with the parents. Hearing sob stories about people dying did not help. If I needed something, then I would Google it. But the information that I was consuming did not come from Facebook or Instagram. When our president would have a national address, I would watch him on live streaming using my laptop. I made sure to control what I watched because of my anxiety.*

P5 identified two support systems:

*At work we had a support group. My family was also a strong support structure during this time.*

Religion was also identified as a form of support that was utilised by one participant to cope during the COVID-19 pandemic. P3 stated:

*I am a spiritual person, so I would pray as a Christian. My faith helped me out through the pandemic. But I must not make myself a starring [sic]. At home when the pandemic started it was like doomsday. Like, the world was coming to an end because no one was on the street. At one point I even thought to myself that I actually feel sorry for people that have anxiety at such a time like this (pandemic). I was scared that people would commit suicide. It was emotionally taxing, and scary when it started. It was like something has crept into our lives and has changed how we normally did things.*

While one participant (P2) indicated that she coped by “gardening, praying, and swimming”. Whereas P9 resorted to self-care practices as a way of coping with the challenges that she experienced during the pandemic. She stated,

*I would say that I took it day by day, and assessment by assessment. I am a day-by-day type of person. I listened to church sermons a lot. I also listened to my Gospel music. I think that just doing what I love. I told myself that I would make sure that I read one book per month. I told myself that I would give myself just one week during the week to not do anything that is work-related. This is because during the pandemic I had to bring a lot of work home. So, one day in a week, I did what I love to do, which is reading. I scheduled this day to be on a Wednesday because on Wednesdays I have bible studies. So, after bible study I would have the time to do what I wanted to do.*

#### **4.6.1. Summary of Theme**

The above data indicates that the participants developed both positive and negative strategies to cope with the different challenges that they experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The strategies that they utilised were diverse as they experienced different challenges, such as health and emotional challenges. Due to the nature of the challenges that the participants experienced, having strategies in place during the COVID-19 pandemic was essential in helping them to navigate the pandemic. As previously highlighted (Section 4.3), all of the participants were, to some extent, mentally impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic so it was important to have coping strategies in place.

This theme was central to the focus of this study. It was thus important that in identifying the challenges that the participants experienced, the study also identified how they were able to navigate through these challenges through the different support systems that they had in place.

#### **4.7. THEME 5: WORKLOAD EXPERIENCED BY THE PARTICIPANTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

Teaching is a highly stressful occupation that is coupled with a heavy workload, as indicated in Chapter 2, Section 2.10.4 This was no different during the COVID-19 pandemic as the participants were challenged with high levels of workload, as subsequently indicated in Section 2.10.5. One of the workload challenges that was experienced by the participants related to the curriculum. In light of this, P5 stated,

*It was overwhelming because we were expected to finish the curriculum as stated by the department at a set time. It also made me feel inadequate because at some point I felt*

*like I didn't know what I was doing. I think that the pandemic put us at a disadvantage where we were behind with our workload. Certain things that we were supposed to teach our learners were not taught during the pandemic, so a lot of our learners progressed to other grades with missing knowledge. This was problematic because the learners would get to me, and I would start teaching them things that they should be taught in my class whereas these kids are still lacking the knowledge that they should've been provided with in the previous grade. So, trying to now fill in that gap of knowledge from the previous grade to the current grade was overwhelming. However, this took over my time as I had to now re-plan lessons based on what the department expected us to do with the learners. Redoing everything was very time-consuming.*

Short time constraints were also a challenge for P9, who explained:

*The stress was just too much. We had to cover a lot of content in a really short space of time. It was also your responsibility to see how you would get things done. So, the work pressure was a lot. Things were not the same. We as teachers were required to just make the learners pass. I don't even think that the assessments were adequate. During COVID, we had a lot to do especially because the learners did not come to school fully. So, we worked around a schedule. Each teacher had 25 lessons per week. We probably had double that number during the pandemic, and the marking was a lot. We didn't see the same learners every day.*

The workload challenge experienced also related to the fact that in some cases, while still attending, learners were not going to school every day. Rotational learning (as discussed in Chapter 1, Section 1.2) was utilised, and this on its own was a challenge for P3, as she stated:

*The workload that I was exposed to during the COVID-19 pandemic was bad, and there are now learning gaps in the knowledge that the learners have. When we got back to school, our school used the alternate days method. We had to alternate because our classes are overcrowded. A class caters for 42 learners and during COVID that class would be split into two. So, they alternated with their school attendance. However, in this alternating method, teachers were getting confused because they had to teach one thing in two days to two separate groups of learners. It needed a teacher that was very alert. This brought in a lot of emotional trauma on the teachers because they couldn't organise their work properly. Even if they could prepare their lessons but, they were getting confused. The learners were also confused. They did not know what was happening. It*

*was like we had two schools in one school. I did not know how the learners were separated. I did not know whether it was based on their abilities...*

#### **4.7.1. Summary of Theme**

As indicated in the literature review (Sections 2.2.1, 2.9.4, 2.10.5), teaching is already a demanding profession, with teachers constantly being exposed to a high workload. This was no different for the participants in this study as evident in the data provided above. The participants articulated the substantial challenges that they faced in managing overwhelming workloads on a daily basis. The participants had to devise ways to ensure that teaching and learning continued to take place, and were compelled to establish robust communication channels with the parents of their learners. All these requirements that were bestowed on them were demanding and resulted in them having an insurmountable workload. This resulted in teachers experiencing further challenges in other areas of their lives, like their mental health.

#### **4.8. THEME 6: IMPLEMENTING COVID-19 REGULATIONS IN THE CLASSROOM DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

Another challenge that was experienced by SETs and LSEs during the pandemic was implementing COVID-19 regulations in their classroom. Responding regarding this challenge, P4 stated the following:

*That was the difficult part because as a teacher, I had to teach with my mask on, and some of the learners could not hear what I was saying. So, I used to remove my mask when teaching the learners, and then I would put it on after I had concluded my lesson. The wearing of masks was also a challenge for my learners because when they had questions to ask, they had to lower their mask, ask the question, and then put their mask back on again. It was also difficult for the learners to keep their masks on throughout the day. Some of them even said that they do not wear masks at home, so why should they wear them at school? During lunchtime, the younger learners would go wash their masks at the tap. So, this was just a havoc, especially for learners living in a township, and for learners with special needs.*

*The school supplied the learners with masks, but the following day the learners would come to school without a mask. The school then provided all the teachers with masks, and whenever a learner would come to class without a mask, we would then provide the learner with a mask. Social distancing was also a challenge. But what was helpful in*



*keeping the learners at a safe distance from each other was the way in which the classroom had been set up to create a distance amongst the learners. However, during lunchtime, the learners would forget about social distancing, and they would play together (P4).*

P1 had a different experience, explaining:

*My class is level 3 autism, but they are slightly more understanding, and they do have a comprehension. A lot of my kids are stronger than the other kids in the school. So, for me, implementing the COVID-19 regulations has been pretty easy because if I do something then they also do it. As long as I give them an explanation when I do a social story. Then my class is willing. My kids and I work as a team. I can't teach my kids, but I use my kids to teach each other. My kids are verbal, but they weren't always like this though because it took me three years to get them to be verbal. So now it is easier for the kids to tell each other to put their masks on without having to be told by someone that is bigger/older than them to do so. They are sick and tired of being told and nagged by an older person to do things. So, it's easier for them to do things if they are being told to do them by someone like their classmate.*

*It's not like we can tell children to keep social distance because our kids are not social. Which was a blessing but, at the same time, this was going against everything that we were trying to teach them, which is to be social. And once you teach them a rule, you can't then undo the teaching of that rule. In all honesty, it was hell on earth. There were protocols but because of our kids, we had to re-open schools earlier because our kids follow routine. We had to come up with ways of dealing with the pandemic with our kids. In South Africa, there was nothing, so we had to go via Britain and Scotland to see what they were using. We tried to implement strategies that we thought could work for our children, but they didn't. Then we had the department come in and ask why we were doing things a certain way, and they just did not understand that we came up with different strategies to continue teaching and learning but these strategies were not working for our kids. But we had sanitising stations. If a child plays with a toy, it gets sanitized. Which was also hectic because we had to try to get the kids to not spray sanitizers in their mouths. The workload for the teachers quadrupled and we don't have any cleaners, so it was up to us to look after our own classroom. We also had this fear of getting sick, and the parents were also not enforcing the COVID-19 rules at home. So, it was a nightmare!*

Although P1 had a different experience, it is evident that she also experienced challenges with implementing the COVID-19 regulations in her classroom.

A lack of understanding from the learners was also identified as one of the challenges that teachers faced when trying to implement these COVID-19 regulations. P5 stated:

*I think for us, since we work with children in the foundation phase, you would find that a child does not even understand what COVID is. They would see people wearing masks and sanitizing their hands... So, most of the time we always had to reassure them that they are safe. Some children refused to wear a mask because the masks were uncomfortable to wear. So, we had to constantly inform them about the importance of wearing a mask.*

P5 further added, “*Implementing COVID-19 rules was difficult in the beginning, but I think as we went along it became a bit easier for the kids to adhere to the COVID-19 rules*”. This indicates that, with the progression of time, learners became accustomed to adhering to these regulations. However, not all the participants experienced challenges when implementing the COVID-19 regulations in their classrooms. This is evident in the response given by P2:

*[Implementing COVID-19 regulations in her classroom was] Not too difficult, really. It started off as being a bit of an adventure for my learners. In the beginning, the children were a bit anxious (I do have a couple of anxious children), and all the parents were anxious as well. I did have an issue with one of my kids who felt that he was just so unsafe. A very anxious boy. My kids are verbal, so I was able to say to them when we came back with very few words, the COVID rules. That they had to wash their hands, sanitize... So at least I could do that to a bunch of kids that could understand. So, it wasn't difficult. The kids were amazing. My kids caught on to the COVID-19 regulations very quickly. They did see the urgency behind them following the rules.*

One of the regulations of the COVID-19 pandemic was keeping a social distance between people. This was a regulation that P3 particularly found challenging to adhere to, particularly because of her personality. P3 responded:

*One or two things that I learnt during the pandemic was to be conscious of everything that I did. This was not easy because sometimes I had to assess the learners individually. There was a general assessment conducted where the learners would sit 1.5 meters apart, but, when it was individual assessment, I then also had to keep that distance from the learner. We had to get used to keeping the distance between ourselves and the learners, and this was not easy for me because I am a touchy person. I like to hug, and I am taking in learners who really need that hug sometimes. So not hugging them or touching them was hard, especially because I knew that some of the learners really*



wanted to be hugged since they may not be getting hugs at home. So, even before I could assess them, I was longing to touch/hug them. So, knowing that we couldn't have that human touch was hard.

Basic rules were taught to the learners before they could enter the classroom. Basic rules like washing of the hands and sanitizing the hands, wear a mask, keep a 1.5 distance from the next person. All these basic rules were taught to the learner, but also when they were coming to me for assessments these were the rules that I had to enforce every day. Initially, it was very difficult. We had to adhere to the rules, and it was not easy, especially for the young ones. Because one minute their masks are off, and they are playing with them. They are pulling each other's masks off, so the learners were not conscious of what the reason was behind them wearing masks, so we had to constantly enforce the rules. Sometimes you'd find that in one day you have given one child three masks, and they will still rip it off and then go home without a mask. So initially it was very challenging. However, with time and with the enforcement of the rules, things did get easier. The learners started getting used to wearing masks and using sanitizers.

P9 also expressed the challenges that she encountered when adhering to the COVID-19 regulations in her classroom, expressing:

*Adhering to the COVID-19 regulations was not easy, it was actually very difficult. The kind of school that I am at where we are dealing with overcrowded classrooms, we didn't even adhere to the 20 or 25 learners per classroom rule. Some classes had 30, whilst others had 35 learners per classroom. We didn't even adhere to the restrictions. The learners did not understand why they had to wear masks, be distanced from each other; why they couldn't share their lunch boxes with each other. So, the discipline side of it was something else because we had to become like the police. What they saw as unnecessary, we had to enforce that it was necessary. So that also was emotionally draining because the learners did not want to put on a mask, they did not want to social distance. So, it was a mess. You just went to work and hoped that you won't get COVID or something.*

*Our school was built to only accommodate 800-900 learners, but we are currently sitting at 1 600 learners this year, and I think that during COVID we had about 1 400 learners. So, it was a hellish place to work in! Hence the reason why we couldn't follow the 20 learner per class rule, because the learners were too much, and the classes were not enough. So, we couldn't adhere to the COVID-19 protocols.*

#### **4.8.1. Summary of Theme**

Implementing COVID-19 regulations in the classroom was challenging for the participants in this study, as indicated by the data above. This was because the participants worked with learners who have special needs. As such, some of these learners did not have the cognitive ability to understand what the COVID-19 pandemic was, and why they had to follow specific rules to stop the spread of the virus.

Teaching learners with diverse needs to adhere to the rules proved to be a challenging task, and this is one of the factors that contributed towards these participants having a big workload. Once face-to-face classes resumed, the participants had to teach these learners how to follow the rules imposed due to the pandemic, while also trying to catch up on the content that they were supposed to teach in class.

#### **4.9. DATA COLLECTED FROM THE CONSERVATION OF RESOURCES QUESTIONNAIRE (SECTION 2 OF THIS CHAPTER)**

The questionnaire for this study was developed based on one of the theoretical frameworks that guided this study, the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory. As already discussed in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2, this theory focuses on demands and resources. The questionnaire comprised 35 demand, and 30 resource questions.

The answers derived from the questionnaires were qualitatively analysed and used to formulate themes for this study. The questionnaire is available in Appendix H.

#### 4.9.1. Themes from section 2: Conservation of Resources Questionnaire

**Table 4.2**

*Overview of themes elicited from the questionnaires*

<b>THEMES</b>	
<b>Theme 1:</b>	Workload experienced by the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic.
<b>Theme 2:</b>	Mental health challenges experienced by the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic.
<b>Sub-theme 2.1:</b>	Feeling anxious during the COVID-19 pandemic.
<b>Theme 3:</b>	Lack of motivation to teach experienced by the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic.
<b>Theme 4:</b>	Shortened syllabus due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
<b>Theme 5:</b>	Implementing COVID-19 regulations in the classroom during the COVID-19 pandemic.
<b>Theme 6:</b>	Working with the parents of learners during the COVID-19 pandemic to meet the academic needs of the learners.
<b>Theme 7:</b>	Online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.
<b>Theme 8</b>	Having a work/life balance during the COVID-19 pandemic.
<b>Theme 9:</b>	Teaching practical subjects during the COVID-19 pandemic.
<b>Theme 10:</b>	Overall health and well-being of the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic.
<b>Theme 11:</b>	Support systems utilised by the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic.

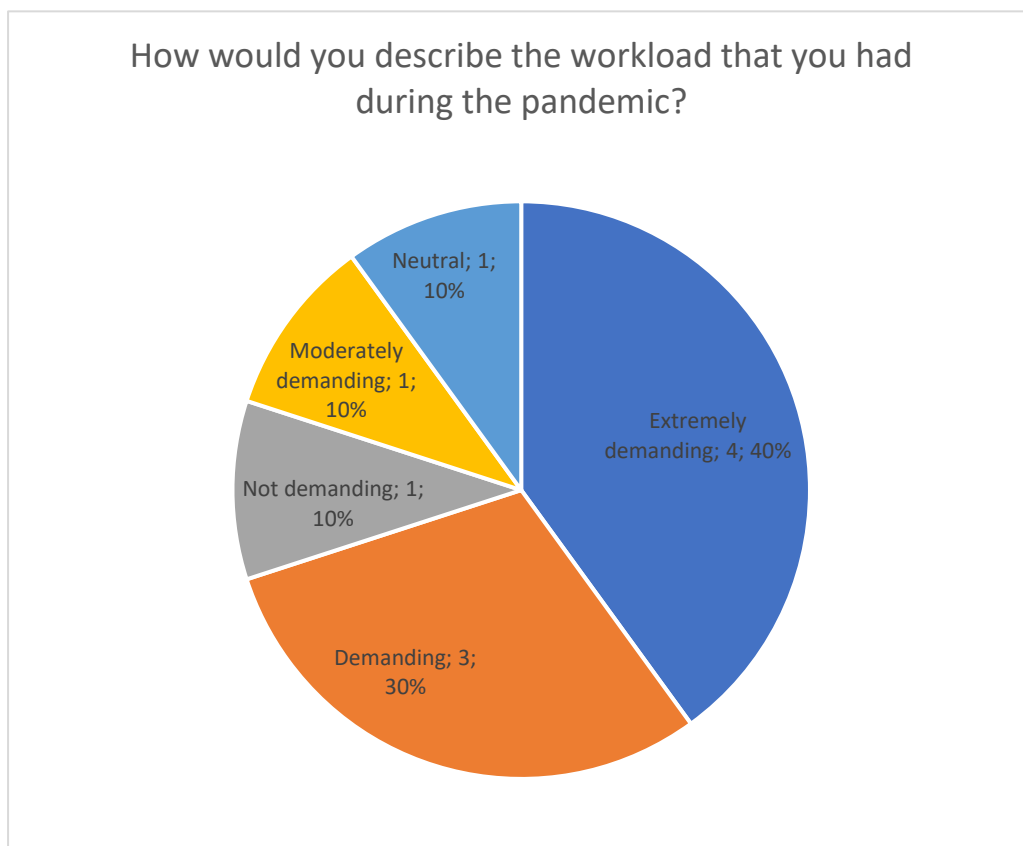
## 4.9.2. Demand Questions

### 4.9.2.1. Theme 1: Workload experienced by the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic

This theme is visually represented in Figure 4.2, and explored in the subsequent section.

**Figure 4.2**

*Participants' workload during the pandemic*



The above pie chart indicates that three participants indicated that the workload that they were exposed to in the workplace during the pandemic was extremely demanding. Three participants (30%) indicated that the workload was demanding. Four participants (40%) indicated that their workload was demanding, whereas only one participant (10%) indicated that their workload during the pandemic was neutral. One participant (10%) indicated that their workload was moderately demanding, and lastly, only one participant (10%) indicated that their workload during the pandemic was not demanding.

#### 4.9.2.2. Extracts from the data to support the information depicted above

The COVID-19 pandemic required that major shifts and transitions take place in teaching and learning. This resulted in teachers being burdened with a heavy workload, as illustrated by P1 when she stated, *“We had to make all policy and procedures with little knowledge of what to expect, so our workload increased”*.

P2 also experienced a heavy workload during the pandemic, responding:

*Working at school whilst in lockdown and having to prepare the classes for the return of the learners was a huge endeavour for all staff members. Making sure that the learners were all safe and protected during the pandemic always meant more consideration. We also had to make sure that the classrooms were safe for the learners to use each day. This meant that we had extra work throughout, and after each day. It was quite tiring.*

Distance education requires a serious amount of planning, and in this case, the planning had to be done in a short space of time. This is illustrated by P3, who explained: *“Planning the activities for learning packages for homework took hour on end. The hours spent were way over the 7 hours that we normally spend at school.”*

However, P4 had a different experience as the school where she taught incorporated rotation learning. She stated, *“The workload was not demanding because a class had to be divided into two groups attending in different days. Forcing one to teach the same lesson in different days”*. P5 also taught at a school that practised rotational learning, however she had a different experience, recounting that, *“The norm of teaching changed. We had to do a lot with little time as learners came in groups.”* Thus, indicating that rotational teaching created a lot of work for her, which was also experienced by P6, as she indicated that, *“New rotation strategies had to be implemented, and parents had to be motivated to work with their children at home.”*

Workload was an enormous challenge for P7 because she indicated:

*I was HOD of the LSPID phase. All the other teachers in my phase had health challenges and/or above 60 years of age. So, they all stayed home. I had to do lesson preparation for all the classes. Luckily, all the assistants were at school, so every day I had to do rounds in all the classes to ensure that the learners were busy with appropriate activities. At the end of the term, I had to do all the reports for all the learners in the phase who attended school. Official work hours did not change much, although I worked at home preparing home stimulation packs after hours. This did not bother me, though, since I*

*always do schoolwork at home. I had to teach five classes AND prepare all the home stimulation packs. Luckily, some of the teachers who stayed at home did come in sometimes to help with the packing. Learners whose parents kept them home due to fears related to the pandemic had to receive home activity packs, so one had two sets of preparation to do. We cleaned the whole classroom twice per day when the learners leave for break time, and just after home-going time. Luckily, I have an assistant who helped with that.*

P8 stated that the workload that she had during the COVID-19 pandemic was demanding for her. Whereas, P9 stated that: *“The norm of teaching changed we had to do a lot with little time learners came in groups. Limited time with greater workload. The rotational system was also very tiring and mentally taxing.”*

#### **4.9.3. Summary of Theme**

The workload that the participants were exposed to transcended focusing on lesson planning, but also involved the physical preparation of the classrooms in preparation for when learners came back to school. Therefore, the participants had to ensure that they kept the classrooms safe and neat for when the learners returned for in-person lessons.

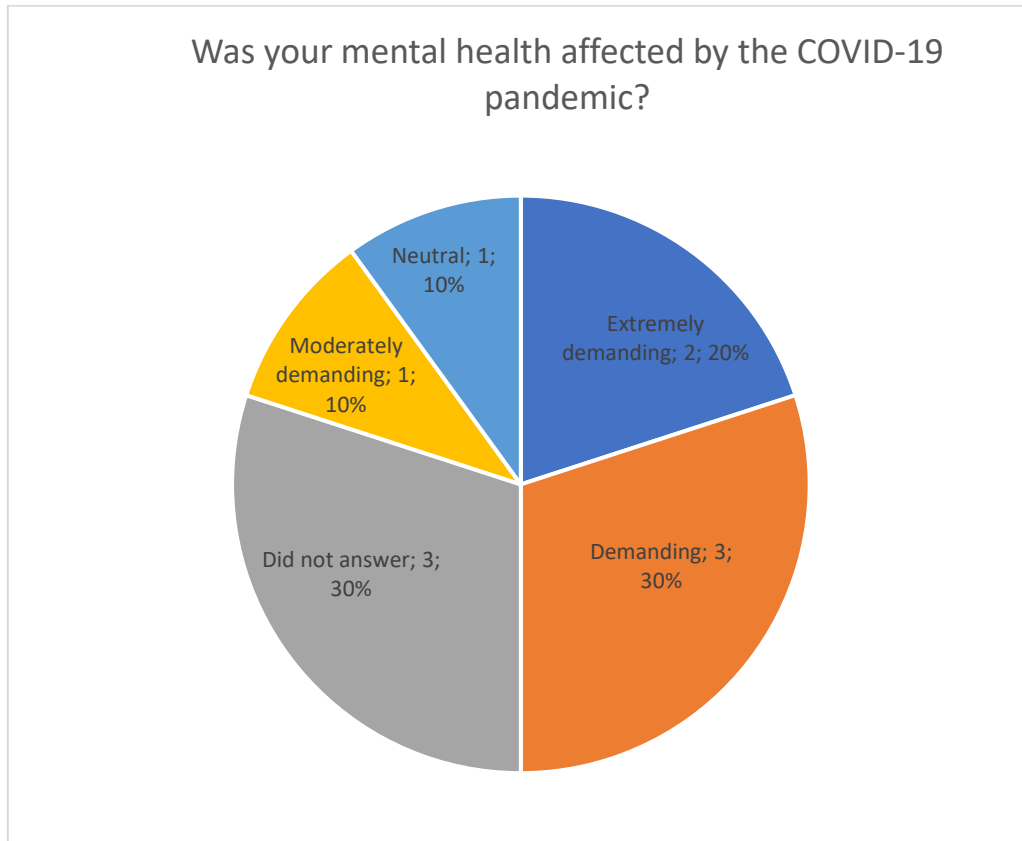
However, some schools practised rotational learning (see Section 1.2), and this reduced the workload they had because the teachers could control the number of classes they had per day or per week. They also had control over the number of learners in each class so as to avoid having a large number of learners in one class and putting them at risk of infecting each other with COVID-19. However, all the participants had different experiences relating to their workload during the pandemic, and this was also largely influenced by the context of the schools at which they worked.

#### 4.10. THEME 2: MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY THE PARTICIPANTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

This theme is illustrated in Figure 4.3, and is detailed in the subsequent section.

**Figure 4.3**

*Participants' mental health challenges*



In the above pie chart, it can be seen that three participants indicated that their mental health was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and that this had an extremely demanding effect on them. Three participants indicated that their mental health was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and this had a demanding effect on them. Whereas only one participant indicated that their mental health was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and this had a neutral effect on them.

#### 4.10.1. Extracts from the data to support the information in Figure 4.3

P1 stated, *“My mental health was affected by the pandemic, and this was demanding on my overall health and well-being. I experienced a lot of stress due to a lack of routine.”*

P2 also experienced stress during the pandemic, as she indicated, *“My Stress was more heightened, and I had a fear for those that I love during the pandemic. My job is also stressful.”* While P3 shared that stress was a common feeling, not only for the teachers but for the learners as well:

*Both teachers and learners started to be anxious, depressed, stressed, and others felt lonely. Personally, I would say that I was extremely troubled by all my learners who were at home not attending school, and who had no support at all from home. I experienced a unique situation which yielded some uncertainty and stress. I had not much solution to this challenging situation, and I was kind of frustrated and irritated. The stress was higher, so much was going on mentally, and mixed emotions were the order of the day. Feelings of fear, and loss of hope for the future were imminent.*

The fear of being infected was also a major stress influencer, as indicated by P4 when she stated, *“I was mostly thinking about what would happen if I were to get infected. This is especially because our learners are from the location where the virus was not taken seriously.”* The unpredictability of the pandemic left P5 feeling fearful, with her expressing, *“I was in a constant fear of the unknown.”* P9 was also fearful, and this negatively impacted her mental health. She indicated, *“Working in constant fear had a negative impact on my mental health.”* While P6 had a different experience because she stated, *“I was not physically affected by COVID. I was in a safe home, and the environment was stable.”*

P7 experienced a heightened level of stress and fear as she was concerned with how to keep herself free of the virus to protect her loved ones, explaining:

*I have two children with cerebral palsy at home, one with a heart condition and the other with weak lungs. I was terrified that I was going to bring the virus home to them and cause their death. So, I was wearing my mask religiously, and got very angry when people were reckless regarding social distancing and mask-wearing. I ended up avoiding social contact with other staff members entirely. The combination of the fact that all my teachers were absent, the fear that I experienced regarding my children at home catching the virus, my*



*inability to protect myself due to the level of functioning of my learners, physical challenges with learners having meltdowns and even causing me injuries, those were all extremely tiring, but I tried to cope day by day. My stress revolved around the health threat to my children due to the exposure I inevitably had at work. I ended up isolating myself completely at work and stopped socializing with anyone but my assistant and the learners in my class.*

P8 was challenged by the process of wearing a mask in the workplace. She indicated:

*The biggest stressful challenge for me was keeping myself safe at a school where others did not see the need to practise good hygiene. Me being safe caused disharmony between the staff and myself, as the staff believed that I thought that I was superior to everyone else simply because I was wearing a mask and sanitising regularly.*

#### **4.10.2. Summary of Theme**

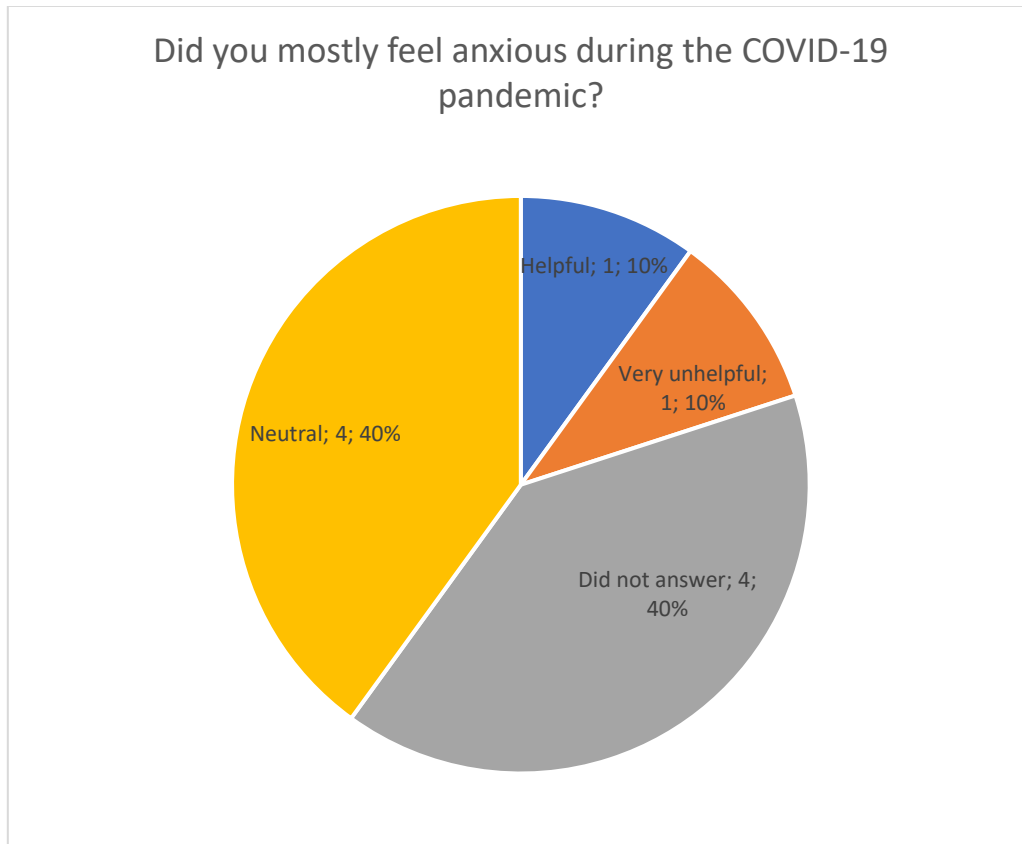
The data derived from the questionnaire suggests that not all of the participants in this study experienced negative mental effects due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although some participants did experience some extreme mental health challenges, others did not. For those whose mental health was negatively affected by the pandemic, the data indicates that they experienced fear, stress, and anxiety because they were surrounded by people who did not adhere to the COVID-19 regulations and who were thus putting them at risk. This indicates that the mental health challenges related to the pandemic had both internal and external causes. In the case of the above-presented data, it is evident that some of the participants' mental health was negatively affected because of the actions of other people (also see Sections 2.10.4 and 2.14 in Chapter 2).

#### **4.11. SUB-THEME 2.1: FEELING ANXIOUS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

Information on the participants' level of anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic is illustrated in Figure 4.4, and subsequently explored in the following section.

**Figure 4.4**

*Participants' level of anxiety during the pandemic*



The above pie chart indicates that one participant felt that the anxiety they had during the pandemic was very unhelpful in terms of how productive they were in their lives (professional and personal). Four participants indicated that the anxiety that they felt had a neutral effect on their productivity. One participant indicated that the anxiety they felt during the pandemic was helpful for their productivity. The other four participants left the question unanswered.

**4.11.1. Extracts from the data to support the information in Figure 4.4**

P2 stated, *“I sometimes felt anxious during the pandemic.”* While P3 had a specific fear regarding being vaccinated against the Coronavirus. She indicated,

*I had minor anxiety about being controlled by unknown forces and being forced to vaccinate made me wonder where the world was heading, and if life was worth living from here going forth. I often felt discouraged, disillusioned, doomed, demotivated, and overwhelmed.*

P5 expressed feeling a combination of fear and anxiety during the pandemic:

*Constant fear of the unknown. Every day was a challenge leaving you anxious especially when one of my colleagues passed away. At some point, I started feeling like I was not giving my best.*

While P6 stated, “*Personal anxiety was mainly a problem.*” However, even in the face of constantly feeling anxious, P7 tried to stay positive, explaining:

*Even though I felt anxious and sometimes even demotivated, I still felt a strong obligation towards my learners and therefore pushed through and tried to be as productive as possible. My anxiety about my children was not helping. I was struggling to get past that on a daily basis. I had to force myself to stay seated during a meeting when all would lower their masks when speaking. I was fuming when that happened and had to hide my frustration in order to conduct my daily tasks. This was emotionally exhausting.*

Another thing that caused fear was the idea of losing a loved one, as expressed by P9: “*Consistent fear of the unknown. Every day was a challenge leaving you feeling anxious when you find out that one of your colleagues has passed away.*”

#### **4.11.2. Summary of Sub-Theme**

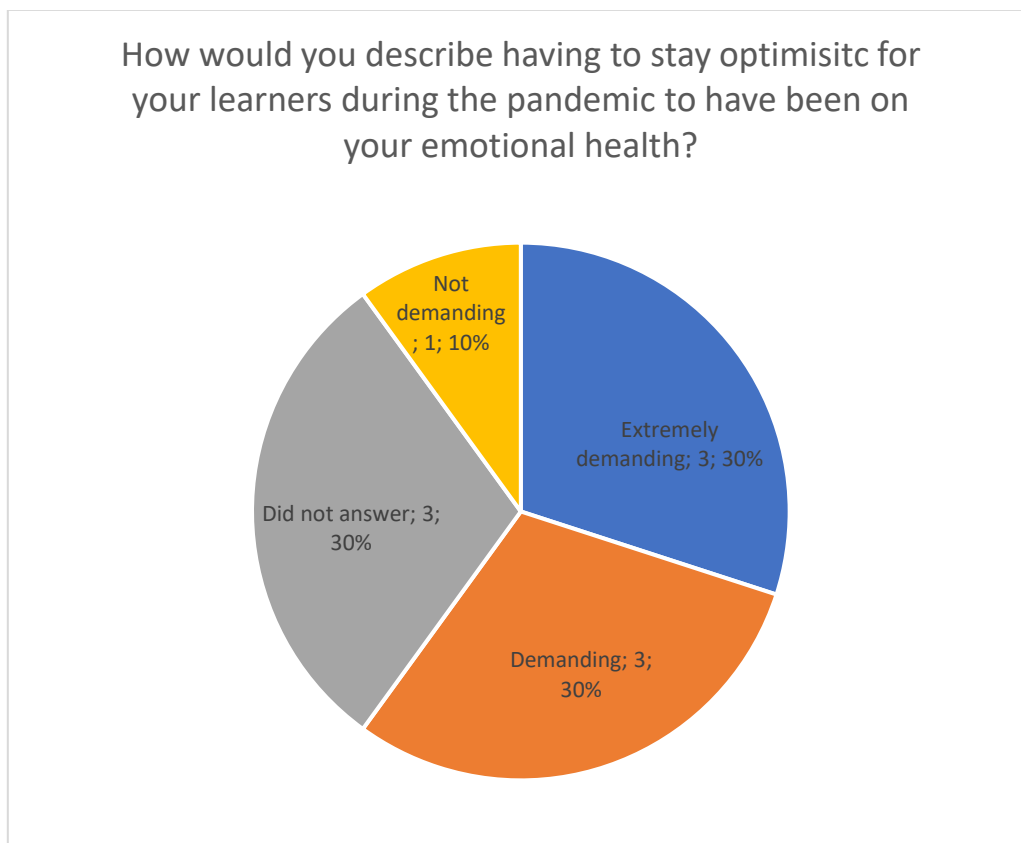
The above data indicates that some participants experienced anxiety because they did not know what to expect since rules and regulations were constantly changing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the uncertainty of the pandemic made them feel anxious. Others experienced anxiety because they lost colleagues that they were close to because of the pandemic. Others had anxiety because they feared getting vaccinated, which was one of the health requirements during the pandemic. Lastly, others had anxiety because some of the people that they were around did not always adhere to the COVID-19 regulations, such as wearing a mask. Although the above data indicates that all of the participants experienced anxiety because of the COVID-19 pandemic, they experienced different concerns that caused it. This anxiety affected their mental health and well-being, as discussed in Section 2.10.4.

#### 4.12. THEME 3: LACK OF MOTIVATION TO TEACH EXPERIENCED BY THE PARTICIPANTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

This theme is explored in Figure 4.5 and the following sections.

**Figure 4.5**

*The participants' lack of motivation to teach*



The above pie chart indicates that three participants indicated that staying optimistic towards their work (teaching) during the COVID-19 pandemic was extremely demanding for them, and this affected their motivation to teach. While three participants indicated that this was demanding for them, and resulted in their motivation to teach being affected negatively. Three participants did not answer the question, and only one participant indicated that staying optimistic during the COVID-19 pandemic was not demanding for them, and thus they were not demotivated towards their work during the pandemic.

#### 4.12.1. Extracts from the data to support the information in Figure 4.5

As indicated by the data, the participating teachers struggled to stay motivated during the COVID-19 pandemic. P2 stated:

*Some days were harder than others, but my responsibility was to protect the learners, and to keep them in a safe place, mentally, physically, and emotionally. However, I had to remain positive even if at times I privately felt overwhelmed.*

While P3 indicated:

*Some of my colleagues began to doubt themselves or their ability to perform/deliver their duties as teachers. Staying positive and optimistic as always had to be the norm on a daily basis. Having different types of learners, teachers had to be flexible and always maintain a positive attitude. Most learners were extremely stressed, they could not cope with the workload and the COVID-19 pressure. Also, there were a number of teachers who were sick and not coping and fit to teach. Teachers themselves had no hope, a few were optimistic. The pandemic pushed me into a new era. I had to devise ways and strategies to make things better for my learners. I was motivated to introduce my school to integrate ICT in learning and teaching. It is still a pipe dream given the environment my school is surrounded by.*

Although these teachers experienced feelings of stress, fear, and anxiety, they still wanted to remain positive for their learners during the pandemic. This was illustrated by P5 when she indicated, *“I had to remain the beacon of hope and reassure them that all will be well.”* However, due to the high death rates caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, remaining motivated was a challenge because some learners lost one or both of their parents due to the pandemic. This is indicated by P6, who specifically stated, *“Having parents pass away because of COVID was challenging. Having to help an SID learner to understand and process death was challenging.”*

P7 did not feel any demotivation to do her job during the pandemic, clarifying:

*I don't think my level of motivation to overcome challenges was any higher in COVID-19 than during any other time period. Because I'm passionate about my job, I always try to overcome challenges and stay positive.*

P9 and P10 shared similar sentiments:

*As a teacher I had to be positive and always put my learners at ease, doing so with a calming voice (P9).*

*Overall, I am optimistic, and I am used to cheering the learners up. So, we just went on like normal (P10).*

#### **4.12.2. Summary of Theme**

Staying motivated during a challenging time such as the COVID-19 pandemic was not easy for the participants. Since a host of negative emotions were felt throughout the world, some participants indicated that they started to doubt their ability to do their job during the pandemic. The participants indicated that staying optimistic and motivated to teach during the pandemic was also affected by how their learners were feeling during this time. Some learners lost their parents to the virus, indirectly affecting the participants as they had to provide emotional support to the learners at a time when they were also feeling emotionally depleted.

This was an important theme to identify in this study because there is a direct link between the participants' motivation to teach and their productivity during the pandemic.

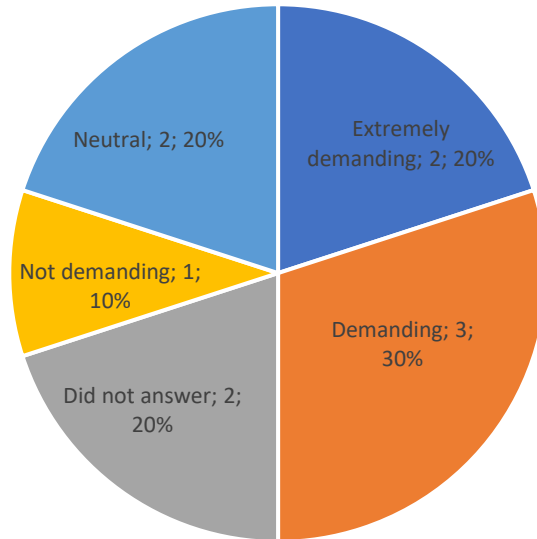
#### **4.13. THEME 4: SHORTENED SYLLABUS DUE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

This theme is represented in the pie chart in Figure 4.6, as well as the subsequent sections.

##### **Figure 4.6**

*Participants' experience of the syllabus being shortened due to the pandemic*

How did you experience the added pressure of completing a shortened syllabus with short time constraints during the COVID-19 pandemic?



The above pie chart indicates that two participants felt that the pressure to complete the syllabus under short time constraints during the COVID-19 pandemic was very demanding for them. Three participants indicated that this was demanding for them. Two participants indicated that this was neither demanding nor easy for them, and only one participant indicated that the pressure to complete the syllabus under short time constraints was not demanding to them.

#### 4.13.1. Extracts from the data to support the information in the above pie chart

P3 stated:

*Abridged syllabus (compressed) was confusing and frustrating. The learning gaps were inevitable. It was evident enough that teachers had to adopt a new mindset or have a change of attitude, and work along to assume the new demand.*

P4 shared different thoughts about the shortened syllabus, as she indicated:

*The shortened syllabus was not demanding because with us, the syllabus is spread to three years' work. If you can't finish term one, year one work, then you will have to finish it in term one, year two.*

However, P5 indicated that even though the “*curriculum was taught, no learning took place*”. P8 stated:

*It was challenging as many learners have slow cognitive processing skills, and my school does normal CAPS curriculum, so a lot of topics were missed because we didn't have enough time to cover the entire curriculum. The lockdown regressed the learners due to little or no academic stimulation at home. Learner's language suffered the most, and when returning to school it was back to basics for all learners specifically with reading". P7 shared a different experience when she indicated that "at our school, the pressure to complete a curriculum in a certain time frame is not so intense – our learners don't write tests and don't get formally promoted to a next grade.*

Once school reopened, there was a challenge with learner attendance. P10 illustrated this by stating:

*For a long time, I didn't have learners in my class even though the school was open because my learners have too many comorbidities. The therapist and I went on home visits and that was very insightful, and it feels if I understood my learners much better after the visits and I still have excellent relationships with those parents. When my learners did come back and was at school 50% of the time it was a dream because the learners were split into two groups and each group functioned on the same level. The class was smaller, and I could do more work and learner specific.*

#### **4.13.2. Summary of Theme**

The COVID-19 pandemic took away most of the time that was allocated for teaching and learning, especially in the year 2020 when the virus was still new. The negative consequence of this, as indicated by the above data, was that schools had to shorten their syllabus. Meaning that because schools were closed for such a long time during the hard lockdown, when schools reopened, they could no longer teach the learners the entire curriculum as intended. Schools experienced severe time constraints to cover the curriculum, so it had to be shortened. This will have adverse consequences for the education system in the years to follow. This was an important theme to identify for this study because it contributed to the heavy workload, stress, frustration, and anxiety that was experienced by the participants in this study.

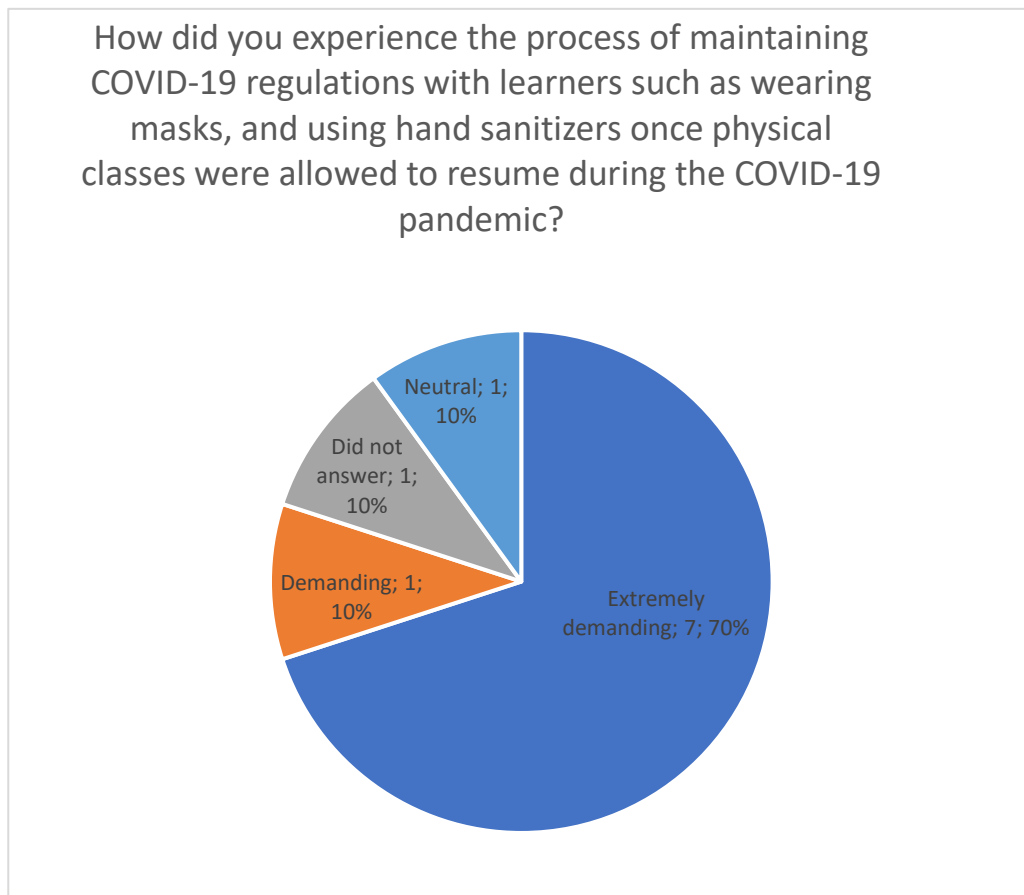


#### 4.14. THEME 5: IMPLEMENTING COVID-19 REGULATIONS IN THE CLASSROOM DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The information gained from the questionnaire regarding this theme is presented in Figure 4.7 and the subsequent discussion.

**Figure 4.7**

*Implementing COVID-19 regulations in the classroom*



The above pie chart indicates that seven participants felt that it was extremely demanding to maintain the COVID-19 regulations in their classrooms. One participant indicated that it was simply demanding for her. Lastly, one participant indicated that maintaining COVID-19 regulations in the classroom was neither demanding nor easy for her.

#### 4.14.1. Extracts from the data to support the information in Figure 4.7

The participating teachers found it challenging to make their learners adhere to the COVID-19 regulations, particularly due to the fact that they were learners with special needs. P1 stated:

*Maintaining COVID-19 regulations in the classroom was extremely demanding due to our learners being highly sensory. So, the masks were eaten, and vizers scratched. We couldn't wear masks to teach our learners. They HAVE to see facial expressions.*

While P3 shared her experience as follows:

*Before learners were allowed back into the classroom, COVID-19 workshops were conducted. Every learner was practically trained to always wear a mask, and also shown how to use a sanitizer (Standard Operation Procedures). The GDE supplied schools with sanitizer, masks, and gloves to be utilised daily. The wearing of a mask was initially a challenge as learners hid behind the mask. The learners were not freely expressive, however, with time they adjusted to this new normal and communicating through a mask. We did not encourage working in groups, even the learners over-reacted if anyone sneezed or coughed. Social distancing of 1.5m was highly adhered to.*

Wearing a mask in the classroom to protect against the spread of the Coronavirus was also a challenge, as expressed by P4:

*Most learners did not want to wear a mask all the time. They didn't want to sanitize all the time, and they didn't want to keep to the social distancing rule. Some even told us that the only time they use masks is when they are at school. Group work stopped completely for us because learners were not controllable under normal classes, how much more then during the pandemic? In my class, we had to allow the person speaking to remove the mask and only put it back on once they were done speaking.*

Maintaining the COVID-19 regulations was a daunting experience for P2 as she indicated that:

*The COVID-19 regulations were a constant added process that we had to adhere to. Plus, teaching social distance to autistic children was difficult to do. Autistic children HAVE to see facial expressions. So, I had to wear a vizer.*

P5 added, “*The learners struggled to keep social distance. Wearing a mask while teaching was challenging as some of the learners could not hear me.*” Learners with special educational needs present with various barriers, and thus teaching them to adhere to the the COVID-19 regulations was a challenge. This was corroborated by P6 when she indicated that:

*Teaching SID (Severely Intellectually Disabled) learners new routines was a huge challenge. Getting a learner with ASD to wear a mask and not take it off was a huge challenge! The learners did not always understand social distancing rules. The learners struggled to keep the mask on, and this hindered some aspects of communication the classroom as I had to get their attention before speaking.*

P7 shared similar sentiments:

*It was impossible, unfortunately. All the learners in my class had autistic features and they simply tore off the masks the moment they entered the classroom. Sanitizing hands was not sufficient at all – learners were drooling and touching surfaces with contaminated hands all the time or putting toys in their mouths and then handing the toys to others right after that. Food rests would fall to the floor – etc. So, after a while, we just gave up, did what we could and accepted the rest. Learners had un-learnt appropriate classroom behaviour, and on top of that, they were anxious due to all the changes. So, it was a challenge to get everyone back into a structured routine, adhering to rules.*

P8 had a different experience with her learners, recounting that:

*Many of the learners with a hearing impairment could not hear when wearing a mask. I have learners that suffer from poor muscle control over their mouths. Some of the learners drool, and their masks would be wet. So, when they took their masks off, they would spit on the face of the person that they were talking to. The learners in my class believed that there was no COVID-19. They stated that it was a lie, and some would say that “only people in the city believed in the existence of the virus”. The learners with hearing impairments struggled, so we as the teachers ended up using clear shields to cover our faces. Learners did not wear masks due to breathing problems. Some of the learners and staff members were not willing to follow basic hygiene rules at the school.*

P9, alternatively, indicated that the major challenge that she experienced was with the learners keeping a social distance from each other. She stated, “*The learners struggled to keep social distance.*” In the words of P10:

*[Maintaining COVID-19 regulations] was a nightmare. The low-function learners really struggled with the masks, and they didn't understand social distance. After a few days, I just gave up, we wore masks when they came into the school in the morning and when we went out. In class, it was off. Even the lowest function learner figured out how to pull the masks off. The only learners it worked for was the learners which drool. We placed like 4 layers of cut up facecloths in it and then the drool didn't drip on everything. Wearing a mask for me was also very difficult because my learners are all second-language learners. They also struggle to speak. I couldn't read their lips and they couldn't read mine. And I couldn't hear them.*

#### **4.14.2. Summary of Theme**

Maintaining COVID-19 regulations was a major challenge for the participants, as indicated by the above data. The data indicates that there were challenges relating to both implementing and maintaining the regulations in the classroom. Teaching these learners how to protect themselves against contracting the virus by using hand sanitizer, wearing a mask, and maintaining social distance rules was a very demanding task for most of the participants.

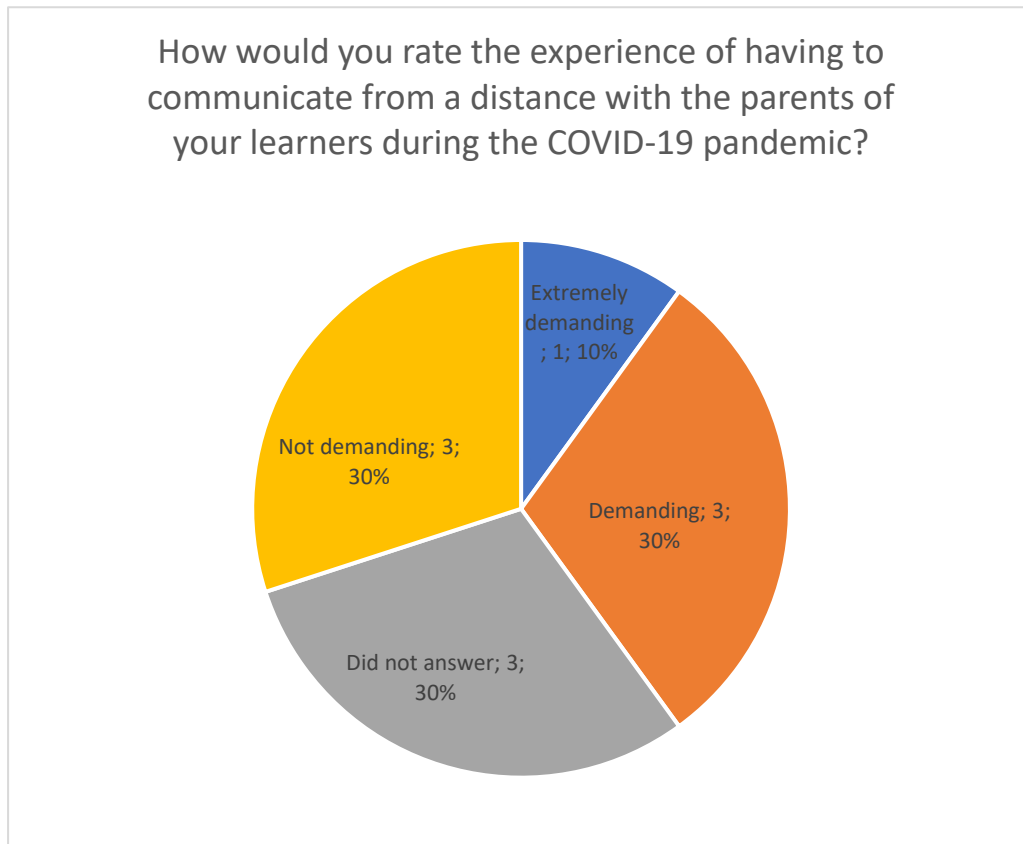
This was once again an important theme to identify in this study because, on top of the usual challenges in getting learners to adhere to the new regulations, the participants were dealing with learners with special needs, which created further difficulties.

#### **4.15. THEME 6: WORKING WITH THE PARENTS OF LEARNERS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC TO MEET THE ACADEMIC NEEDS OF THE LEARNER**

The data from the questionnaire is presented in Figure 4.8 below, followed by corroboration from the group discussion.

**Figure 4.8**

*Working with parents during the pandemic*



The above pie chart indicates that one participant felt that it was extremely demanding to work with the parents of her learners during the COVID-19 pandemic. Three participants indicated that this was demanding; whereas three of the participants indicated that they did not find this demanding. Four of the ten participants in this study did not provide any answers to this question.

#### **4.15.1. Extracts from the data to support the information in Figure 4.8**

In regard to the topic of communicating with parents during this time, P1 explained:

*I experienced challenges with working with the parents of my learners during the pandemic. This made my job very demanding because parents needed to follow the COVID-19 rules, but they either didn't or they refused to. However, the parents had a very supportive and loving attitude towards me during the pandemic.*

However, P2 had a different experience, indicating:

*Working with the parents of my learners during the pandemic was not a challenge. They were amazing. However, the parents needed to be constantly assured that their kids were in safe hands at the school. I was constantly in communication with the parents of my learners. I was able to also listen to and hear the concerns that they had. This which helped me to know how to support their children.*

Alternatively, P3 had no communication with the parents of her learners:

*There was no interaction between us and the parents of our learners since we are not digitally savvy at the school. Even prior to the pandemic, our school had a huge challenge of absent parental involvement in their kids learning. COVID-19 further exposed this challenge. There was a lack of parental involvement and parents were scared to avail themselves to come pick up the learning packages. I would say that they were literally hiding away and had lost hope generally. I could not get hold of them. It was like they had vanished into thin air. I guess they were undergoing instability and loss of hope.*

In some cases, there was no collaboration with the parents of the learners. This was indicated by P4 when she stated:

*Some parents did not want to bring their children to school when schools re-opened. I think that only a few parents took this seriously, most didn't take this virus very seriously. A few of the parents that were serious did not bring their children to school until the schools were fully functioning. These were parents that had children with additional illnesses.*

Fear and anxiety were emotions experienced by the participants as well as the parents of their learners, as indicated by P5, who stated, *“Some of the parents were anxious and feared for the well-being of their children. While some of the parents were unreachable.”*

P6 further added, *“Parents needed motivation and guidance to follow through. They are not skilled to assist their children with academic activities.”* P7 had no challenge in communicating with the parents of her learners. She explained:

*I kept in contact with WhatsApp and/or video calls, or I would record a video of me singing one of our beloved class songs and send that to the parents. Parents would then sometimes send a video of the learner singing along with the song I sent, saying my name, or looking happy when recognising my face. Some parents were really suffering – not having food in the house, for instance. Our school drove out to parents' houses to deliver food parcels, we also had food parcel distribution days at school. Our learners, when at home, just want to relax, schoolwork is far from their minds. Even the parents had so much*

*on their plates, very few of them actually worked on the learners' stimulation. But that's ok, we did what we could and worked with what we had.*

However, the COVID-19 pandemic was also a stressful time for parents, as indicated by P8:

*Parents also needed support. They found it stressful having to deal with the disability of their child for so long, because usually they just left their child at the hostel, and then the school would raise the child.*

Some schools utilised both online and offline methods to communicate and send work to the parents of their learners. P9 expounded:

*Whatsapp groups with parents was helpful to communicate. However, some of the parents were anxious and feared for the well-being of their children. We had to print additional worksheets and we also relied on parents to assist at home”.*

Some parents were fearful, and they communicated this to the teachers, as recounted by P10:

*Many of the parents were very afraid to send their children to school because most learners in my class had comorbidities. The parents I went to visit at home because the learners couldn't come to school, I had and still have a good relationship with most of them.*

#### **4.15.2. Summary of Theme**

Communicating with the parents of learners was not something that only gained importance during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is something that has always been important, but gained greater significance during this period due to the nature of the pandemic, which caused schools to close for some time to curb the spread of the virus. It was important for teachers and parents to have an open line of communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was to enable a clear understanding of when, where, and how teaching and learning would be conducted during the pandemic. However, the data does not indicate that this was much of a challenge, with only three of the ten participants indicating that communicating with parents during the pandemic was demanding for them. This was an important theme to highlight as it shows that teachers and parents should prioritise communicating with each other so that both parties are aware of what is going on when it comes to the child, their learning, and

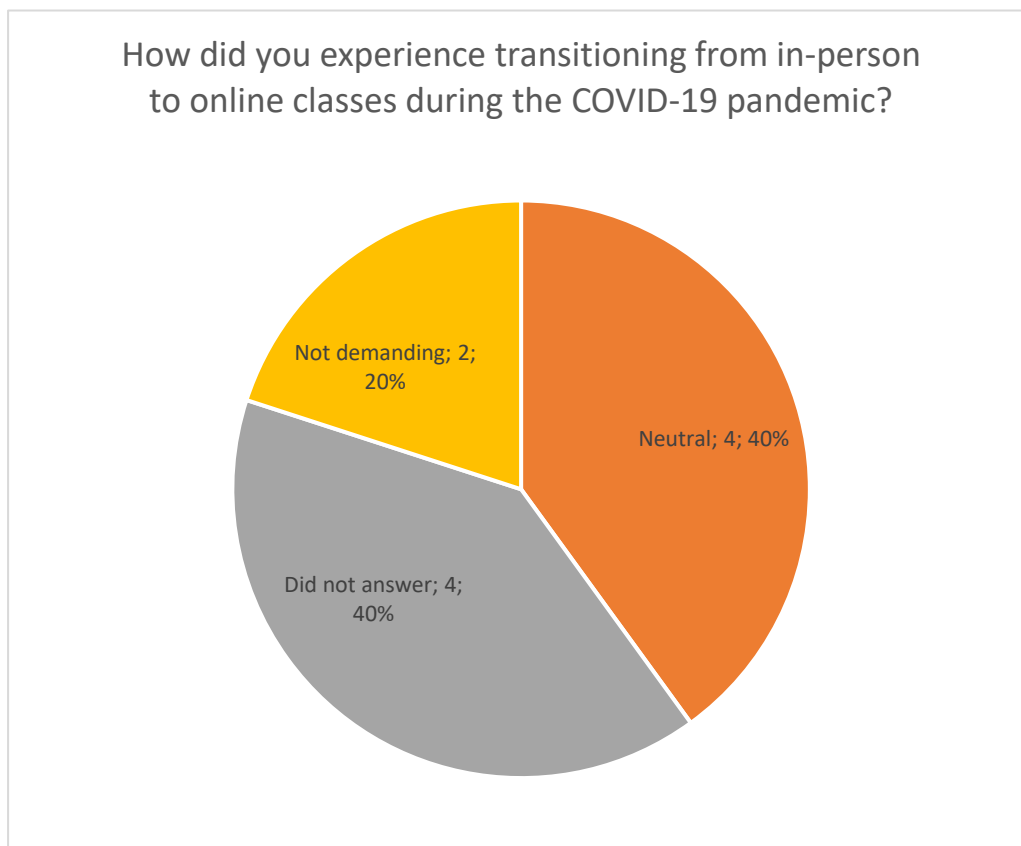
any challenges that they are experiencing which may affect the way in which they learn.

#### 4.16. THEME 7: ONLINE TEACHING AND LEARNING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The data on this theme from the questionnaire, as well as the corroboratory excerpts from the group discussion, are presented subsequently.

**Figure 4.9**

*Online teaching during the pandemic*



The above pie chart indicates that four participants indicated that their experience with transitioning from in-person to online classes was neither good nor bad. Two participants indicated that their transition to online classes from the traditional in-person classes was not demanding. Four of the ten participants of this study did not provide an answer. However, they did provide some answers to the question, and this can be seen below in the extracts from the group discussion.



#### 4.16.1. Extracts from the data to support the information in Figure 4.9

P1 clearly indicated that, “*Online learning does not suit special needs.*” Although the literature review in Chapter 2 refers to teaching learners with special needs using an online platform, this was not applicable to the participants in this study. P3 further added:

*We were not trained to do online teaching due to the lack of ICT equipment. We had no means to teach online. Given this opportunity, it would have been welcomed, and it would've also been an exciting challenge for both the teachers and learners. Given the opportunity, I think that the learners would've done better when learning digitally, and with appropriate learning programmes. Given the opportunity, I think they would've done better when learning digitally and with the appropriate learning programmes.*

P4 identified that a lack of resources was the reason why the school she taught at could not implement online learning, “*We did not have online classes because our learners have no laptops, cell phones or tablets, and these were never used even under normal conditions. We only had physical classes.*” Whereas P5 indicated, “*We never had online classes. We only had in-person classes.*”

P6 also supported these sentiments, stating, “*We didn't teach online. We only did paper-based work, and activity ideas were sent to parents. We also just had to work on adjusting the curriculum.*” Whereas P7 expressed:

*We did not do any online teaching. This would have been completely fruitless with the level of functioning of our learners (LSPID). Instead, we made some simple videos of our well-known songs or some activities (more for the benefit of the parents, who then had to do the activities with the learners).*

P8 further added:

*I work in an LSEN government school where online learning was not accessible to all learners as they live in impoverished households. I would also get many learners sending me WhatsApps at all hours because we did WhatsApp teaching. Learners at our school use specialised devices at school, and they don't have these at home. This created a challenge when we were trying to teach learners while they were at home.*

P9 simply stated, “*We never had online classes.*”

As a teacher who teaches learners with severe intellectual disabilities, P10 indicated that:

*I couldn't do online teaching with low-function learners. I am ok to teach online for learners, but our learners are, on average, too poor to afford to do the online classes and not all have the technology at home. Our school didn't expect us to do online classes. We did send some activities home for the parents to do with the learners. Not that I think many of the parents did it with the learners. The LSEN learner really struggle to learn online. They did enjoy the stories I send them and the songs that we sang in class. Most of my work I do with objects that is theme-related. I also need to help them hand over hand to do the activities. Both of this wasn't possible online. You can't get their attention and keep it online. They also come out of poor families that can't afford data and can't buy the things to do with the learners when you give them lessons online. That is why we didn't try to do online lessons.*

#### **4.16.2. Summary of Theme**

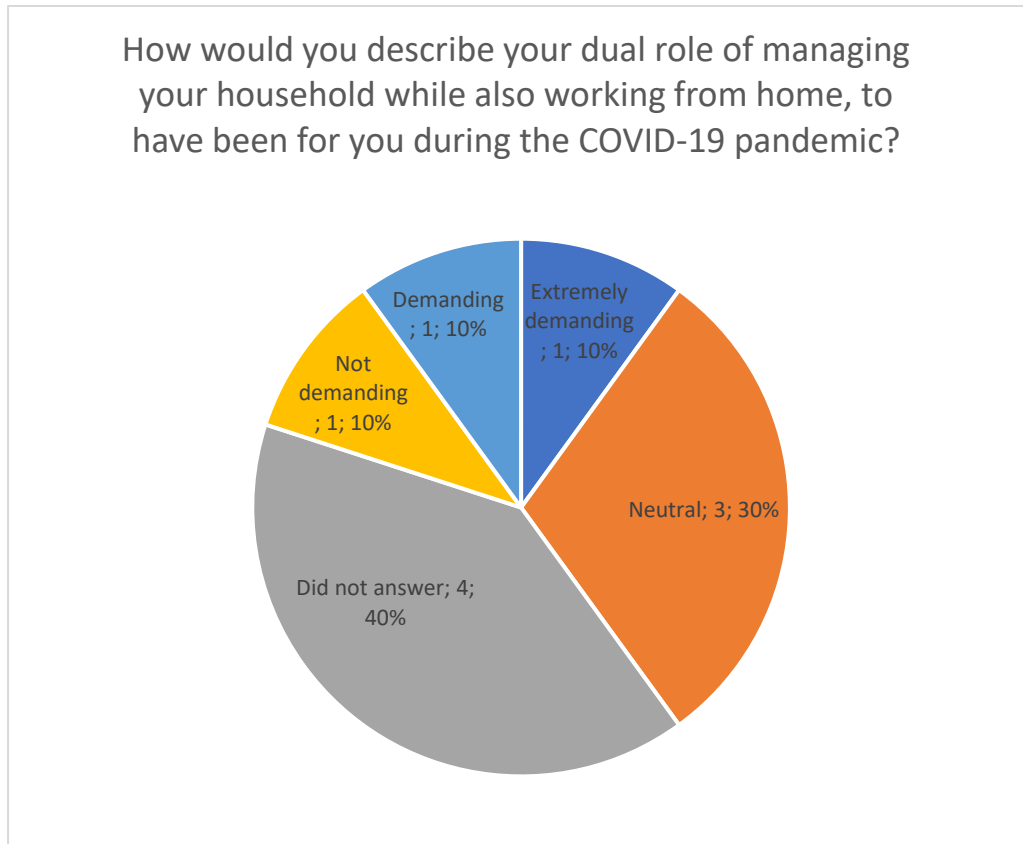
The data indicates that most of the participants worked at schools that did not use online learning to facilitate teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the participants worked at underprivileged schools that did not have sufficient resources to implement online teaching and learning. This was an important theme to identify because online teaching and learning was also a challenge for the participants because they teach learners with special needs, and these learners present with various barriers. Some of these learners are not able to be able to make use of any form of technological device such as a laptop due to the nature of their disability. The participants also indicated that they were never trained to teach using an online platform, which was discussed in Section 2.10.6.

#### **4.17. THEME 8: MAINTAINING A WORK/LIFE BALANCE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

The data from the questionnaire regarding the theme of having a work/life balance is presented in Figure 4.10. The corroborating data from the group interview is then explored.

**Figure 4.10**

*Participants' work/life balance during the pandemic*



The above pie chart indicates that one participant found balancing work and life during the pandemic to be extremely demanding. One participant found it demanding, while one participant found it to be easy. Three participants found it neither easy nor demanding; and four of the ten participants did not provide an answer.

#### **4.17.1. Extracts from the data to support the information in Figure 4.10**

Although the participants indicated different levels of difficulty in balancing their work and personal lives during the COVID-19 pandemic, there were some participants who found striking a balance to be challenging.

P2 indicated that *“Life was simply more tiring,”* whereas P3 explained:

*Balancing work and life was extremely impossible. Juggling around, and time management was the solution. I had to be flexible in all the roles that I had to play. During the pandemic, I felt a lot of pressure, and this was extremely challenging because I would feel guilty that the learners are not benefitting or learning at home since they had no parental support. The learners had to work on their own, but most did not even touch their*

*learning packages. We prepared lessons, and spent time on this, so I was concerned when I could not reach my learners.*

However, working from home was not something that was experienced by P4, as she stated, “*I did not work from home*”. P7 was able to strike a work and personal life balance as she indicated:

*I felt more relaxed at home, since the risk of bringing the virus to my children was much diminished while working from home. I don't mind working hard, it was more the worry about killing my own children that got to me. I never stick to stipulated work hours. I always work after hours and during holidays, so that is nothing new to me. Finding a balance between work and home was not unique to COVID-19 – for me.*

P9 indicated that “*Finding a work/life balance was challenging,*” while P10 expounded:

*My Oldest was in Grade 1 (2020) and Grade 2 (2021) and my youngest was about 15 months old when the hard lock down started. I found hard lock down a blessing because my youngest didn't sleep and it help that I didn't work during hard lockdown. My oldest was later diagnosed with ADD and it was a fun when it was hard lockdown. When she got homework, it was a nightmare because she didn't want to do schoolwork with me. It was a struggle to work and do all the schoolwork. Luckily, we worked shorter hours and for a long time we didn't work because the school was closed.*

#### **4.17.2. Summary of theme**

The data above indicates that most of the participants did not experience noticeable challenges in striking a balance between work and their personal lives during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, some participants did indicate difficulties in this area.

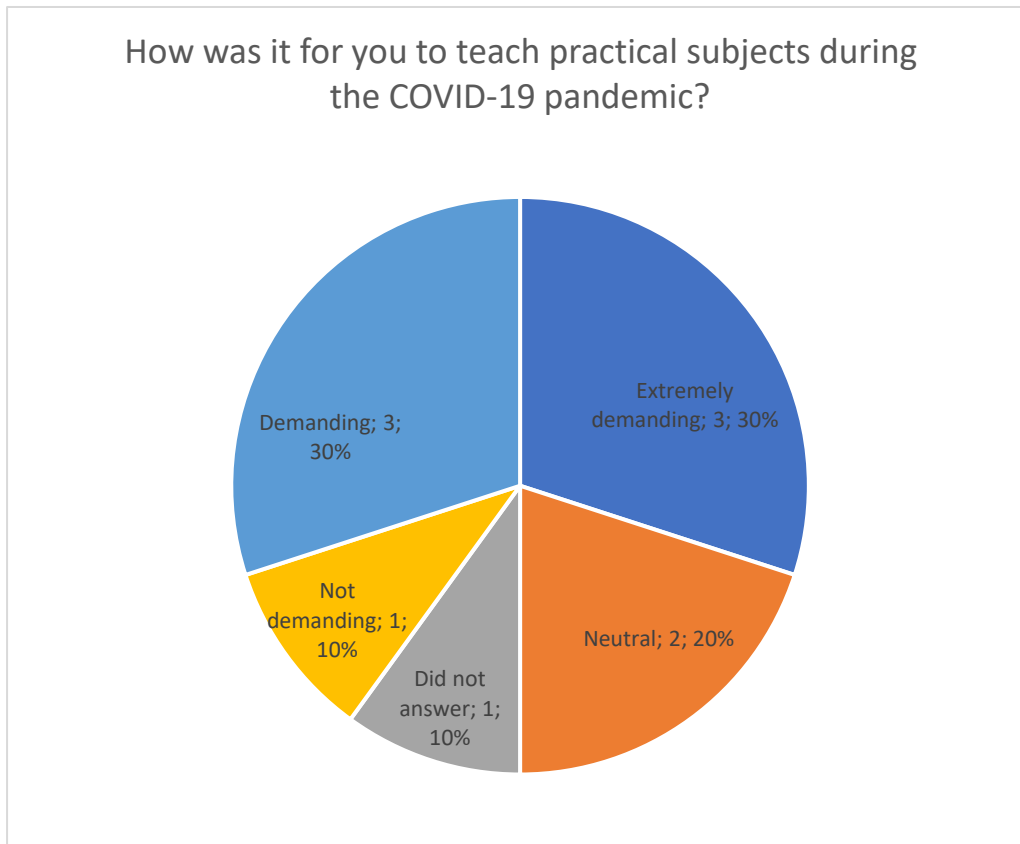
This was an important theme to identify because this study focused on both the professional and personal challenges that the participants experienced, and how they were able to deal with both. This was addressed in the literature review (Section 2.15).

#### **4.18. THEME 9: TEACHING PRACTICAL SUBJECTS TO SPECIAL NEEDS LEARNERS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

The information gained from the questionnaire in terms of this theme is presented in Figure 4.11, followed by confirmatory information from the group discussion.

**Figure 4.11**

*Teaching practical subjects to special needs learners during the pandemic*



In the pie chart above, three participants found teaching practical subjects to special needs learners to be extremely demanding. Three participants found this to be demanding, while two participants found it neither challenging nor easy. One participant found it to not be demanding, while one participant did not respond to this question.

**4.18.1. Extracts from the data to support the information in Figure 4.11**

In light of this theme, P3 stated:

*No practical subjects were taught, or any projects given especially in the foundation phase. Only worksheet activities were given. We had to take into cognisance all the issues that the learners were experiencing.*

P4 taught practical subjects during the pandemic, and this was her experience:

*Teaching physical subjects during the pandemic was extremely demanding because at first, the learners would share the tools. Now, the learners had to use their own tools,*

*meaning that the learners had to wait till one was done using the tool. Then the tool had to be cleaned (sanitized) before being used by the next learner during the physical class.*

P6 also experienced some challenges as she indicated that teaching practical subjects during the COVID-19 pandemic “*was challenging, especially for the parents when the kids were at home, because they needed supplies, instruction, and motivation to execute the physical lessons.*”

P7 had the following to say about teaching practical subjects to learners with special needs during the COVID-19 pandemic:

*All our subjects involved practical activities (our learners don't read and write). So, for instance, for a baking activity, you would have to include all the ingredients in the home activity box, with a recipe, and then also make a video to demonstrate the activity. So, each activity involved a lot of planning and preparation, and then you wouldn't even know for sure if the parents really did it at home.*

P8 also experienced this challenge as she indicated, “*I teach drama, which is a practical subject. Teaching drama was very challenging during this time because the learners had to wear masks.*”

#### **4.18.2. Summary of Theme**

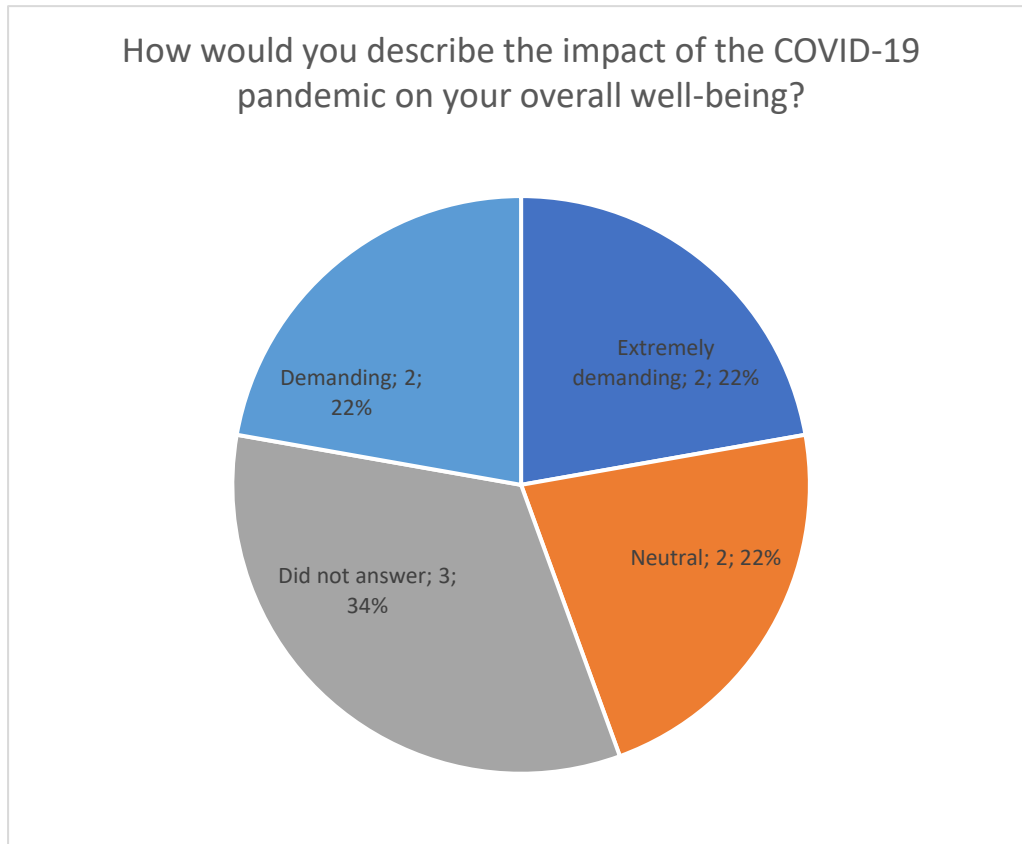
Social distancing was a measure put in place to slow down the spread of the Coronavirus. However, this regulation made it challenging for the participating teachers to teach practical subjects during the pandemic. Teaching practical subjects required that learners share tools, which could have resulted in them spreading the virus. As a result, some participants resorted to not teaching any practical subjects. This is an important theme to identify because it addresses how the participants had to adjust their teaching to accommodate the COVID-19 pandemic. This was discussed in Section 2.9.10.

#### **4.19. THEME 10: OVERALL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING OF THE PARTICIPANTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

The data from the questionnaire relating to this theme is illustrated in the following figure, followed by confirmatory excerpts from the group discussion.

**Figure 4.12**

*Participants' overall health and well-being*



The pie chart above shows that two participants found the toll of COVID-19 on their health and well-being to be extremely demanding; two found it to be demanding; two found it neither demanding nor easy; while three participants did not respond to this question in the questionnaire.

**4.19.1. Extracts from the data to support the information in Figure 4.12**

The overall health of the participants was affected by COVID-19, with each participant giving a unique response to this question. P1 indicated, *“My stress levels were very high.”* Whilst P2 had just recently moved to South Africa (Gauteng) when the pandemic started, explaining, *“Living and working in a new country (I am from the UK) was challenging during the pandemic, as I was new to the country.”* P3 was mostly concerned about her learners:

*Personally, I would say I was extremely troubled by all my learners who were at home, not attending school, and who had no support at all from home. I experienced a unique*

*situation which yielded some uncertainty and stress. I had not much of a solution to this challenging situation, and this left me feeling frustrated and irritated.*

P4 contracted the Coronavirus, indicating, *“As a victim of the COVID-19 virus, the virus had a huge impact on me because I was sick and away from work. I was also isolated from everything and everyone.”* P6 personally struggled with supporting others during the pandemic, reporting, *“I struggled with supporting those around me who lost loved ones.”*

P7 experienced great challenges with her overall health and well-being:

*The combination of the fact that all my teachers were absent, the fear that I experienced regarding my children at home catching the virus; my inability to protect myself due to the level of functioning of my learners, physical challenges with learners having meltdown and even causing me injuries. Those were all extremely challenging, but I tried coping day by day. Some of my autistic learners (especially one boy) was completely out of control due to all the changes. He would refuse to even enter the school grounds, then he would refuse to enter the class. He would have meltdowns to the point that I, in an effort to console him, would sometimes end up on the floor with him. I was struggling with severe arthritis in my hip and hurt myself sometimes trying to cope with these learners. I had to have a hip replacement at the end of the year.*

P10 said that her overall health and well-being were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly because she *“missed some of my colleagues. Missed my friends and family more than my colleagues.”*

#### **4.19.2. Summary of Theme**

The data presented above indicates that the overall health and well-being of the participants were not universally affected. However, some participants did indicate how their overall health and well-being were affected due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This theme was important in this study because it allowed the participants to reflect on how their overall health and well-being were affected by the pandemic. This theme was discussed in Section 2.10.4.



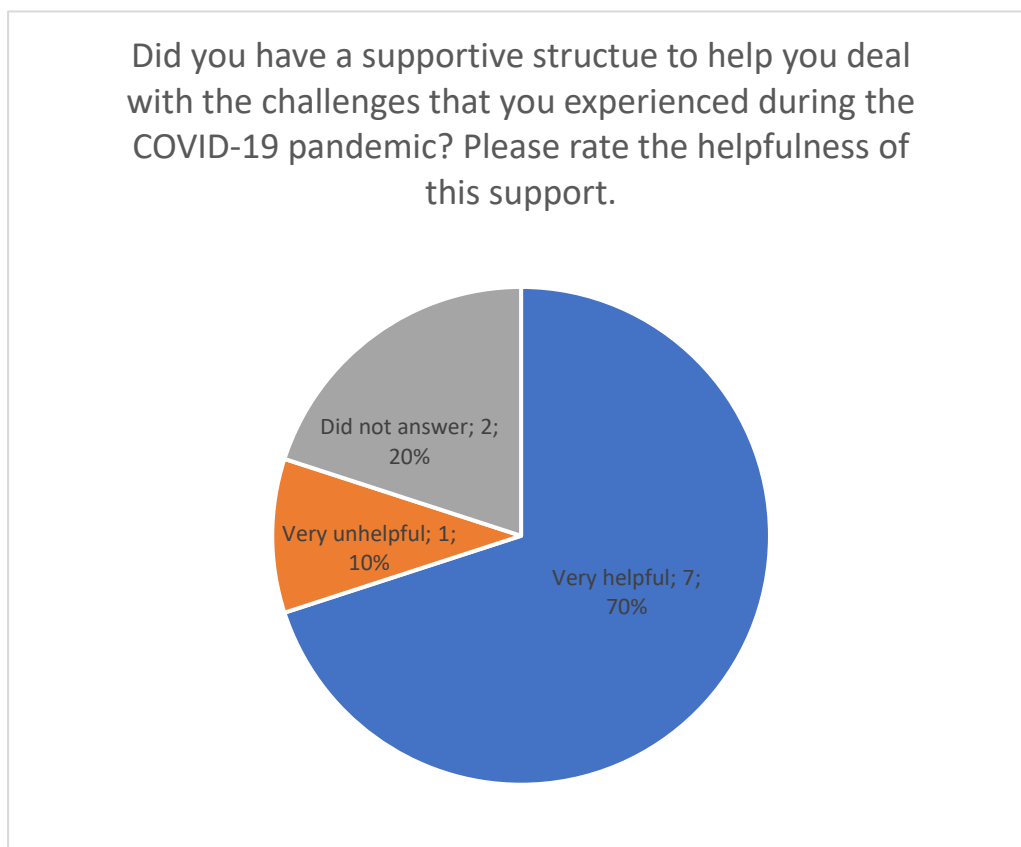
## 4.20. THEME 11: SUPPORT SYSTEMS UTILISED BY THE PARTICIPANTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

### 4.20.1. Sub-theme 1: Personal support system during the COVID-19 pandemic

The statistics from the questionnaire regarding this theme are illustrated in Figure 4.13 below. This is followed by data from the group discussion.

**Figure 4.13**

*Participants' personal support system during the pandemic*



The pie chart above indicates that seven participants found a support system to be very helpful during the pandemic. One participant found it very unhelpful at this time, and two participants did not answer.

### 4.20.2. Extracts from the data to support the information in Figure 4.13

P1 indicated that *“The staff at the school is very close to one another, so there was a lot of support there.”* While P2 stated, *“My partner, church and friends were my support*

*systems during the pandemic.” P3 referred to the support given by the school where she taught, explaining, “The school tried its best to keep us encouraged through WhatsApp messages.” P5 simply stated, “My family and friends were my support system,” and P6 echoed the same sentiments, “Family and friends were very supportive.”*

P7 then recounted:

*I have a very supportive family, and the school staff also supported each other very well. I was able to communicate with colleagues, we do have a staff group, but I didn't utilise the communication channels much. I relied more on my family for emotional support, as well as P8 who indicated that “I have a very strong support system at home”.*

P9 also stated, *“I was supported by my family and friends.”*

P10 also referred to the support given by the school she worked at at the time of this study:

*A very understandable principal and positive working environment helped a lot. And my pastor who gave me a travel permits to go and check in on my parents and help them as elderly. That way I didn't worry about them. And it was very special to spend more time with my personal children. The demands as low because all extra activities were closed like dancing, church.*

#### **4.20.3. Summary of Theme**

The above data indicates that some participants received support, which helped them deal with the different challenges that they encountered during the pandemic. Support varied, and, as indicated by the data, some of the participants received support from their colleagues, family, and friends. This was an important theme to identify as it showed that although the participants experienced challenges during the pandemic, they had some kind of support structure in place to help them cope.

## 4.21. SECTION 3: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

This section will discuss the themes generated from the data collected using a focus group discussion.

### 4.21.1. Theme 1: lack of resources in schools during the COVID-19 pandemic

During the focus group discussion, P3 revealed the following:

*I come from a school that caters for learners in informal settlements so there was no WIFI, no internet. We struggled. Learners could not even come to school to come get their homework packs, because some of their parents don't even have cell phones or they have not even provided the school with the correct cell phone numbers, or the numbers were not working. There was no learning taking place at all. We had very little resources to work with at all.*

P3 agreed with P3, explaining as follows:

*I agree with P3. In terms of PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) we really didn't have much, and in terms of materials such as textbooks we really didn't have much. We just had to make do with the little that we had. There were no homework packs created for the learners, nothing at all.*

Alternatively, P7 came from a school that was well-resourced:

*At our school we really did not lack any resources. We really don't have any complaints about that. We bought resources for the learning packs that the learners would use at home, and we really had more than enough resources. We didn't have any challenges with resources at our school.*

### 4.21.2. Summary of Theme

A lack of resources made it challenging for some of the participants to do their job effectively during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was more evident during the hard lockdown when schools were closed and distance education had to be implemented (as discussed in Section 2.9). This was an important theme to identify because a lack of resources coupled with high job demands led to teachers feeling stressed because they did not have the correct resources for online and remote teaching.

## **4.22. THEME 2: ADHERING TO THE SIAS POLICY DOCUMENT DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

In light of this theme, P3 indicated:

*Since there were no learners there were no screening, no identification, no assessment, and no support because there were no learners. By the time the learners came back, the teachers were grabbing them. They just wanted to fill the learning gap. So, the SIAS process was not followed.*

P7, who is an SET, stated:

*Well, we are at the end of the chain where the learners have been identified for individual support, and we provide the support. Our viewpoint is a bit different to that of other schools. It was very difficult for us to render support to our learners because at first, we had no learners, and when the learners returned, only half of the learners were present. So, in terms of the learners not being there at all then it was huge challenge to offer appropriate support. But we tried to support the learners with food banks. Our support was more in terms of food provision, not academic support.*

P9 expressed that at her school:

*[We] had a lot of challenges. Our school is also in an informal settlement, so we have overcrowded classrooms. Screening was not done sufficiently (if it was done at all). We just made up stuff as we went on.*

### **4.22.1. Summary of Theme**

The above data indicates that the participants who participated in the focus group discussion had challenges with the implementation of the SIAS policy during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is an important indicator of how the pandemic was a barrier to the practising and implementation of this policy in the education system.

## **4.23. THEME 3: ONLINE TEACHING AND LEARNING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

P3 reflected on the experience that she had with online teaching and learning, expressing:

*What I know now, if I knew it then, I would've really encouraged teachers to use online learning if we had the means and resources. Learners learn better when the learning occurs through media. When the media is different from person-to-person teaching. Though our Grade 7 teachers did try using an app called Moyo. So, they were able to gather parents slowly but surely. Through the Moyo app, the teachers were able to give the learners homework. I was not using the app, but I saw my colleagues using it. The app was effective. Through the app the learners could get homeworks and worksheets.*

P7 had a different experience, reflecting:

*We did not even try anything like that. Because some of our learners are still at a concrete level that they don't even comprehend a picture. What about online learning? We sent homework packs so that the parents could try and help their children with homework. We would guide the parents on how to provide stimulation... to their children. Online learning for learners with intellectual disabilities can never work. We did try sending videos. For instance, we sent out videos on how to make toast. We sent out these videos to parents and they could play it to the learners and try the practical application of the video. When we tried sending videos to the parents, many parents did not get these videos because they didn't have data or maybe even some of them did not have smartphones to receive what we were sending to them. The different levels of severity of impairment are also a challenge because some of our severe to profound intellectually disabled learners are not even able to comprehend a line drawing. So, how can you do online learning with a learner that is still at such a concrete level that they can't even comprehend a line drawing. We have to sit with that child and the child has to see things, touch things, and explore things. So, we can't teach such a child on a phone or computer. It is just not possible.*

While P9 explained:

*I think it would've been a no-go area at the school where I am at because the learners that we have are from different socio-economic issues. Most of the parents of our learners do not understand what technology is, and how technology works. This is not only frustrating for the parents, but it is also frustrating for the learners, and it also adds to their expenses because data is also very expensive. So, I don't think that online learning is the way to go. Also, online learning is a challenge because of the socio-economic status as there are different levels to it. Not every child has access to a laptop. Not every parent has a smartphone that they can use in terms of online teaching.*

#### 4.23.1. Summary of Theme

The data indicates that online learning was not practised in any of the schools at which the participants taught. This was because the participants had learners with different impairments, and at different severities. However, this was not the only reason for the lack of using online methods to continue teaching and learning as learners' socio-economic background also played a role. This was an important theme to identify because it addressed various reasons for the challenges experienced in incorporating online learning in certain schools.

#### 4.24. THEME 4: COPING STRATEGIES UTILISED BY THE PARTICIPANTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Regarding the theme of the coping strategies utilised by the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic, P3 expounded:

*In our school, teachers were paranoid. They were scared to come together. It was each person to their own corner. It was worse because from time to time there were teachers that were ill, so it was a no-go area. So, in such instances the teacher was a no-go area, her class was a no-go area, even her learners were a no-go area. We didn't have much support. There was no support.*

Whereas P7 shared her experience to be as follows:

*At our school it wasn't like a formal thing to get support such as a psychiatrist. But somehow the staff came together as a group, and it is as if we bonded as a group. We had some very nice activities. For instance, we did the Jerusalem dance. One day we came together on the rugby field and the whole staff did the Jerusalem dance, and we took a video and sent it to other schools as a challenge. So, there were things like that. Somehow the staff coming together as a unit, and as a group rendered support.*

However, P9 agreed with P3, recounting that at the school at which she worked at the time of this study:

*There was no support at all. You were like your own support system, or your support system was at home. When you were at work isolation. You came to work, did what you were supposed to do such as curriculum teaching. Teachers were very paranoid. There was no socialising, no sitting together, nothing. So, we got more emotional support from home instead of getting it from work.*

#### 4.24.1. Summary of Theme

The above theme indicates that the participants were not emotionally supported by the schools at which they taught during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants indicated that they had to outsource their own support to effectively deal with the challenges that they experienced due to the pandemic.

#### 4.25. THEME 5: REFLECTING ON THE LESSONS LEARNT BY THE PARTICIPANTS FROM THE EXPERIENCES THAT THEY HAD DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

In terms of lessons learnt based on their experiences of the pandemic, P3 shared:

*What comes up is knowing how important a teacher is. Because for learners, once there is no teacher in front of them, then they were not even bothered to read or to do anything. So, I realised how important teaching is. One of the things that I have learnt is to restructure the way that I was teaching. I had to re-strategise from the strategies that I was using on how I was going to teach; how I was going to fill in the learning gaps. So, I had to think of new strategies, and to learn these strategies.*

P7 then explained:

*I learnt so much about the individual challenges of my learners because it is as if these challenges intensified and then I had to focus more on learning how to alleviate these challenges. I am thinking specifically about a learner that I have who has autism. I had to teach him outside and then I discovered all kinds of things that he could do. He had more meltdowns, so I had to learn how to handle these meltdowns effectively. In the end I felt like an autism specialist. So, I learnt much more during the pandemic than I would have if everything stayed in a routine. So, the disruption of pandemic lifted out more challenges for the learners, and I had to learn more on alleviating these challenges. I learnt more about my individual learners in terms of the challenges they have, and how to alleviate these challenges.*

Whereas P9 said:

*I would say that the South African education system has a very long way to go, because as P3 has just said, we as teachers had to re-structure the ways that we teach, we had to stretch ourselves to the limit. We had to think of different ways to cover the curriculum;*

*ways to reach out to the learners. Everything was on our shoulders as teachers. So, I would say that an educator plays a very important role in teaching.*

#### **4.25.1. Summary of Theme**

The above theme indicates that the participants were able to reflect on the lessons that they learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants had to think about different and new ways of teaching their learners as a result of the pandemic, and the challenges it posed. This was an important theme to identify because it gave the participants an opportunity to reflect on what they could do better for their learners now that we are living post-COVID-19. The participants also reflected on the important academic role that they played in the academic lives of their learners. They reflected on how, when they were not in a physical classroom to facilitate teaching and learning, learners felt lost and unmotivated to learn. This allowed them to identify that they played an important role in the lives of their learners. After assessing the impact of the pandemic on their learners, they were able to devise strategies to assist their learners to learn more effectively. The COVID-19 pandemic also gave the participants an opportunity to understand the individual challenges with which the learners were living. This was something that they could not easily do when they had a full class with many learners before the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### **4.26. THEME 6: A LACK OF FOCUS ON SPECIAL SCHOOLS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

In terms of a lack of focus on special schools during the pandemic, P9 responded:

*I don't think so. I think that we were all just fumbling around. We all had to make do, because we as teachers had to make a plan on how to make teaching and learning possible for your learners.*

P3 shared the same sentiments as she expressed that:

*It's also a no from me. We were not given any attention. I wouldn't say that private schools were given much attention, but I honestly think that everything boiled down to the resources that the school had. Everything depended on each school. If the school had enough resources for whatsoever.*



While P7 stated:

*In terms of attention given from the authorities, I would agree with the other two speakers. In terms of support in the school, it depends a lot on the SMT and principals of each school. I think that we have a very good principal. He was prepared to go to any extra mile. He drove personally with his own car to some of the learners houses to deliver food parcels. He encouraged us to create our education packs, he created a budget for this. He stretched all the resources. In the end, each individual school needs a good principal and SMT. If we have to rely on the department then we won't always get the appropriate support always from that side.*

#### **4.26.1. Summary of Theme**

The data above indicates that the participants felt that special schools did not get much attention and focus during the COVID-19 pandemic, even though it is common knowledge that these schools cater to learners with special needs. Schools had to use existing resources to meet the challenges that they were experiencing. This was an important theme to identify in this study because it highlights the fact that there was no collaboration amongst different stakeholders in the education system to alleviate the challenges experienced by schools during the pandemic, particularly special needs schools.

#### **4.27. THEME 7: WORKLOAD EXPERIENCED BY THE PARTICIPANTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

In light of their workload during the pandemic, P3 stated:

*As an LSE (Learning Support Educator), I didn't have much academic work. It was more emotional work that had to be done. More psychological support that I had to provide to the learners before I could even bring them back to what was happening in the classroom. I had to ease them into a more focused place of learning. So, for me, it was more emotional and psychological support that I had to provide to my learners.*

P7 agreed with P3, reflection that:

*I agree with P3 that the disruption and emotional stress, those things actually weighed more than the physical workload, because the physical workload was actually cancelled out by the fact that there were less learners. Yes, we made educational packs, and these took a lot of time because we had to pack everything into boxes. But when all the learners*

*were there, we had to have more activities with them in class, and we had extra-curricular activities. Those all fell away So, I don't think that our physical workload was as much as the fact that all of us were just so emotionally and psychologically taxed, and the learners felt this way too.*

P9 added:

*I had to summarise the content like from the summarised ATPs that we got, I had to physically shorten the content and summarise it; make activities easier for the learners to answer. My workload became more because I had to think about how I could make teaching and learning for myself and my learners more quality.*

#### **4.27.1. Summary of Theme**

The data indicates that the workload experienced by the participants varied according to their role as either SETs or LSEs. For some of the participants, the workload increased as they now had to plan how to teach their learners from a distance. However, with the increase in workloads also came the emotional challenges of balancing work. This theme was identified in both the data collected for this study, as well as in the literature reviewed for this research (see Section 2.10.5).

#### **4.27.2. Sub-theme: Re-planning of lessons as an addition to the workload that the participants had during the COVID-19 pandemic**

As an LSE, P3 indicated that:

*Learning Support is a pull-out system, so you take learners from the class to your classroom. So, teachers had to refer learners to my classroom. So that process took long. I had to wait. Mainly, I was just a support system to the teachers and parents, so, it took me longer to get into the vibe of things. To get learners that had learning challenges then I had to start from the beginning. So, I plan according to the kind of learners that I get in the moment. Though I do have a structured programme, but I do plan as the learners come.*

P7 added to the discussion, explaining:

*The restructuring of lessons when we made our home education plans. We also set up a day-by-day programme for the parents to know the activities that they were supposed to complete with their children each day. You had to think of what could be possible for the parents. We had to put ourselves in the shoes of the parents and think of their perspectives*

*in terms of what they could do with the learners at home. So, we had to rethink whatever that we had planned to do in class and think about what would be possible to do at home. Once, I had an activity where I asked the learners to draw using chalk. So, I had to ask the children to make a drawing on the sidewalk. Sometimes I would ask the learners to wash the car at home. So, these were activities that the parent could easily get involved in and assist the learner to complete. So, we had to rethink our lessons in terms of what would be possible at home.*

Lastly, P9 responded by saying, *“I would say yes. I had to look at what needed to be done first, and what was less important, as well as prepare exercises for my learners.”*

#### **4.27.3. Summary of Theme**

The data indicates that the participants had to replan their lessons because they could no longer teach their learners in the traditional, face-to-face manner during the pandemic. However, the participants had to do this with the resources that they had at their disposal. The participants thus had to devise new ways to teach the lessons that they had already planned to teach before the pandemic started. This was an important theme to identify as it addresses the change in teaching and learning style because of the COVID-19 pandemic, which was identified and discussed as a challenge in chapter 2 section 2.10.8.

#### **4.28. THEME 8: CURRENT EXISTING CLASSROOM CHALLENGES DUE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

In light of this theme, P3 noticed the following:

*I have noticed that most learners cannot read and comprehend. Even those learners who were average learners have now gone back to not being able to comprehend what they are reading. There are a lot of gaps even in maths. The number of learners has gone up for learners who cannot read, write, and comprehend. So yes, I would say that it's because of the pandemic, and also maybe because of the language of learning in our school. Because the learners are now being taught English as their second language, when they were previously taught in IsiZulu. But there are learning gaps in reading, writing and comprehension.*

P7 had a different perspective, explaining:

*At our school we don't have the pressure of reaching a certain level of learning in a specific time frame because our learners are severely intellectually disabled. So, they progress very slowly. So, they don't write tests, they don't pass. We just let them progress according to their age. We are back to normal. If there are gaps, we don't experience these because the learners learn very slowly. Our learners have passed that stage of trauma and adaptation that happened after COVID, so we are back to functioning as we did before the pandemic.*

Lastly, P9 stated:

*Learner attendance. Learners don't understand why they must come to school every day now. After the pandemic, we had a rotational system, and we still have a rotational system with some grades. But the learners in the higher grades don't understand why they have to attend school every day. So, I would say attendance is now an issue. Another challenge now is the workload. During the pandemic, everything was shortened. So, the learners are now struggling to adjust to the amount of work that they have to complete.*

#### **4.28.1. Summary of Theme**

The above theme indicates the aftereffects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which are now apparent in the participants' classrooms. Some of the participants identified various aftereffects of the pandemic, such as learner school attendance and learning gaps. However, other participants identified a slow transition back to normalcy after the COVID-19 pandemic in their classrooms.

This was an important theme to identify because it allowed the participants to identify the challenges experienced post-COVID-19. This is important as it shows that things did not remain the same after the pandemic, making it the responsibility of schools and educators to rectify the damage done by the COVID-19 pandemic. The following section will discuss all the themes that were gathered from the data collected for this study, as well as linking them to the literature explored in this study.

#### **4.29. A DISCUSSION OF THE THEMES LINKED TO THE LITERATURE REVIEW**

In this section, the dominant themes identified from the data collected for this study will be discussed. These comprise the themes as they were gathered from all three data collection processes, and how each of these themes link to the literature review presented in Chapter 2 of this study.

#### **4.29.1. Theme: mental health challenges experienced by the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic (Section 2.10.4 in Chapter 2)**

The participants identified that their mental health was compromised because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The major mental health implications of the pandemic for the participants were feelings of stress and anxiety. Mental health was thus identified as one of the dominant themes from the data, with a sub-theme of stress and anxiety.

The data supports the literature in Chapter 2 by indicating that the participants experienced stress due to lockdown. During lockdown, social gatherings were prohibited, and individuals had to stay at home to slow down the spread of the Coronavirus (Filho et al., 2021).

The uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic caused several mental health challenges for the participants in this study. The participants reported that they were stressed, overwhelmed, and anxious during the pandemic. They were not able to physically be in contact with their family, close relatives, and friends. This caused them to experience stress as they were isolated in their homes, and had no one outside of their homes to talk to and comfort them during this difficult time (Primack et al., 2017).

This aligns with the findings of Smith and Lim (2020), in Section 2.14, where they indicated that the measures undertaken to curb the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as social distancing and lockdown had a significant effect on the social relationships of individuals, thus leaving them feeling lonely and isolated. The data supports this statement as the participants in this study also expressed that they were feeling lonely and isolated because they could not be with their loved ones during the hard lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic also caused people to feel a lot of uncertainty, which resulted in the participants feeling anxious because of the unpredictability of the pandemic. Thus, the social isolation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic created an objective physical isolation because interactions between the individual and the world outside of the household were prohibited. This social isolation also created a subjective experience of isolation where individuals felt alone (Filho et al., 2021). Despite the separation from colleagues, friends, family, and close relatives, some participants were fortunate to be sharing their homes with their families during this time. In such cases, the participants were then able to get the necessary emotional support that they needed to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic

(Pietromonaco & Overall, 2020; Stanley & Markman, 2020). However, in some cases, the participants were living on their own, thus making it challenging for them to get the kind of support that they needed during the pandemic.

The data indicates that the participants were stressed during the pandemic due to a lack of resources in their workplace (Shukla & Srivastava, 2016). This lack of resources was a direct contributor to the stress that the participants experienced as they were not able to meet the demands of their jobs (Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020). This links to one of the theoretical frameworks of this study, the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory. This theory indicates that there is a direct link between job demands and job resources (Section 2.17.1). If there is a shortage of resources in a particular workplace, then employees will not be able to meet the demands of their job. The opposite is also true - if there are sufficient resources in the workplace, then employees will be able to meet the demands of their job as set by their workplace.

COVID-19 affected more than just the mental health of the participants. The data shows that the mental health challenges that the participants experienced, such as stress, affected their physical health too (Hayes et al., 2020). One participant indicated that she experienced health complications such as heart attacks because of the stress that she experienced due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Another participant indicated that she got infected with the Coronavirus and had to be hospitalised for a very long time. Lastly, a third participant indicated that in one instance, one of the learners in her classroom was having a meltdown because they could not understand the new 'normalcy' of abiding by COVID-19 regulations in the classroom, such as keeping a distance from one another. The participant indicated that while she was trying to calm the learner down, she ended up getting hurt. The participant already had a fractured hip before this episode, but then ended up having to get a hip replacement because she hurt herself in the process of trying to calm this specific learner.

However, the data also indicates that even though the participants were fearful, anxious, and stressed about the COVID-19 pandemic, they had to be a beacon of hope for their learners. The participants had to remain positive, and they also had to show the learners that they would live through the COVID-19 pandemic. A person's ability to minimise concern, depression, and to keep their spirits up during challenging times, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, shows resilience (Bonanno, 2020).

Day and Gu (2013) explain that teacher resilience refers to the ability of teachers to successfully manage the uncertainties that they come across in their profession. Teacher resilience can lead to resilience-promoting outcomes, such as commitment to one's job even under harsh circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The data collected for this study indicates that the participants were resilient as they continued to perform their duties as either LSEs or SETs, even when they were continuously challenged in their profession during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The data also indicates that some of the participants did not engage with any form of media during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to avoid feeling further stressed about it. The participants refused to engage with things such as TV shows and social media platforms to avoid constantly being reminded of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, social media was also used as a positive tool during this period, such as sharing information about different perceptions held by people about the Coronavirus, and providing health-related information about the virus (Galea et al., 2020). Even though the media can be a useful tool to spread urgent information, especially during times when there is collective trauma, the media can cause serious mental health issues (Zhao & Zhou, 2020). Social media can also contribute to widespread misinformation and rumours, which can cause people to panic and feel confused (Garfin et al., 2020). It is for such reasons that some of the participants refrained from engaging with any form of media during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Differential Susceptibility to Media Effects Model, also known as the DSMM (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013) is an integrative model that focuses on the relationship that exists between one's consumption of the media and their health outcome. This model states that how a person uses media can influence their behaviour, cognitive, emotional, and physiological outcomes. This, therefore, supports the actions taken by some of the participants in deciding to not consume any media during the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### **4.29.2. Theme: Learning and Teaching Support Material Utilised by the Participants During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The Education White Paper 6 (EWP6) on inclusive education focuses on three types of schools: mainstream, full-service, and special schools. These schools are meant to be inclusive schools; however, full-service schools and special schools are intended



to provide support to learners who need moderate to high levels of support, which cannot be provided in mainstream schools (DoE, 2001; Engelbrecht & Muthukrishna, 2019). Full-service schools and special schools are thus better equipped to provide support services and resources to learners who need moderate support (Department of Basic Education, Republic of South Africa, 2010).

Support services can be provided through various stakeholders who have been equipped with essential resources to provide support to learners with moderate needs in different schools (Makhalemele & Nel, 2021). The EWP6 thus indicates different stakeholders that can provide support to these diverse learners in the form of a School-Based-Support Team (SBST). However, despite schools having SBSTs, the national lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic presented challenges in the provision of these support services to learners who needed it during the pandemic (Kamga, 2020). The disruption of these support services was because schools had to transition from operating at a face-to-face level to an online platform, therefore, putting distance education into effect.

As discussed in Section 2.9, during the COVID-19 pandemic, teaching and learning had to transition from a face-to-face teaching and learning method to online teaching and learning through distance education (Agusta et al., 2022). For distance education to be effective, there needs to be thorough planning of how to transform teaching practices, methods, and assessments so that they fit the distance education mode. This is to ensure that teaching and learning continue to take place despite the distance from the traditional classroom (Karasel et al., 2020). Although the literature refers to distance learning as how teaching and learning had to be done during the COVID-19 pandemic, the data states the contrary.

The literature reviewed in Section 2.9 indicates that in as much as distance education was an option, even for learners with special needs, learners with special needs develop at a different rate than learners without special needs. Therefore, this would only work if these learners were provided with the necessary tools that would make it possible for them to learn during the pandemic (Karasel et al., 2020).

Distance education for learners with special needs introduced new challenges for these learners, such as: the inaccessibility of the format used in distance learning; the curriculum; a lack of qualified support staff to support the learners beyond school hours



(as indicated in the above discussion about the SBST); a lack of access to the care that is needed; and a lack of availability of assistive technology, and the required training to use this technology (Whitley, 2020). Although it has been highly advised that learners with special needs should continue to be taught using their IEP during distance learning, this is a great challenge as the IEP cannot be transformed to meet the distance education format (Jameson et al., 2020; Nadworny & Kamenetz, 2020).

Distance education can be a tremendous challenge for learners with special needs such as those with severe cognitive disorders, brain trauma, or even severe autism. These learners will not be able to get their needs met through distance education because they may have challenges with self-regulation, following a routine, staying motivated, and paying attention, and some may even need more intensive physical support (Ferretti, 2019). Before distance education because of the COVID-19 pandemic, some learners received physical, face-to-face support through teachers or specialists. During the COVID-19 pandemic, they had to receive this kind of support through a computer (Young & Donovan, 2020), which did not meet their needs. Therefore, distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic went against inclusivity, especially for learners with special needs, as it did not accommodate the diverse learning needs of these learners.

According to the literature, the teaching and learning style that was utilised during the COVID-19 pandemic was distance education through online learning (Glessner & Johnson, 2020). The data gathered in this study indicates that distance education was not an applicable method for the special schools at which the participants worked as it presented various challenges. Among these challenges was a lack of access to the internet, as well as access to online learning portals that were equipped with tools that were easily accessible to, and accommodative of the different needs of the learners (Alexa & Baci, 2021; Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD Commission, 2020).

Teachers in full-service schools were also expected to adapt their teaching style to accommodate learners with moderate support needs (Engelbrecht & Muthukrishna, 2019). One way in which they could do this was through a differentiated curriculum (Taole, 2020). However, Makhalemele and Payne-van Staden (2018) indicate that although teachers understand curriculum differentiation, they seldom receive support

on how they can implement it in their classrooms. Therefore, a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic was that educators could not accommodate learners with learning barriers because a differentiated curriculum could not be monitored on an online platform (Nambiar, 2020).

#### **4.29.3. Sub-theme: Online Teaching and Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

According to UNESCO (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic prompted the closure of schools in more than 100 million schools worldwide, and it also resulted in one billion learners being out of the schooling system. The closure of schools caused uncertainty about the quality of learning that was to take place during the pandemic, especially because there was a lack of face-to-face teaching. There was also concern about the education of learners with special educational needs as these learners often require more guidance and attention from their educators, and the school professionals designated to meet their needs (Bozkurt et al., 2020).

Children with special educational needs may need support from professionals, and learning from home limits the level of support accessible to them (Petretto et al., 2020). They also need accommodations to be made for them when completing certain learning tasks and assessments, and they also need to have learning material and learning platforms that will meet their educational needs (Conderman et al., 2017).

The literature reviewed in Chapter 2, Sections 2.2 and 2.10, indicates that online teaching and learning was implemented in schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the data indicates that online teaching and learning was not feasible, nor was it a method that was used by any of the schools where the participants worked. According to Parish et al. (2010), Hughes (2013) and Balistreri (2019), children with special educational needs typically come from low-income households, and many of them do not have the necessary resources such as a computer or internet connection. This also makes online learning challenging (Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020).

The learners taught by the participants presented with various special educational needs. It was revealed that teaching them using an online platform was not possible as these learners, in many instances, did not have the mental and physical ability to use any online platform to learn.

Another challenge identified by the participants was online teaching and learning specifically for learners with special educational needs. The data indicates that the participants did not receive any form of training on how to use an online platform to teach their learners. This correlates with the literature in Section 2.4. Some of the participants indicated that they tried using WhatsApp to facilitate teaching and learning. They sent videos and communicated with the parents of learners, but then realised that this way of teaching was not the best for their learners. Some of the participants indicated that they would have appreciated it if their schools incorporated online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, they had no training on how to use an online platform to facilitate teaching, and had limited to no online teaching skills to ensure that teaching and learning could continue despite the pandemic (Joshi et al., 2020; Klapproth, et al., 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic made it necessary to migrate from the traditional face-to-face teaching and learning method to one that was exclusively online-based using different technological tools, and internet-based learning systems (Zhou et al., 2020). However, this adjustment was challenging, particularly for learners with special needs, who found it challenging to adapt to a different mode of learning (de Klerk & Palmer, 2022).

It is, however, argued that the inclusion of learners living with disabilities aligns with the SDG 4 (see Section 2.3), where the SDG wants to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (United Nations, 2015, pp. 19-20). However, realising this goal was a challenge, particularly for the participants in this study as they did not have sufficient resources, such as internet access, to facilitate teaching and learning. The participants also indicated that they were not able to incorporate online learning in their schools due to the nature of their learners’ learning barriers, which limited the learners’ competency and ability.

Some of the participants also indicated that a few of the teachers in their schools were computer illiterate. Therefore, these teachers would not be able to teach using a technological device such as a computer or laptop.

#### **4.29.4. Theme: Communicating With the Parents of Learners during the COVID-19 Pandemic (Section 2.11.1)**

Henderson and Berla (1994), Richardson (2009), and Sheldon (2009) have identified the important role that homes and schools play in the development and education of children. According to Arnold et al. (2008), El Nokali et al. (2010), and Powell et al. (2010), when there is a partnership between a school and the family of a learner, there will be a better learning and school experience for the child. For learners to receive integrated support, it is essential that schools forge a relationship with parents so that there can be a development of mutual responsibility for children's educational success. Building a relationship between the school and parent will augment children's learning, and, as such, it is encouraged that parents try to support schools as this will have a positive impact on the learner (Durišić & Bunijevac, 2017). Sanders and Sheldon (2009) state that schools become successful when a positive relationship has been formed between the learner's parents, teachers, and the community. Moreover, learners are said to perform better academically if they have a supportive home environment.

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA, 1975), the Education of the Handicapped Act Amendments (EHAA, 1986), and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments (US Department of Education, n.d), state that there needs to be a collaboration between teachers and parents, especially in special education practices. This partnership is grounded on the goal that teachers and parents need to work together to give the child the best education possible. However, there are various circumstances that can make it challenging for parents and teachers to collaborate. Challenges can result in there being tension between the two parties, which may ultimately affect the educational experience of the child (Staples & Diliberto, 2010).

Research conducted by Hornby and Lafaele (2011), and Goss (2019) indicates that communicating with the parents of the learners is a process filled with many challenges. Communicating with parents is a greater challenge in special education because this type of education focuses on learning that is individualised, as well as visual and physical support, depending on each child's impairment. Educators working with learners with special needs thus found it challenging to communicate with parents because they had to replicate what they were doing in the physical classroom on a

digital platform that did not cater to these learners' needs. Examples of challenges between teachers and parents include communication styles (Laluvein, 2010); communication preferences (Palts & Harro-Loit, 2015); the content of the communication (Rothengast, 2016); and lastly, power differences that may exist between the parent and teacher (Dunn et al., 2016). The data indicates that the participants had difficulty communicating with the parents of their learners during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some parents did not have smartphones or internet to ensure that they could communicate with the participants (Toquero, 2021). Communicating with the parents was essential during the COVID-19 pandemic because teaching and learning were done at a distance. Therefore, there had to be a clear line of communication between the parents and educators to ensure that the learners were still learning even though they were learning from home. However, this was not always the case as some participants indicated that they were not able to get hold of the parents of their learners, and this made it challenging for them to form a collaboration with the parents for the academic success of the child. Some participants indicated that they were able to maintain a healthy and balanced relationship with the parents of their learners. For these participants, communicating with parents during the COVID-19 pandemic was not a barrier.

#### **4.29.5. Theme: Coping Strategies Utilised by the Participants to Cope with the Challenges Experienced during the COVID-19 Pandemic (Section 2.16)**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, educators were pressured as they were expected to adapt to the sudden changes imposed by the pandemic. The inability to adapt to these changes led to educators experiencing various psychological disorders, such as stress and anxiety (Maisyarah, 2023).

According to Maisyarah (2023), individuals resort to a form of coping strategy when they experience physical and emotional tension, which causes them discomfort. Thus, individuals are motivated by feelings of discomfort, which propel them to think of ways to reduce such feelings. Coping, according to Hawari (2001), results when an individual is trying to adjust the differences that exist between their demands and their available resources. This definition links to the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory (see Section 1.8.1 and Section 2.15.1).

The pandemic had a negative impact on the participants' lives as they had to resort to using different strategies to cope with the challenges they experienced. Some of the participants reflected on how they were surrounded by family during the pandemic, and how family served as a coping mechanism for them. Other participants resorted to physical activities such as gardening, praying, and swimming. A systematic review conducted by Crompton et al. (2021) indicated that during the pandemic, teachers needed various forms of support to navigate teaching remotely. These forms of support included pedagogical, as well as mental and wellness support. However, because COVID-19 was a new phenomenon to all, the teachers who participated in this study indicated that they did not have much support from external sources (excluding their families). They had to find different coping strategies within themselves to overcome the challenges that they were exposed to during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data shows us that the participants were able to be resilient, and were able to overcome different challenges, often utilising coping strategies that were inherent to them. This has been identified as teacher resilience (Day & Gu, 2014; Mansfield et al., 2018). According to Beltman and Mansfield (2015, p. 26), teacher resilience refers to:

The capacity of an individual teacher to harness personal and contextual resources to navigate through challenges as well as the dynamic process whereby characteristics of individual teachers and of their personal and professional contexts interact over time, to enable the outcome of a teacher who experiences professional engagement and growth, commitment, enthusiasm, satisfaction, and wellbeing.

This will be further discussed in Chapter 5.

#### **4.29.6. Theme: Workload Experienced by the Participants during the COVID-19 Pandemic (Section 2.10.5)**

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers were already exposed to a high workload (Walker, 2018), as indicated in Section 2.10.5 The participants indicated that their workload increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, which also had a direct influence on their stress levels, as indicated by Marko (2015). The participants had to spend extra hours planning lessons, communicating with parents, and ensuring that learning and teaching would continue to take place despite the COVID-19 pandemic. This was time-consuming for the participants, and often meant that they had to work extra hours to get the work done (Petrankova, et al., 2020).

The participants also indicated that they were confronted with the challenge of having to complete the curriculum under time constraints. This is because schools were closed during the hard lockdown, so when classes resumed through rotational learning, the participants then had a lot of work that they still needed to cover with their learners within a very short period of time (Polok et al., 2020).

The data indicates that some of the participants were not able to complete the curriculum, especially during the first year of the Coronavirus. This resulted in some learners moving to other classes with knowledge gaps as they were not able to be taught everything that was required of them to learn during the year of the hard lockdown. The heavy workloads that the participants were exposed to during the pandemic also contributed to their high levels of stress during this time (Austin et al., 2005; Marko, 2015).

Finding a balance between work and personal life is essential for a happy, and successful life (Unal & Dulay, 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the process of working from home was implemented, and this made it challenging for individuals to strike a balance between their work and personal lives (Angayarkanni, 2021; Uslu, 2020). To prevent the spread of the Coronavirus, many regulations, including lockdown and working from home, were implemented (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). However, there was a blurring of lines between the professional and personal lives of educators.

The work-life balance looks different from one profession to the next (Uslu, 2020). The teaching profession demands a higher level of labour and responsibility. However, the work-life dimension needs to be balanced so that teachers can be healthy in all aspects of their lives (Unal & Dulay, 2022). As for many other professions, it was challenging for teachers to strike a balance between their professional and personal lives (Sundari et al., 2020). Work and personal space thus became a single entity, blurring the lines between the two (Näswall et al., 2008).

Workload, as illustrated by the above data, not only refers to the workload in terms of facilitating teaching and learning, but to the various roles and responsibilities that the participants had to take on during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants had to be considerate when designing work for these learners to ensure that it could be completed at home without the presence of the teacher. Completing such a task required that the participants work extra hours beyond those that were designated for



their daily job. Uslu (2020) reports that teachers were finding it challenging to have a balance between their work and personal lives when working from a distance. This often resulted in conflicts arising within the family as they were not able to strike a balance between their work and personal life. This often resulted in teachers focusing more on their role within the family, rather than focusing on their work role.

The hard lockdown caused schools to pause having classes at a physical level. This resulted in teachers being left with the work that they were supposed to have covered in class on specific days according to the curriculum. This resulted in teachers also experiencing a high workload because they had to try and make up for all the teaching and learning time that they had lost because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The data thus supports the literature by indicating that the participants were burdened with a huge workload during the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### **4.29.7. Sub-theme: Re-planning of Lessons as an Addition to the Participants' Workload during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

SETs and LSEs have special work demands which require that they do extra paperwork, extra record keeping, and they must possess thorough content knowledge, and have specialised behaviour management skills. This further adds to the workload that they already have (Lee et al., 2011). In addition, educators who are inadequately competent in online teaching may feel that virtual teaching creates an excessive workload for them, and this may cause them to feel frustrated. The data supports the literature by indicating that some of the participants had to re-plan their lessons. Doing this required that the participants put extra effort into making sure that these lessons could be taught in a home context, instead of a school context.

#### **4.29.8. Theme: Lack of Motivation to Teach Experienced by the Participants During the COVID-19 Pandemic (Section 2.10.7)**

The expectation placed on teachers to switch from the traditional face-to-face teaching and learning method was daunting, and it also affected teachers' motivation to teach during the COVID-19 pandemic (Khanal et al., 2021).

Teachers begin to feel demotivated to do their job when they experience certain job-related challenges. This has a direct impact on the level of satisfaction that they experience when doing their job (Rasheed et al., 2010). Teachers' motivation is thus



directly linked to the level of satisfaction that they feel towards their job (Khanal et al., 2021) (see Section 2.10.7). The data indicates that the participants were demotivated to do their job due to a lack of resources during the COVID-19 pandemic. This affected their motivation and self-efficacy (Lee, et al., 2011). The data supports the literature by indicating that the participants' motivation to teach during the COVID-19 pandemic was severely impacted.

#### **4.29.9. Theme: Working with the Parents of Learners During the COVID-19 Pandemic to Meet The Academic Needs of The Learner**

Online learning for children with special educational needs is often overlooked by parents. When choosing online education as a teaching and learning method for their children, parents need to be aware of their own responsibilities in making this a success (Grindle et al., 2019).

It is imperative that parents are involved in the academic life of their school-going children, and this was no different during the COVID-19 pandemic, as indicated in Sections 2.4 and 2.8. The COVID-19 pandemic required that parents and teachers work together as indicated in Section 2.11.2. This was largely due to learning and teaching now taking place at home, requiring a strong collaboration to ensure that teaching and learning continued to take place despite the COVID-19 pandemic (Mustafa, 2020; Kritzer & Smith, 2020). Although the literature indicates that teachers must work with the parents of their learners, this was not always the case as the data indicates that some of the participants were challenged when trying to work with the parents of their learners during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the participants indicated that there were parents who did not adhere to the COVID-19 regulations, which made their job challenging because they had to teach these children how to adhere to these regulations even though their parents did not. Some participants indicated that they did not work together with the parents of their learners due to a lack of digital devices and resources.

Parents were important sources and guides for learners during the COVID-19 pandemic (Cai & Wang, 2020). However, collaborating with teachers was challenging for parents because the pandemic created job losses due to the prolonged shutdowns (Akoğlu & Karaaslan, 2020; Fry-Bowers, 2020). The literature also indicates that in the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, parents were more involved in the lives of

their children, however, this involvement decreased throughout the pandemic (Cai & Wang, 2020).

Challenges that may impact the involvement of parents in the online learning of their child may also include access to economic resources (Hohfeld et al., 2010). The data shows that some of the participants' schools were in poor locations, indicating a lack of resources in the schools, as well as the community as a whole. Another challenge that may hinder the successful involvement of parents in their child's education is a lack of access to the internet (Hollingworth et al., 2011); a lack of interest in using technology (Beckman et al., 2019); or having low digital self-efficacy (Povey et al., 2016). Some parents feel more connected to the learning process of their child through online learning, whereas others feel that online learning is an additional burden that they must take on in their role as parents (Selwyn et al., 2011). However, parents who are not accustomed to using technology may find it challenging to use technology to teach their children at home, and this will have a negative impact on the child's ability to learn successfully (Situmorang & Purba, 2020).

#### **4.30. THEME: HAVING A WORK/LIFE BALANCE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

The International Labour Organization (2020) indicates that educators were exposed to a high workload because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is supported by the data as the participants indicated that trying to strike a balance between work and life was challenging for them (Section 2.15). The participants indicated that they had to plan how to use their time because they had a heavy workload. So, time management was of the essence during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, the data indicates that the participants had to work overtime to meet the high workloads that they were exposed to during the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### **4.31. THEME: TEACHING PRACTICAL SUBJECTS TO LEARNERS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

As indicated in the literature, teaching learners with special needs often includes having close, physical contact and frequent interaction with the learner (Fitzpatrick, 2022). The participants indicated that they had to adhere to the social distancing COVID-19 regulation, and this meant that they could not be in physical contact with

their learners. Some of the participants indicated that this was challenging for them because they taught learners with special needs, and most of these learners need some form of physical touch, such as a hug, throughout the day. The data also indicates that conducting assessments, which normally require having close contact with the learner, was difficult due to social distancing. Therefore, the participants had to adapt their teaching style to accommodate the COVID-19 regulations.

The literature indicates that teachers had to adapt their teaching style during the COVID-19 pandemic so that it could fit online learning. However, the data indicates that the participants did not implement online learning, and thus had to come up with different strategies to teach and assess their learners without implementing online learning.

#### **4.31.1. Theme: Overall Health and Well-being of the Participants During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The unexpected and drastic changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic led to educators feeling immensely challenged because of the uncertainties that emerged. These uncertainties left educators feeling stressed, and this jeopardised their well-being (Gadermann et al., 2021). The data supports the literature, as it indicates that the overall health and well-being of the participants were compromised because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The data indicates that the participants experienced stress, and when teacher stress is not managed it can have negative effects such as burnout, reduced effectiveness, and a lack of job satisfaction (Kumawat, 2020). In particular, some of the participants ended up feeling like they did not know how to do their job. The pandemic had negative physical effects on the participants as they indicated that not only did some of them get infected with the Coronavirus, but they also presented with other health issues such as strokes, hair falling off, and hip fractures. The data indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated the health issues that the participants were already experiencing, and their overall health was negatively affected as a result.

#### **4.32. CONCLUSION**

Chapter 4 presented the results gathered from the data collected. The chapter first presented the results gathered from the interviews through six themes. Then the

results gathered from the questionnaire were presented through 11 themes. Lastly, the chapter presented the results gathered from the focus group discussion through nine themes. All of the themes from the different data collection processes were discussed in detail, and a summary was provided for each of the themes gathered from the data. In this chapter, a discussion of the different themes, and how they support the literature review in Chapter 2, was also provided.

This chapter has illustrated the different challenges that were experienced by the participants in this study. The challenges, as discussed through the findings and themes, confirm those that were identified and discussed in Chapter 2 of this study. The findings indicate that the participants of this study were severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The challenges that each of the participants alluded to indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic not only challenged the participants in their professional lives, but also in their personal lives. This linked to the focus of this study as it aimed to focus on both the professional and personal challenges that special education teachers and learning support educators in Gauteng experienced because of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the different coping strategies that they used to cope with these challenges.

Chapter 5 will answer the research questions posed in Chapter 1 through the findings presented in this chapter. These will also be linked to the theoretical frameworks that guided this study. The limitations and contributions of this study will also be discussed. Lastly, future recommendations for LSEs and SETs will be made. Finally, the study will be ended with concluding comments.

## 5. FINAL CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1. INTRODUCTION

This study investigated the challenges experienced by Special Education Teachers (SETs) and Learning Support Educators (LSEs) in Gauteng during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study sought to identify these challenges so that they could be understood in their entirety. This study chose to specifically focus on teachers working with learners with special needs because, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, they were experiencing severe challenges in their professional roles. Therefore, this study aimed to determine whether the challenges already faced by these teachers were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic or not.

Teachers who work with learners with special needs often have diverse learners in their classrooms. This means that these teachers work daily with multiple special needs requirements as the learners in their classrooms may each present with different types of special needs.

The responsibilities and duties of teachers working with special needs are immeasurable, often leaving them with a heavy workload. These teachers not only have teaching responsibilities, but also have administrative duties such as having to constantly create Individualised Educational Plan (IEPs) for their learners. Beyond their professional lives, SETs and LSEs also have personal lives that require their attention.

Therefore, the findings of this study aimed to: (a) Highlight the different challenges that were encountered by SETs and LSEs during the COVID-19 pandemic, (b) Provide an understanding of how the professional challenges encountered by the participants affected their personal lives, and (c) Identify the different coping strategies that they utilised to navigate the extraordinary challenges that they encountered (d) To identify the most significant barriers that hindered effective communication and collaboration between special needs educators, learning support educators, parents and learners (e) To explore how the change in instruction during the Covid-19 pandemic affected the teaching methods, and support strategies utilised by special education and learning support educators.

It is anticipated that the findings gathered from this study will provide valuable insights for educational institutions, especially those catering to students with special needs. This will assist them with proactive measures that they can take to mitigate challenges in the event of future pandemics or natural disasters that may prohibit the traditional face-to-face teaching and learning method. The researcher also anticipates that the experiences shared by the participants will provide an understanding of the different personal challenges that SETs and LSEs encounter because of their profession. This will further highlight the various challenges in teaching learners with special needs, and how these affect the well-being of these teachers, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **5.2. SUMMARY OF CHAPTERS**

The following sections provide a summary of each of the chapters of this study.

### **5.2.1. Chapter 1: General Orientation of The Study**

Chapter 1 framed the research by providing background information on the Coronavirus. This brief background included information on the symptoms of the virus, as well as the preventative measures that were put in place to prevent the spread of the virus. Information was furthermore provided on how this affected the education system of South Africa as the traditional, face-to-face pedagogy of teaching and learning had to be changed to an online method of teaching and learning. The chapter then proceeded to provide a preliminary literature review, which addressed the different measures that were implemented worldwide to prevent the spread of the Coronavirus. This chapter addressed how the closure of schools was a preventative method that was put in place to minimise the spread of the virus among school-going children. This further resulted in there having to be different teaching and learning methods implemented, such as distance learning (through online learning), and at a later stage during the pandemic, rotational learning to ensure that teaching and learning continued to take place during the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter proceeded to discuss the purpose of the study, which was to identify the challenges experienced by LSEs and SETs in Gauteng during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher needed to provide information on the purpose of the study so that a clear framework of the study could be established from the beginning of this research report.

The research questions were also identified in this chapter. These comprised of one primary research question, and four secondary research questions. The chapter clarified the important key concepts of this study, these being: Coronavirus; COVID-19; pandemic; Special education teachers in the South African context; Learning support educators in the South African context; and Special schools in South Africa. Clarifying these concepts was essential to creating a clear understanding of the terminology used in this study.

The research paradigms of this study were then presented. Here, the metatheoretical paradigm informing the study, namely, the interpretivist paradigm, as well as the qualitative research methodology guiding the study were elaborated on.

The chapter proceeded to briefly discuss the research design that was utilised in this study (single, descriptive case study), as well as the research site where the data were collected (school and home of the participants after working hours). However, the names of the schools where the participants worked were not identified in this study. This was an ethical measure that the researcher had to abide by to protect the identity and confidentiality of the participants and their schools.

The method that the researcher used to select the participants of this study was discussed, which was the purposive sampling method. The researcher discussed how the participants were selected so that there would be transparency regarding the approach that was used. It was then detailed how the data would be collected in this study using three data collection methods, namely, qualitative semi-structured interviews, a qualitative questionnaire, and a focus group discussion. It was then briefly discussed how the data would be analysed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), and the two theoretical frameworks that underpinned this study. Additional details pertaining to the transcription and reporting methodologies for the data were provided. The quality criteria and ethical considerations that this study adhered to were discussed; the role played by the researcher of this study was discussed; and lastly, the assumptions made by this study were also indicated.



## 5.2.2. Chapter 2: Literature Review

The literature review constituted the second chapter of this study. Through the literature reviewed, information was gathered on the different challenges that SETs and LSEs experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The introduction of this chapter provided background information about the Coronavirus, and how the virus was historically identified in animals.

The chapter proceeded to discuss the variants of the Coronavirus, as well as where and when the first case of the virus was detected. This was done so that there could be a clear understanding of the different variants of the virus that exist because the symptoms of the variants are not the same.

The literature review addressed the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on the profession of teaching, and how the traditional method of teaching had to be altered to accommodate the COVID-19 restrictions that were imposed at the time of the hard lockdown. This aspect was a crucial focus point as this study specifically examined the challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic created for individuals in the education profession. It was thus important that the literature review be contextualised so that it focused on the effects of the pandemic on the field of education.

This chapter addressed Sustainable Development Goal 4, and the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on this goal being achieved in time. The literature review discussed special education teaching in South Africa specifically, as this was where the research took place.

Thereafter, the challenges and the impact of COVID-19 on the implementation of inclusive education were discussed. A discussion of inclusive education was included because the study focuses on special education, which is one of the dimensions of inclusivity.

This was followed by a discussion on the role of LSEs and SETs, and the specific challenges that were encountered by these teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The challenges that were addressed in this chapter are: how distance education was used as a mode of teaching; teaching learners with special educational needs during the COVID-19 pandemic; challenges to educators' professionalism during the COVID-19 pandemic; the integration of an online code of ethics for educators in the COVID-



19 era; the impact of the pandemic on teacher stress and well-being; an increase in teacher workload due to online education; insufficient online teaching skills during the pandemic; challenges in communication, and collaboration between SETs, LSEs, parents and learners with special needs during the COVID-19 pandemic; parental involvement in teaching and learning; the adaption of teaching and learning styles for online education during the pandemic; and lastly, challenges that were experienced by SETs, and LSEs in using the IEP

Thereafter, the Universal Design for Learning was discussed as a method that could be utilised to come up with strategies to teach to ensure that no learner was excluded from learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter then proceeded to discuss further challenges experienced by the participants during the pandemic. Examples of these challenges include: the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on teacher self-efficacy; understanding teacher burnout in the context of educational disruption; social isolation's impact on teacher interactions during the COVID-19 pandemic; the challenges of balancing work and home life during the pandemic; and lastly the coping strategies utilised by SETs and LSEs to cope with the different challenges that they encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In concluding this chapter, the two theoretical frameworks that guided this study were discussed, which were the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory, as well as the Coping-Competence-Context Model of Teacher Stress (3C Model of teacher stress).

### **5.2.3. Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology**

The meta-theoretical paradigm that this study utilised was the interpretivist paradigm. The advantages and disadvantages of using this paradigm were presented in relation to this study.

The characteristics of the interpretivist paradigm were elaborated on, relating each to the phenomenon on which this study focused. The section subsequently discussed the axiology of this study.

Every study is grounded on a methodological paradigm. Thus, this chapter elucidated the methodological paradigm guiding this study, which was the qualitative research approach. The researcher furthermore discussed the advantages and disadvantages

of using this research approach, contextualising both in relation to the focus of the study.

In this chapter, the research methodology utilised in this study was examined with a particular focus on the research design employed, which was a single, exploratory case study research design. The advantages and disadvantages of using this research design for the current study were also discussed.

The chapter discussed how the participants were selected using purposive sampling. The advantages and disadvantages of using this method were also addressed.

It was imperative for the researcher to maintain transparency regarding the limitations encountered during the conducting of this study. Therefore, the limitations in the number of participants who participated in this study, as well as their geographical location were addressed in this chapter. Thereafter, the demographics and biographical information of the participants were listed, followed by a description of how pseudonyms were used in this study to protect their identity.

The different types of schools that the participants worked at were also discussed to ensure that it was clear that the study utilised participants from different schools, even though these schools all focused on learners with special educational needs.

The gender of the participants was discussed as part of the biographical information of the participants, and a summary of all the biographical information of the participants was provided through a table which detailed the following: (a) The pseudonyms used for the participants; b) Gender; c) Race; (d) Age; (e) Number of years as either an LSE or SET; (f) Location of the school where they each worked; and (g) The type of school where they each worked.

This chapter discussed how the data for this study were generated and documented. The chapter provides details about how the data were collected through a semi-structured interview. How the questions for the interviews were formulated, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of using semi-structured interviews for the current study were provided in this chapter.

The researcher proceeded to discuss another data collection method that was utilised, a focus group discussion. The definition thereof was provided, as well as details on

how this was used to collect data for this study. The advantages and disadvantages of using a focus group discussion in research were then presented.

The demand and resource qualitative questionnaire that was devised to collect data for this study was then explored. The questions in the questionnaire were developed using one of the theoretical frameworks of this study, the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory. The chapter also indicated how the questionnaire was piloted to ensure its relevance for the current study. The researcher then detailed how the questionnaire was administered to the participants. How the questionnaire was utilised to collect qualitative data, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of using a questionnaire for this study were then discussed.

The researcher then described how Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was utilised to analyse the data in this study. The potential bias, advantages, and disadvantages of using IPA for this study were also addressed. A discussion on how the researcher was able to remain objective while conducting this study by keeping a reflective journal was provided.

The process of transcribing was discussed, along with how the study adhered to the quality criteria (credibility, transferability, confirmability, and authenticity) during the research process. Information on how the data were stored, and the inclusion of the secondary data clause that is used by the University of Pretoria in all the consent letters of this study was provided.

A detailed account was provided of how the researcher adhered to the ethical considerations of research when conducting this study (voluntary participation, anonymity, and confidentiality, as well as the ethical consideration of not harming participants while conducting research on them). The chapter was concluded by discussing the ethical challenges that the researcher encountered while collecting data for this study.

#### **5.2.4. Chapter 4: Presentation of the Results and Findings**

In this chapter, the purpose of this study was first provided. The researcher then proceeded to discuss how the data were analysed following Pietkiewicz and Smith's (2014) guidelines on how to conduct an IPA. The process of conducting an IPA was thoroughly discussed and elucidated in detail in this chapter.

The findings from the semi-structured interviews, focus group discussion, and qualitative questionnaire will be discussed below. The themes and sub-themes gathered across all three data collection processes appear in no particular order.

*5.2.4.1. Theme 1: Mental health challenges experienced by the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic.*

The data indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected the mental health of the participants in this study.

- **Sub-theme: Stress and Anxiety experienced by the Participants during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Stress and anxiety were the dominant feelings that the participants experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data indicates that they often felt anxious and stressed during the pandemic.

*5.2.4.2. Theme 2: Learning and Teaching Support Material utilised by the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic*

The data indicated that the participants were challenged when it came to implementing learning and teaching support material that would accommodate the COVID-19 pandemic, and the regulations imposed during the pandemic.

- **Sub-theme: Online Teaching and Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Online teaching and learning was advocated to be used by educational institutions worldwide during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the data indicates that the participants in this study were particularly challenged when it came to using online tools and methods to teach their learners. The participants lacked the necessary training on how to use online platforms to facilitate teaching and learning, and they also could not implement online learning because of the nature of the needs of the learners with whom they worked.

*5.2.4.3. Theme 3: Communicating with the parents of learners during the COVID-19 pandemic*

The data indicated that the participants had challenges in communicating with the parents of their learners. They indicated that some parents did not have resources

such as cell phones, and access to the internet to communicate with the teachers. This resulted in the participating teachers not being able to effectively communicate with these parents during the COVID-19 pandemic.

*5.2.4.4. Theme 4: Coping strategies utilised by the participants to cope with the challenges experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic*

The data indicated that having experienced various challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, the participants had to devise personal ways, and use personal resources to cope with these challenges.

*5.2.4.5. Theme 5: Workload experienced by the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic*

The data indicated that the workload experienced by the participants increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, the participants had a challenging time trying to manage this workload.

- **Sub-theme: Re-planning of Lessons as an Addition to the Workload that the Participants had during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The data indicated that the extra workload that the participants experienced included them having to re-plan the lessons that they had initially thought would be taught in the traditional classroom. Therefore, the participants were challenged with an even heavier workload as they had to replan lessons so that they accommodated the COVID-19 pandemic.

*5.2.4.6. Theme 6: Implementing COVID-19 regulations in the classroom during the COVID-19 pandemic*

The data indicated that the participants were challenged with the process of implementing COVID-19 regulations in the classroom. They indicated that the learners did not understand why they could not function and behave in the manner that they did before the COVID-19 pandemic. This suggests that the learners did not understand why they could no longer hug; share their lunch boxes; be near one another, and also why they had to constantly sanitise their hands and have their facial masks on throughout the day.

5.2.4.7. *Theme 7: Lack of motivation to teach experienced by the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic*

The data indicated that the participants lacked the motivation to continue to teach during the COVID-19 pandemic because of the different challenges that they were exposed to during this unprecedented time.

5.2.4.8. *Theme 8: Shortened syllabus due to the COVID-19 pandemic*

The data indicated that the participants were presented with a short teaching and learning syllabus because schools were closed during the hard lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a consequence, the participants were only able to cover a condensed version of the syllabus originally intended for the academic year.

5.2.4.9. *Theme 9: Working with the parents of learners during the COVID-19 pandemic to meet the academic needs of the learner*

The data indicated that some of the participants experienced challenges when attempting to collaborate with the parents of their learners during the COVID-19 pandemic. This resulted in these teachers not being able to effectively work with the parents to ensure successful learning outcomes for the learner.

5.2.4.10. *Theme 10: Having a work/life balance during the COVID-19 pandemic*

The data indicates that the participants had a higher workload during the COVID-19 pandemic, and this affected their ability to strike a balance between their professional and personal lives. This was because not only were the participants working from home during the hard lockdown, they were working extra hours at home trying to compensate for all the learning time that was lost because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

5.2.4.11. *Theme 11: Teaching practical subjects during the COVID-19 pandemic*

The participants indicated that they were challenged when attempting to teach practical subjects during the COVID-19 pandemic because one of the regulations of the pandemic was that there had to be a socially acceptable distance between people (one metre) to minimise the spread of the Coronavirus.

5.2.4.12. *Theme 12: Overall health and well-being of the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic*

The data indicates that due to the challenges that the participants experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, their health and well-being were negatively affected. This left the participants feeling vulnerable and anxious about the possibility of contracting the virus, amongst other health issues that some of the participants were already experiencing.

5.2.4.13. *Theme 13: Support systems utilised by the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic*

The data indicates that the participants did not have access to any external support systems during the COVID-19 pandemic, except for that of family with whom they were living during the hard lockdown. Therefore, they could not access external support that could have been of assistance to them in managing the challenges that they were exposed to during the COVID-19 pandemic.

5.2.4.14. *Theme 14: Adhering to the SIAS policy document during the COVID-19 pandemic*

The data indicates that the participants were not able to screen, identify, assess, and support their learners during the hard lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic. This resulted in there being a backlog with the placement of learners in schools that would cater to their needs.

5.2.4.15. *Theme 15: Current existing classroom challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic*

The data indicated that there are currently existing challenges in the classroom as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges did not exist in the classroom before the pandemic, but are now something with which the participants have to contend.

5.2.4.16. *Theme 16: A lack of focus on special schools during the COVID-19 pandemic*

The data indicated that the participants felt that there was a lack of focus on special schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants indicated that special schools had already pre-existing challenges before the pandemic, and that they believed that more attention should have been given to special schools during the COVID-19 pandemic.



5.2.4.17. *Theme 17: Reflecting on the lessons learnt by the participants from the experiences that they had during the COVID-19 pandemic*

This theme gave the participants an opportunity to reflect on the different experiences that they had during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to also discuss any lessons that they learnt from these experiences.

Lastly, the chapter then discussed the findings gathered from the data by linking them to the theoretical frameworks that guided this study.

### **5.3. ANSWERING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

In this section, the research questions that guided this study are discussed. The four secondary research questions are first addressed, and then the primary research question is answered. Throughout this chapter, a link is drawn between the findings gathered from the data to the literature review that was presented in Chapter 2, as well as the theoretical frameworks that guided this study.

The secondary research questions that helped the researcher to address the primary research question were:

- (a) *What were learning support educators, and special needs teachers' main concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic?*
- (b) *What strategies did special education teachers and learning support educators employ to navigate the challenges they faced in their educational settings during the COVID-19 pandemic?*
- (c) *What were the most significant barriers to effective communication and collaboration among special education teachers, learning support educators, students, and parents during the Covid-19 pandemic?*
- (d) *How did the shift to remote and hybrid learning environments during the Covid-19 pandemic affect the instructional methods and support strategies used by special education teachers and learning support educators?*



### 5.3.1. Secondary Research Question 1

*What were learning support educators, and special needs teachers' main concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic?*

#### 5.3.1.1. *Online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic*

The findings of this study indicate that LSEs and SETs were concerned about the shift from the traditional face-to-face teaching and learning method to an online teaching and learning method during the COVID-19 pandemic. They indicated notable concerns due to the substantial transition to online learning, a shift widely advocated on a global scale, augmented by their engagement with learners necessitating special accommodations. Learners with special needs have diverse needs, and they come from diverse social and economic backgrounds. Therefore, the participants were concerned about how they were expected to teach their learners using an online platform when the learners had not been previously trained or even exposed to an online method of learning.

The participants were furthermore concerned about how they would have to create an inclusive learning atmosphere using an online platform. Not only were the participants concerned about online teaching and learning because they worked with learners who have special needs, but they were also concerned about using online platforms to facilitate teaching and learning because they were never trained on how to use any online method to teach. Some of the participants were not computer literate, making the use of online methods impossible for them.

They were also concerned about a lack of resources in the schools where they taught, as they did not have laptops and computers to facilitate teaching and learning on an online platform. Therefore, online teaching and learning was a major concern for the participants, however, they did not indicate that they were anxious and stressed because they could not use any online platform to teach. Rather, they were anxious and stressed because of the challenge that this posed considering the diversity of their learners, and also taking into consideration their lack of training on how to use these online platforms to teach.

The researcher concludes that this concern links to the Conservation of Resources (COR) theoretical framework that this study utilised. Online teaching skills are

regarded as a physical resource according to this theoretical framework, which is a resource that the participants lacked. The schools where the participants worked not only lacked physical resources such as computers and laptops, but had not trained the participants on how to use any online platform to teach, or even incorporated any form of online teaching and learning before the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the participants indicated that they worked at schools that lacked resources, most of them indicated that online learning would not be feasible at their schools anyway due to the nature of the special needs of the learners with whom they worked.

The researcher further concludes that even though the literature indicates that schools worldwide had to resort to teaching and learning using an online platform, this was not the case for the participants in this study. The findings indicated that the participants did not use any online platform to facilitate teaching and learning. This was because the participants worked with learners that have diverse needs, such as severe intellectual disabilities, and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). As such, these learners did not have the cognitive ability to learn using an online platform as these learners required face-to-face interaction with their teachers in a physical classroom.

Some participants, however, indicated that they had a desire to use some form of online platform to continue teaching their learners during the COVID-19 pandemic. This meant that some of them saw the benefit of being equipped with the correct online tools to work with learners with special needs, even though this method may not be user-friendly for learners with special needs. However, because the COVID-19 pandemic was abrupt, and changes had to be implemented with urgency, there was no time for the participants to be trained on the use of online tools to continue with the teaching and learning process during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants thus reflected on the possibility of being able to access and use an online learning platform, and the possible effectiveness of this in making their job less demanding during the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### *5.3.1.2. Overall health and well-being of the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic*

The participants were concerned about their overall health and well-being because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants identified that the pandemic did have an impact on their health and well-being, and they were thus concerned about this.

Some participants indicated that they contracted the Coronavirus, and this made them anxious and worried about how they would survive living with the virus. They were also concerned about the possible chances that they would be the ones to infect their own family members with the virus. Some of the participants indicated that their fear of getting the Coronavirus was largely because they worked with learners that have special needs, and some of these learners would experience emotional challenges such as throwing a tantrum, and dropping to the floor during class. This required that the participants either touch or comfort the learners up close. However, touching or being at a close distance from one another was prohibited during the pandemic. However, due to working with learners with special needs, they sometimes had to blur the COVID-19 regulations boundary, which made them prone to getting infected with the virus. The participants indicated that they felt compelled to bend certain COVID-19 regulations in the classroom, such as teaching with a mask on. The participants indicated that once the hard lockdown was eased, and face-to-face lessons could resume, they had to adapt some of the COVID-19 regulations in their classroom to be able to continue with the teaching and learning process. The participants indicated that they had to remove their face masks when they were teaching because the masks made it difficult for the learners to hear them and see their facial expressions. Some participants indicated that they worked with learners who have autism, and these learners need to see the facial expressions of the teacher to understand what the teacher is saying. It was because of such cases that the participants thus had to adapt this COVID-19 regulation in their classrooms.

The data also indicated that the participants were challenged when it came to ensuring that the learners always had their facial masks on. The learners did not understand why they had to wear masks, and this resulted in them defying this rule, thus putting the teachers at risk of contracting the virus. This negatively affected teachers because it caused them to constantly worry about the possibility of contracting the virus.

The overall health and well-being of the participants in this study can be classified as the coping aspect under the Coping-Competence-Context Theoretical Model (3C Model of Teacher Stress) that this study utilised. The data indicates that the participants were fearful, anxious, and stressed because they had to work in conditions that exposed them to contracting the Coronavirus. The data indicates that the participants did not identify any personal characteristics or skills that they could use to

cope with this challenge. The data indicates that the participants were thus exposed to stress because they did not have any individual characteristics or skills that they could use to cope with the challenge of their overall health and well-being being at risk because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The researcher thus concluded that the COVID-19 pandemic did affect the overall health and well-being of the participants in this study. Some of the participants were already experiencing health issues, and their fear was that they would not survive the COVID-19 pandemic as a result. Some of the participants experienced health issues, such as strokes, because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **5.3.2. Secondary Research Question 2**

*What strategies did special education teachers and learning support educators employ to navigate the challenges they faced in their educational settings during the COVID-19 pandemic?*

The regulations that were imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic were challenging to adhere to, and they also made it difficult for the participants to employ specific strategies to overcome these challenges. The findings of this study indicate that the participants reported feeling isolated from others during the COVID-19 pandemic. Social isolation was one of the COVID-19 regulations implemented to curb the spread of the virus. What was considered the 'normal' way of life before the COVID-19 pandemic had changed because of the pandemic. Despite experiencing various challenges during the pandemic, the participants could no longer access the support that they needed as they had previously done before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Support had to be sought in other ways that excluded being in the same physical space as other people. Due to the pandemic, teachers in the workplace could no longer go on staff outings, which were specially designed for staff members to engage with one another, and to offer each other support. Therefore, the participants could no longer utilise this support strategy to cope and gain assistance navigating the different challenges that they encountered in their educational settings during COVID-19. The data does not directly state that the participants used specific coping strategies for educational challenges. However, the data does refer to the different internal coping

strategies that the participants utilised to navigate these challenges. This links to the 3C Model of Teacher Stress that this study utilised.

By using this theoretical framework for this study, it was possible to identify that the participants were able to utilise their own individual characteristics to cope with the various challenges they experienced. They were able to identify that they were exposed to certain risk factors, like the media, which triggered their stress and anxiety. The participants were also able to identify different characteristics within themselves that they could use to avoid such triggers and thus lower their stress. This links to the coping aspect of the 3C Model of Teacher Stress, which addresses how teachers can utilise their own individual strengths and characteristics to prevent themselves from getting stressed.

Some of the participants were situated in schools that utilised the social media platform WhatsApp as a means of communication. Through WhatsApp, they were able to communicate with their colleagues, and offer each other words of encouragement during this unpredictable time of their life. Whatsapp can thus be identified as a supportive resource that the participants used to cope with the challenges that they encountered.

The findings also indicate that some of the participants were religious, and they used their religion as a coping mechanism during the COVID-19 pandemic. This resource can be classified as an individual resource, as discussed in the Conservation of Resources theoretical framework. However, social gatherings were prohibited during the hard lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic, therefore, the participants did not have access to church services during this time. This meant that the participants were not able to access a crucial support resource during this time.

The researcher concluded that although the participants faced unique challenges, they were able to use some form of resource to cope. The participants could not access external resources for support, and this meant that they had to find resources within themselves to cope with the challenges that they encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### 5.3.3. Secondary Research Question 3

*What were the most significant barriers to effective communication and collaboration among special education teachers, learning support educators, students, and parents during the COVID-19 pandemic?*

The data collected supports what Kampwirth (2003), and Friend and Cook (2007) in section 2.11.2 stated when they indicated that there is a strong need for teachers and parents to work together in schools. This need was further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic because teaching and learning had to be conducted over a distance.

The findings of this study indicate that some of the participants had challenges when they wanted to communicate and collaborate with the parents of the learners'. This contradicted the literature, as it indicated that with a shift to online teaching and learning, parents had to take on a more active role in the education of their children. Therefore, to ensure that this was a success, parents had to ensure that they forged a working relationship with the teachers.

However, some of the participants of this study indicated that they could effectively communicate with their learners' parents. One participant indicated that she could communicate with her learners' parents because of the number of years that she had been a special education teacher. This participant attributed her ability to effectively communicate with the parents of her learners to the number of years that she had been in the field of teaching, and how these number of years had provided her with enough experience, and skill to communicate and collaborate with the parents of the learners. Therefore, according to the findings, experience played a major role in the ability of teachers to effectively communicate with the parents of their learners.

The findings of the study also indicate that some participants utilised different online platforms to communicate with the parents, and they also sent homework in the form of homework packs to the parents of these learners through the use of these online platforms. However, there was a barrier to effective communication between teachers and parents, and such a barrier was identified from the literature, and the findings of this study as a lack of access to technological devices such as cellphones. This, which hindered the ability for communication and the exchange of school work to take place.

From this barrier, one can thus state that a lack of resources from the perspective of parents in this case also links to the COR theory that was utilised in this study. However, this lack of resources is now identified from the perspective of parents, who did not have the necessary tools and resources to ensure that they could communicate with the teachers of their learners. This challenge posed a further challenge for the participants of this study as they now could not communicate with the parents, and this which made their jobs more demanding to perform. The more demanding the job of the teachers became, the more stress the teachers experienced. This which also links to the 3C Model of Teacher Stress theoretical framework that was utilised in this study. Thus showing that teachers experienced stress not only from the challenges that directly affected them. But, they also experienced stress because of the challenges that affected parents, which in turn ended up having a direct impact on their competence in doing their job, as discussed by the competence pathway of the 3C Model of Teacher Stress theoretical framework in section 2.17.4.

The data indicated that the Covid-19 pandemic enables a more unified way of communicating with the parents of their learners. This which was a challenge before the pandemic. Thus some participants highlighted the fact that even though the pandemic presented some unfavourable challenges in the schools where they work, the pandemic did however improve the communication process between their school, teachers, and the parents of the learners.

The literature indicated that effective communication was essential, and it also gave teachers and parents an opportunity for them to understand the different challenges that a learner experienced, as well as possible solutions and strategies that could be implemented to assist these learners with the challenges that they were encountering (Ozmen et al., 2016). This was also evident from the findings of this study, as none of the participants opposed communicating with the parents of their learners. But all the participants saw the importance of communicating and collaborating with the parents of their learners for the sole benefit of the learner with special needs. The researcher thus concludes that there were pre-existing issues in the process of communication between teachers, parents and learners before the COVID-19 pandemic. However, these challenges were further highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic. In some cases (as illustrated by the data), the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this challenge,



however, in some cases the COVID-19 pandemic rectified this challenge and forged a new path for teachers to effectively communicate with the parents and learners.

When it comes to communication and collaboration between teachers and learners during the COVID-19 pandemic, the findings of this study illustrated that there were communication challenges between teachers and learner during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly with non-verbal communication as teachers had to teach with masks on. The wearing of masks in class during the pandemic made it challenging for teachers to effectively communicate, and teach their learners. This, links well to section 2.11.5 of this study that addressed the importance of non-verbal communication in the teaching and learning process.

#### **5.3.4. Secondary Research Question 4**

*How did the shift to remote and hybrid learning environments during the Covid-19 pandemic affect the instructional methods and support strategies used by special education teachers, and learning support educators?*

The literature of this study has indicated that online teaching and learning was a strategy that had to be implemented worldwide due to the school closures caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the findings of this study indicate that participants of this study experienced major challenges when trying to implement online learning into their instructional method. The participants of this study work with learners with special needs, and these learners have a specialised way of learning that has been specifically designed for them, these which could not be accommodated by online or hybrid teaching and learning. The findings identified that the participants experienced a challenge that superseded online and hybrid learning when there was a shift in instructional methods and strategies during the Covid-19 pandemic. The participants identified that they could no longer teach using the same methods that they used before the Covid-19 pandemic, not only was this a challenge but they now had to implement different practices as they were teaching, like the wearing of vizers and masks. The findings thus illustrated that the participants now had to also use different classroom practices to accommodate the rules and regulations of the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore the challenges that they experienced with implementing hybrid and online teaching were not only focused on what they taught, but this transcended



to how they taught because they had to teach in a way that would meet the needs of their learners, but also be cognisant of the Covid-19 rules that they had to adhere to.

The findings of this study also indicate that the support strategies that the participants of this study utilised before the Covid-19 pandemic, such as the use of the SIAS policy and the IEP was a challenge to use during the Covid-19 pandemic. The findings illustrate that during the hard lockdown, SETs and LSEs did not utilise these support strategies. They could not utilise these strategies because of the different Covid-19 pandemic regulations which prohibited things like being in close contact with another person. The researcher based on the findings gathered, concludes that the pandemic resulted in some important practices and precautions not being implemented. This which would have adverse effects on learners with special needs as they needed to be properly assessed, so that they could get support that was tailored to their specific needs.

SETs and LSEs were not able to support their learners the way that they did before the Covid-19 pandemic. The researcher thus makes the conclusion that this also contributed to the level of stress and anxiety that the SETs and LSEs of this study experienced. The participants had knowledge of what they had to do in terms of providing support to their learners, but they could not do so because of the Covid-19 pandemic. This links well to the coping aspect of the 3C Model of Teacher Stress theoretical framework that this study utilised because it directly identifies another factor that caused teachers stress.

### **5.3.5. Primary Research Question**

*What were the specific challenges encountered by special education teachers, and learning support educators in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?*

#### *5.3.5.1. Workload experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic*

The findings of this study indicate that LSEs and SETs in Gauteng were exposed to a higher workload during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants had to spend extra hours planning lessons, communicating with parents, and ensuring that learning and teaching continued to take place despite the pandemic. The findings indicate that this

was time-consuming, and this often meant that the participants had to work extra hours to get the work done. These extra hours of work further resulted in them being unable to have a good balance between their personal and work life.

Due to schools being closed during the hard lockdown, when classes resumed through rotational learning, the participants then had an excess of work that they still needed to cover with their learners under short time constraints. Some participants were not able to complete the set curriculum for the year, especially during the first year of the pandemic. This resulted in some learners moving to higher grades with knowledge gaps as they were not able to be taught everything that they were supposed to learn during the year of the hard lockdown.

The researcher concluded that the workload challenge experienced by the participants links to the Conservation of Resources (COR) theoretical framework used in this study. The participants encountered a significant workload (demands) during the COVID-19 pandemic, and they struggled to handle this workload because of a lack of resources at their disposal. The COR Theory indicates that in cases where teachers are in a workplace where they have a high job demand, and few resources to meet that demand, then they will experience. This supports the data that indicated that the participants experienced stress and anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic, which will be further explored below.

#### *5.3.5.2. Stress and Anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic*

The increase in workload experienced by the participants had a direct influence on their mental health as most of them reported being highly stressed and anxious during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data indicates that this stress and anxiety was not only because of the heavier workload that they experienced, but also due to a host of other challenges outside of work.

Some of the participants were distressed because they already had health issues, which heightened their vulnerability to the Coronavirus. Fear was thus a common feeling experienced and shared by the participants of this study. They feared that they were going to contract the virus, and then infect their family members, which further caused them more stress and anxiety. Some of the participants experienced a feeling of uncertainty because they did not know what to expect during the pandemic, as governmental rules regarding the Covid regulations were constantly changing.

The findings also indicate that some participants avoided engaging with any form of social media. At the time, there was insurmountable media coverage of the virus, and the participants indicated that consuming all this media made them feel anxious and stressed. They therefore chose not to consume any media content during this time to safeguard their mental health.

The researcher concluded that the stress and anxiety experienced by the participants in their professional lives can be linked to the 3C Model of Teacher Stress used in this study. Stress and anxiety, in particular, fit well within the coping aspect of this theory because this refers to the individual characteristics and skills that individuals have, and how these can be used to mitigate teachers' stress. According to the findings gathered, some of the participants in this study had the character and skills to fight against teacher stress, while others did not. The researcher thus concluded that because some of the participants lacked essential internal resources, such as character and skills, they were not able to navigate through the stress and anxiety that they experienced during the pandemic.

#### *5.3.5.3. Implementing COVID-19 regulations in the classroom during the COVID-19 pandemic*

The findings of this study revealed that it was a challenge for most of the participants to teach learners the importance of adhering to COVID-19 regulations. Some participants indicated that some of their learners were not adhering to the same COVID-19 regulations at home, making it hard for the participants to implement these in class. This resulted in there being a discrepancy in the adherence to the COVID-19 regulations in different contexts.

The data indicates that the wearing of a facemask was particularly the most challenging COVID-19 regulation that teachers tried to implement in their classrooms. Facemasks make it difficult to breathe, read facial expressions, and for people to express themselves. The data indicated that some of the participants' learners live with neurodevelopmental disorders that make it further challenging for these learners to wear facemasks. The data further illustrates how the participants tried to use equipment other than facemasks to abide by the regulation of covering one's mouth to protect against spreading the virus.

The researcher concluded that the challenge of implementing the COVID-19 regulations in the classroom can be linked to the competence aspect of the 3C model of teacher stress used in this study. Due to the nature of their disabilities, the participants' learners did not understand the significance of adhering to COVID-19 regulations, and resisted doing so. This affected the participants' ability to manage their classrooms, and thus caused them stress in the process.

#### 5.3.5.4. *Communicating with the parents of learners during the COVID-19 pandemic*

The data indicates that the participants were concerned about how they would maintain their communication with the parents of their learners during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the participants indicated that communicating with the parents of their learners was already a challenge before the pandemic.

The data indicates that the participants had to make sure that their learners were still learning while they were at home, and the only way that they could ensure that this was happening was through communicating with the parents of their learners. Some of the participants indicated that they prepared homework packs for their learners, and they had to communicate with the parents to ensure that the homework packs were received, and that the work was being done at home. However, the data indicates that not all the participants had a positive outcome when it came to being able to communicate with the parents of their learners.

Some participants indicated that some parents did not have access to technological necessities such as cell phones or the internet. This made it difficult for them to be able to get hold of the parents and communicate with them. The researcher concluded that not being able to communicate with the parents of learners could be directly linked to the context aspect of the 3C Model of Teacher Stress applied in this study. According to this model, when teachers are exposed to stress, they can utilise resources within their own contexts to mitigate it. However, the data indicates that the parents in these communities seldom had access to smartphones or the internet, so they could not communicate with these teachers. This lack of resources in these communities caused teachers stress as they were not able to send messages to the parents, or keep them updated about any teaching and learning activities that were to take place from a distance, since schools were temporarily closed.

#### 5.3.5.5. *A lack of resources in schools*

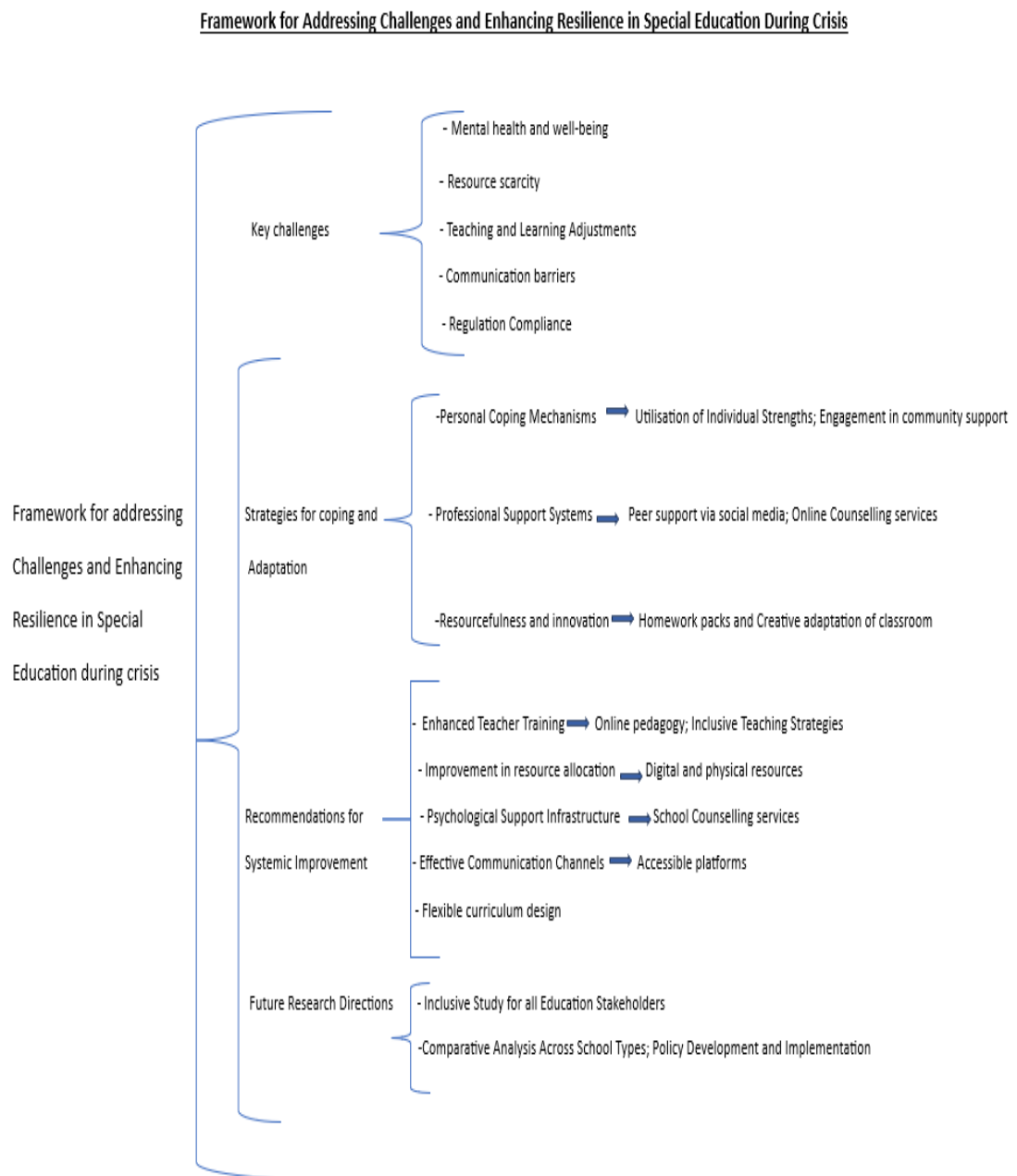
The participants indicated that they were challenged due to a lack of resources in the schools where they taught, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants stated that they had very limited resources to work with during the COVID-19 pandemic, and this made it difficult for them to do their job. The schools lacked resources such as Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) that they could use to protect themselves against the Coronavirus. This lack of resources links to the COR Theory utilised in this study as PPE was a mandatory requirement that had to be provided to the participants to ensure that they were protected from the virus. This resource would allow them to be able to focus better on doing their job instead of worrying about contracting the virus. However, this was not the case as these schools lacked PPE resources. This resulted in the participants being in a constant state of fear, worry, stress, and they also lacked the motivation to do their job as they did not feel protected from the Coronavirus while they were at work.

The researcher concluded that the lack of resources links well with both the theoretical frameworks of this study. Firstly, it relates to the context aspect of the 3C Model of Teacher Stress. The context aspect of the theory focuses on teachers' workplace (schools), and how the different resources within this context can either contribute to or protect teachers from stress. It can thus be said that the participants were prone to experiencing stress because there was a lack of resources within their school contexts. A lack of resources also links to the COR Theory as PPE can be classified under physical resources that were required for the participants to fulfil their job demands. A lack of PPE exposed the participants to getting the Coronavirus, and also exposed them to severe stress.

## 5.4. FRAMEWORK DESIGNED FROM THE STUDY

This study has contributed towards the development of a framework for addressing challenges, and enhancing resilience in special education during a crisis.

**Figure 5: Mpho Mthembu’s framework for addressing challenges and enhancing resilience in special education during a crisis.**



## 5.5. CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE STUDY

The objective of this study was to provide a comprehensive description of the challenges encountered by SETs and LSEs in Gauteng during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study aimed to offer valuable insights and knowledge regarding the diverse challenges faced by these educators. Furthermore, it is anticipated that by gaining an understanding of these challenges, effective strategies can be developed and implemented to mitigate these challenges in the event of future pandemics or other unforeseen school disruptions.

Another objective of this study was to gain an understanding of the different coping strategies that SETs and LSEs used to work through the challenges that they experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The findings of this study have identified multiple challenges that SETs and LSEs in Gauteng faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. A lack of resources and accessibility were identified, along with a lack of a balance between work and personal life; challenges with implementing COVID-19 regulations in the classroom; insufficient online teaching skills; teachers lacking the motivation and self-efficacy to teach; adapting teaching and learning styles; teacher-learner communication; teacher burnout; and lastly, teacher stress.

This study highlights how resources within the school context have a direct influence on how well teachers cope in the face of adversity. This which supports the COR theoretical framework utilised in this study. In the case explored in this study, most of the participants taught in schools that did not have resources such as laptops and computers, and this affected their ability to cope with the challenges that they encountered.

Notwithstanding the fact that a few participants mentioned facing resource difficulties throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, some of these participants also indicated that they overcame these difficulties. Thus, some of the study participants did not find that a lack of resources prevented them from coping during the pandemic. This demonstrates that the schools in which the participants worked and the resources available to them from the schools, were not the only factors that affected their ability to cope during the pandemic. This indicates that even in the absence of external

resources, the individuals had internal coping mechanisms that they could employ, and use to cope with the challenges that they encountered throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. This internal ability to cope links to the coping aspect of the 3C Model of Teacher Stress that was utilised in this study.

The findings illustrate that the participants' mental health was directly influenced by the lack of resources in the schools where they worked. The participants were presented with challenging work demands that superseded the resources available to them. The inability to meet these work demands thus caused stress for the participants, as illustrated in the data.

Conversely, the researcher concluded that these findings support the COR theoretical framework that this study utilised. According to this theory, when teachers are exposed to job demands that overpower the resources available in their job, they will not be able to perform their job duties. However, some of the findings indicate that some of the participants would prepare and send homework packs to their learners during the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure that learning continued to take place. This explicitly demonstrates that despite facing constraints such as a shortage of resources, i.e. laptops and computers, some of the participants ingeniously devised strategies tailored to the resources available to them to continue teaching and learning. In doing so, these teachers ensured that teaching and learning persisted despite the challenges posed by both resource limitations and the COVID-19 pandemic. This study, furthermore, underscores the resilience and resourcefulness of some educators in overcoming challenges, and emphasises the need for holistic support systems to sustain teaching and learning in unprecedented circumstances for all educators.

## **5.6. RECOMMENDATIONS**

In this section, the researcher makes recommendations for practice, policy, and future research based on the findings of this study.

### **5.6.1. Recommendations for Practice**

#### *5.6.1.1. Enhancing teacher training for educators working with special needs learners*

Among the diverse challenges that were experienced by the participants in this study, the findings revealed that SETs and LSEs were concerned about the worldwide



promotion of online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants were worried about this transformation because they (a) Had no previous knowledge or skills on how to teach learners with special needs using an online platform; (b) They did not know how they would create an inclusive classroom on an online platform; (c) The learners in their classrooms presented with different special needs, and some of these prevented the learners from being able to learn using an online method.

Using technology to make an impact on teaching and learning can only be effective if educators are properly trained on how to integrate technology into their classroom, curriculum, and traditional classroom practices. The researcher thus recommends that teacher training programmes incorporate an online pedagogy module where teachers will be taught essential skills on how to teach and assess learners with special needs using an online platform. It is also recommended that the Department of Education creates workshops where teachers who work with learners with special needs are taught how to use different teaching and learning equipment to teach these learners and cater to the diverse needs of their learners.

In making this recommendation, the researcher is aware that some schools in South Africa do not have a sufficient supply of resources to cater to the diverse learners with whom teachers work. However, it is recommended that the Department of Education prioritise the supply of resources in schools so that teaching and learning can continue to take place, even under unfavourable circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and other natural disasters that may occur in the future.

#### 5.6.1.2. *Psychological support*

The findings of this study indicate that a few of the participants lost some of their colleagues due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This left these participants feeling depressed and anxious about whether they would survive the Coronavirus. The findings further indicate that the participants did not receive any psychological support from the schools where they worked during the pandemic. The researcher is of the opinion that the participants should have been provided with psychological support, such as online counselling, to help them cope with the psychological effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic was a new phenomenon for everybody, and the

participants were in no way prepared to deal with the challenges that they experienced because of it.

The researcher views the lack of psychological support from these schools as a contributing factor towards the stress and anxiety that the participants experienced. This lack of resources can be classified as part of the context pathway in the 3C Model of Teacher Stress. It is thus recommended that in the future, schools should invest in a professional who can offer counselling services to teachers. This would be an important resource for schools to provide because it will benefit teachers directly, and will indirectly benefit learners as well considering that teachers will be in a better mind space to focus on their learners.

#### *5.6.1.3. Creating an accessible platform to communicate with parents*

The findings of this study illustrate that the participants were challenged in communicating with the parents of their learners. These findings elucidate that some of the participants came from schools where there was no strong line of communication between the school, teachers, and the parents of learners. This deficiency existed prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and it created a further challenge for the participants during the pandemic.

Therefore, it is recommended that schools consider allocating resources towards identifying and implementing communication methods that are preferred and easily accessible to the parents of their learners.

If schools do not consult the parents regarding a way in which they can communicate with them, then schools may implement communication channels that are inaccessible to the parents of learners. It is thus essential that before schools decide on the type of platform that they will be using to communicate with the parents, they should get an indication of the resources that the parents have at their disposal to communicate with the school.

#### *5.6.1.4. Flexibility in curricula*

Inclusive education promotes flexibility in curricula to ensure that teachers can use different methodologies to cater to differential teaching. It is thus recommended that teaching should be made flexible so that teachers are given the opportunity to adapt the curriculum to make it manageable for all learners. The Curriculum and Assessment

Policy Statement (CAPS) is rigid, and emphasis is placed on the subject matter, and completing the requirements of the curriculum.

This was indicated by a participant in this study who noted that, due to learning disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, some learners had to be moved to higher classes and grades without having fully mastered the curriculum from their previous class or grade. Teachers were tasked with the responsibility of ensuring that the instructional content delivered during the pandemic was aligned with the curriculum requirements. However, because of the COVID-19 pandemic and its regulations, it was challenging for teachers to complete the curriculum with their learners. It is because of this that some learners shifted to other grades and classes with a lack of knowledge on some of the content that they should have learnt in class. The researcher is of the opinion that a flexible curriculum will allow for SETs and LSEs to be flexible in their methods of teaching and assessing. This would include analysing the current context in which they are working (such as the COVID-19 pandemic), and coming up with different strategies to achieve the goals as set out in the CAPS document.

The researcher is also of the opinion that all schools should employ the learning losses recovery programme that was developed by the Department of Education to remediate the lost learning time due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, this needs to be monitored closely to ensure that the programme is running effectively.

## **5.6.2. Recommendations for Further Research**

### *5.6.2.1. A focus on the school management team*

This study focused solely on identifying the challenges experienced by SETs and LSEs. The researcher recommends that for future practice, a study should be conducted that broadens the focus of the participants included. Such a future study could focus on the school management teams in special needs schools and full-service schools. The researcher contends that directing attention to the challenges faced by the school management team, such as the Head of Department, Principals, and the School-Based Support Team, could identify deeper challenges that exist within schools and how these affect the management team both in their professional and personal lives.

The researcher also recommends that parents who have learners with special needs be included in the study to ensure that it provides a holistic account of the challenges that they also experience. This is important as the study already identified that parents play a significant role in the academic success of their children. Thus, a study that also includes the parents of learners would raise awareness regarding the different roles that parents play in the education of their children, and the challenges that they experience as parents with children who have special needs.

The researcher is of the opinion that such a study may offer greater data on, and insight into why SETs and LSEs experienced the challenges that they did in the workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### 5.6.2.2. *An inclusion of mainstream schools*

The participants of this study were gathered from special schools, as well as full-service schools.

The researcher recommends that for future practice, there could be a study that includes a focus on mainstream schools. The researcher makes this recommendation because mainstream schools place learners with special needs in a general classroom. Including teachers from mainstream schools will broaden the data gathered and may reflect the different challenges experienced by SETs and LSEs in mainstream schools, as opposed to only those in special and full-service schools.

The researcher suggests that the inclusion of mainstream schools will also develop a comparative analysis of the challenges encountered in special schools, full-service schools, and mainstream schools. This would therefore provide a comparison of the challenges encountered by SETs and LSEs from the three different types of schools. It is possible that SETs and LSEs in mainstream schools experienced different challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to those from special schools, and full-service schools. This could, therefore, generate more crucial data to support teachers working with special needs learners.

### **5.6.3. Recommendations for Policy**

#### *5.6.3.1. SIAS Policy Document*

The researcher recommends that the Screening Identification Assessment and Support Policy include an online method to ensure that the process of screening, identifying, assessing, and supporting a learner takes place even when the learner and the educator cannot physically be present in the same context.

The findings of this study illustrate that the SIAS process had to be halted during the COVID-19 pandemic because everyone had to adhere to the COVID-19 regulations. A new method of screening, identifying, assessing, and supporting learners that does not involve physical proximity could eliminate delays in this process. This would be particularly crucial in the event of another pandemic or disaster affecting the world, or South Africa in particular.

Devising a method for the SIAS policy document to be implemented without face-to-face interaction between the learner and the LSE will ensure that there is no delay in placing the learner into the correct school once the entire SIAS process is completed. This means that the process will also be quicker as the individuals involved in the process would not have to be in the same space to get it done.

The SIAS policy can be included under the context pathway of the 3C Model of Teacher Stress. The participants indicated that their inability to execute the SIAS process further caused them distress.

The SIAS policy document was a cause of stress for teachers during the pandemic because they were not able to complete this process due to COVID-19 regulations. It is for these reasons that the researcher therefore recommends that there be an online element incorporated into the process of screening, identifying, assessing, and supporting learners. This would allow the process to take place even when teachers are not able to meet learners in person to do so.

### **5.7. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

The following sections comprise the limitations that the researcher encountered when conducting this study.

### **5.7.1. Small Sample Size**

The researcher initially aimed to conduct this study using a sample size of 18 participants. However, only ten participants were able to form part of the cohort for this study. Research states that using a small sample for a study may be a limitation as the data gathered from a small sample cannot be generalised to other samples of people in different contexts. The researcher recognises the focus on a specific group of participants, namely, SETs and LSEs, may be considered a limitation of this study. It is, however, significant to note that this research delves into a particular case. As such, the researcher is of the opinion that data saturation was reached during the data collection, and data analysis stages of this study. According to Urquhart (2013), saturation refers to a point where the researcher identifies mounting instances of the same data across different datasets where there is no new data to add to the data that were already collected. Therefore, although the data for this study were collected from a small sample, the data was sufficient, and it was able to provide answers to the research questions of this study.

### **5.7.2. Data Collection**

The questionnaire that the study utilised consisted of 65 semi-structured questions that the participants were required to answer. The questionnaires were administered on a face-to-face basis to those participants with whom the researcher had in-person interviews. The questionnaires were electronically sent to the other participants with whom the researcher conducted online interviews.

The participants who completed the questionnaire electronically reported that they felt overwhelmed by the number of questions that they had to answer, and they also stated that completing the questionnaire was time-consuming. However, this was not the case for the participants who completed the questionnaire with the researcher physically present.

Some of the participants completed the questionnaire online because they were too far away from the researcher to meet in person. Other participants completed the questionnaire in person because the researcher was able to schedule in-person interviews with these participants, and they completed the questionnaire after their interview with the researcher.

The researcher encountered a challenge with the participants who completed the questionnaire online because these participants took longer than the agreed time to complete the questionnaire and send it back to the researcher. However, the researcher was in constant communication with these participants, and encouraged them to complete the questionnaire and send it back, which they eventually did.

### **5.7.3. Scheduling the Focus Group Discussion**

Another limitation that the researcher encountered in conducting this study was the scheduling of the focus group discussion. Although the participants were asked to indicate their availability to conduct the study (based on dates and times that were given to them), the researcher often had to reschedule the dates for the discussion. This was because the participants were sometimes unable to participate in the discussions due to unforeseen circumstances, or they were experiencing loadshedding at the time scheduled for the focus group discussion. However, ultimately, the researcher was able to conduct a focus group discussion successfully.

### **5.7.4. Online Interviews and the Online Focus Group Discussion**

The researcher conducted the individual interviews using both the in-person and online methods. This was because six of the participants were unable to have in-person interviews with the researcher as they were either working, or were too far away from the researcher. To mitigate this challenge, the researcher conducted six online interviews, and four in-person interviews. The limitations that the researcher identified in conducting online interviews are that: (a) The researcher was unable to gauge the body language of the participants as they were responding to the questions; (b) In some instances, there were connectivity issues, so the researcher had to constantly repeat questions to the participants; and (c) Limited emotions could be gathered from the participants as they responded to the questions online, as opposed to the in-person interviews where the researcher was able to identify their facial expressions. The participants were selected from various towns and locations within the Gauteng province. Due to financial and logistical constraints, the researcher was not able to arrange for all the participants to meet in person to have the focus group discussion.

While acknowledging this limitation, the researcher highlights the success of the focus group discussion. All of the participants who participated in the discussion were able to express themselves freely, and honestly. Thus, conducting the focus group discussion online was more of an advantage than a disadvantage in this study.

#### **5.7.5. Scope**

This study only focused on SETs and LSEs. If this study had also included learners with special needs, then the study would have been able to generate additional data and knowledge. Moreover, it would have made the study bidirectional, not just unidirectional, as the focus would include the learners and the challenges that they too experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **5.8. CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The findings of this study have revealed that SETs and LSEs did experience challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges were either very demanding or not demanding at all for the participants, as already alluded to in the Conservation of Resources Theory. The implication here is that the impact of these challenges on the participants varied.

The findings gathered from this study indicate that the challenges experienced by the participants were a combination of both personal and professional challenges. From a professional perspective, the findings reveal that most of the challenges experienced by the participants were caused by a lack of necessary training on how to use and incorporate online teaching and learning. Another key contributor to the challenges that were identified was a lack of resources. This had a profound impact on the participants' ability to perform their occupational duties to the best of their ability.

The findings reveal an interconnectedness between the challenges that were experienced by the participants, and their mental and physical health. The findings have identified that there is a bidirectional relationship between an individual's personal and professional life. If there are unfavourable circumstances in the workplace, then these will affect that individual's private life. Conversely, if an individual experiences challenges in their personal life, then this will affect how they perform their work duties.



However, the findings of this study have identified that the primary cause of the challenges experienced by the participants was the workplace. Most of the professional challenges that were identified by the participants were resource-driven. This demonstrates that schools in South Africa, specifically in the Gauteng province, are challenged by a lack of resources.

The findings of this study exposed the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on SET and LSEs' ability to perform their duties during the COVID-19 pandemic. The demands that were placed on them during the pandemic, and the effect thereof on their health and well-being were highlighted. Lastly, the participants' ability to cope with the stress and anxiety that they were exposed to because of the COVID-19 pandemic was revealed.

What is innovative about this study is that even though it focused on a sample of individuals within a specific profession, the focus went beyond the challenges encountered in their professional lives. This study subsequently highlights the importance of understanding the individual from a holistic perspective, where the individual is nested in different systems that contribute towards their life experiences. By identifying the different personal and professional challenges that the participants experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, this study has provided a comprehensive portrayal of the lives of the individuals who participated in this study.

Each of the experiences that were shared by the participants highlighted the importance of an individual's narrative. Although the pandemic affected the entire world, each participant had a different experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, and they were affected by the pandemic in their own unique way. This illustrates that the participants' experiences were diverse, even though they were exposed to the same phenomenon (the COVID-19 pandemic). Their individual encounters with the pandemic, both personally and professionally, varied significantly. This aligns closely with the research design of this study, which was phenomenology, as well as its epistemology, which was the interpretive paradigm, as it stresses the significance of subjectivity.

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**APPENDIX A: TURNITIN REPORT**

*M Mthembu*

*M Finestone*

Dr M Finestone 13 May 2024

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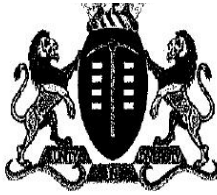
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## APPENDIX B: RESEARCH APPROVAL LETTER



### GAUTENG PROVINCE

Department: Education  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

8/4/4/1/2

#### GDE RESEARCH APPROVAL LETTER

Date:	19 May 2023
Validity of Research Approval:	08 February 2023– 30 September 2023 2022/198A
Name of Researcher:	Mthembu MP
Address of Researcher:	10 Mostert place Dawn park Boksburg
Telephone Number:	073 9341 397
Email address:	<a href="mailto:Mpho.mthembu@up.ac.za">Mpho.mthembu@up.ac.za</a>
Research Topic:	Challege Experienced by special education teachers in Gauteng during the Covid-19 pandemic
Type of qualification	PhD in Learning Support, Guidance and Counselling
Number and type of schools:	8 LSED Schools
District/s/HO	Gauteng East

#### **Re: Approval in Respect of Request to Conduct Research**

This letter serves to indicate that approval is hereby granted to the above-mentioned researcher to proceed with research in respect of the study indicated above. The onus rests with the researcher to negotiate appropriate and relevant time schedules with the school/s and/or offices involved to conduct the research. A separate copy of this letter must be presented to both the School (both Principal and SGB) and the District/Head Office Senior Manager confirming that permission has been granted for the research to be conducted.

*Mpho Mthembu* 19/05/2023

The following conditions apply to GDE research. The researcher may proceed with the above study subject to the conditions listed below are met. Approval may be withdrawn should any of the conditions listed below be flouted:

1

*Making education a societal priority*

**Office of the Director: Education Research and Knowledge Management**

7<sup>th</sup> Floor, 17 Simmonds Street, Johannesburg, 2001

Tel: (011) 355 0488

## APPENDIX C: ETHICS APPROVAL LETTER



Faculty of Education

### Amendment

Ethics Committee

22 August 2022

Dear Miss MP Mthembu

The application for ethical clearance for the research project described below served before this committee on 17 August 2022 :

<b>Ethics Protocol No:</b>	<b>EDU196/21</b>
<b>Principal investigator:</b>	<b>Miss MP Mthembu</b>
<b>Student/Staff No:</b>	<b>18109081</b>
<b>Degree:</b>	<b>Doctoral</b>
<b>Supervisor/Promoter:</b>	<b>Dr M Finestone</b>
<b>Department:</b>	<b>Educational Psychology</b>

The decision by the committee is reflected below:

<b>Decision:</b>	<b>Approved</b>
<b>Comments:</b>	
<b>Period of approval:</b>	<b>Three years</b>

The approval by the Ethics Committee is subject to the following conditions being met:

1. The research will be conducted as stipulated on the application form submitted to the Ethics Committee with the supporting documents.
2. Proof of how you adhered to the Department of Basic Education (DBE) policy for research must be submitted where relevant.
3. In the event that the research protocol changed for whatever reason the Ethics Committee must be notified thereof by submitting an amendment to the application, together with all the supporting documentation that will be used for data collection namely; questionnaires, interview schedules and observation schedules, for further approval before data can be collected. The changes may include the following but are not limited to:
  - Change of investigator,
  - Research methods any other aspect therefore and,
  - Participants.

The Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education does not accept any liability for research misconduct, of whatsoever nature, committed by the researcher(s) in the implementation of the approved protocol.

Best wishes



Prof Funke Omidire  
Chair: Ethics Committee  
Faculty of Education

Room 3-63, Level 3, Aldoel Building  
University of Pretoria, Private Bag X20  
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Faculty of Education  
Fakulteit Opvoedkunde  
Lefapha la Thuto

## APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS



Faculty of Education

Department of Educational Psychology

MP Mthembu  
P O Box 1459  
Boksburg  
Gauteng  
10 May 2023

Dear participant

### Invitation to participate in a study.

I am a PhD student at the University of Pretoria in the Faculty of Education. I wish to invite you to participate in a study titled: “Challenges experienced by Special Education teachers in Gauteng during the Covid-19 pandemic”. The purpose of this study is to investigate and give an in-depth description of the challenges that special education teachers in Gauteng, experienced in teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic. The findings of the study will possibly be used to create knowledge and awareness of the different challenges that special education teachers in Gauteng experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic, and how they were able to navigate through these challenges.

This letter is intended to inform you of what may happen if you agree to participate in this study. You can then decide if you want to participate in the study or not.

The process will take place online, and all meetings with the participants will be through appointments after school-working hours. Data will be collected in the form of an online focus group discussion, an online semi- structured interview, and a stress questionnaire, and I may ask teachers some relevant follow-up questions.

The duration of the focus-group discussion will be 1 hour, and the interviews will be of 20-30 minutes, and the stress questionnaire will be of about 30-35 minutes. Participants’ conversations during the focus-group discussion and interviews will be voice recorded, for the researcher to review and transcribe.

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Faculty of Education  
Fakulteit Opvoedkunde  
Lefapha la Thuto

The questionnaires completed will be strictly anonymous, and no names will appear on the questionnaire, and the teachers' and schools' names will be kept confidential by using pseudonyms. Participation in this study is fully voluntary and no participants will be forced to participate. Teachers will be free to withdraw from the study at any stage if they wish to, without providing reasons, and the teachers will not be reimbursed for participating in this study. The risk of teachers taking part in the study is not more than minimal risk. The safety and privacy of teachers and the school will be respected.

All Covid-19 regulations are considered with regards to this study. These may change based on the Government-imposed lockdown measures as regulated by the Disaster Management Act, 2002 with regards to Covid-19.

I also would like to request your permission to use the data, confidentially and anonymously, for further research purposes, as the data sets are the intellectual property of the University of Pretoria. Further research may include secondary data analysis and using the data for educational purposes. The confidentiality and privacy applicable to this study will be binding on future research studies.

Should you have any questions or concerns about this study, you can contact the researcher Ms Mpho Princess Mthembu at +27 64 659 6901 or [mpho.mthembu@up.ac.za](mailto:mpho.mthembu@up.ac.za) and the supervisor Dr Michelle Finestone at +27 12 420 5510 or [michelle.finstone@up.ac.za](mailto:michelle.finstone@up.ac.za)



Faculty of Education

Department of Educational Psychology

Informed assent Letter

I.....agree/disagree to participate in a study conducted by M Mthembu on “Challenges experienced by Special Education teachers in Gauteng during the Covid-19 pandemic”. I am aware that the research has nothing personal to do with me and my school, and my participation is voluntary. I am also aware that I am free to withdraw my participation at any time should I wish to do so, and my decision will not be held against me.

- I understand that my duties as a teacher will not be disturbed, and I grant the researcher permission to use some of my after-school hours.
- I understand that my identity and that of my school will remain anonymous and confidential.
- I understand that the researcher will only ask teachers questions on the topic of the challenges they experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- I grant permission to the researcher to use my work for this study only.
- I have received the contacts of the researcher and the supervisor should I need to contact them about matters related to this research.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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Lefapha la Thuto



## APPENDIX E: INFORMED CONSENT LETTER TO THE PRINCIPAL/S



Faculty of Education

Department of Educational Psychology

10 Mostert Place  
Dawn Park, Boksburg  
Extension 8  
1459

The Principal/Chairperson of the School Governing Body

Dear Sir/Madam

Request for permission to conduct research at your school

I am a PhD student at the University of Pretoria in the Faculty of Education. I wish to apply for permission to conduct a study at your school titled: "Challenges experienced by special education teachers in Gauteng during the Covid-19 pandemic". The purpose of this study is to investigate and give an in-depth description of the challenges that special education teachers in Gauteng experienced in teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic. The findings of the study will be used to create knowledge and awareness on the different challenges that special education teachers in Gauteng experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic, and how they were able to navigate through these challenges.

This letter is intended to inform you what will happen if you allow your school to participate in this study. You can then decide if you want your school to participate in the study or not.

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Faculty of Education  
Fakulteit Opvoedkunde  
Lefapha la Thuto

The process will take place in the school premises, and all meetings with the participants will be through appointments after school-working hours. Data will be collected in the form of an online focus group discussion, a face-to-face semi- structured interview, and a stress questionnaire, and I may ask teachers some relevant follow-up questions.

The duration of the focus-group discussion will be 1 hour and 30 minutes, and the interviews will be of 1 hour, and the stress questionnaire will be of about 30-35 minutes. Participants' conversations during the focus-group discussion and interviews will be voice recorded, for the researcher to review and transcribe.

The stress questionnaire completed will be strictly anonymous, and no names will appear on the questionnaire, and the teachers' and schools' names will be kept confidential by using pseudonyms. Participation in this study is fully voluntary and no participants will be forced to participate. Teachers will be free to withdraw from the study at any stage if they wish to, without providing reasons, and the teachers will not be reimbursed for participating in this study. The risk of teachers taking part in the study is not more than minimal risk. The safety and privacy of teachers and the school will be respected.

All Covid-19 regulations are considered with regards to this study. These may change based on the Government-imposed lockdown measures as regulated by the Disaster Management Act, 2002 with regards to Covid-19.

I also would like to request your permission to use the data, confidentially and anonymously, for further research purposes, as the data sets are the intellectual property of the University of Pretoria. Further research may include secondary data analysis and using the data for educational purposes. The confidentiality and privacy applicable to this study will be binding on future research studies. Should you have any questions or concerns about this study, you can contact the researcher Mpho Mthembu at +27 64 659 6901 or [mpho.mthembu@up.ac.za](mailto:mpho.mthembu@up.ac.za) and the supervisor Dr Michelle Finestone at +27 12 420 5510 [michelle.finestone@up.ac.za](mailto:michelle.finestone@up.ac.za)

Researcher-Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Supervisor-Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_



## APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS



UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA  
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA  
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA

Faculty of Education

### Interview questions

1. How did you change your teaching model to meet the demands of the Covid-19 pandemic?
2. What kind of effect is the learning and teaching model that you are using during the Covid-19 pandemic having on your social and professional well-being?
3. How easy or difficult has it been for you to implement Covid-19 regulations in your classroom?
4. How confident are you in your ability to teach effectively during the Covid-19 pandemic?
5. Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, how active have your learners been online or in person, during classes?
6. What emotional challenges did you experience because of the Covid-19 pandemic?
7. What coping strategies did you implement to cope with the challenges that you experienced because of the Covid-19 pandemic?
8. According to you, what effects have the pandemic had on the teaching profession?
9. What teaching challenges have you experienced because of the Covid-19 pandemic?
10. What strategies are you using to cope with the teaching challenges that you have faced because of the Covid-19 pandemic?

## APPENDIX G: EXAMPLES OF INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS AND CODING

### Transcriptions:

- **Question: What emotional challenges did you experience because of the COVID-19 pandemic?**

P1: *I follow a strict routine. My day has to be planned. So, I was having anxiety attacks, I was depressed because my family is overseas, and they couldn't come and visit. I suffered from terrible anxiety and stomach ulcers. I was severely stressed, and my hair was falling off.*

P5: *Anxiety over the fact that everything is so uncertain. You are at school the one day, and the next day you are notified of three of your colleagues that now have the virus. People that you know also get the virus, and some have passed away due to being infected with the Coronavirus. So I felt anxious and overwhelmed almost all the time*

- **Question: Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, how active have your learners been online or in person, during classes or during assessments?**

P4: *We did not have online classes. There was no change in our face-to-face classes with the learners. In fact, to our learners there was no such a thing as the COVID-19 virus. The learners continued to participate in class the same way as they did before the pandemic.*

P3: *The school is struggling with internet just for teachers. some teachers are computer illiterate. No one was prepared for online teaching. I don't remember us as teachers coming together to think of ways that we can implement online teaching.*

- **Question: How easy or difficult has it been for you to implement COVID-19 regulations in your classroom?**

P4: *That was the difficult part because as a teacher I had to teach with my mask on, and some of the learners could not hear what I was saying. So, I used to remove my mask when teaching the learners, and then I would put it on after I had concluded my lesson. The wearing of masks was also a challenge for my learners because when*

they had questions to ask, they had to lower their mask, ask the question, and then put their mask back on again.

P3: Initially it was very difficult. We had to adhere to the rules, and it was not easy especially for the young one's. Because one minute their masks are off, and they are playing with them. They are pulling each other's masks off, so the learners were not conscious of what the reason was behind them wearing masks so we had to constantly enforce the rules. Sometimes you'd find that in one day you have given one child three masks, and they will still rip it off and then go home without a mask. So initially it was very challenging.

### Coding of data:

<b>Theme: Mental health effects of the COVID-19 pandemic</b>	
Participant	Extracts
P1	<i>I follow a strict routine. My day has to be planned. So, I was having anxiety attacks, I was depressed because my family is overseas, and they couldn't come and visit. I suffered from terrible anxiety and stomach ulcers. I was severely stressed, and my hair was falling off.</i>
P5	<i>Anxiety over the fact that everything is so uncertain. You are at school the one day, and the next day you are notified of three of your colleagues that now have the virus. People that you know also get the virus, and some have passed away due to being infected with the Coronavirus. So, I felt anxious and overwhelmed almost all the time.</i>

<b>Theme: Online learning and teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic</b>	
Participant	Extract
P4	<i>We did not have online classes. There was no change in our face-to-face classes with the learners. In fact, to our learners there was no such a thing as the COVID-19 virus. The learners continued to participate in class the same way as they did before the pandemic.</i>
P3	<i>The school is struggling with internet just for teachers. some teachers are computer illiterate. No one was prepared for online teaching. I don't remember us as teachers coming together to think of ways that we can implement online teaching.</i>

<b>Theme: Implementing COVID-19 regulations in the classroom during the COVID-19 pandemic</b>	
Participant	Extract
P3	<i>Initially it was very difficult. We had to adhere to the rules, and it was not easy especially for the young one's. Because one minute their masks are off, and they are playing with them. They are pulling each other's masks off, so the learners were not conscious of what the reason was behind them wearing masks so we had to constantly enforce the rules. Sometimes you'd find that in one day you have given one child three masks, and they will still rip it off and then go</i>

	<i>home without a mask. So initially it was very challenging.</i>
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**Question: What coping strategies did you implement to cope with the challenges that you experienced because of the COVID-19 pandemic?**

*P4: We had a Whatsapp group as colleagues. Even when I got hospitalized my colleagues sent me messages of encouragement to keep me strong. I also got prayers from the people that I attend church with.*

*P1: I didn't cope. I took it a day at a time, and that is all that I could honestly do. This was hard to accept because as someone who likes to fix things there was nothing that I could do. One day at a time, one week at a time, lots of communication with the parents. Hearing sob stories about people dying did not help.*

**Coding data:**

Theme: Coping strategies utilised by participants during the COVID-19 pandemic	
Participant	Extract
P4	<i>We had a Whatsapp group as colleagues. Even when I got hospitalized my colleagues sent me messages of encouragement to keep me strong. I also got prayers from the people that I attend church with.</i>
P1	<i>I didn't cope. I took it a day at a time, and that is all that I could honestly do. This was hard to accept because as someone who likes to fix things there was nothing that I could do. One day at a time, one week at a time, lots of communication with the parents. Hearing sob stories about people dying did not help.</i>

P3	<i>I am a spiritual person, so I would pray as a Christian. My faith helped me out through the pandemic. But I must not make myself a starring. At home when the pandemic started it was like dooms day.</i>
P5	<i>At work we had a support group. My family was also a strong support structure during this time.</i>

# APPENDIX H: TEACHER STRESS QUALITATIVE QUESTIONNAIRE



Faculty of Education

## Teacher Stress Questionnaire

### Demand questions:

1. How would you describe the workload that you had during the pandemic?

- Extremely demanding
- Demanding
- Neutral
- Moderately demanding
- Not demanding

Please elaborate on your selected answer

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2. Was your mental health affected by the Covid-19 pandemic?  Yes  no

If yes, how demanding was it on your overall health and well-being?

- Extremely demanding
- Demanding
- Neutral
- Moderately demanding
- Not demanding



Please elaborate on your selected answer

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3. How did you experience your working hours during the pandemic?

- Extremely demanding
- Demanding
- Neutral
- Moderately demanding
- Not demanding

Please elaborate on your selected answer

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4. Did your learners struggle to concentrate in class during the Covid-19 pandemic?

Yes	No
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If yes, how was this on your ability to keep them engaged in your class?

- Extremely demanding
- Demanding
- Neutral
- Moderately demanding
- Not demanding

5. How did you experience the pressure to manage your classroom during the Covid-19 pandemic:

- Extremely demanding
- Demanding
- Neutral
- Moderately demanding
- Not demanding

6. How did you experience the added pressure of a shortened syllabus with short time constraints during the pandemic:

- Extremely demanding
- Demanding
- Neutral
- Moderately demanding
- Not demanding

Please elaborate on your selected answer

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7. How did you experience the process of maintaining Covid-19 regulations with learners such as wearing masks, and using hand sanitizers once physical classes were allowed during the Covid-19 pandemic?

- Extremely demanding
- Demanding
- Neutral
- Moderately demanding
- Not demanding

Please elaborate on your selected answer

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8. Did you receive training as preparation to use an online platform to teach during the pandemic? 

Yes	No
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If yes, how was the training?

- Extremely demanding
- Demanding
- Neutral
- Moderately demanding
- Not demanding

Please elaborate on your selected answer.

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9. How did you experience transitioning from in-person to online classes?

- Extremely demanding
- Demanding
- Neutral
- Moderately demanding
- Not demanding

Please elaborate on your selected answer.

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10. How would you describe your dual role of managing your household while also working from home?

- Extremely demanding
- Demanding

- Neutral
- Moderately demanding
- Not demanding

Please elaborate on your selected answer:

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11. How did you find the restructuring of the curriculum to fit online teaching, to impact on the way that you teach:

- Extremely demanding
- Demanding
- Neutral
- Moderately demanding
- Not demanding

12. How challenging did you find teaching practical subjects during the pandemic:

- Extremely demanding
- Demanding
- Neutral
- Moderately demanding
- Not demanding

Please elaborate on your selected answer

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13. Were you able to form a virtual teacher- and learner relationship with your learners during the pandemic?

Yes	No
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If, YES how did you experience this relationship?

- Extremely demanding
- Demanding
- Neutral
- Moderately demanding
- Not demanding

Please elaborate on your selected answer

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14. Did you experience challenges with working with the parents of your learners during the pandemic?

Yes	No
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If Yes, how demanding did this make your job:

- Extremely demanding
- Demanding
- Neutral
- Moderately demanding
- Not demanding

Please elaborate on your selected answer

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15. Conducting online as well as physical classes when the lockdown regulations were eased was:

- Extremely demanding
- Demanding
- Neutral
- Moderately demanding
- Not demanding

Please elaborate on your selected answer.

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16. How would you describe having to stay optimistic and positive for your learners during the pandemic to have been on your emotional health:

- Extremely demanding
- Demanding
- Neutral
- Moderately demanding
- Not demanding

Please elaborate on your selected answer.

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17. You were expected to quickly adjust to teaching on an online platform. How did you experience this?

- Extremely demanding
- Demanding
- Neutral
- Moderately demanding
- Not demanding

18. How did you find working from home during the online classroom teaching period?

- Extremely demanding
- Demanding
- Neutral
- Moderately demanding
- Not demanding

Please elaborate on your selected answer

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19. Were you able to stick to your stipulated working hours whilst working from home? 

Yes	No
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If Yes/No, how did you find this to be?

- Extremely demanding
- Demanding
- Neutral
- Moderately demanding
- Not demanding



20. Did you feel pressured to have a balance between your personal and work life during the pandemic?

Yes	No
-----	----

If Yes, how was this pressure on your well-being:

- Extremely demanding
- Demanding
- Neutral
- Moderately demanding
- Not demanding

Please elaborate on your answer

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21. How did you find teaching learners with special educational needs through an online platform?

- Extremely demanding
- Demanding
- Neutral
- Moderately demanding
- Not demanding

Please elaborate on your selected answer

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22. How demanding was the diversity of learners in your classroom on your ability to teach your class:

- Extremely demanding
- Demanding
- Neutral
- Moderately demanding
- Not demanding

Please elaborate on your selected answer

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23. How would you describe the teaching responsibilities that you had during the pandemic:

- Extremely demanding
- Demanding
- Neutral
- Moderately demanding
- Not demanding

24. How would you describe the impact of the pandemic on your overall well-being:

- Extremely demanding

- Demanding
- Neutral
- Moderately demanding
- Not demanding

Please elaborate on your selected answer

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25. How would you describe the attitude of the parents of your learners to have been towards you during the pandemic?

- Extremely demanding
- Demanding
- Neutral
- Moderately demanding
- Not demanding

Please elaborate on your selected answer

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26. How was the process of helping your learners to adapt to the classroom once face to face resumed:

- Extremely demanding
- Demanding
- Neutral
- Moderately demanding
- Not demanding

27. Have you been exposed to teaching using an online platform before the pandemic?

Yes	No
-----	----

If Yes or No, how did this make online teaching during the pandemic to be for you:

- Extremely demanding
- Demanding
- Neutral
- Moderately demanding
- Not demanding

28. Did working from home further increase the challenges that you were exposed to during the pandemic? 

Yes	No
-----	----

If Yes, how demanding did this make your job as a teacher?

- Extremely demanding
- Demanding
- Neutral
- Moderately demanding
- Not demanding

29. Did you experience attendance issues (absenteeism) from your learners once face to face classes resumed?

Yes	No
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If Yes, how demanding was this on your job as a teacher:

- Extremely demanding
- Demanding
- Neutral
- Moderately demanding
- Not demanding

Please elaborate on your selected answer

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30. Were you expected to come up with strategies to help your learners to catch-up on lost

learning time caused by the pandemic?

Yes	No
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If Yes, how was this expectation on you as a teacher:

- Extremely demanding
- Demanding
- Neutral
- Moderately demanding
- Not demanding

Please elaborate on your selected answer

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31. Did you conduct online assessments during the hard lockdown?

Yes	No
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If Yes, how demanding were these on your teaching skills:

Page | 13

- Extremely demanding
- Demanding
- Neutral
- Moderately demanding
- Not demanding

Please elaborate on your selected answer

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32. How did the wearing of a mask in a classroom impact the communication between you and your learners?

- Extremely demanding
- Demanding
- Neutral
- Moderately demanding
- Not demanding

Please elaborate on your selected answer

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33. Did you clean up after each class to keep the classroom safe from the Covid-19 virus?

Yes	No
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If yes, how demanding is this on you getting ready for the next class:

- Extremely demanding
- Demanding
- Neutral
- Moderately demanding
- Not demanding

Please elaborate on your selected answer

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34. How demanding was it to restructure the curriculum so that you can teach it on an online platform?

- Extremely demanding
- Demanding
- Neutral
- Moderately demanding
- Not demanding

35. How demanding has re-establishing classroom rules such as working in a group during a pandemic where social distancing is required:

- Extremely demanding
- Demanding



- Neutral
- Moderately demanding
- Not demanding

Please elaborate on your selected answer

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### **Resource Questions**

1. Did you have a personal computer to conduct your online classes?

Yes	No
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If yes How was this towards you being able to conduct online classes:

- Very unhelpful
- Unhelpful
- Neutral
- Moderately helpful
- Very helpful

Please elaborate on your selected answer

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2. How helpful do you think your online lessons were for your learners:

- Very unhelpful
- Unhelpful
- Neutral

Moderately helpful

Very helpful

3. Were you personally motivated to overcome the challenges that you experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic?

Yes	No
-----	----

If Yes, how was this towards your ability to work?

Very unhelpful

Unhelpful

Neutral

Moderately helpful

Very helpful

Please elaborate on your selected answer.

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4. Were your learners motivated to do their schoolwork during the pandemic?

Yes	No
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If Yes, how did this affect your job as a teacher:

Very unhelpful

Unhelpful

Neutral

Moderately helpful

Very helpful

Please elaborate on your selected answer.

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5. Did you have a supportive structure to help you deal with the challenges that you experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic?

Yes	No
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If Yes, how did these structures help towards your well-being during the pandemic?

- Very unhelpful
- Unhelpful
- Neutral
- Moderately helpful
- Very helpful

Please elaborate on your selected answer.

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6. How would you describe the stress that you experienced during the pandemic to have been on your overall well-being:

- Very unhelpful
- Unhelpful
- Neutral
- Moderately helpful
- Very helpful

Please elaborate on your selected answer

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7. Has it been easy to adapt to the living and working conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic?

Yes	No
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If Yes, how helpful was this towards transitioning from physical to online classes?

- Very unhelpful
- Unhelpful
- Neutral
- Moderately helpful
- Very helpful

8. Were all your learners able to use the online platform to learn during the pandemic?

Yes	No
-----	----

If No, how was this towards your ability to conduct online classes:

- Very unhelpful
- Unhelpful
- Neutral
- Moderately helpful
- Very helpful

9. Were you at some point during the pandemic demotivated towards teaching?

Yes	No
-----	----

If Yes, how was this towards your ability to teach lessons:

- Very unhelpful
- Unhelpful
- Neutral
- Moderately helpful
- Very helpful

10. Did you worry about not having a job after the pandemic?

Yes	No
-----	----

If Yes, how was this towards your mental health:

- Very unhelpful
- Unhelpful
- Neutral
- Moderately helpful
- Very helpful

11. Did you mostly feeling anxious during the pandemic?

Yes	No
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If Yes, how was your anxiety towards your productivity as a teacher:

- Very unhelpful
- Unhelpful
- Neutral
- Moderately helpful
- Very helpful

Please elaborate on your selected answer.

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12. Did the school provide you with resources to help support your teaching during the pandemic? 

Yes	No
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If Yes, how helpful were these resources:

- Very unhelpful
- Unhelpful
- Neutral
- Moderately helpful
- Very helpful

Please elaborate on your selected answer

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13. Were you mostly hopeful and optimistic during the pandemic? 

Yes	No
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If Yes, how did it support your well-being:

- Very unhelpful
- Unhelpful
- Neutral
- Moderately helpful
- Very helpful

Please elaborate on your selected answer

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14. Are you a problem-solver? 

Yes	No
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If Yes, how helpful was this towards the teaching challenges that you were exposed to?

- Very unhelpful
- Unhelpful
- Neutral
- Moderately helpful
- Very helpful

Please elaborate on your selected answer

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15. Are you a good communicator? 

Yes	No
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If Yes, how was this in sustaining a good relationship with your learners?

- Very unhelpful
- Unhelpful
- Neutral
- Moderately helpful
- Very helpful

Please elaborate on your selected answer

Page | 22



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16. Do you manage your time well? 

Yes	No
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If Yes, how was/has this been towards the workload that you had during the pandemic?

- Very unhelpful
- Unhelpful
- Neutral
- Moderately helpful
- Very helpful

Please elaborate on your selected answer

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17. Do you easily connect with other people? 

Yes	No
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If Yes, how helpful was this towards working with the parents of your learners:

- Very unhelpful
- Unhelpful
- Neutral
- Moderately helpful
- Very helpful

Please elaborate on your selected answer

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18. Are you easily approachable? 

Yes	No
-----	----

If Yes, how helpful was this in you being able to form a working relationship with the parents of your learners during the pandemic:

- Very unhelpful
- Unhelpful
- Neutral
- Moderately helpful
- Very helpful

Please elaborate on your selected answer

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19. Were you able to seek professional help (if needed) to help you deal with the psychological challenges that you experienced because of the pandemic? 

Yes	No
-----	----

If Yes, how was this towards your mental wellness:

- Very unhelpful
- Unhelpful
- Neutral
- Moderately helpful
- Very helpful

Page | 24

Please elaborate on your selected answer

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20. How was the school management towards helping you with any of the teaching challenges that you experienced because of the pandemic:

- Very unhelpful
- Unhelpful
- Neutral
- Moderately helpful
- Very helpful

21. How would you describe working from home to have been for you during the pandemic:

- Very unhelpful
- Unhelpful
- Neutral
- Moderately helpful
- Very helpful

22. Are you are a parent?

Yes	No
-----	----

If Yes, how would you say the challenges that you experienced during the pandemic were towards your own parenting:

- Very unhelpful
- Unhelpful
- Neutral

- Moderately helpful
- Very helpful

Please elaborate on your selected answer

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23. Which strategy did your school implement during the pandemic, and how did you experience this strategy:

Strategy	Very helpful	Unhelpful	Neutral	Moderately helpful	Very helpful
1. Rotational learning (Learners attending once or twice a week)					
2. Distance learning (online)					
3. Blended learning (Online and face to face)					
4. Platooning					

(when there are two teachers and learners using the same school building, for example, a classroom but at different times of the day)					
5. Bi-weekly model (where a group of learners from a specific grade would attend school on alternative weeks)					

24. Do you think that the closure of schools was helpful in containing the spread of the Corona virus?  Yes  No

If Yes, how helpful was this especially on your job as a teacher:

- Very unhelpful
- Unhelpful
- Neutral
- Moderately helpful
- Very helpful

Please elaborate on your selected answer

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25. Were you able to interact and engage with your colleagues during the hard lockdown?

Yes	No
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If No, how did you find this to be towards your need for moral support:

- Very unhelpful
- Unhelpful
- Neutral
- Moderately helpful
- Very helpful

Please elaborate on your selected answer below:

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26. Which strategies did you use to cope with the difficulties that you encountered in your educational setting during the Covid-19 pandemic, and how helpful were these strategies towards you navigating through the challenges:

Strategy	Very helpful	Unhelpful	Neutral	Moderately helpful	Very helpful
1. Physical activities e.g., running, walking					
2. Watching television					
3. Reading					
4. Confiding in a friend/family member					
5. Praying					

27. Which of the following attributes describe you, and how did these attributes contribute towards your well-being during the pandemic:

Personal Attribute	Very helpful	Unhelpful	Neutral	Moderately helpful	Very helpful
1. Hard working					
2. Optimistic					
3. Highly motivated					



4. Confident					
5. Dedicated					

28. When face to face classes resumed, were you given a teaching assistant in your classroom?

Yes	No
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If Yes, how helpful was the assistant in your class:

- Very unhelpful
- Unhelpful
- Neutral
- Moderately helpful
- Very helpful

Please elaborate on your selected answer below:

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29. Did you receive guidance on how to teach learners with special educational needs under the conditions of the pandemic?

Yes	No
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If Yes, how helpful has this guidance been:

- Very unhelpful
- Unhelpful
- Neutral
- Moderately helpful
- Very helpful

30. Do you think that the pandemic has helped you to re-think ways of teaching under different circumstances?

Yes	No
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If Yes, how has this been towards your skills development as a teacher:

- Very unhelpful
- Unhelpful
- Neutral
- Moderately helpful
- Very helpful

Please elaborate on your selected answer

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## APPENDIX I: EXAMPLES OF QUESTIONNAIRE TRANSCRIPTIONS AND CODING

**Question:** How would you describe the workload that you had during the COVID-19 pandemic?

**P1:** We had to make all policy and procedures with little knowledge of what to expect, so our workload increased.

**P2:** Working at school whilst in lockdown and having to prepare the classes for the return of the learners was a huge endeavour for all staff members. Making sure that the learners were all safe and protected during the pandemic always meant more consideration. We also had to make sure that the classrooms were safe for the learners to use each day. This meant that we had extra work throughout, and after each day. It was quite tiring.

**P3:** Planning the activities for learning packages for homework took hour on end. The hours spent were way over the 7 hours that we normally spend at school.

### Coding of data:

<i>Theme: Workload experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic</i>	
Participant	Extracts
P1	<i>We had to make all policy and procedures with little knowledge of what to expect, so our workload increased.</i>
P2	<i>Working at school whilst in lockdown and having to prepare the classes for the return of the learners was a huge endeavour for all staff members. Making sure that the learners were all safe and protected during the pandemic always meant more consideration. We also had to make sure that the classrooms were safe for the learners to use each day. This meant that we had extra work throughout, and after each day. It was quite tiring.</i>

- **Question: How would you describe having to stay optimistic for your learners during the pandemic to have been on your mental health?**

P2: Some days were harder than others, but my responsibility was to protect the learners, and to keep them in a safe place, mentally, physically and emotionally. However, I had to remain positive even if at times I privately felt overwhelmed.

P3: Some of my colleagues began to doubt themselves or their ability to perform/deliver their duties as teachers. Staying positive and optimistic as always had to be the norm on a daily basis.

P7: I don't think my level of motivation to overcome challenges was any higher in COVID-19 than during any other time period. Because I'm passionate in my job, I always try to overcome challenges and stay positive.

#### **Coding of data:**

<i>Theme: Lack of motivation to teach experienced by the participants of this study during the COVID-19 pandemic</i>	
<b>Participant</b>	<b>Extracts</b>
<i>P2</i>	<i>Some days were harder than others, but my responsibility was to protect the learners, and to keep them in a safe place, mentally, physically, and emotionally. However, I had to remain positive even if at times I privately felt overwhelmed.</i>
<i>P3</i>	<i>Some of my colleagues began to doubt themselves or their ability to perform/deliver their duties as teachers. Staying positive and optimistic as always had to be the norm on a daily basis.</i>
<i>P7</i>	<i>I don't think my level of motivation to overcome challenges was any higher in COVID-19 than during any other time period. Because I'm passionate in my job, I</i>

	<i>always try to overcome challenges and stay positive.</i>
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- **Question: How did you experience the added pressure of completing a shortened syllabus under short time constraints during the COVID-19 pandemic**

P3: Abridged syllabus was confusing and frustrating. The learning gaps were inevitable. It was evident enough that teachers had to adopt a new mindset or have a change of attitude, and work along to assume the new demand.

P4: The shortened syllabus was not demanding because with us the syllabus is spread to three years' work. If you can't finish term one, year one work then you will have to finish it in term one, year two.

P5: Curriculum was taught, but no learning took place.

#### Coding of data:

<i>Theme: Shortened syllabus during the COVID-19 pandemic</i>	
Participant	Extracts
<i>P1</i>	<i>Abridged syllabus was confusing and frustrating. The learning gaps were inevitable. It was evident enough that teachers had to adopt a new mindset or have a change of attitude, and work along to assume the new demand.</i>
<i>P2</i>	<i>The shortened syllabus was not demanding because with us the syllabus is spread to three years work. If you can't finish term one, year one work then you will have to finish it in term one, year two.</i>
<i>P3</i>	<i>Curriculum was taught, but no learning took place.</i>

## APPENDIX J: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



Faculty of Education

### Focus-group discussion questions

1. What teaching challenges have you/are you experiencing because of the Covid-19 pandemic?
2. How have these challenges affected your teaching profession?
3. In your own opinion how has the pandemic affected the education system of South Africa?
4. What support was given to special schools during the pandemic, and was it adequate?
5. Do you think that the effects of the pandemic are the same or different across mainstream schools, special schools, and full-service schools?
6. Do you think that teachers were given enough support during the Covid-19 hard lockdown?  
If not, in retrospect what support would you have suggested?

## APPENDIX K: EXAMPLES OF FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION AND CODING

**Question: What teaching challenges have you/are you experiencing because of the COVID-19 pandemic?**

P3 indicated that *“I come from a school that caters for learners in informal settlements so there was no WIFI, no internet. We struggled. Learners could not even come to school to come get their homework packs, because some of their parents don’t even have cell phones or they have not even provided the school with the correct cell phone numbers, or the numbers were not working.”*

P7 came from a school that was well-resourced, and she said *“At our school we really did not lack any resources. We really don’t have any complains about that. We bought resources for the learning packs that the learners would use at home, and we really had more than enough resources. We didn’t have any challenges with resources at our school”.*

### Coding of data:

Theme: Lack of resources in schools during the COVID-19 pandemic	
Participant	Extract
P3	<i>“I come from a school that caters for learners in informal settlements so there was no WIFI, no internet. We struggled. Learners could not even come to school to come get their homework packs, because some of their parents don’t even have cell phones or they have not even provided the school with the correct cell phone numbers, or the numbers were not working.”</i>
P7	<i>“At our school we really did not lack any resources. We really don’t have any complains about that. We bought</i>

	<p><i>resources for the learning packs that the learners would use at home, and we really had more than enough resources. We didn't have any challenges with resources at our school".</i></p>
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**Coding of data:**

Theme: Adhering to the SIAS policy document	
Participant	Extract
P3	<p><i>"Since there were no learners there were no screening, no identification, no assessment, and no support because there were no learners. By the time the learners came back the teachers were grabbing them. They just wanted to fill the learning gap. So, the SIAS process was not followed".</i></p>
P7	<p><i>"Well, we are at the end of the chain where the learners have been identified for individual support, and we provide the support. Our viewpoint is a bit different to that of other schools. It was very difficult for us to render support to our learners because at first, we had no learners, and when the learners returned only half of the learners were present. So, in terms of the learners not being there at all then it was huge challenge to offer appropriate support. But we tried to support the learners with food banks. Our support</i></p>



	<p><i>was more in terms of food provision, not academic support”.</i></p>
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## APPENDIX L: EXAMPLE OF RESEARCHER JOURNAL NOTES

- **Day 1 of data collection (interviews and completion of questionnaire)**

*Going to the first school where I collected my data made me feel nervous. This was because I had never collected data on my own before. When I initially contacted the school and spoke to the principal, I came across a very nice principal who was friendly and willing to listen to my request about collecting data from some of the teachers at the school. The principal was also knowledgeable about data collection processes and conducting research because she had completed her PhD in her earlier years of life.*

*Upon her approval of me coming to the school to collect data we set a day and time for when I was to come to the school. She also indicated that she would ask the teachers at the school to participate in the study.*

*On the day of the data collection, I got to the school, and found that two teachers had volunteered to participate in the study. I was happy about this, because I had wanted to get the experiences of two different teachers who were teaching at the same school. The introduction and rapport were established with the participants, and they also understand what the study was about; the expectations that I had of them as participants in the study, and the rights that they had as participants in the study.*

*I first conducted an interview with one of the teachers. When we first started with the interview the teacher was quite uneasy, and she spoke in a very soft, and low voice. She seemed a bit nervous, and uncomfortable. However, this changed as the interview continued. She started opening about the challenges that she experienced and got emotional as she recalled some of the things that she encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic.*

*I was particularly touched when the participant shared her experiences regarding her the status of her health which was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. She experienced a lot of health challenges, and even though I did not know her personally, I was proud of her for surviving all the health challenges that she experienced during the pandemic.*

*The participant was particularly emotional when I asked her questions regarding how her emotional and physical well-being was affected because of the COVID-19*

*pandemic. I was however very sympathetic, and I allowed her to express her emotions without holding back.*

*Then after the interview she completed the questionnaire. The participants made a comment about not expecting the questionnaire to be this long (65 questions), but she managed to fill out the questionnaire having only asked for clarity on two questions.*

*Then I interviewed the second participant. This participant was very eager to share her experiences about the challenges that she encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic. I really enjoyed interviewing the participant but found that at times she would derail a little bit from the questions that I had posed to her. In such cases I then had to repeat the question to her, so that I could get an answer to the direct question that I had asked her.*

*What I also identified from this participant was that she was very passionate about her role as a special education teacher. She loved her job, and the children that she was teaching. After the interview, the participant completed the questionnaire. As she was completing the questionnaire, she indicated that some of the questions on the questionnaire were not applicable to their school as they referred to online teaching and learning. This which was not implemented by the school.*

*After completing the questionnaire, the participant invited me to her class. When we got to her class, she introduced me to her learners and showed me some of the prompts that she uses in her class to teach these learners, and how she had to continue teaching her learners during the classroom.*

*The classroom that she took me in had around 12 learners, and it was not a very big classroom. This was concerning for me as I wondered how she was able to ensure that her learners kept a distance from each other during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, she was a very hands-on teacher who paid attention to all her learners and created a warm learning space.*

*After seeing her classroom, I was then invited to go see the playground that all the learners of the school played at during lunchtime. The playground was very neat, well-resourced, and the learners were well-behaved.*

*I enjoyed collecting data at this school from these participants, and I learnt a lot from the experience.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> The researcher journal notes were directly taken from the hand-written notes that the researcher noted down during the data collection.