

# Experiences of transformational leaders practising social-emotional learning in a time of crisis<sup>1</sup>

Mariska van Reenen, University of Johannesburg, South Africa

Paul Triegaardt, University of Johannesburg, South Africa

## ABSTRACT

*This research focused on investigating how adopting a Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) approach to leadership influenced the learning culture in low-decile Limpopo, South African schools amid the challenges posed by the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) crisis. The study employed the Head, Heart, and Hands Transformational Leadership Model as its theoretical framework. Through workshops with school leaders, the researchers gathered the leaders' experiences and insights, revealing the difficulties faced by them during the pandemic and the strategies they employed to ensure continuous learning. The study underscores the significance of SEL in fostering mindfulness, self-mastery, and effective communication and relationship-building skills. The researchers recommend providing SEL training for school leaders and integrating SEL into teacher training programmes. Ultimately, the study contributes to advancing both theory and practice in the realm of SEL leadership, particularly in crises.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19, crisis management, head hearts and hands, ongoing staff training, staff wellbeing, transformational leadership, social-emotional learning

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

On 25 March 2020, the COVID-19 epidemic in South Africa resulted in a lockdown, due to the high rates of infections and all schools in the province of Limpopo were forced to close (Amnesty International, 2021). This made the role of leaders more difficult, but the principals did not give up and in this time of crisis, they still had hope. Protocols for COVID-19, rotational timetables, concerns about learning losses, inability to cover the curriculum, anxiety, despair, stress and burnout were all evident in schools (Ozamiz-Extebarria, Mondragon & Santamaria, 2021). Even though principals are not psychologists and have to support others while dealing with similar traumas themselves, they were forced to develop social-emotional learning (SEL) plans without any prior training. The SEL approach to leadership that forms the basis for a sustainable culture of learning can only be maintained through a pedagogy of care (Bergmark, 2020). There were few school leaders at the time who were prepared to lead schools through a crisis of this magnitude. At the time, there were no guidelines readily available for principals. The requirement for wellness and psychosocial support for principals and their teams was critical.

---

<sup>1</sup> Date of Submission: 9 August 2023  
Date of Review Outcome: 30 October 2023  
Date of Acceptance: 9 February 2024

The Sandbox Project reports on school principals' experiences in different schools throughout the Waterberg District using different SEL approaches because of the pandemic. Researchers in Sandbox have been exploring what 'education in a fast-changing world' (Yassim, 2021: 18) could look like in South African public schools. The Sandbox Project aims to conduct more research and share findings with school leaders to offer feedback to the sector and expand the evidence base about education in a rapidly changing world (EDHUB, 2021). In the role of leading schools during a crisis, school leaders were prompted to start looking at their policies and to make amendments, thereby creating opportunities for management, teachers and learners to learn more about SEL. After learning about SEL, it was evident that leaders were more equipped and empowered to manage and sustain a supportive and effective culture of learning.

The study was exploratory in nature since it reports on leadership practices adopted during uncharted times when virtually every aspect of life was threatened (Guterres, 2020). In this study, leaders were approached about the challenges they experienced and the innovations they implemented to guarantee that learning continued throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The main aim of this study was to identify SEL approaches to leadership that can positively transform the culture of learning in low-decile schools in Limpopo, South Africa. The deliberate focus on low-decile Limpopo schools in this research study was motivated by a commitment to addressing educational challenges in a targeted manner. By concentrating on a specific context, the study aimed to provide nuanced insights and tailored recommendations that directly resonate with the unique circumstances faced by schools in this region. While this focused approach may limit the generalisability of the findings to a broader educational landscape, it simultaneously enhances the study's depth and relevance to the identified context. Acknowledging this specific scope is not a limitation but a strategic choice, ensuring that the research outcomes are rooted in the reality of low-decile Limpopo schools, thereby contributing to more targeted and impactful interventions in similar global settings.

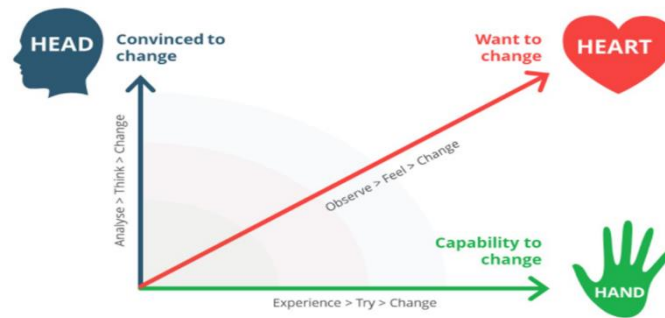
The theoretical perspective below provides the perspective through which the researcher interpreted the experiences and approaches of the school leaders in the study.

## THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

A Head, Heart, and Hands (HHH) perspective on transformational learning was used in this study as the theoretical lens through which the results were analysed. In this study, leaders were approached about the challenges they experienced and the innovations they implemented to guarantee that learning continued throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. This article explores the experiences of transformational leaders practising SEL in a time of crisis. SEL is the development of mindfulness, self-mastery and the skills to communicate and build relationships with others that are essential to being successful academically as well as in everyday life (Page, 2019). There are many references to SEL, such as 21st-century skills, managing emotions, thinking critically and managing relationships, just to name a few (Jones & Doolittle, 2017).

As part of this holistic approach to understanding the experiences of transformational leaders practising SEL in a time of crisis, the intellectual (head), emotional (heart) and practical aspects (hands) are involved. In this model, mindfulness, belonging, and deep engagement are essential for transformation to occur. The HHH model was needed so that school leaders and teachers could recognise the importance of ensuring that children have access to good education (Singleton, 2015). The HHH transformational model was used as the theoretical frame for this study to uncover and analyse the leadership skills required during times of crisis as well as how efficient leadership prepares for pandemics and other disasters. This model illustrates the holistic nature of transformational experience as it links critical reflection (head), relationship (heart) and engagement (hands) to the learning environment (hands). Figure 1 illustrates the HHH Transformational Model in more detail.

Figure 1:  
The HHH Transformational Model (The Head, Heart and Hands Concept Model 2021)



The most important queries stakeholders may have about the strategic transformation process are answered by this model. What are the problems, what needs to change, who is responsible for the change, and how will it be accomplished? As a result, teachers and leaders could gain a deeper understanding of problems and get staff and learners on board with a solution. All stakeholders are encouraged to work towards a common objective by balancing their heads, hearts and hands (The Head, Heart and Hands Concept Model, 2021). This model illustrates the holistic nature of transformational experience as it links critical reflection (head), relationship (heart) and engagement (hands) to the learning environment (hands). Furthermore, incorporating SEL principles into leadership practices not only sheds light on the experiences of school leaders but also emphasises the transformative capacity of SEL in moulding educational environments, as elucidated in the literature review.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review delves deeper into existing scholarly literature and theoretical frameworks related to the role of principals in educational change. It draws on various sources such as the HHH theoretical framework, scholarly articles on leadership in education and studies on the psychological state of teachers during the pandemic.

### Transformational leadership as a social-emotional learning leadership approach

The leadership style of principals has a significant impact on the professional well-being of teachers, as the literature indicates that principals' leadership styles impact the professional well-being of teachers. In addition, teachers' well-being has a significant effect on learners' performance. As a result, it is crucial to explore leadership styles and how principals can inspire SEL that will positively impact teachers' well-being and enhance students' performance (Kok, 2018). Principals must be leaders not only in their schools but also in their communities and learning should be encouraged outside of the classroom. Since the role of educational leadership in school performance is seen as one of the most significant factors in enhancing effectiveness in the classroom, good leadership promotes a school's learning culture (Cambridge International Examinations, 2015).

Leaders of learning are likely to consider, study and implement the HHH transformational model as they reflect on the experiences and events of 2020 following the pandemic that is expected to continue into the near future. This article highlights the importance of transformational leadership competencies to be considered for the HHH model described by Anderman and Anderman (2020) since these competencies influence leadership approaches to managing a crisis. Effective leadership is crucial to the maintenance and growth of organisations in extraordinary times. School leaders must be capable of transformational leadership for such leadership to be recognised. Transformational leadership is defined as a situation in

which the management and employees empower and influence each other's behaviour to achieve a common goal (Louw, Muriithi & Radloff, 2018). Efforts by transformational leaders have been shown to generate positive outcomes for the organisation by engaging their workers to support active behaviours (Lai, Tang & Lu, 2020). The language used by Freire challenges us to think about leadership in urban settings in 'terms of love, humility, faith and hope' (Miller, Brown & Hopson, 2016: 1078). Employees under transformational leadership have a higher positive effect on external job satisfaction, according to a study conducted by Lan et al. (2019). The outcome of this study highlights the importance of transformational leadership in improving employees' job atmosphere and as a result, making them more competitive in the education industry. Furthermore, according to the research of Baker (2019), transformational leadership promotes interconnectedness, empathy and engagement. In this sense, school leaders must ensure that transformational leadership is used continuously during and beyond COVID-19 to stay current with changes that will have a long-term influence on our world. In the findings of a research study on the effect of readiness to change and the importance of transformational leadership on employees' performance during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was concluded that transformational leadership has a positive and significant influence on employees' change readiness, pioneering the chance to advance employee readiness in facing the emergence of the industrial era (Zaman et al., 2020).

### **Transformational leadership's effectiveness in maintaining and sustaining a positive culture of social-emotional learning**

Learners must acquire social and emotional skills to form meaningful relationships, make sound decisions, communicate effectively and participate constructively in society. Teachers and school leaders must grasp that the development of resilient, productive and responsible citizens is about much more than academic accomplishment (Millard & McIntosh, 2020). To encourage social-emotional development in the classroom, school leaders must uphold high ethical standards for themselves, learners, teachers and parents. As a result, more meaningful interactions with staff members are likely to form, leading to enhanced SEL practices and outcomes (Bowers, Lemberger-Truelove & Brigman, 2018). Personal change, self-care and self-empowerment are the prerequisites for many changes. If school leaders wish to establish trust and empathy with their personnel, they should examine their communication and decision-making processes (Issah, 2018). According to a study by Sezer and Uzun (2020), SEL leadership behaviours have a favourable impact on teachers' organisational commitment and performance outcomes. It applied to my study since trust and transformation are crucial components of a successful learning environment. Principals can have a strong influence on their school's learning culture by implementing practices that encourage cooperation and transformation as well as adapting leadership styles that foster an environment of care, compassion and emotional attachment (Dinsdale, 2017).

During and after COVID-19, school leaders should widen their professional development horizons. Self-examination in terms of evaluating stress management practices and improving leadership in terms of how they can improve employees' motivation and job satisfaction should all be part of a school principal's leadership development. The role they play can create safe learning environments and encourage cooperative teaching to prepare learners with the skills they need to succeed academically and emotionally (Costa & Ostariz, 2019). Despite the numerous and unmapped challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, this unprecedented period also offers numerous opportunities for transformation to take place from principals which include reviewing, re-evaluating and strengthening their technology integration (head); reflecting on their upward approaches and creating opportunities for social connectedness within and between teachers (heart); and connecting and creating stronger ecosystems of support and partnership with wider institutions (hands) (Bagwell, 2020).

## METHODOLOGY

The tools used to conduct research are highlighted in the research design. This study was a qualitative case study that investigated the phenomena of crisis-driven school leadership (in this case the COVID-19 pandemic). Qualitative research is based on the perspectives of the study participants rather than the path in which the literature directs the researcher (Creswell, 2012). This research design allowed for a more in-depth examination of the phenomenon. Phenomenology examines the experience itself as well as how living through that experience or situation affects and changes one's knowledge (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Participants in phenomenological research encounter experiences and events differently depending on their perspectives and assumptions (Ary, Jacobs & Sorensen, 2010).

A paradigm is a collection of beliefs, viewpoints or ways of thinking that determine how evidence is interpreted and examined during a research investigation (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). The research paradigm is a conceptual lens that unpacks the methodology of the research being conducted. It also directs how the information will be assessed and presented in the conclusions (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). This study employed an interpretivist paradigm (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) which allowed participants to construct meaning from the event through communication between the researcher and the participants (Creswell, 2012). Interpretivism and qualitative research are inextricably linked since one is a methodological approach and the other is a technique for gathering data. Rather than relying on numbers or statistics, researchers that use the interpretivist paradigm and qualitative methodologies frequently seek out individual experiences, understandings and perceptions for their research to discover reality (Thanh & Thanh, 2015).

Purposeful sampling was used to choose the principals for this investigation. This method of sampling was chosen to provide the researcher with access to as many different types of participants as possible, allowing them to gain as much information and insight as feasible (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). School leaders from poor schools in Limpopo, South Africa were approached as part of this investigation to see how they led their schools and staff members during a time of crisis - COVID-19. For the study, two principals participated in a three-hour online Zoom workshop demonstrating SEL approaches to leadership during COVID-19. Due to time and resource constraints, only two out of a potential four participants were able to participate in the study. The decision to have a sample size of only two participants was made after thoughtful consideration of the research question, methodology and available resources, ensuring that the study remains both feasible and meaningful.

To gather data for the study, participants used visual participatory research instruments (metaphor drawing and photovoice pieces) as part of the workshops. To collect data for this study, the workshops were recorded, and the visual artefacts and discussions were analysed. With a small group of participants, the researcher formed stronger, closer bonds with them which resulted in more natural conversations and better data.

The phenomenological study explored the experiences of school leaders in low-decile schools in Limpopo, South Africa and how they led their schools during and after the global pandemic underpinned by the HHH transformational model. Participant 1 had been the deputy principal at School A for more than 10 years. Participant 2 had been the principal at School B for 33 years. Both participants were female school leaders at low-decile primary schools in Limpopo, South Africa.

Data were collected via a three-hour workshop with the respective staff members, online via Zoom. The workshop included the following activities:

- Welcome and introduction done by the researcher
- Discussion of leader experiences during COVID-19 conducted by the participants
- Metaphor drawings completed by the participants

- Individual discussions of drawings to explore the school leaders' SEL approach to leadership by the participants, researcher and professor who was present in the workshop
- Group consensus from drawing discussions conducted by the participants in collaboration with the researcher and professor present
- Explanation of the photovoice activity required to be submitted to the researcher by a given deadline.

The workshop included open-ended questions as well as the use of metaphor drawings and photovoice activities to gain specific information from each participant's unique perspective and experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Participants were asked to explain how they viewed and implemented an SEL approach to leadership in their respective schools. Experiences were shared in the discussions about how each participant guided their schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. The school leaders also elaborated on the previous versus the current culture of learning at their schools, their staff members' well-being, and the challenges they were facing in the mammoth task of leading in a crisis.

Photovoice is a participatory research approach that allows participants to describe their environments and practices with a collection of photos or videos. There was a discussion and interpretation of the results to establish an understanding, create awareness and stimulate community change (Hannes & Wang, 2020). Participants were asked to take photographs that had literal and symbolic meanings which represented their individual experiences with SEL approaches from a HHH transformational perspective. Participants took photos of things that resonated with their leadership methods. The participants then provided feedback on their perspectives and narratives.

This study involved multiple forms of data collection. This practice is known as triangulation and increases the reliability of conclusions drawn by the researcher (Portney & Watkins, 2015).-This study employed multiple methods to ensure triangulation which increases the reliability of the conclusions drawn by the researcher. The methods used for triangulation in this study included:

- Metaphor drawings: Participants in the study created metaphor drawings to represent their perspectives and experiences with SEL approaches. These drawings provided one set of data for the study.
- Photovoice activities: Participants were asked to take photographs that had literal and symbolic meanings related to their leadership methods and experiences with SEL approaches. These photographs served as another source of data for the study.
- Online Zoom workshop: The workshop included open-ended questions and discussions with the participants about their views and implementation of SEL approaches in their schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. The verbal feedback and voice notes provided during the workshop acted as important sources of data.
- Transcripts of discussions: The recorded discussions from the online workshop were transcribed and analysed to identify themes and sub-themes related to the experiences of transformational leaders practising SEL in a time of crisis.

By using these different methods of data collection, the study aimed to reduce bias and increase the reliability of the findings.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Different data sets were thematically analysed to obtain the themes in relation to the phenomenon – experiences of transformational leaders practising SEL in a time of crisis (Creswell, 2012). The study interpreted this knowledge using the HHH theoretical framework and scholarly literature to determine the role of the principals in this process. The transcripts of the discussions, metaphor drawings and

photovoice activities to formulate relevant codes and themes from the data pertaining to the topic were interpreted (Creswell, 2012).

The researcher evaluated the results by applying labels in the transcripts to identify themes as part of the coding procedure (Creswell, 2012). In addition, the researcher conducted the workshop from a neutral stance to gain information. The researcher made sure that the data decoding was done within the parameters of their intended function, which included understanding the participants' thoughts and protecting their identities as warranted (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Two main themes emerged after the data were analysed, namely (1) Collaborative school culture, and (2) Social and emotional development of staff and students during a crisis. These themes are discussed next.

## DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

The pandemic created significant disruptions to education, introducing a myriad of both logistical and emotional challenges that required urgent attention. The research findings highlight the importance of SEL strategies and the need for school leaders to understand and implement these for effective management during global crises. The research underscores the pivotal role of school leaders in driving change, managing crises and maintaining a culture of learning. The two main themes and insights derived from qualitative data analysis are discussed below.

### *Theme 1: Collaborative school culture*

The data suggest that the leaders of Schools A and B had to apply transformational leadership principles to gain the commitment of their staff to such a degree that high levels of accomplishment could become a moral imperative. Both participants explained the importance of involving all stakeholders to understand the changes that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the schools.

Participant 1 stated the following:

You know, putting all these changes in place is with the help of educators, the help of the SMT, the help of the department – everybody is putting a hand and that is why it is easier.

### *Photovoice Piece 1 'Sharing and Collaborating' – Participant 1*

#### **Sharing and Collaborating**

*I attended training, where now I realised that you know, caring for an individual, collaboration, sharing ideas, togetherness; that is where you can do good. At School A, our teachers respond with being hands-on; they help whenever they can.*



*Photograph and narrative by Participant 1*

Participant 2 in agreement with Participant 1 gave the following explanation in one of the photovoice pieces:

### Collaboration

*We hold an SMT meeting to learn some of the challenges we are going to face during the COVID-19 pandemic. Allocation of duties was done. We moved out from traditional timetable to rotational timetable. We attend a visual meeting to get the curriculum from the department. Teachers show relationship skills by working together as a team. Shared ideas among the SMT, teachers and learners.*



*Photograph and narrative by Participant 2*

The study revealed that a transformative leadership strategy should involve all stakeholders supporting SEL. The goals of leaders and followers should converge to the point where it is reasonable to expect a happy relationship and genuine convergence leading to agreed-upon solutions (Coll, 2018). The HHH framework highlights the holistic character of transformative experiences by integrating the intellectual (head) into deep thought, the emotion (heart) into factors in the development and the physical aspect (hands), to commitment to collaboration during challenging times (Singleton, 2015). The HHH model encapsulates the multi-faceted character of transformative processes as well as the relevance of the learning context. The environment of the educational setting provides a framework of real-world experience for deeper reflection, feelings of connectedness and stimulus control, all of which operate as motivators for the close connection and collaboration crucial for transformation, especially during and after something like a global pandemic (Quinlan, 2014). School leaders and teachers have a responsibility and an opportunity to broaden their understanding of transformational leadership to provide a more comprehensive view of the HHH Transformational Leadership Model.

During the COVID-19 crisis, transformational leadership became the general reaction, necessitating more educational leaders and managers to engage, communicate, discuss and navigate their way through the difficulties (Harris, Azorin & Jones, 2021). Effective school leadership is nowadays interconnected, cooperative, creative and adaptable by demand rather than by planning. Transformational leadership has respective underlying value-based styles of guidance. This leadership style has a noteworthy existing value system and when implemented correctly, it can increase team effectiveness and promote good governance.

Social support and interaction are included as important elements of a positive organisational culture that leads to improved organisational readiness for change – meaning that positive influences can facilitate an environment more encouraging to individual willingness and openness for an organisation's change involvement and supportiveness (Madsen, Miller & John, 2015). Key people's readiness for change (such as the school's management team) will act as a mediator in the relationship between employees' perceptions of cultural orientation and their subsequent implementation of the new standard operating procedures.

Both participants agreed that at the beginning of the pandemic, they did not know much about the outbreak, stigmatisation and all the new protocols required. The sub-theme of creating a supportive and effective culture of learning was therefore divided into two separate points of discussion. Firstly, school leaders had to identify the need for professional experts to educate them as well as their teachers and learners about the Coronavirus itself.



Social-emotional learning (SEL) is demonstrably important in academic achievement in schools, universities, employment and beyond, according to research. A growing number of schools and districts around the world appreciate the significance of SEL, but many are unsure where it belongs – whether as an intervention programme or as a supplement to already overburdened academic content. Hood (2020) argues that the difference with SEL is that most professionals have not taken emotional intelligence classes or participated in programmes designed to improve their social-emotional skills. This creates a divide and makes implementation much more difficult, as many teachers and leaders are not confident in their own ability to represent, promote and present the information to others. If schools and districts are serious about putting SEL first in the classroom, they will have to figure out how to put it first in staff meetings, SMT meetings and throughout the organisation. Adults, such as school leaders are the first to benefit from SEL. This is not something we simply hand out to students. Furthermore, the school principals had to find out how to avoid stigmatisation and build supportive relationships with each other. The following photovoice segment and metaphorical drawing depict the assistance and contributions that schools used.

*Photovoice Piece 2 'Getting professional support and guidance' – Participant 1*

**Getting Professional Support and Guidance**

*We also invited psychologists who can help with the educators. The psychologists were the ones sitting there talking to the educators, to make them aware you know, mentally because they were affected mentally and emotionally. This just helped to bring them back to the school environment. To say you're one of us, you belong somewhere, don't feel alone. The psychologists spoke to all teachers and then the stigma was removed.*



*Photograph and narrative by Participant 1*

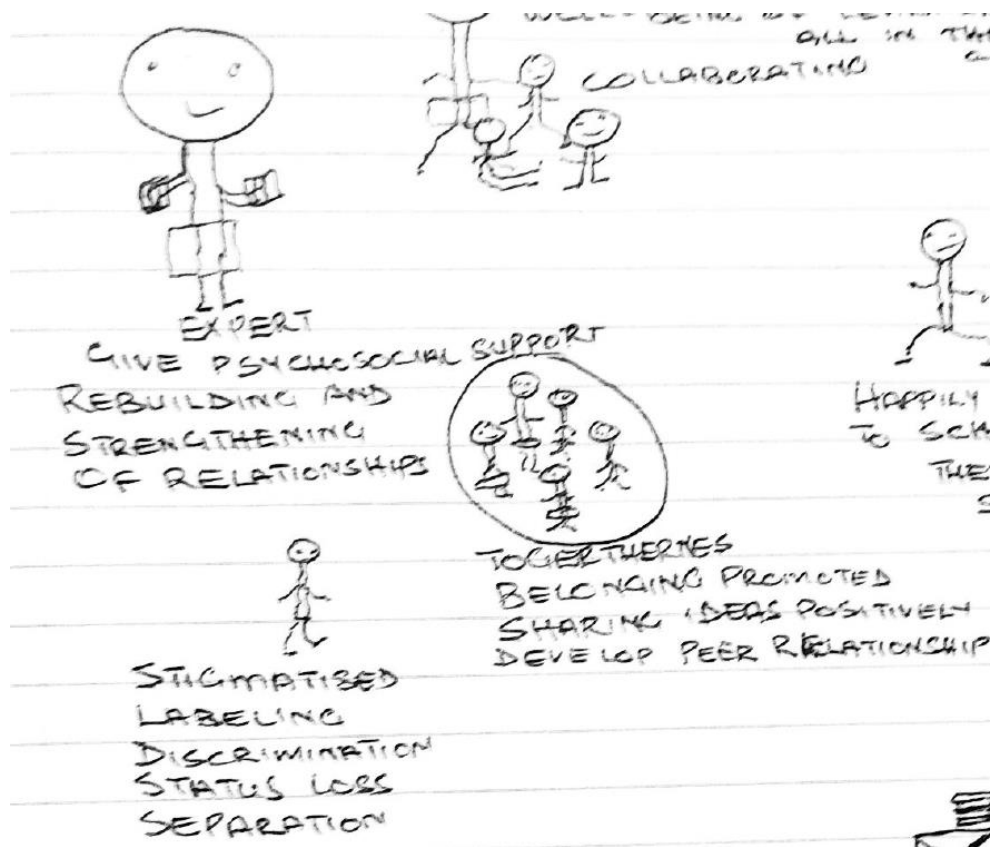
Participant 2 corroborated the importance of ongoing professional support and training regarding COVID-19 protocols for people to understand and implement the rules (workshop lines 233 – 236):

People are still holding on to the old mentality to say even go to, you know, a field where somebody passed on due to COVID, then you'll also get sick. But now we got PPE, sanitisers, and protocols to protect us. They give us an idea that you know, you must not run away.

Participant 1 passionately reiterated collaboration:

It is important to share one mind; one goal – it makes it easier for people when we spread the same vision to everyone. I think if these experts can do more talks, the community and South Africa will be a better place for everyone. For example, the community is so afraid that they can't even come to the funeral because they think they'll get sick you know. I think it is important for the information to be spread to all the people around us. I think then we will be able to do a lot to minimise the stigma and stuff.

Participant 1: Metaphor Drawing: 'Expert help'



Secondly, the findings of the study also revealed that school leaders had to familiarise themselves with all standard operating procedures which led them to realise that they must be extra strict with discipline and supervision as necessary steps to mitigate any harmful factors. Wangaard, Elias and Fink (2014) state that we must acknowledge more than just the head component of the academic offering to meet the demands placed on the educational system. According to their research, the heart and head elements must be included to achieve the best educational practices. Within these networks, school leaders must empower communities to form relationships with one another (heart) and to develop a high standard of behavioural competence (hand). The holistic education of learners' heads, hearts and hands, it is concluded, would result in genuine preparation for school and life success. The lack of including SEL pre-COVID was exposed in this study. The participants, however, acknowledged that they found the means to support their staff and offer them the required training, as highlighted previously. The most responsible approach to accomplish substantial results is a strategic approach to execute the intended goals of moral education, SEL and holistic development by engaging the HHH of our teachers and learners (Shaikh & Lachman, 2021), which leads to transformation. The next theme involves an exploration of strategies and initiatives aimed at fostering the emotional intelligence, interpersonal skills and overall well-being of both educators and learners within an educational setting. This foundational approach recognises the critical role that social and emotional competencies play in creating a positive and conducive learning environment.

*Theme 2: Social and emotional development of staff and students during a crisis*

The findings of the study revealed that a crisis provides an opportunity for school leaders to reflect and learn to create something better within a school or organisation going forward. Effective learning can only take place in a safe environment (Joubert, 2017). For this reason, safety orientation was a priority

at schools. Participants responded with a variety of rules and protocols they have at their schools to create as safe an environment as possible.

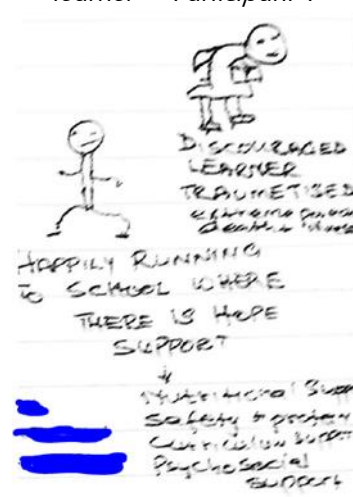
Schools in Limpopo, South Africa needed to build learning structures that would pay special attention to social and emotional components, in addition to obtaining expert guidance and assistance in terms of personal protective equipment and COVID-19 standard operating procedures (Magampa et al., 2018). It is critical to consider the reality of unequal opportunities which was highlighted in the government's measures in South Africa (conducting classes via online platforms; radio and television not being accessible to all learners across the country); these inequalities should aid in re-evaluating how crisis education preparation can be inclusive across all provinces and socio-economic backgrounds (Kamga, 2020).

Participants agreed that being isolated with restricted resources, along with the fear of developing COVID-19, negatively affected learners and teachers mentally.

In Figure 1, Participant 1 explained (workshop lines 112–127):

There comes a learner who is very much discouraged. The learner was traumatised. The learner comes from extreme poverty and illnesses that the learners need to be attended to. By the leadership at school, educators and everybody here – they must empathise with him. You'll see, he is running happily to school where is support and nutritional support. He runs to a place where safety is seen as protection given in curriculum support and psychosocial support. The child will be happy to be away from home where there is no hope. A parent might have died or have the illness, or they know someone who is very ill due to the coronavirus. But the child will need to go to a place where there are people who can sympathise. To hold their hand and give him support. And then that child who is never interested in schoolwork; now know that to remain or stay at home is not effective; because he knows that he suffered but that he can get help from the school he is attending. In School A, we practice togetherness.

Figure 1:  
*Metaphor Drawing: 'Discouraged learner getting support results in a happy and motivated learner' – Participant 1*

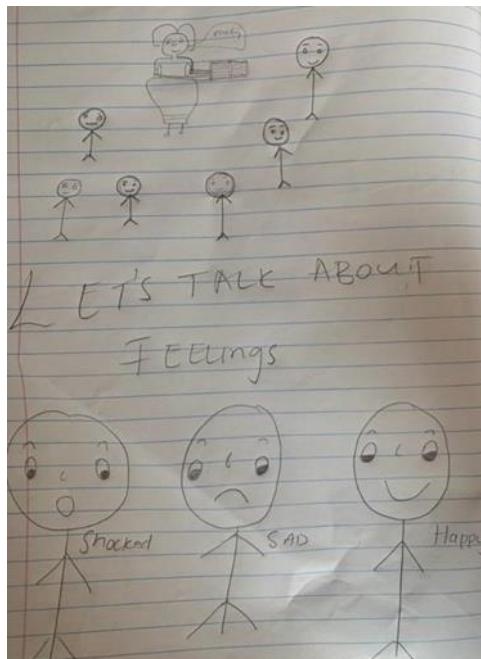


In agreement with Participant 1, Participant 2 confirmed that emotional learning is very important. She elaborated on her metaphor drawing (Figure 2) in workshop lines 345–354:

The first one you see is learners with me. As a leader, I'm conducting research based on the challenges we are in contact with during this difficult time. As per the picture, learners are sharing

their views on how COVID-19 has impacted them emotionally. Due to COVID-19, some learners were able to build positive relationships such as working in teams and dealing with conflict effectively. Even the educators are showing understanding and empathy to each other as each, and understand every learner has their challenges and emotions. As per the picture, a discussion was made regarding this decision-making. Stories were shared among these learners. Problems were identified and is part of emotional learning.

Figure 2:  
*Metaphor Drawing: 'Let's talk about feelings' – Participant 2*



Specifically, the pandemic's ambiguity and imperceptibility generated an adverse reaction among both learners and teachers. The South African government, therefore, needs to act rapidly to make online learning a reality for future crises, particularly for rural learners who would require assistance in accessing and benefiting from this relatively new learning experience. Schools and colleges should also be given resources so that they may design SEL programmes that are motivated by context-specific needs (Landa, Zhou & Marongwe, 2021) which would result in transformed organisations. While this study aims to contribute valuable insights to the field, it is essential to recognise and address certain limitations inherent in the research design. Both researchers and readers need to be aware of the constraints discussed next as they shape the boundaries within which the study's conclusions can be applied and interpreted.

#### LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The participants were working unprecedented hours to facilitate learning during the pandemic, and they were not available during the academic school term to participate in the online Zoom workshop. The workshop session then had to be scheduled during the school holiday, which resulted in the original planning of having two respective workshops combined into only one session. Consequently, the participants were asked to complete the photovoice activity by a certain deadline. They were asked to submit their photos and voice notes to explain the meaning of each photo. One of the participants was overwhelmed with commitments and often had a delayed response time regarding her photovoice pieces because of unplanned power outages. In South Africa, when a power station is unable to meet the demand for electricity, certain parts of the grid experience power cuts as a protective measure for power-generating assets, a practice known as loadshedding. The heightened frequency of loadshedding

sessions in South Africa posed resource and time constraints and contributed to limited contact opportunities with the participants. The COVID-19 pandemic is not over (during the time of writing this paper); therefore, the full social and emotional effects on learners, teachers and school leaders cannot be fully comprehended or quantified yet. A phenomenon such as post-traumatic stress disorder can only be studied when the pandemic has passed and school leaders who are living through this crisis have passed through all the changes resulting from the effects of the pandemic. The study focused on low-decile primary schools in Limpopo Province, South Africa and the findings are limited to these schools.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

While schools have various policies in place, such as health and safety, curriculum aspects and human resources, among others, the principals in these low-decile primary schools in Limpopo, South Africa were not fully aware of what an SEL policy requires in terms of a transformational approach when leading during a changing world, such as was the case with COVID-19. This led to the following two recommendations.

### Recommendation 1

The Limpopo Province Department of Education policies for teacher training should include guidelines on counselling and psychosocial difficulties. Schools in Limpopo, South Africa should also develop and implement learning systems that promote social and emotional development. In addition, principals should get additional training on the skills teachers need to regulate their own emotions and effectively deal with the stress that will come with their responsibilities. The Limpopo Province Department of Education should include counselling in their teacher training programme and an example is the healing circles which can be implemented at school, circuit and district levels.

### Recommendation 2

Principals should be allowed to undergo SEL training as a leadership approach and this should become a requirement for all school principals. This blueprint of crisis management from an SEL perspective will assist school leaders with their preparedness during a crisis, as they will have the skills to manage and communicate in extreme circumstances. The training can be provided by professional experts, such as trauma counsellors, psychologists and social workers. Training can be done at the school management level as well as with teachers and learners. This could lead to school leaders and teachers who will be better equipped with resilience and transformational skills to manage trauma and crises better.

## SUGGESTIONS: AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Some potential avenues for future research on SEL leadership during crises could include:

- Examining the long-term effects of SEL leadership during crises: Research could investigate the lasting impact of SEL approaches on the mental health and well-being of learners, staff and school leaders even after a crisis has passed.
- Exploring the evolution of SEL frameworks post-crisis: Research could explore how SEL approaches may need to be adapted or modified considering the lessons learnt during a crisis. This could involve examining whether the same theoretical frameworks and strategies are still applicable or if new approaches are needed.
- Developing an SEL blueprint for future crises: Research could focus on creating a comprehensive SEL blueprint that can serve as a reference for school leaders in managing and leading during future crises. This blueprint could apply to both private and public institutions and guide effective SEL strategies and interventions.

- Exploring contrasting views and challenges experienced by school leaders during the implementation of SEL strategies during and after a crisis period.

### CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF THEORY AND PRACTICE

This study contributes to the development of theory and practice in the field of SEL leadership during crises in several ways:

- The study highlights the importance of SEL approaches in leadership during a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. It emphasises the need for leaders to be compassionate, communicative and empathic in building relationships with learners and participating in ongoing training on SEL and staff well-being.
- The study introduces the HHH Transformational Leadership Model as a theoretical framework for understanding and implementing SEL approaches during crises. This model emphasises mindfulness, belonging and deep engagement as essential elements for transformation to occur.
- The study provides insights into the challenges faced by school leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic and the innovative solutions they implemented to ensure that learning continued. It highlights the role of SEL in supporting and sustaining a supportive and effective culture of learning during crises.
- The study offers recommendations for policy and practice, such as including guidelines on counselling and psychosocial difficulties in teacher training programmes, implementing learning systems that promote social and emotional development and providing SEL training for school principals.
- Overall, this study contributes to the understanding of how SEL leadership can positively impact the learning culture during crises and provides practical recommendations for implementing SEL approaches in educational settings.

### CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to highlight some of the challenges faced and solutions implemented by school leaders as they led their institutions through the COVID-19 pandemic. In the role of leading schools during a crisis, school leaders were prompted to start looking at their policies and to make amendments to opportunities for management, teachers and learners to learn more about SEL. When acquiring social-emotional skills, it was evident that leaders were more equipped and empowered to manage and sustain a supportive and effective culture of learning. It is hoped that this study has highlighted some of the challenges that school leaders encountered and the solutions they realised in response to these challenges while leading with their hearts, heads and hands in rural primary schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. Collaboration among educators, the school management team and the education department were crucial in implementing the necessary changes. The study highlighted the importance of creating a supportive and empowering environment for teachers and staff. This included providing resources, training and emotional support to navigate the challenges of the pandemic. Effective communication and clear guidance from school leaders were also essential in ensuring a smooth transition and maintaining a sense of purpose and motivation among the staff.

The implications of these findings suggest that during times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, school leaders need to adopt a transformational leadership approach and prioritise collaboration and support. By involving all stakeholders and creating a conducive environment, leaders can effectively navigate challenges and ensure the well-being and success of their schools.

## REFERENCES

- Amnesty International. (2021). *South Africa: COVID-19 pushes inequality in schools to a crippling new level, risks a lost generation of learners*. Amnesty International South Africa. Retrieved 18 March 2021 from <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/AFR5333442021ENGLISH.pdf>
- Anderman, E. M. & Anderman, L. H. (2020). *Classroom motivation: Linking research to teacher practice*. UK: Routledge.
- Ary, D., Jacobs, L. C. & Sorenson, C. (2010). *Introduction to research in education*. (8<sup>th</sup> ed.). California, Wadsworth.
- Bagwell, J. (2020). Leading through a pandemic: Adaptive leadership and purposeful action. *Journal of School Administration Research and Development*, 5(1), 30-34.
- Baker, J. (2019). Transformational leadership and workplace effectiveness. PhD dissertation. Northcentral University: San Diego, US.
- Bergmark, U. (2020). Rethinking researcher-teacher roles and relationships in educational action research through the use of Nel Noddings' ethics of care. *Educational Action Research*, 28(3), 331-344.
- Bowers, H., Lemberger-Truelove, M. E. & Brigman, G. (2018). A social-emotional leadership framework for school counsellors. *Professional School Counseling*, 21(1b), 1-10 <https://doi:10.1177/2156759X18773004>
- Cambridge International Examination. (2015, November). *Educational leadership*. UK: Cambridge.
- Coll, S. (2018). *System-level policies for developing schools as learning organisations*. Paris: OECD.
- Costa, R. & Ostariz, P. (2019). School culture on school effectiveness: Cooperation with the environment as a leading way of learning. *Kulture - Przemiany - Edukacja*, 7(1), 113-121. <https://doi:10.15584/kpe.2019.7.7>
- Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Research design, qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approach*. (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- Dinsdale, R. (2017). The role of leaders in developing a positive culture. *BU Journal of Graduate Studies in Education*, 9(1), 42-45.
- EDHUB. (2021, May 6). *The Sandbox blog. Learning at home through stories: The Sandbox@Home COVID-response intervention*. Retrieved 11 June 2021 from NECT: EdHub. <https://sandboxblog.home.blog/2021/05/06/learning-at-home-through-stories-the-sandboxhome-covid-response-intervention/>
- Hannes, K. & Wang, Q. (2020). *Photovoice methodology in master thesis projects: Outlining a pedagogy of ethics and participatory visual research*. Research Report Centre for Sociological Research (CeSO). Retrieved 15 September 2020 from [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/341121434\\_PHOTOVOICE\\_METHODODOLOGY\\_IN\\_MASTER\\_THESIS\\_PROJECTS\\_OUTLINING\\_A\\_PEDAGOGY\\_OF\\_ETHICS\\_FOR\\_PARTICIPATORY\\_VISUAL\\_RESEARCH?enrichId=rgreq-63d91ebf09f78f48324ae3c16dd48cde-XXX&enrichSource=Y292ZXJQYWdlOzM0MTEyMTQzNDtBUzo4ODc0MzEyNTU1NzI0ODBAMTU4ODU5MTUwNzAwOQ%3D%3D&el=1\\_x\\_2&\\_esc=publicationCoverPdf](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/341121434_PHOTOVOICE_METHODODOLOGY_IN_MASTER_THESIS_PROJECTS_OUTLINING_A_PEDAGOGY_OF_ETHICS_FOR_PARTICIPATORY_VISUAL_RESEARCH?enrichId=rgreq-63d91ebf09f78f48324ae3c16dd48cde-XXX&enrichSource=Y292ZXJQYWdlOzM0MTEyMTQzNDtBUzo4ODc0MzEyNTU1NzI0ODBAMTU4ODU5MTUwNzAwOQ%3D%3D&el=1_x_2&_esc=publicationCoverPdf)
- Harris, A. & Jones, M. (2020). COVID-19 – school leadership in disruptive times. *School Leadership & Management*, 40(4), 243-247. <https://doi:10.1080/13632434.2020.1811479>

- Harris, A., Azorin, C. & Jones, M. (2021). Network leadership: A new educational imperative? *International Journal of Leadership in Education* 1(1), 1-17.
- Hood, J. (2020, March 8-11). Integrating Social, Emotional, and Academic Learning (S.E.A.L.) into school culture: It starts with all of the adults. 31st Annual Nyar Conference. Thriving YoUniversity. [https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/nyar\\_savannah/2020/2020/121/](https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/nyar_savannah/2020/2020/121/)
- Issah, M. (2018). Change leadership: The role of emotional intelligence. *SAGE Open*, 8(3). <https://doi:10.1177/2158244018800910>
- Jones, M. J. & Doolittle, E. J. (2017). Social and emotional learning: Introducing the issue. *The Future of Children*, 27(1), 33-40. [www.jstor.org/stable/44219018](http://www.jstor.org/stable/44219018)
- Joubert, R. (2017). *The law of education in South Africa*. Pretoria, Van Schaik Publisher.
- Kamga, S. (2020). COVID-19 and the inclusion of learners with disabilities in basic education in South Africa: A critical analysis' *African Human Rights Law Journal*, 20(2). <https://doi:10.17159/1996-2096/2020/v20n2a9>
- Kivunja, C. & Kuyini, A. B. (2017). Understanding and applying research paradigms in educational contexts. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 6(5), 26-41.
- Kok, T. (2018). *The relationship between the professional wellbeing of teachers and principals' leadership styles*. PhD thesis, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa. <https://doi.orcid.org/0000-0003-3903-3996>
- Lai, F. Y., Tang, H. C. & Lu, S. C. (2020). Transformational leadership and job performance: The mediating role of work engagement. *Sage Open* 1(1), 1-11.
- Lan, T., Chang, I., Ma, T., Zhang, L. & Chuang, K. (2019). Influences of transformational leadership, transactional leadership and patriarchal leadership on job satisfaction of Cram School faculty members. *Sustainability* 11(12), 3465. <https://doi:10.3390/su11123465>
- Landa, N., Zhou, S. & Marongwe, N. (2021). Education in emergencies: Lessons from COVID-19 in South Africa. *International Review of Education*, 67, 167-183.
- Louw, L., Muriithi, M. & Radloff, S. (2018). The relationship between transformational leadership and leadership effectiveness in Kenyan indigenous banks. *South Africa Journal of Human Resource Management*, 15(1), 935. <https://doi:10.4102/sajhrm>
- Madsen, S., Miller, D. & John, C. (2015). Readiness for organisational change: Do organisational commitment and social relationships in the workplace make a difference? *Human Resource Development Quarterly* 16(2), 213-233.
- Magampa, M., Sodi, T. & Sobane, K. (2018). *Orphans and scholastic performance in Mankweng Circuit: Policy implications for Limpopo Province*. Human Sciences Research Council: Pretoria.
- Merriam, S. B. & Tisdell, E. J. (2015). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). USA: Jossey-Bass.
- Millard W. & McIntosh, J. (2020). Social and Emotional Learning and the New Normal. London: Centre for Education and Youth. Retrieved 15 September 2020 from <https://cfey.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Social-emotional-learning-report-A4-digi.pdf>
- Miller, P. M., Brown, T. & Hopson, R. (2016). Centering love, hope and trust in the community: Transformative urban leadership informed by Paulo Freire. *Urban Education*, 46(5), 1078-1099.



- Miller, R. J., Goddard, R. D., Kim, M., Jacob, R., Goddard, Y. & Schroeder, P. (2016). Can professional development improve school leadership? *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 52(4), 531-566. <https://doi:10.1177/0013161X16651926>
- Portney, H. & Watkins, M. (2015). *Foundations of clinical research: Applications to practice*, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall.
- Quinlan, K. (2014). Leadership of teaching for student learning in higher education: What is needed? *Higher Education Research and Development*, 33(1), 32-45. <https://doi:10.1080/07294360.2013.864609>
- Ozamiz-Extebarria, N., Mondragon, N. B. & Santamaria, M. D. (2021). The psychological state of teachers during the COVID-19 crisis: The challenge of returning to face-to-face teaching. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11(1). <https://doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2020.620718>
- Sezer, S. & Uzun, T. (2020). The relationship between school principals' social-emotional education leadership and teachers' organizational trust and job performance. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 1-20. <https://doi:10.1080/13603124.2020.1849812>
- Shaikh, U. & Lachman, P. (2021). Using the head, heart and hands to manage change in clinical quality improvement in the time of COVID-19. *International Society for Quality in Health Care*, 1(1). <https://doi:10.1093/ijcoms/lyab012>
- Singleton, J. (2015). Head, heart and hands model for transformative learning: Place as context for changing sustainability values. *The Journal of Sustainability Education*, 9(1), 1-16. [http://www.susted.com/wordpress/content/head-heart-and-hands-model-for-transformative-learning-place-as-context-for-changing-sustainability-values\\_2015\\_03/](http://www.susted.com/wordpress/content/head-heart-and-hands-model-for-transformative-learning-place-as-context-for-changing-sustainability-values_2015_03/)
- Sutton, J. W. & Austin, Z. (2015). Qualitative research: Data collection, analysis, and management. *The Canadian Journal of Hospital Pharmacy*, 68(3), 226-231. <https://doi:10.4212/cjhp.v68i3.1456>
- Thanh, N. C. & Thanh, T. T. (2015). The interconnection between interpretivist paradigm and qualitative methods in education. *American Journal of Educational Science*, 1(2), 24-27.
- Wangaard, D., Elias, M. & Fink, K. (2014). Educating the head, heart and hand for the 21st century. *SouthEast Education Network Magazine*, 16(2), 16-19.
- Yassim, K. (2021). Department of Education Leadership and Management (DELM) hosts. *Edubrief 18*, Johannesburg: Faculty of Education.
- Zaman, M., Novitasari, D., Goestjahjanti, F., Fahlevi, M., Nadeak, M., Fahmi, K. ... Asbari, M. (2020). Effect on readiness to change and effectiveness of transformational leadership on workers' performance during COVID-19 pandemic. *Solid State of Technology*, 63(1), 185-200.