



## Article

# The Influence of the Pandemic on the Affective States of School Principals and Teachers: A Comparative Study between South Africa and Latvia

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**Abstract:** This study explores the extensive influence of COVID-19 on the affective states of school principals and teachers. A comparative, qualitative study was conducted on Latvian and South African participants' experiences during the pandemic, with a focus on leadership, change, extra workload, ICT, and uncertainty. A total of 59 participants from rural, urban, and private schools in both countries took part in this study. Data were collected by conducting interviews with open-ended questions after which themes were identified and grouped. The results demonstrated that the states of mind of Latvian school principals and teachers were more affected than those of South Africans for whom vaccination was not compulsory. Furthermore, it was found that technological adaptation was easier for Latvian than for South African educators. The role of the Department of Education has evoked mixed feelings. Leadership, and the lack of it, also influenced the affective states of school principals and teachers. Emotional support from society, family, and colleagues was experienced differently in Latvia than in South Africa. The results of this study revealed that a pandemic can be experienced differently by principals and teachers but also that there are similarities in these experiences, as no one is ever completely prepared for the effects of a pandemic.

**Keywords:** affective state; COVID-19; Latvia; South Africa; teachers; principals; leadership; school environment; job security; support



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## 1. Introduction

The research conducted in this study involves two scholarly fields: the rapidly developing (but two-century-old) field of comparative and international education (Bartman 2020) and the much newer scholarly field of education leadership (Bush 2007). The literature begins with these two concepts. The general problem with some of the modern knowledge transmission methods is that they are mainly based on the image of humans as cognitive or rational beings, which is very narrow, incomplete, and reductionistic. For example, the affective as an essential feature of being human is denied. The final part of this article explains the concept of “affect” and describes the motivation for investigating the affective side.

Comparative and international education is a field that studies education from a threefold perspective (see Wolhuter 2024). The first is that of the education system. While national education systems (such as the French or the Japanese education system) attract the most attention from scholars of comparative and international education, there are education systems that exist or can be traced at geographic levels, both larger and smaller than the nation state (see Wolhuter 2008). An example of the former is the European Higher Education Area or the Bologna system. As for education systems at geographic levels smaller than nation states, these are provincial-, state-, or district-level education systems.

In fact, on an even smaller level, every single educational institution, every school, can be considered an educational system on a micro level. An education system consists of components and elements, such as education planning, education administration structures, education financing structures, teaching methods, institutional structure, textbooks, curricula, and assessment structures (see [Steyn et al. 2015](#)). One of the elements of an education system is education leadership.

Education systems do not emerge from a vacuum, nor do they exist in one; instead, these systems exist in symbiosis with the societal context in which they are situated ([Hudson et al. 2020](#)). Education systems are established and shaped by different societal contexts. It has become customary to classify the societal forces that shape education systems as analytical heuristic tools in the study of contextual education systems. The classifications can be listed as follows: geographical forces, demographic forces, level of scientific and technological development, social system, structure and dynamics, economic forces, political structure, system and dynamics, and religious, life, and world philosophies ([Care and Anderson 2016](#)). One aspect of geographical forces is the size or geographic extent of a country/system. One of the effects that geographic size has on an education system is the level of centralized or decentralized control and authority. All other factors being equal, geographically large countries tend to have decentralized education systems. For example, Canada is the second largest country in the world based on surface area. It has an extremely decentralized education system with all control at the provincial level and no central ministry of education.

Comparative and international education is the third perspective. This involves comparing various education systems in a mutual contextual relationship. In this way, both more general and more nuanced statements about education systems, and especially education systems with contextual interconnections, can be made.

The above-described background sets the scene for this study. In the next section, COVID-19, the impact of the pandemic on education, and the states of mind of leaders and educators are discussed.

## 2. Related Literature

### 2.1. COVID-19

As explained above, societal contextual forces affect and shape education systems. The COVID-19 pandemic is an example of one of the global societal trends that has had a noticeable impact on education systems over the past four years. In 2020, the world was caught off guard by the unexpected and sudden outbreak of the coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2). On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic. About one year after the first outbreak, by 9 March 2021, a total of 117.7 million people around the world had already been infected with the virus, 2.6 million people had died from COVID-19-related illnesses, while the number of new infections had increased at a rate of 410,000 per day ([Worldometers 2021](#)). One year later, on 4 April 2022, the death rate worldwide stood at 6,176,628, with 491,870,635 cases, of which 426,859,271 people had recovered ([Worldometers 2022](#)).

Schools are among the most impacted institutional victims of complex disasters ([Ensign and Jacob 2021](#)). Children experience irreversible harm to their psychological well-being and cognitive development during disasters. Pre-school children under the age of six typically experience fast periods of cognitive development and learning. The withholding of teaching and learning due to external factors such as disasters hinders the development of children ([Luo 2023](#)). The impromptu reflexive response of managers (ministries) of education to the outbreak of the pandemic was to close educational institutions. Statistically, this involved approximately 91% of the learner population worldwide ([UNESCO 2020a, 2020b](#)). When the coronavirus reached its peak, 1.6 billion learners were forced to stay out of school, representing the biggest disruption to education since World War II. Even a full year after the outbreak, by March 2021, educational institutions were still closed in

26 countries (UNESCO 2021). An alternative was to replace face-to-face education with distance learning, which meant that it had to take place online and at home.

On the one hand, distance learning was an exciting, even welcome proposition. Education is notorious for its slowness to accept new technology and the possibilities it offers for expansion and improvement. One way to look at this development is that information and communication technology (ICT), which has been around for the better part of a generation, has improved education in society. On the other hand, this shift towards technology-assisted teaching and learning has caused quite a few problems, exacerbating many education problems, such as the misappropriation of profits for the expansion and promotion of education. These problems involved access to and participation in education, ensuring the quality of education and equal educational opportunities.

## 2.2. *The Impact of the Pandemic on Education*

Authors argue that the impact of the pandemic on principals and teachers was noticeable. In this regard, Boskurt et al. (2020) refer to several aspects that had an impact on educators. The authors reported that the pandemic created trauma and placed psychological pressure on educators, which resulted in anxiety. Educators worried about their own health but also the safety of their loved ones. In addition, educators had to deal with the loss of loved ones. The authors further argued that the impact of the pandemic on education could be seen in terms of inequity and social justice. “The material, cultural-epistemic and geopolitical inequalities, that are now clearly visible through the lens of COVID-19, are not new phenomena but are exacerbations of deeply rooted pre-existing inequalities” (p. 6). A clear distinction was made between the privileged and the less privileged. Where the privileged had sufficient supplies (food, etc.), the less privileged struggled to survive because some working-class people lost their jobs. This, in turn, influenced the schools.

For García-Sampedro et al. (2021) the focus of the pandemic on education was narrowed down to the students. The pandemic resulted in a substantial loss of learning time. This can be attributed to the fact that no contact classes were offered but online teaching was relied upon. Some students did not have the necessary infrastructure to receive instruction daily. They believed that the “whole-child” development was interrupted by the pandemic, which resulted in a delay in the development of social and emotional skills.

In another argument about the impact the pandemic had on education, Hodges et al. (2020) describe the difference between emergency remote teaching and online learning. They postulate that online teaching is not the issue, but rather that the speed at which teaching had to transition to online teaching during the pandemic had devastating consequences. Where lesson plans were sometimes completed months in advance and the necessary method of teaching was clearly stipulated, teachers had to adapt the lesson plans for online teaching. In the process, teaching methods had to be adapted and the outcomes were not necessarily the same as those of face-to-face planning.

Hwang and Höllerer (2020) refer to the institutional changes that resulted from the pandemic, including the normal day-to-day going-to-work routine suddenly changing to working from home. In the process, the socialization of people was compromised. The authors explain that “we had to sacrifice our existential need for the social for the benefit of society as a whole” (p. 298). With specific reference to teachers, it was a significant adjustment to no longer socialize with colleagues. On the other hand, individualism emerged, allowing people to rediscover themselves. Nevertheless, the fluctuation between complete socialization and partial socialization (partial return to the “new normal”) influenced the psyche of educators.

Mitescu-Manea et al. (2021) posit that the notion of “emergency remote teaching” was forged by Hodges et al. (2020) to highlight the “rushed experiences” of online learning. At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the state administrators of Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and the Republic of Moldova were promptly cautioned by non-governmental organizations about the worsening risk of social and educational inequalities when disregarding evidence of technological disparities. Mitescu-Manea et al. (2021) concluded

that great discrepancies in the digital skills of teachers, students, and their supporting families were likely to worsen educational inequalities in the four European countries under investigation. However, education authorities ignored the unequal implementation of interventions and the ascending equity issues. Non-state agencies in these countries drew attention to the unequal future impact that “emergency remote teaching” could have on diverse vulnerable groups of students.

In Finland, the closing of schools had some interesting results. Children of crucial workers were allowed to attend contact teaching and daycare, and no break in teaching and learning occurred. During the partial closing of schools, a mere 8% of students attended contact teaching while 32–35% of daycare children attended, and up to 40% of daily school time was consumed by washing hands (Loima 2020). Worryingly, upper-grade students in Finland felt uncertain as to whether they had learned sufficient subject content during the pandemic (Loima 2020). In Sweden, some schools even utilized Saturdays and Sundays for remote teaching. Based on the local circumstances, these schools could also decide to adjust the amount of schoolwork upwards or reduce it (Loima 2020).

The South African education system is a young system faced with challenges as it tries to rid itself of the legacy of apartheid. Even though there have been improvements in school infrastructure and resources in the past 25 years, certain students still go to schools with inadequate infrastructure and run-down buildings. These schools also have unsafe and unsanitary pit latrines, problems with water supply, under-equipped teachers, lack of learning materials, overcrowded classes, and high rates of students leaving school. On the contrary, the more privileged schools are high-performing and very efficient. This division in structure creates challenges in managing the education system (Soudien et al. 2022).

Numerous underprivileged schools lack the resources to support effective online learning (Parker et al. 2020; Spaul 2020). Within less affluent households, many kids do not have a quiet area to study, a desk, a computer, internet access, or parents who could commit to homeschooling. According to Spaul and Van der Berg’s (2020, p. 8) survey, despite 90% of South African households having mobile phones, only 60% have internet access through their mobile phones. Mdepa (2020) found that only a few privileged individuals could benefit from using technology for homeschooling. Millions of parents in underprivileged communities could not afford to send their kids to physical schools, let alone facilitate virtual learning due to lack of access and funds. Therefore, online learning cannot guarantee equal education in South Africa. For rural and economically disadvantaged children, online learning is nearly impossible and does not promote educational equity. The impact of COVID-19 on schooling and the unavailability of online learning to poor and rural children reinforced the notion that the poor are becoming poorer while the wealthy thrive (Pillay 2021).

According to a South African Democratic Teacher Union (SADTU 2021) survey of its members, two-thirds of students from deprived families received very little communication from their teachers during the shutdown of schools. According to Spaul and Van der Berg (2020, p. 9), 18% of school-going children lived in family units without an adult caregiver during the daytime periods in which students were at home. Furthermore, many African language learners who were learning English as their first language did not have any support in handling the language because most of the online lessons would have been completed by the students in the absence of adult supervision or teacher interaction. A varied range of learning experiences at home resulted from this differentiation in social capital and resources (Soudien et al. 2022).

In addressing the challenges posed by the pandemic, Latvia has adopted a combination of in-person, remote, and hybrid learning approaches. To support disadvantaged children, rural schools, and educators in purchasing computers, the Latvian Ministry of Education allocated an additional EUR 5 million to education. Major telecommunications companies supplied schools with essential technology for effective remote learning. Emphasis was placed on engaging parents as partners in home-based education, particularly for young learners, in cooperation with teachers (Galkienė et al. 2022).

The Latvian education system was not initially equipped for remote learning; therefore, parents found themselves taking on the role of teachers for their children. This brought about entirely new circumstances in the daily lives of families. Parents stressed the need to support their children both technically (assisting with online lessons and homework submissions) and academically (providing explanations for various subjects). Meanwhile, parents grappled with their own work-related challenges, such as working remotely, increased workloads, and the possibility of job losses (Martinsone et al. 2021).

### 2.3. Affective States of Mind and Leadership

Arnold is cited by Barrett and Bliss-Moreau (2009) in describing affect as a state of mind resulting from an emotion. There are four basic emotions: happiness, sadness, fear, and anger. These are differentially associated with three core effects: reward (happiness), punishment (sadness), and stress (fear and anger) (Gu et al. 2019). Furthermore, the impact and importance of influence have been confirmed in many ways by research, for example, the impact of influence on service delivery and satisfaction (Jiang and Wang 2006). Since positive moral feelings can protect people from and reduce their negative experiences, enhance personal health, and improve connections with others, these feelings probably have a crucial part in helping people adjust to challenging situations, including a significant crisis such as the novel COVID-19 pandemic (Belkin and Kong 2022).

The intersection between affect and issues of leadership has recently been exposed by research (see Gooty et al. 2010) by showing that leadership and affect (influence) are deeply intertwined. For example, transformational leaders ignite and channel aspirations, instill pride, attract enthusiasm, and convey optimism about a desired and aspiring future to the flock they lead. Gooty et al. (2010) conducted an extensive literature survey on leadership and affect in which they identified three distinct themes that appear in the literature: (1) leader affect, follower affect, and outcomes; (2) discrete emotions and leadership; and (3) emotional competencies and leadership. The authors also found that while the first two aspects are covered by the literature, the third aspect has not been adequately addressed, and thus future theoretical and empirical work is recommended in this area.

The literature considers this to be an important topic (Gooty et al. 2010), and empirical findings in this regard are that leaders' positive moods tend to result in favorable outcomes for all parties, while negative moods seem to be detrimental (see, for example, Barsade et al. 2000; Gaddis et al. 2004; George and Bettenhausen 1990; and Johnson 2008).

Research by Belkin and Kong (2022) reveals that when leaders showed signs of companionate love, it led to a stronger sense of gratitude in their staff. Moreover, when staff members felt more uncertain due to the crisis, their gratitude towards their leaders increased, thereby enhancing their engagement and performance in their roles. Overall, the results of Belkin and Kong (2022) suggest that in times of a significant crisis, showing care and empathy through companionate love can encourage staff to feel a positive, appreciative emotion towards their leaders, especially when they feel more unsure about the situation. Bustamante (2021, p. 64) posits that experts depicted the traits of leadership during these challenging moments of COVID-19 as "empathy and intelligence, knowledge and flexibility, readiness to know, to do, and to inspire people, and honesty, agility, and value for people".

A leader must exhibit confidence and assertiveness in times of crisis (Vaneva and Bojadjev 2022). The persuasive language employed by leaders significantly impacts the dynamic interaction between leaders and followers, primarily because it plays a crucial role in shaping the emotional and mental states of staff, including their drive to work. The selection of words used by leaders is among the most influential methods for fostering a sense of reliability and dependability among their staff members (Vaneva and Bojadjev 2022). To facilitate effective interactions between leaders and followers, leaders must cultivate a welcoming work atmosphere, which necessitates learning the most effective techniques for engaging in meaningful and reflective conversations. Without a deep understanding of their staff members' requirements, leaders cannot offer the necessary support. Moreover, if messages about performance are not communicated in a manner that

is easily understood, then both teaching outcomes and teacher performance and morale will inevitably decline (Vaneva and Bojadjev 2022). Vaneva and Bojadjev (2022) found that leaders were careful in selecting their words when talking to their staff during the COVID-19 pandemic, and leaders also tended to employ more uplifting and supportive language when engaging with the staff, rather than resorting to negative, admonishing words. Leaders employ understanding words to show kindness and human feelings, as well as to prove their reliability and offer their staff mental comfort, thus strengthening their connections and sense of belonging to the institution. The words a leader chooses can communicate understanding and emotional backing to their staff members, which can, in turn, boost the staff's happiness with their work and their ability to perform well (Vaneva and Bojadjev 2022).

Effective leadership is essential during crisis times as individuals turn to their leaders for guidance and “expect that they will minimize the impact of crisis at hand in the face of blame and criticism, chaos, disruptions in normal routines, and uncontrolled media reports” (Bustamante 2021, p. 71).

To summarize the literature review, remote online learning replaced face-to-face education but caused education problems. The quick adaptation of lesson plans was ineffective and educational inequalities affected the vulnerable groups most severely. Remote work impacted socialization and led to a resurgence of individualization and mental health challenges. The pandemic exposed and deepened existing educational inequalities, with countries responding in various ways to address these challenges.

The conclusion that can be drawn from the above is that a disruptive event such as the pandemic would in all probability have had a strong impact on the affective states of school principals and teachers, which, in turn, has implications or consequences for the practice and quality of leadership.

### 3. Methodology

This qualitative study provides insights into the affective states of school principals and teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this study, we focus on principals' and teachers' experiences of the sudden switch to online classes. The focus is on their feelings as well as the support, especially mental support, provided to them. Leedy and Ormrod (2013) explain that a qualitative design allows researchers to collect in-depth data from participants to learn more about the unknown aspects, e.g., the affective states of school principals and teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the main phenomenon shared by participants emerges in a qualitative design (Creswell 2014, p. 16). The nuances and complexities of the specific situation in which participants had to perform their daily duties were investigated (Leedy and Ormrod 2013). According to Creswell (2014), there is a tendency among qualitative researchers to understand experiences, feelings, social circumstances, or phenomena as they occur in the world.

This research was conducted according to an interpretivism paradigm as it highlights the meaning that individuals attach to their experience. This emphasizes the importance of intersubjectivity for understanding and meaning. Since behavior is determined by social conventions, it must be interpreted; the facts do not speak for themselves. Interpretivism not only enabled us to describe the social contexts, conventions, norms, and standards of the principals involved but also to reflect on the decisive elements in the assessment of principals' and teachers' behavior (Maree 2010).

#### 3.1. Recruitment of Participants

The participants in this study were recruited from urban, rural, and private schools in Latvia and South Africa. As South Africa consists of nine provinces, only one province (Gauteng) was selected as the province has the densest population in South Africa. In Latvia, four urban, four rural, and two private schools were selected. The sample of Latvia consists of six principals and twelve teachers. In South Africa, three urban, three rural, and three private schools were selected. The sample of South Africa consists of

principals, acting principals, deputy heads, heads of departments, and teachers, comprising a total of 41 participants. A larger population was the dominant reason for the selection of more participants in South Africa, which ensured greater representation. No criteria for participation in this study were established as we wanted to cover a wide spectrum of experiences. Due to these unrestricted criteria, it was possible to involve participants from different job levels with years of experience. The principals decided which teachers, deputy heads, acting deputy heads, and heads of departments could participate.

After the schools agreed to participate, the necessary letters were sent to the principals. Letters included a confidentiality agreement, disclaimer form, legal authorization, and informed consent. The letters also contained a brief explanation of this study, its purpose, the methodology, what was expected of the participants, the benefits of participation, confidentiality, and protection of identity. A well-informed ethical procedure was sent to all participants.

### 3.2. Data Collection

Since in the case of South Africa the research was conducted during/after COVID-19, data were collected through face-to-face and online interviews with school principals. A semi-structured interview schedule was used, which allowed the researchers to probe the participants for clarity and gain a better understanding of their responses. The interview schedule was tested by the researchers to ensure that the participants would be able to understand and interpret the questions correctly. The principals stipulated that the participation of teachers in the study could not interfere with teaching time. As a result, the same open-ended questions that were asked of the teachers, deputy heads, acting deputy heads, and heads of departments were also asked of the principals. In the case of Latvia, all semi-structured interviews were conducted face to face. The qualitative, semi-structured interviews lasted for one hour.

### 3.3. Data Analysis

The analysis began with the reading of transcripts to obtain an overall picture of the topic under discussion (Creswell 2014). This involved thematic grouping by highlighting specific concepts. Then, the themes were compared with the research question so that the answers could be measured accordingly. Data were then coded, and the codes were grouped to form categories. Inductive analysis was used, which did not rely on pre-determined themes and categories but rather allowed this information to emerge from the responses of the participants. This thematic analysis enabled us to describe participants' experiences during COVID-19. The steps recommended by Leedy and Ormrod (2013, p. 158) were followed to successfully conduct the data analysis. These steps included organizing the data, reading it repeatedly to obtain an overall picture, identifying general themes, as well as sub-themes, and classifying the data accordingly. In this way, patterns emerged that ultimately enabled us to integrate and summarize the data.

Information was obtained from both educational and societal contexts. Data from South Africa and Latvia were then compared to establish a relationship between school leaders and stakeholders from society.

## 4. Findings

Interviews with the participants highlighted two aspects, namely the real influence of the pandemic on participants' states of mind as well as missing or valuable support since personal feelings about it could be shared for the first time. The influence of the pandemic on body, mind, and emotion was understood with empathy. The way in which participants were able to describe the adjustments that had to be made in response to COVID-19 made the scale and impact of the pandemic even clearer. Following the primary research question, "what influence did the pandemic have on the affective states of school principals and teachers", themes were formed. The themes were as follows: (1) critical reflection on affective states of mind, (2) uncertainty, and (3) support.

#### 4.1. Critical Reflection on Affective States of Mind

In general, participants' states of mind were very negative. On the one hand, this was due to the uncertainty about the pandemic itself and, on the other hand, this was due to the sudden transition from contact to online teaching. Sub-themes emerged from the interviews. The codes assigned to the participants are as follows: U = urban school; R = rural school; Pr = private school; PR = principal; AC = acting principal; DP = deputy head; Dh = departmental head; and T = teacher. Schools in Latvia are referred to as 1–4 and those in South Africa as A–I.

##### 4.1.1. Experience of the School Environment

According to the interviews, participants' experiences tended to have two sides. On the one hand, they had to continue teaching and learning; on the other hand, they had to consider their own health. It was also clear that the participants experienced the school environment differently, especially when rural, urban, and private schools were differentiated. One of the participants from a rural school in South Africa said the following:

Very stressful. New laws, rules and regulations that need to come into place. Uncertainty as to when the school will start. Unsure of which grades may return and when. [ARP1]

For one of the participants from an urban school in South Africa, it came down to balancing health and work:

It was stressful balancing the health/safety of educators and learners versus the process of optimal teaching and learning that should take place. [DUP1]

Change was inevitable, and principals and teachers had to adapt very quickly. A participant from a South African private school described this adaptation as follows:

Everything was disorganized to go to online teaching in one day. Extra work to do, everything electronically and a different approach to teaching other than hands-on. [BPT3]

From the interviews with Latvian participants, it appeared that their experiences were the same as those of South Africans. One of the participants from an urban school in Latvia explained the following:

Initially, when we learned that we have entered a completely different learning pace, the first experience was extremely disturbing, there was an enormous amount of what is unknown. So much emotionally intense tension I had not felt for so long! So many quests, so many learning in the field of IT—how to digitalize and transfer all the learning content that is needed for children, here and now—immediately. . . . But looking back, there is still more association with immense tension and with a very large number of questions—both from parents and from children. [U1T]

A principal from a private school in Latvia added the following:

This was a new experience, an unknown experience. We didn't know what was going to happen. One day there was a message from the management that the school should be closed, that one person was ill. Of course, we were frightened, emotionally frightened—the huge uncertainty was at that time. What will happen? What about it? What should I do? That time was pretty hard for all of us. [Pr2PR]

One participant from a rural school in Latvia realized the magnitude of the pandemic when teaching was directly affected by it:

No one had had experience. . . It was a new experience, something that had not happened before. I'm a music teacher, and this time proved that it is very difficult to teach any instrument remotely. [R3T]

What emerged clearly from the interviews was the participants' uncertainty. Although principals are considered leaders of schools, teachers are also leaders in their own right as they have to take the lead in their classes. Not only was school leadership tested, but leadership by the Department of Education was also challenged. In this regard, one of the participants from a rural school provided the following comment:

[The pandemic] presented many challenges—leaders lacked leadership. However, opportunity for growth, time for innovation, showing leadership, time for extensive reflection/study of curriculum. [CRT4]

The school environment during the pandemic also experienced confusion, stress, and uncertainty. To expand on this, the following sub-theme comes into play.

#### 4.1.2. Sudden Change to Online Teaching

We made a statement, namely that the sudden change to online teaching led to discomfort, a sense of being lost, doubt, stress, overtiredness, mental exhaustion, and worry. The aim was to determine the feelings of school principals and teachers in this regard. The feedback was informative. A participant from a rural school in South Africa explained as follows:

I find this statement very true. My own level of mental fatigue and worry escalated to anxiety and depression. [ART]

In another comment, one of the participants from an urban school in South Africa used a metaphor to express feelings about the experience:

I couldn't agree more. It felt like I had to fly a plane, whilst building it, without a manual and zero experience in the mode of transportation. Being at a parallel-medium school also means that every lesson had to be recorded and prepared twice. I felt burnt out after lockdown/online teaching. [GUHOD1]

One of the participants from a private school in South Africa agreed with the above statement:

This statement rings true to me. Teachers had to adopt new tools to teach with little support and a lack of resources resulting in mental health implications. [EPT6]

A Latvian participant did not completely agree with the statement and provided the following explanation:

Online Learning—meetings in Zoom or Teams. Did it make me uncomfortable? No. In my case, it was even more convenient for me because I did not have to deal with constant disciplinary issues in class. Everyone logged in. If someone didn't log in or didn't turn on the camera—it could be resolved or adjusted very quickly, as we had internal rules in place with respect to the use of Zoom. Did I feel a sense of loss? Depending on what context we're looking at. I think that in terms of time—yes, because to transfer and create all the study content again digitally, so that I can explain it to the children as best as I can and not in the form of lectures, but so that I can tell the child and actively engage him/her in the learning process—this requires a huge time resource. Doubts, of course, were constant all the time, because there was no clear form or algorithm—what is the best thing to do. This was only felt and polished by teachers after a while, so it is extremely difficult to assess how it was at the beginning or end, and what we gained or lost from the initial process when we were looking at how and what to do better. Stress, of course, accumulated. One could very much feel it at the peak time of COVID. In the beginning there is something like a start, but then, when you have already done it constantly and for a long time, the euphoria of being able to work from home and in my slippers disappeared. Then you start thinking: it's Zoom again, and it's meeting the children online again. Of course, also the children were trying out the limits finding holes or gaps to interfere

with online learning for others. This brought on other issues. The stress did not disappear in any way, it only transformed into different contexts. Fatigue was overwhelming, mental exhaustion too. After COVID, I felt it very much. While you're mobilized and doing what is required, you don't feel that you're so tired, but once you've lived through it all for a while, you realize how tired you are. In my case, I was happy to be able to work a bit from home. But when it was for a long time—for months and months, it was a mental exhaustion and we could also feel it very much during the supervision sessions for teachers. Was there a worry—yes there was. But thank God, there was a supportive environment around us, colleagues and our team, we could express our worries and excitement, put our heads together and think and discuss how to do things the best way. I guess, for me subjectively, in relation to children, the biggest worry was whether I would not steal from them something while teaching them digitally, because explaining mathematics in a digital environment, where you have to draw, write, explain—it's not so easy. But today I find that what I myself learned at that time, is very useful for my work in the classroom. Really helpful. [U1T]

One participant from a private school in Latvia felt the sudden change intensely:

All of the above was on a full spectrum. If you have a computer standing next to your bed, and the only thing you need in the morning is to wake up and sneak up to the computer, I finally realized that I am starting to have a profound depression. [Pr2T]

For a Latvian participant from a rural school, the extra work due to the sudden change was exhausting:

Yes, the fatigue was much greater when working remotely. More focus is needed when working remotely. When you work 5 h at school, then working 5 h remotely really created extra stress. [R3T]

It became clear that stress, exhaustion, etc., were due to the lack of direction. This phenomenon was not limited to schools in South Africa and Latvia, but the whole world was caught off guard and was directionless due to the pandemic. Change is manageable, but it has come to light that unexpected change can result in unprecedented emotions and strange moods.

Answers to the above statement, that participants were confronted with change, contributed positively to determining the influence of extra work and pressure on their states of mind.

#### 4.1.3. Extra Work and Pressure

It was clear throughout the interviews that extra work and pressure had a big impact on the participants. Due to the fact that most participants were used to a structured teaching and learning environment, the sudden extra workload overwhelmed them and deprived them of a fixed routine so that they necessarily had to make adjustments. Working hours changed and they had to learn new skills and provide answers they did not have.

One of the principals from an urban school in South Africa explained the experience as follows:

As a leader, there was a lot of pressure. I felt I should know more than the staff. The DBE's support was minimal. Questions from parents to which there were no answers. [DUP1]

According to a participant from a South African urban school, the change was initially positive, but later turned into a negative experience:

At first it was a welcome change, to the hectic life as we knew it. However, later my role in managing the process for a whole Foundation Phase was extremely tiring. I worked very long hours, especially after 12 p.m.–4 a.m. since that was the time when I had night owl data. [FUHOD2]

South Africa does not provide free internet to all households and users often have to sign a contract. Free Night Owl data bundles can only be used between midnight and 5 am on any day of the week. This has caused more pressure as many teachers make use of this kind of free internet access.

The extra work and pressure that took its toll was confirmed by one of the participants from a South African private school who said that many teachers depended on medication to cope.

For a participant from a rural school in South Africa, time was one of the factors that placed even more pressure on teachers. The participant described its effects as follows:

Working against time was hectic because learners were not coming to school every day due to precautions. As teachers we had to make sure that even with the COVID-19 but learners must get adequate education. [IRT3]

As for Latvian participants, the same states of mind, such as anger, were observed as in South Africans due to extra work and pressure. One of the participants from an urban school in Latvia explained it in the following way:

It's an interesting question. I didn't lose my mind. But I had a lot of anger. Exactly what I just told you before. This is not only my opinion. Most teachers felt mentally exhausted. Some had doubts about their choice: for or against, to continue working in education or not. Then came the decision about compulsory vaccination, and for those who fluctuated on the dividing line, that compulsory vaccination was the decisive point for their decision. A lot of teachers left school. Some came back, some didn't. But the pressure was enormous, and the frustration was enormous for the people. [U1T]

Another participant from a rural school in Latvia added the following:

I can't answer. Fatigue, anger, desire that everything would end faster. [RT3]

A Latvian participant from a private school responded affirmatively about the workload:

Emotions got very disturbed because some teachers refused to get the vaccines—we often got double the workload because of those who refused to get vaccinated, and then we had to explain everything to the parents why they need or don't need to get vaccinated. I didn't make that decision. It was unpleasant and a huge emotional tension. [PR2T]

In South Africa, the Department of Basic Education recommended that all employees be vaccinated, although this was not mandatory. Furthermore, the department assured employees that the vaccination would not conflict with human rights, constitutional, religious, cultural, comorbidity, or medical reasons. As a result, most educators were able to continue their work online. However, in Latvia it was different. It can be inferred that vaccination was compulsory, which had a negative effect on participants coming from that country.

#### 4.2. Uncertainty

One of the themes noted in the transcripts is that of uncertainty. When the announcement came that the world had to lock down due to the COVID-19 virus, uncertainty was the common denominator of humanity. There was uncertainty about the effect of the virus on people as well as about job prospects and finances while the future became an everyday topic of conversation. Education was by no means exempt from this uncertainty. Two aspects that emerged from this are, namely, job security and what the future holds for education after the pandemic.

##### 4.2.1. Job Security

This sub-theme made a clear distinction between the reasons given by South African and Latvian participants as to why they thought their careers were at risk. In South Africa, it was about the fact that parents suffered financially during the pandemic and were,

therefore, unable to pay school fees. On the other hand, Latvians' biggest concern was loss of career if they were not vaccinated.

Most South African participants were not worried about losing their jobs as they were assured of a salary by the Department of Basic Education. However, the governing bodies of some South African schools appoint teachers, and they are paid from the school fund. In South African private schools, teachers are paid directly with money that parents pay the school. It was these participants who were concerned. One of the participants from a private school in South Africa expressed this concern as follows:

Yes. Many families have moved, and our learner numbers have dwindled. I was afraid that our school would not be able to survive financially. [EPDH1]

Another participant added:

Yes, I work at a private school. No payment from parents will result in no salary. I felt that we will lose our jobs. [EPHOD2]

Concerns ranged from reasons for not being paid to "uncertain times", as one participant from a rural school in South Africa described this as a possible reason for losing a job:

Yes, it was on unsure times where schools did not receive income to pay teachers. [ARDH3]

Another participant contributed:

Yes, it was uncertain times and there was a significant move to online schools and home schooling. [HPT5]

Another comment added the following:

The virus added stress in that matter. The uncertainty of how long the lockdown would be, worried everyone and knowing how many people and industries lost their jobs. [FUT3]

One of the participants from a rural school in South Africa made the following comment:

Yes, the way the government was handling things, it was not promising that South Africa will have enough money to sustain people's jobs. [IRT3]

Some participants were positive about keeping their jobs. One of the participants from a private school in South Africa said that teachers are needed more than ever by learners and parents. Comments such as education being a basic need in any community and that education will never disappear, but that the approach must change, presented the necessity of principals and teachers in a positive light.

Contrary to South African comments, some Latvians had a different view of a possible job loss. One of the participants from an urban school in Latvia made the following statement in this regard:

I did not think so, but the question could be about those colleagues who did not have a vaccination certificate. At that time, some colleagues were forced to terminate their employment. There were not many of them in our school—a teacher at retirement age, one who had already found another job. At that moment, it seemed to me that the current crisis of the shortage of educators began. [U3PR]

The participant went on to say the following:

Yes. My career was absolutely threatened starting from the fall of 2001, when it was decided on Government level that without a vaccination certificate, I will not be able to work in my teaching profession. I belonged to the 'common sense' people who believed that strengthening immunity, taking vitamins, exercising, being in the fresh air is much more valuable than exposing yourself to an unknown substance—an injection. By the end of the COVID-19 I was fired from work, according to the rules of the Cabinet of Ministers, which prevented me

from working in my profession only because I did not perform this medical manipulation, but I always knew that if one door closes, another door opens.

In another comment, one of the participants from a private school in Latvia referred to the possibilities of online education.

There was a moment when parents realized that the children can learn remotely and started taking their children out of school so that they could continue to learn remotely. Many chose this option, but now everyone comes back. They left with a loud bang, but then began to realize that this is not the best way for their child and started coming back.

However, there was a positive comment from one of the participants from a rural school in Latvia:

No, I didn't think my career was at risk. On the contrary, many new tools and solutions emerged to increase their professionalism.

South Africans and Latvians were concerned about their jobs due to various reasons. However, strong leadership could immediately remove any uncertainty about a career that was hanging in the balance.

#### 4.2.2. Future of Education after COVID-19

There were divergent opinions about the future of education after COVID-19 according to South Africans and Latvians. In some cases, participants were positive and in others negative. Latvia focused in particular on the direct consequences of the pandemic and how it would affect the future. A participant from a rural school in Latvia elaborated on this as follows:

Since I taught Grade 1, and it was the time for laying all the foundation, many 'notches' (holes) had formed, and those notches will be shoving at some point. One day these children will catch up and learn, but the very start for them happened to be during COVID. [R1T]

A Latvian participant from an urban school drew attention to the consequences of COVID-19 and how it would affect education in the future:

This has left gaps in the education system. We were aware that often parents did the schoolwork instead of children—preparing projects, even when submitting tests. The kids that did not do it themselves, gained the biggest gap as they hadn't done the work themselves. In higher grades, there were cases where children did not connect for classes, but there were also a few who did not know how to connect. For many children, this time also left a psychological gap. [U2T]

Another Latvian participant from a private school made the following statement:

These 3 years of education have left a big gap. The victims are the children of the big classes. The little classes will learn slowly forward, and everything will be fine. For children in large classes, both this year and last year—not productive results. This is where we will have consequences. [Pr2PR]

One of the participants from a rural school in Latvia focused on the consequences that COVID-19 had on quality learning by making the following statement:

Three years of COVID undeniably had consequences for the quality of learning, and also for social interactions, emotional health of students and teachers, and for the ability to build relationships between students. Learning outcomes are gradually levelling off, but still work needs to be done on strengthening socio-emotional aspects. [R4PR]

However, a participant from a rural school in Latvia was positive about the future of education:

... we gained a variety of experiences and I think that now the education system is much more prepared for various stressful challenges. [R3PR]

South African participants' comments about the future of education were remarkably positive. One of the participants from an urban school commented as follows:

I think parents realized the value of teachers, but teaching also has to be rethought with technology in the classroom playing a bigger role than before. [DUDP2]

One of the participants from a private school was still positive despite the effects of the pandemic:

The education landscape has been disrupted and causes all those involved in it to reimagine future. The future will look bright for those who come up with solutions to critical problems. [HPT5]

Although most of the participants from a rural school in South Africa admitted that there was a backlog in education due to the pandemic, they were positive that it would be possible to catch up in time. On the other hand, one of the participants from an urban school said the following:

My personal opinion is that it is going to take very long to recover. I feel that 2020 should have been repeated in 2021 (grades). Children have a whole years' backlog, yet teachers and learners are expected to carry on and catch up. It is impossible with a full curriculum. [GUT4]

From the diverse views, it is clear that the future of education after COVID-19 is not assured. Education will have to be viewed through a new lens. Furthermore, stakeholders will need to be more prepared for any sudden changes.

#### 4.3. Support

The last theme is support, from which the following three sub-themes were identified.

##### 4.3.1. Support from South African and Latvian Departments of Education

It is worth noting that South African as well as Latvian participants were of the opinion that their departments of education did not provide sufficient support. This could possibly be attributed to the fact that the whole world was plunged into uncertainty and education was only a part of it. However, some participants disagreed with their colleagues. One of the participants from a rural school in Latvia said the following:

Overall, the school received quite a lot of support. It took place in quite an organized way. There were tablets, phones and computers available for children, and not only for children—also for educators. Overall, it was handled in a problem solving and quick manner. Parents appreciated the food packages handed out to the children. [R1T]

Another participant from an urban school was also positive about this, providing the following comments:

... we received continuous information, explanations, infographics from the Department of Education on how to explain to pupils and parents different situations, rules. If the school had any questions, we called the specialists of the Department and received answers and explanations. The school also received additional phones to hand out to students to learn and connect to online lessons. [R1T]

However, one of the participants from an urban school summarized the support of the Department of Education differently:

If there was any support, then unfortunately it was all late. The support should have been faster. For example, freedom on one side is a good thing—you choose a platform that is more convenient to work on, but for those who worked on Zoom (which is a paid platform), lessons after 40 min were interrupted. Stopping a lesson meant not saying goodbye when ending a lesson— but that's not how we communicate on a daily basis when the conversation just stops. Universities quicker

decided on what platform to use. This unity was lacking in the school. It would have been easier if there had been a clear plan of action straight away. [U4T]

South African participants in this study were of the opinion that the department did everything hastily without a clear vision in mind.

Very little. Just push to get procedures in place. At one point we were 17 staff who tested positive. Help asked for school to close. No answer. A member of staff (site manager deceased). Very traumatic. [DUP1]

A participant from a rural school said the following:

Not a lot, just the new curriculum received some worksheets, but they were full of mistakes. [ARDH3]

In most cases, participants from South African schools said that the department provided basic needs such as disinfectants, masks, and information about the rules and regulations. Most of the time, however, information that had to be implemented on Monday was given on a Sunday evening. Principals and teachers were also kept in the dark about adjustments to and implementation of the curriculum.

#### 4.3.2. Support from Society

Participants were asked how they were supported by the community during the pandemic in order to determine the impact of the community on principals' and teachers' states of mind, which elicited conflicting responses. Participants from Latvia were of the opinion that they were supported by their parents. However, some of the participants made it clear that principals and teachers are not valued enough. A participant from a rural school in Latvia responded to this as follows:

If we are talking about a part of society that is closely related to the school, then they are parents. It was very much necessary to communicate with parents both online and in writing to explain all the decisions made. Most parents were understanding, supportive, helped teachers in supporting their children. If we are talking about the wider community, then there was no special support. There was a lot of opinions that teachers do nothing, only send tests, but students learn by themselves. It depends on each educational institution, which path the institution chose when providing the distance learning process. [R1PR]

A Latvian participant from an urban school said the following:

Society did not support. The public condemned schools, for example, for the fact that schools asked children to spit—for spit tests. Society, to tell the truth, absolutely did not think about what a school's competence is and what—educational management competence, and where there is State competence. The public was not very understanding. I do not believe that the school has received any support from the public. That's impossible. The public was angry about all these conditions, but who implemented these conditions—the school. The anger was already starting from the fact that the parent could not take his/her child up to the classroom or training room, or why does graduation take place this way? Or why do masks need to be worn? The public was certainly not the one that supported. [U2PR]

On the other hand, some Latvian participants were also positive. The following statement (from a private school in Latvia) is an example of this positivity:

We were praised and appreciated by our pupils' parents. They knew how things were going in other schools and also how we worked. This turned into a great advertisement for our school. [Pr2T]

What emerged from the interviews is that teachers and society differed from each other, especially when it came to vaccination. One participant referred to it as an "aggressive split", where the teachers kept their opinions to themselves and society was more outspoken, causing more tension.

South Africans' feedback on social support was more positive despite those feeling that parents were "more demanding" than ever before. Participants used phrases such as "looking out for each other", "always there to help", "more empathy", and "grateful parents". One of the participants from an urban school provided the following comment:

Good support. Schools in \*\*\*, high and primary schools have created a support forum. We have a meeting every Tuesday from 2020 until now. COVID-19 process concerns were shared. [DUP1]

Another participant from an urban school added the following:

[I receive support] from close friends, family and colleagues; a lot of encouragement. Small things like dropping of a cooked meal, because I didn't have time to cook due to extended teaching time. [GUHOD1]

It is noticeable that participants from urban schools received more support from the community than those from rural and private schools, although there is no explanation for this.

#### 4.3.3. Emotional Support

The last sub-theme has to do with emotional support, which is related to the pandemic's effects on principals' and teachers' affective states. It was clear that family, friends, and parents played a big role in this sub-theme. One of the participants from an urban school in Latvia stated the following:

From family. I was the one who had to provide support for my colleagues, especially when a kind of witch-hunt began in society towards those who did not want to be vaccinated and therefore should be dismissed. It was a difficult stage. As the head of the institution, I haven't thought about myself at that moment, I have thought about others. So, I guess that's when you just do and don't think about other things. But I got emotional support at home. [U2PR]

In another comment, one of the participants from a private school referred to the innovative ways in which colleagues provided support to each other:

I received support from the closest ones, from talking to work colleagues. We had various support measures at school. There was a time when we all had to meet on Zoom dressed up in folk costumes. Another team-building meeting at Zoom—all dressed in green. Then we came in different colors, then the theme was necklaces, hats... Zoom turned on—and everyone's dressed up. [Pr2T]

One of the participants from a rural school in Latvia described the support in simple terms:

I received emotional support from colleagues, working in a team and looking for common solutions. As well as support was provided by the family, helping to recharge, relax from work, accumulate strength. [R1PR]

South African participants' comments about emotional support were twofold: those who did not receive any emotional support, and those who did receive emotional support in some way. Those with positive comments were supported by family, parents, and colleagues. In some cases, there were even positive comments about schools trying to support staff emotionally. For example, one of the participants from an urban school said the following:

We got a psychologist for staff who wanted to chat with her. It was good, especially because staff also had COVID, and staff and parents died. [DUP1]

Another participant from a private school thought outside of the box:

I joined a poetry group. I did courses in lyric writing and mindfulness online. I phoned everyone I knew once, felt connected but needed real people in flesh. [EPT5]

A participant from a rural school added the following:

Management supported each other as well as teachers. It was a team effort, otherwise we wouldn't have got through the tough times. [ARP1]

The conclusion drawn from the interviews about emotional support is that in times of need and uncertainty, people tend to unite by supporting and encouraging each other.

## 5. Discussion

In response to our research question, “what influence did the pandemic have on the affective states of school principals and teachers?”, participants appreciated the opportunity to critically reflect on their emotional states and the effects the pandemic had on them. In both countries, the sudden shift to online teaching caused confusion and stress as teachers attempted to optimize teaching and learning despite health and safety challenges. These multiple roles that principals and teachers had to fill were a common challenge they had to overcome, apart from an excessive workload (Minihan et al. 2022). Principals and teachers had to deal with new laws, rules, and regulations, which required rapid adaptation to and implementation of teaching and learning approaches. This meant, among other things, adapting to a new way of working in a different learning space. Although the schools in the two countries had similar experiences, it was an even greater challenge for teachers of practical subjects.

School leaders, including teacher leaders, have been challenged by the changing trends due to the pandemic. The findings of this study showed that leaders lacked the necessary experience to perform effectively during the pandemic. The new way of working placed additional stress on principals as teachers looked to them for support and guidance (Anand and Bachmann 2021). However, the pandemic has provided school leaders with opportunities to be more innovative and critical about the curriculum and to reflect on the responsibilities of school principals (Charalampous et al. 2023).

Principals and teachers from South African schools experienced more and more mental fatigue, anxiety, depression, worry, and burnout. They had to quickly learn and implement new skills without any support and with insufficient resources, which may have exacerbated stress and anxiety (Minihan et al. 2022).

Latvian principals and teachers had a different experience from their South African counterparts. They perceived the remote online platform as more comfortable and convenient, especially when it came to classroom discipline and controls built into online platforms. Latvian principals and teachers, like their South African counterparts, were often exhausted due to time constraints and an increased workload to edit content for online use. They were also unsure about the new teaching and learning environment they had to provide to students without any methodology. Latvian principals and teachers did not experience their stress disappearing, but rather saw it transform into a different context. They also experienced fatigue, overwhelming mental exhaustion, and severe depression, which was noticeable even after the pandemic. This condition was much worse for Latvian principals and teachers during distance education than when they worked in a regular school environment. However, Latvian colleagues worked in better environments with more support, where they could express themselves, work together, and decide on the best strategies collectively. Being involved in decision-making was something many teachers desired, as many were excluded from crucial decisions (Minihan et al. 2022). According to Anand and Bachmann (2021), more teacher involvement in decision-making results in less burnout.

Latvian principals and teachers were also concerned about the possible negative impact online teaching and learning could have on their learners, despite the valuable lessons they learned in this particular context. Research has proven that lack of support, isolation, anxiety, insufficient resources, and fear of the pandemic can affect principals and teachers mentally to such an extent that they cannot reach their full potential (Kaup et al. 2020). Allen et al. (2020) confirmed the assumption that it is predominantly school principals who experienced increasing anxiety during the pandemic.

Apart from an increasing workload and work pressure, Latvian principals and teachers were also under the pressure of compulsory vaccination, in contrast to South Africa where it was only a strong recommendation. This regulation resulted in many Latvian principals

and teachers deciding to resign instead, putting extra workload and pressure on the remaining teachers.

The change to distance education in South African schools and many other countries was accompanied by unexpected extra workload and high work pressure (García-Sampedro et al. 2021). Principals and teachers who were used to a structured teaching and learning environment had to adapt to the online platform with minimal support from the Department of Education. Principals were expected to know more than usual and support their teachers, placing additional pressure on them. Furthermore, limited internet access made it difficult for most public-school teachers to provide synchronized instruction. This was exacerbated by the fact that most principals and teachers could only access free or cheaper internet in the early hours of the morning, while many learners had no internet access at home. This sudden shift to online education significantly widened the gap between rich and poor learners in South Africa. Furthermore, most South African public schools had to prepare hard copy notes for learners that parents could collect from schools on certain dates. Relaxation of containment restrictions later allowed school attendance on certain days despite the number of persons per square meter. This placed extra pressure on teachers as they attempted to complete more work in less time due to the limited number of days they could directly teach. Teachers then had to prepare notes and exercises in hard copy that learners were to complete at home on the days that they did not attend school, which placed additional pressure on parents who had to ensure that children completed the given assignments. The expectation that all parents would assist their children was in some cases far-fetched; moreover, this expectation caused new problems as not all parents and guardians are up to the academic standard that is required to assist their children with schoolwork.

While compulsory vaccination was a threat to job security in Latvia, most of the South African participants were not afraid of losing their jobs. South African teachers who did have a fear of possible job loss or reduced income were those teachers who were appointed by schools' governing bodies and paid from the school fund instead of the Department of Education. Job loss in some South African sectors led to some parents not paying school fees, which, in turn, caused teachers to lose salaries provided by school funding. Similarly, teachers from private schools feared possible job losses and cuts in salaries as these are also paid from school fees.

Latvian and South African principals and teachers had mixed opinions about the future of education in their countries due to COVID-19. In Latvia, for example, principals and teachers described the gaps in the foundation phase as a major concern. Although they believed that learners would catch up, their concern was more about the interim knowledge and skill building that took place on a foundation full of gaps. Principals and teachers were also concerned about learners whose homework was completed by their parents during the pandemic as well as those who did not tune in to online classes. Another cause for concern was about learners in large classes for whom catching up would be difficult due to the pandemic. In addition to the backlog, which had to be corrected in time, some principals and teachers expressed their concern about possible socio-emotional issues, such as learners' willingness to rebuild meaningful relationships with their peers.

Nevertheless, Latvian principals and teachers experienced the pandemic as a significant opportunity during which they were well equipped for similar challenges. They viewed online teaching as a tool to increase professionalism in education rather than a threat. According to data from the interviews, South African principals and teachers harbored high expectations for education in the country, especially with regard to better use of technology in the future. Although these principals and teachers were fully aware of the disruption caused by the pandemic, they felt that the challenges could be overcome, especially in critical problem solving. Despite this positive outlook, participants were still of the opinion that it would take learners a long time to catch up academically due to the pandemic and an overloaded curriculum.

There was a notable difference between support for Latvian principals and teachers compared with support for South Africans. Latvian schools were quite well supported by their Department of Education in terms of continuous information, explanations, and the issuance of tablets, phones, and computers. In certain areas, learners also received food parcels during the pandemic. However, in some cases, the support was not always fast enough; therefore, decisions on issues, for example, the use of online platforms, were not considered to be well reasoned.

As far as South Africa is concerned, the opinion of participants was that most of the time the Department of Basic Education acted hastily without a clear vision and implementation plan. Support was generally considered poor: decisions by education officials were not made promptly, common worksheets arrived late at schools and were sometimes full of errors, and communication with schools was generally poor. Furthermore, participants claimed that school leaders were kept in the dark about adaptations to and implementation of the curriculum. Although communication and support were not always sufficient and provided on time, the Department of Basic Education provided schools with masks, disinfectants, and information about the rules and regulations that had to be followed. As in the case of Australia, the role of teachers in South Africa extended beyond education by including sanitation and virus control taskmasters (Beames et al. 2021).

Latvian principals and teachers appreciated the support of parents during the pandemic. Although most parents were seen as supportive, there was not much support from the wider community. Principals and teachers in schools that were limited to a number of learners and were not as outspoken as the rest of the community about compulsory vaccination were accused of laxity by the community. This controversial issue has placed school principals in a difficult position as they serve as social leaders in the community, despite being employed by the Department of Education (Charalampous et al. 2023). In contrast, South African principals and teachers reported that they received more support from parents and the community. The community looked after each other with more concern, empathy, and encouragement during lockdown. An interesting finding was the fact that urban schools received more support from the community than rural and private schools. Okyere-Manu and Morgan (2022) argued that the COVID-19 pandemic was an opportunity for Africans to revive their positive traditional values of Ubuntu leadership, which proposes an ethic of care.

Family, friends, and parents made a significant contribution to the emotional support of school principals and teachers. Latvian principals relied on the support of their families when they had to assist staff members. Emotional support was also provided to each other by having team-building sessions and innovative meetings on Zoom.

In some cases, South African teachers claimed that they received no emotional support, while others confirmed that they were assisted by family, learners' parents, and colleagues. Some schools surpassed expectations by providing psychological counseling to staff members who lost colleagues, parents, and other family members. While some of the most affluent schools were able to pay for counseling, less affluent schools could not afford it. In addition, principals and teachers used their creative thinking to inspire each other by attending online courses in groups. School management teams and teachers were also involved in team efforts to support each other. However, teachers who worked in isolation from home were less supported, leading to loneliness (Minihan et al. 2022).

## 6. Conclusions

This comparative study has demonstrated that the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the affective states of school principals as well as teachers and that the effects have implications for their well-being and work quality. Despite the uncertainty, stress, uncomfortable feelings, doubts, and anger, this study also proved that participants' ability to deal with and solve problems, as well as their IT skills, generally improved during the pandemic. Therefore, the pandemic provided a learning opportunity that especially equipped princi-

pals and teachers with the skills and experiences to successfully overcome any challenges in the future.

According to data from interviews with South African and Latvian school leaders and teachers who participated in this study, we were able to point out different experiences as a result of the pandemic. However, all the participants agreed on the importance of support in unfamiliar situations and during irregular working hours, and the anger and fatigue that came with such working conditions. As a UNESCO study, *Reimagining our futures together: a new social contract for education*, puts it, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted human fragility as well as a need for interconnectedness (UNESCO 2021). What becomes clear from this is that support systems in educational institutions must be continuously strengthened as educational workers' well-being and positive affective states of mind are the keys to excellent performance.

Furthermore, this study investigated issues such as gaps in learning, socio-emotional conditions of teachers as well as learners, and learners' willingness to rebuild relationships with their friends, which highlighted the need for the implementation of transformative learning. This, in turn, requires self-awareness, renewed values, and attitudes that will ultimately result in positive thinking and a better lifestyle.

As argued in the Section 5 of this article, the COVID-19 pandemic has provided an opportunity for Africans to revive their positive traditional values of Ubuntu leadership, which proposes ethics of care (Okyere-Manu and Morgan 2022). The ethics of care is a moral paradigm with a relational approach that emphasizes responsibility, connectedness, and concern for others, thus transcending geographical boundaries and offering everyone an equal opportunity to learn from their experiences.

The results of this study indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the emotional well-being and work quality of school principals and teachers. Moreover, this study highlights the need for principals and teachers to be provided with healthy support systems in order to maintain positive affective states for optimal performance.

Finally, the researchers recommend expansion of the existing theories outlined in this study to include the impact of global crises on the affective states of school leaders and educators and the subsequent effects on their performance and well-being.

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