

# Teaching without COVID-19 vaccination: Grade 12 teachers' experiences

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## Abstract

Grade 12 teachers undertook teaching and learning activities in a Covid-19 context, which was a new normal. This new context shaped the teaching strategies and methods for teachers, and this new context came with new experiences. Consequently, this study aimed to explore the experiences of Grade 12 teachers in teaching without COVID-19 vaccination. A descriptive case study design was used to frame the study aligned with a qualitative approach. Using purposive sampling, seven focus groups were used to generate data which were analysed thematically. Findings revealed that teaching without COVID-19 vaccination is risky. Covid-19 comes with urban or semi-urban teachers, no support from the Department of Basic Education (DBE) for infected teachers, Covid-19 causes depression for some teachers, and wearing a mask while teaching is impossible in the classroom context. As a sequel to these findings, this study recommends that the DBE works more closely with schools during Covid-19 period so that it clearly understands school contexts. The DBE should expedite the vaccination process for teachers so that they can feel safe in schools, and awareness campaigns should be organised for rural communities about the Covid-19 pandemic. Lastly, the DBE should provide support for infected teachers until full recovery.

**Keywords:** Grade 12; teachers; Covid-19; vaccination; experiences



## Introduction

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic owing to the discovery of the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARSS-CoV-2) in 2019, the virus which causes coronavirus disease (Covid-19) (Ludvigsson, Engerström, Nordenhäll, & Larsson, 2021) affected all spheres of life, including education. The coronavirus was first discovered in Wuhan, China in December 2019 (Clerkin, Fried, Raikhelkar, Sayer, Griffin, Masoumi & Schwartz, 2020; Gupta, & Goplani, 2020). To fight the spread of the virus, all forms of gathering were prohibited, and this resulted in the shutting down of schools. The closure of schools was also a response to the national lockdown proclaimed by the president, Cyril Ramaphosa, on 23 March 2020, which put the whole country at level five of lockdown. The lockdown was meant to flatten the curve of coronavirus infections. With school closure, teaching and learning activities were interrupted until such time as schools were reopened. The United States, Australia, Italy, India, France, Germany, Nigeria and Ghana shut down schools amid the spread of the coronavirus (Onyema, Eucheria, Obafemi, Sen, Atonye, Sharma, & Alsayed, 2020), and South African schools were closed on 18 March 2020, started reopening on 1 June 2020, and were again closed from 27 July to 24 August 2020 (Department of Basic Education, Notice 432 of 2020).

The school opening on 1 June 2020 was meant only for Grade 12 and Grade 7 learners. They opened earlier than other grades because they were the in their schools. At that time of school reopening, it was crystal clear that there was no vaccine for Covid-19 that could be administered for either Grade 12 or Grade 7 teachers, but they were expected to undertake teaching and learning activities as if everything was normal. In other words, teachers assumed teaching responsibilities and gathered at school with learners without vaccination that would protect them against infection by the coronavirus. The safety of Grade 7 and Grade 12 teachers was in jeopardy. From that day they remained in school until other grades joined them two or three times a week. However, it should be borne in mind that vaccination does not necessarily mean that one cannot get infected by the coronavirus. What is more critical is to adhere to the regulation, but being vaccinated gives hope that one is not as vulnerable as the ones not vaccinated. Grade 12 teachers teach the last grade in secondary school, and it serves as an entry requirement to the higher education institutions (HEIs). Hence there was a dire need for Grade 12 teachers to ensure that when the year ended, these learners had completed their work programme.

In the United Kingdom (UK), for example, it was declared that schools would remain closed until a vaccine could be administered for teachers and learners (Sheikh, Sheikh, Shekh, & Dhama, 2020). In England, schools were kept open only for young children aged 4 to 11 on 1 June 2020, and was voluntary (Smith, Woodland, Amlôt, Rubin, & Rubin, 2020). This was a clear indication of scepticism about the spread of Covid-19 owing to gatherings at school. A study conducted in India reveals that keeping teachers to school during Covid-19 had a lot of impact on their morale (Bhat, Singh, Kamath, Muliman, & Kulkarni, 2020) more



especially for their not having received a protection against Covid-19. Presumably, Grade 12 teachers and learners were dubious about going back to school since the pandemic was rife, and they were not vaccinated, so they were safe against Covid-19; but they had no choice since they had to put food on the table. During this time everybody was scared of being infected. Even learners may have found it difficult to mingle with others. The expectation of being in a risky working environment created some experiences for these teachers. Whatever they experienced may have been shaped by the wide spread of Covid-19. Therefore, it was crucial for Grade 12 teachers to be vaccinated before they went back to school for teaching and learning activities. From what has been proclaimed by the President of the Republic of South Africa, Cyril Ramaphosa, and the then Minister of Health, Dr Zweli Mkhize, no date has been set for the vaccination of teachers, yet their schools have reopened, and they go there daily. Therefore, this study sought to explore the experiences of Grade 12 teachers on teaching without Covid-19 vaccination in order to understand how they viewed the working conditions during this period.

## Literature review

A literature review is the process whereby the researcher describes previous research to map and assess the research area to clarify the aim of the study to be undertaken, and justify the research question (Snyder, 2019) for the new study. The value of an academic review depends on what was done, what was found, and the clarity of the reporting (Moher et al., 2009); Literature assists the researcher to do this. The review ensures the researchability of the topic before 'proper' research begins (Hart, 2018). For these reasons, it is pertinent that the researcher should review the literature before undertaking the study in order to ensure that the new study is not a duplicate of the existing scholarship.

## Covid-19 vaccination: concerns and issues

Like any other vaccine, the Covid-19 vaccine helps to boost the immune system so that those who received it do not get infected by Covid-19. Since people died owing to this pandemic, it was essential for Grade 12 teachers to be vaccinated before teaching in the Covid-19 environment. Vaccination would mark the return to full and lasting normality (Giubilini, Savulescu, & Wikinson, 2020) for teachers. Bell, Clarke, Mounier-Jack, Walker and Paterson (2020) argue that when a vaccine becomes available priority should be given to those most at risk of disease; Grade 12 teachers are no exception. Since Grade 12 teachers also work with learners are community members like other essential workers, they should have been prioritised to get vaccinated. Even though some medical staff had concerns about the safety of a vaccine, those who felt they were at high risk of disease showed higher vaccine acquiescence (Dror, Eisenbach, Taiber, Morozov, Mizrachi, Zigran, Srouji & Sel, 2020). Covid-19 endangers the lives of human beings, hence the vaccine was meant to clear any misrepresentations about it (Vergara, Sarmiento, & Lagman, 2020). It

was imperative for Grade 12 learners to be vaccinated before resuming teaching and learning activities because they might be community reservoirs for the transmission of the virus (Giubilini, Savulescu, & Wikinson, 2020; Sheikh, Sheikh, Sheikh, & Dhami, 2020). Grade 12 teachers might have been infected through contact with learners in class. In line with this, Sheikh, Sheikh, Sheikh and Dhami (2020) contend that schools should have remained closed until a vaccine could be administered to teachers and learners. While the primary goal of vaccination was safety, there were ubiquitous narratives which triggered scepticism about the administration of the vaccine. The scepticism about vaccination was also informed by the notion that it could make subsequent SARS-CoV-2 infections more severe (Graham, 2020). It is clear that administration of the Covid-19 vaccine depended on a personal risk-benefit perception that might be influenced by misinformation (Dror, Eisenbacht, Taiber, Morozov, Mizrachi, Zigron, Srouji & Sela, 2020). Consequently, the World Health Organisation (WHO) warned the public about the new kind of epidemic information and scientific claims (Vergara, Sarmiento & Lagman, 2020). The so-called "infodemics", which means the progressive spread of fake news, misled many people, who thus doubted the vaccine. So, these were all narratives and concerns about Covid-19.

### **Teaching and learning activities during COVID-19**

The closure of schools due to Covid-19 disrupted teaching and learning, and gave birth to a new normal, and teachers had no choice but to shape up or ship out. They had to adapt to this new normal without fail. Owing to Covid-19, face-to-face interactions were prohibited, thus in countries like the US, teachers were forced to work from home and scheduled tests and examinations were annulled (Onyema et al., 2020). Online teaching replaced the traditional way of classroom teaching and became the mainstream mode (Gao & Zhang, 2020) for most schools, but a challenge for underdeveloped countries since some parents could not afford to buy learners' technological gadgets. This created pressure on teachers who were expected to cope with covering the curriculum in a short space of time (van der Berg & Spaul, 2020). This sudden change from traditional to online teaching and learning resulted in disrupted teaching plans, and required knowledge and skills for information communication technology (ICT) (Gao & Zhang, 2020). ICT was needed mostly for those teachers who succumbed to online teaching. The school closure disrupted the academic interest and performance of learners (Onyema et al., 2020). When schools re-opened they had to abide the regulations of Covid-19 for teaching and learning to take place conveniently. In England, for example, in preparation for teaching and learning activities some measures were put in place. Learners were expected to frequently clean their hands, mix in groups of 15 or less, maintain physical distance where possible, minimise parents' contacts at school gates and limit their use of public transport (Smith, Woodland, Amlôt, Rubin, & Rubin, 2020). Some schools recommended additional steps to make teaching and learning possible during Covid-19. They asked parents to wash their children's clothes daily and have their temperature taken daily (Smith, Woodland, Amlôt,



Rubin, & Rubin, 2020). These measures were introduced to ensure that teaching and learning were not interrupted by anything.

### **Theoretical underpinning: Social bond theory**

The working conditions for Grade 12 teachers during Covid-19 were a conundrum since they were not protected against this disease. Their unremitting commitment to complete work programmes set for the year showed the bond they had with the learners and their determination to complete set targets. The commitment from teachers showed that they had nothing to lose, but wanted to maintain and sustain relationships they valued (Hirschi, 1969) with learners and the community. They showed commitment by risking their lives just to accomplish the mammoth task of teaching Grade 12. This may suggest that Grade 12 teachers were attached both to their work and their learners. This attachment manifested itself when, knowing very well that they might be infected with Covid-19 and die, they decided not to resist going to school and teaching Grade 12 in these uncondusive conditions. Their love for and attachment to their learners never prevented them from continuing with their teaching and learning activities, even though they knew they were hazardous. Through their attachment, Grade 12 teachers' showed how much they cared about learners, and this showed the psychological commitment teachers had to learners and school as an institution (Hirschi, 1969).

In addition to commitment and attachment, teachers showed their involvement with the work they do. If teachers were not greatly involved with teaching and learning, they would not have bothered to continue with teaching and learning while Covid-19 was still ubiquitous. Teachers viewed themselves as involved in the prosperity and success of learners as future adults. They were quite aware that without their involvement in teaching and learning, learners might not achieve their learning objectives. They spent time engaging in some form of social activity, which suggested that they did not engage in antisocial activity (Hirschi, 1969). Teachers had good epistemological beliefs about themselves and learners. All that did was informed by the beliefs they had. Without positive beliefs about their undertaking of the desired tasks and that learners would perform well, teachers would not have shown determination and commitment to teach while conditions were unfavourable. Teachers showed that they had a strong personal moral code (Hirschi, 1969) for teaching and learning. For these reasons, the social bond theory founded by Hirschi in 1969 underpinned this study. Hirschi (1969) argued that the bonds that people have with prosocial values, prosocial people, and prosocial institutions control their behaviour. Therefore, the decision of teachers to step-up and continue teaching while the Covid-19 pandemic was still rife was informed by the attitudes they had towards Grade 12 learners.



## Methodology

Using a descriptive case study design, this study sought to explore teachers' experiences in teaching Grade 12 learners without Covid-19 vaccination for this pandemic. The rationale for using a case study was that it helps to answer the *how* and *why* questions of the phenomenon (Baskarada, 2014). A case study assisted the researcher to have an in-depth understanding of Grade 12 teachers' experiences (Creswell, 2002). For data generation, seven focus groups of five members each were used for seven rural schools. Since focus groups are about gathering data through group interaction on a chosen topic (Morgan, 1996) they allowed the researcher to tap into different forms of data from different teachers (Doody, Slevin, & Taggart, 2012) at once. The responses retrieved through the focus groups conducted for the selected Grade 12 teachers were used to proffer answers to the identified research question guiding the study: what are the experiences of Grade 12 teachers in teaching Grade 12 learners during Covid-19 pandemic without vaccination? The focus group interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed by means of coding (Creswell, 2009), and thereafter theme construction. Coding involves going through the data and identifying and assigning codes to key concepts (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Purposive sampling was adopted in this study because it allowed the researcher to judge participants and deliberate on choices owing to the qualities the participants possessed (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). Grade 12 teachers were suitable because they continued teaching Grade 12 during Covid-19 while other grades were closed. Data were analysed thematically because thematic analysis allows researchers to identify, analyse and interpret patterns of meaning or themes within qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2014). Ethical considerations were provided for by securing ethics clearance before undertaking the study. Pseudonyms were used for the participants and schools involved, and participants signed consent forms before taking part in the study.

## Discussion of findings

The findings to be discussed in this section are a response to the research question that guided this research study. As stated above, it was: what are the experiences of Grade 12 teachers in teaching without Covid-19 vaccination? In an attempt to proffer answers to this question, themes were generated, and used as a guide for the presentation of findings for this study. These themes are that teaching without vaccination is risky; Covid-19 comes with teachers who stay in urban or semi-urban areas; there is no support from the Department of Basic Education; Covid-19 causes depression for some teachers; it is difficult to wear a mask while teaching; and the classroom context is un conducive for regulating the Covid-19 pandemic. For reference purposes, the researcher used FGs for focus groups. For example, focus group one is referred to as FG1.



## Teaching without Covid-19 vaccination is risky

Grade 12 teachers – for example, FG4 – submitted that teaching learners without Covid-19 vaccination is risky because they could also be infected. FG4 indicated that *“teaching without COVID-19 is risky, we may be infected by learners”*. Those who serve in the school management teams (SMTs) claimed that when they assumed duties, they had been told that schools had been fumigated. However, upon arriving, they discovered it was not true; hence they were putting themselves at risk. This was revealed by FG5, who said: *“Claims were that our school had been fumigated, but when we got there, we found it was not true. But we carried on with our duties as normal.”* Learners move around and travel to places where this pandemic seems to be mostly found, like towns and townships, and they may carry it to schools and then infect teachers. This view was shared by FG2. *“Teachers are exposed to learners who travel everywhere freely and may be infected with corona, but they come to school”*. Grade 12 teachers see learners as putting them at risk because most of them do not abide by Covid-19 regulations, so it may be easy for them to infect teachers and other learners. Sheikh et al. (2020) and Giubilini et al. (2020) submit that learners may be community reservoirs for the transmission of the virus, so they should be careful how they conduct themselves during this time of Covid-19 so that they do not cause unnecessary infections. Owing to the risk of working under Covid-19 conditions without vaccination, some teachers feel that increasing numbers of people were dying. This was presented by a member of FG1: *“If it was up to me school would be closed for six months, but there is nothing we can do.”* According to Sheik et al. (2020), in the UK schools remained closed until teachers could be vaccinated so that they were safe and not putting themselves at risk. Only vaccination was supposed to mark the return to full and lasting normality (Giubilini et al., 2020) in schools.

## COVID-19 comes with teachers who stay in urban or semi-urban areas

Learners claimed that Covid-19 was carried by teachers to schools because they stay in vulnerable spaces like cities and townships. According to learners, these are spaces where the corona virus is mostly found, but not in rural. This view was shared by FG7: *“The corona virus comes with teachers; we stay in rural areas where there is no corona.”* FG3 also claimed *“Rural communities do not believe corona exists and can kill them.”* FG2: *“We don’t have corona here in rural areas.”* These claims by learners may have made teachers unsettled and stressed since if learners got infected, teachers were to blame, even though they came to school for teaching and learning activities in terrible conditions of Covid-19. This misbelief of rural spaces not having the corona virus may be viewed as a reason for learners not wearing masks on school premises, but only if teachers commanded them to do so. According to the WHO, the corona virus can infect anyone anywhere; meaning no one is safe, whether rural or urban. The information that learners have is just a distortion of the truth. Maybe if learners were aware that teachers had been vaccinated, they would not label teachers as possible carriers of the corona virus. Since teachers deal with the school community, they are also vulnerable, and should have been classified as amongst

those essential workers at risk of being infected (Bell et al., 2020). Since Grade 12 teachers were at high risk of disease infection they showed higher vaccine acquiescence (Dror et al., 2020). This would have made them legible for acquiring vaccines early, but even now they are not even certain when they will receive vaccination.

### **No support from the Department of Basic Education (DBE) for infected teachers**

Some Grade 12 teachers got infected with Covid -19 and had to take leave and be quarantined as per pronouncement by the President of Republic of South Africa, Cyril Ramaphosa, and some succumbed to it. However, those who made it through the pandemic feel that the DBE did not offer proper support to the victims. The only thing the DBE worries about is getting work done, without caring about the health of those from hospital, and allowing them to recover fully. FG7 alluded to this: *“Even after sickness no one wants to know how you feel. All they care about is duty load.”* Also, an FG2 member said: *“I remember I was admitted into hospital for Covid-19, and when I came back to school even before full recovery, the duty load was waiting for me.”* FG1 commented: *“The DBE knows that the teacher was sick and submitted all the necessary document, but they do not care what happens thereafter.”* It is pellucid from these assertions by Grade 12 teachers that they expected the DBE to follow up on those who had been admitted and survived to find out how they were doing in order to establish if they had fully recovered for work or not, and even identify the kind of support they needed for speedy recovery. Being sick from the corona virus and returning to work was burdensome for some teachers, and they needed support from their employer. Stankovska, Memedi and Dimitrovski (2020) allude to patients who need psychological assistance to help them recover. Psychological support should be offered to Covid-19 patients because of the lack of human contact caused by visitor suspensions and limitations which can result in a higher incidence of post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression (De Picke, Yolken, Bena edetti, Borsini, Branchi, Fusar-Poli, & TWG, 2021). Covid-19 is likely to strain teachers’ psychological reserves, hence fostering teacher resilience can be essential for recovery. Teachers who escaped the wrath of Covid 19 needed specialised counselling to support their psychosocial needs (Stankovska, Memedi, & Dimitrovski, 2020). The DBE should have provided psychological support for teachers so that they could heal.

### **COVID-19 causes depression for some teachers**

The experiences of Grade 12 teachers revealed that Covid-19 causes depression for some. They indicated that quarantining oneself and knowing that one might die, since some Covid-19 patients were dying, resulted in depression. Being forced to live alone in a room, and not be in contact with others, was a monster according to Grade 12 teachers. FG5 explained: *“Being infected by Covid-19 kills you emotionally because the only thing you think about is that you will die.”* FG7 stated: *“Seeing people dying left and right and expected to go to school without vaccination led to depression, and I am still on medication*





*as we speak.*" The victims of Covid-19 only thought about dying after being infected. One cannot fault them since the level of casualties due to Covid-19 was increasing daily. Depressed people may feel sad and anxious (Attkisson & Zich, 1990). So the way Grade 12 felt as depressed people was not peculiar. The fear of illness, uncertainty about the future, stigma, traumatic memories of severe illness and social isolation experienced by patients during t Covid-19 are significant stressors (Brooks et al., 2020; Carvalho et al., 2020) that may lead to depression. These demoralised teachers can benefit from encouragement, support and engagement which can lead to a sense of mastery (Shader, 2020). Covid-19 victimised some teachers to this extent of depression, which was not good for them. Bhat et al. (2020) warn that keeping teachers at school during Covid-19 may have a lot of impact on their morale. It may therefore have been a mistake to open schools while Covid-19 was still rife.

### **Wearing a mask while teaching is challenging**

One of the mechanisms to curtail the spread of Covid-19 is to wear a mask so that no saliva droplets can fall out of one's mouth. A mask also helps to limit the spread of the corona virus. For this reason, it is incumbent on one to always wear a mask especially in public or any place where one may be in contact with people. However, for Grade 12 teachers it became impossible to wear it while teaching since learners struggled to hear what the teacher said. So as a solution, teachers were compelled to remove their mask while teaching, thus putting their lives and that those of their learners in danger. FG2 insisted: *"We cannot wear masks while teaching! It is difficult because learners may not hear our voices clearly."* FG4 added: *Some learners said that they can't hear me clearly when I'm teaching with a mask on.* According to Desai and Aronoff (2020), wearing a mask in public settings, particularly when physically distancing, is difficult. Since most teachers' timetables are congested, taking off the mask may jeopardise the whole exercise of teaching and learning. The primary benefit of wearing a mask is to limit the spread of the virus from someone who knows or does not know they have an infection (Desai & Aronoff, 2020). Therefore, being forced to take the mask off in class puts the lives of learners and teachers at risk. Unfortunately, teachers do not remove masks willy-nilly.

### **Unconducive classroom context for regulating the Covid-19 pandemic**

According to Grade 12 teachers, classroom context was not conducive for them to adhere to some of the Covid-19 regulations, especially social distancing. Social distancing was introduced to slow the spread of infection and reduce the intensity of the epidemic (Kissler, Tedijanto, Lipsitch, & Grad, 2020). The closing of schools was meant to minimise gatherings of learners in response to the Covid-19 outbreak. Grade 12 teachers argued that they teach large classes, and it is difficult to divide them since it would mean more classes and hence more work. FG3 explained: *"Classrooms are small with too many learners, and the staff is small, so it's difficult to divide learners because there will be a duty overload."* This is the issue that stood between social distancing and the Covid-19 infection.

One may see that even if teachers were prepared to apply the social distancing principle, the space did not allow them. Another aim of social distancing is to reduce interaction (Aquino, Silveira, Pescarini, Aquino, & Souza-Filho, 2020) amongst many people. and this includes infected and un-identified individuals. Social distancing allows the transmission to be reduced (Aquino, Silveira, Pescarini, Aquino & Souza-Filho, 2020). This suggests that in order to curb the spread of COVID-19 learners had to keep to social distancing. However, in the classroom context that has too many learners in small classrooms, social distancing may not be feasible.

## Conclusion

This paper was undertaken to explore the experiences of Grade 12 teachers in teaching without vaccination. Following the findings of the analysed data, this research study concludes that conditions were not conducive for Grade 12 teachers to teach during Covid-19. They felt labelled as carriers of Covid-19, and after being infected they are all by themselves without support from their employer. Covid-19 had some psychological effects on teachers after infection, wearing a mask while teaching was cumbersome, and the classroom context was not conducive for effective teaching and learning during Covid-19. Consequent to the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

- The DBE should expedite the vaccination of teachers so that they can feel as safe as other essential workers when they are at school.
- More awareness campaigns should be organised for rural communities so that they understand fully what Covid-19 entails.
- The DBE should trace infected teachers so as to be abreast of their recovery and give support where needed.;
- The DBE should improve school conditions so that they can abide by Covid-19 regulations more efficiently.

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