



The Role of ICTs in South African Public Schools' Athletics during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown education in turmoil, globally, resulting in many challenges for quality education and associated activities, such as sports, to continue. This study's foci are on what detrimental effects of discontinued athletics have on the learner athletes; how information communication technology (ICT) utilisation can mitigate these effects and enable continued athletics participation and coaching. A qualitative research approach was employed. Purposive, convenient sampling method was used to select the participants. Data was collected by means of a face-to-face interview; examining artefacts; two focus group interviews and semi-structured questionnaires. The data was arranged manually according to categories and themes. The findings and recommendations were aligned to the third stage of the Crisis Recovery Stages of Wa-Mbaleka and Costa' model and the research questions were answered. The coach's use of ICTs for training proved to be an effective way for athletes to continue school athletics during the COVID-19 pandemic, with implications for education and society.

Keywords: information communication technology (ICT); athletics; athletes; coaches; COVID-19.

Introduction

Sport is universally recognised for its important role (empowering) and impact (contributions) it has on the lives of humans, economically, socially, educationally and health wise. Sports enables "fostering communications and building bridges between communities and generations.... and creating learning opportunities and accessing often marginal or at-risk populations" (United Nations, 2020 np.). However, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the "normal operation of sports" (Sowier-Kasprzyk & Widawska-Stanis, 2020: 2939); subsequently, its disruptive nature has had devastating effects which has spread across the globe. It is thus construed that "COVID-19 represents an unprecedented challenge for the youth sport sector" (Kelly, Erickson & Turnnidge, 2020: 1). Is this the beginning of new "processes of re-sportization and de-sportization" in view of regulations such as social distancing? (Evans, Blackwell, Dolan, Fahlén, Hoekman, Lenneis, McNarry, Smith & Wilcock, 2020: 85). This merit singling out how school sports, in particular athletics, are being profoundly affected by the pandemic and has piqued our curiosity as to what

the implications are, and how the use of ICTs could possibly serve as a tool to continue with the coaching and training of athletics during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Learners and their parents were reticent, after the lockdown period and the reopening of schools, to restart and attend athletics training sessions as they felt unsafe. Subsequently, education departments have put restrictions in place, among others, social distancing as an important safety measure. Its aim is to prevent/negate the rapid spread of the disease and to safeguard the health of the learners who participate in sports. As these measures are rather restricting, it has raised the concern that learners who are active athletes, may suffer adverse effects on their psyche and physical health. Consequently, it poses great challenges for the athletics coaches as they have been required to implement a “fundamental restructuring” of how athletes are instructed and engaged. Coaches will need to be innovative as to how they will monitor athletic performances, injuries and training, seeing that they will have no or little face-to-face contact with the athletes. Where technique and physical skills are of utmost importance, it will have a limiting effect on coaching practices (Evans, Blackwell, Dolan, Fahlén, Hoekman, Lenneis, McNarry, Smith & Wilcock, 2020: 90). Currently, coaches promote sports development and participation during lockdown by reverting to virtual sessions online and utilising ICTs to ensure continuity of athletes’ participation in athletics activities. This dire situation in which our learners and teacher coaches find themselves, has propelled the authors to focus on the effect the pandemic has on athletics coaching and training and how it is currently being managed in South African (SA) schools.

Digital technology is an enabling tool to continue work, education and communication, however, the digital divide, the “offline world”, has left many people, globally isolated, economically and socially, especially on the African continent (SAIIA, 2020 np.). Due to this dilemma and depending on how much access they have to technology; millions of learners have been affected as they are unable to keep up with the demands of the curricula. In addition, not everybody has “the knowledge and the skills to use the internet for educational purposes...”. The focus of the governments and private sectors should respond with “digital literacy and awareness campaigns, to capacitate citizens on navigating through available information and using the internet to improve their socio-economic situation” (SAIIA, 2020 np.). “E-education for just a privileged minority can exacerbate future inequalities in South African society through the so-called ‘digital divide’” (DoE 2015: 17). In an effort to mitigate/combat the ‘digital divide’ the Department of Education (DoE) put the *Action Plan to 2019: Towards the Realisation of Schooling 2030*, in place and the following goals are applicable to this article:

Goal 16 stipulates: “Improve the professionalism, teaching skills, subject knowledge and computer literacy of teachers throughout their entire careers”; Goal 20 - “Increase access amongst learners to a wide range of media, including computers, which enrich their education”; Goal 22 – “Improve parent and community participation in the governance of schools, partly by improving access to important information via the e-Education strategy”; Goal 25 - “Use schools as vehicles for promoting access to a range of public services amongst learners in areas such as health, poverty alleviation, psychosocial support, sport and culture”; Goal 27 - “Improve the frequency and quality of the monitoring and support services provided to schools by district offices, partly through better use of e-Education” (DoE, 2015: 3). The document also emphasises that “improved access to ICTs must be linked to other elements of school improvement” (ibid.18) which in this case is relevant to the enhancement/promotion/continuation of sport activities at SA schools during the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 is described by Wa-Mbaleka and Costa (2020: 11) as the “worst modern pandemic that has shaken all aspects of human life” and has offered challenges as well as opportunities for qualitative research to play a pivotal role and contribute to the body of knowledge in education. In addition, what is in favour of the researchers is that “... educational institutions have embraced online education much more significantly than ever before” (Wa-Mbaleka et al., 2020: 17). Subsequently, a fertile ground for conducting research (within the confines of government restrictions) is available in an attempt to answer the research questions below.

Wa-Mbaleka and Costa's (2020: 22) Crisis Recovery Stages model (table 1) was used to gauge at what stage this research is and the discussions and recommendations aligned with the identified stage. The Crisis Recovery Stages model (table 1) is discussed in the research methodology section.

Research Questions

What role does ICTs play to ensure continued athletics activities in South African public schools during the COVID-19 pandemic? and the sub-questions:

1. How has the pandemic affected the learner athletes, their parents and the coach?
2. How are ICTs as COVID-19 coping mechanisms being utilised by the athletics coach in order to ensure continued athletics coaching and training remotely?
3. What guidelines/recommendations can be offered to athletics coaches, learner athletes and their parents to continue with their athletic activities during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Review of Related Literature

South African primary schools' athletics

The roles and responsibilities of the [Department of Basic Education \(DBE\)](#), as set out in the *Draft School Sport Policy for schools in South Africa* (DBE, 2011: 12), include the "Development and implementation of the school sport policy on an ongoing basis", and to "Support, monitor, evaluate, report and review school sport activities".

"Relevant research results and applicable technical material have to be disseminated to practitioners around the country allowing for an interchange of ideas" ([Department: Sport and Recreation South Africa, 2012: 32](#)). Further, "In the highly competitive and demanding world of international sport, South Africa needs to explore all possible means to ensure that our coaches are keeping abreast with latest technology, research, techniques and developments and providing our athletes with the competitive edge where possible" (ibid:38). Sports and Recreation South Africa (SRSA) has been assigned to "develop, coordinate and monitor a comprehensive system established in accordance with a broadly agreed national strategy. SRSA is assigned this responsibility and must ensure that the required sport development system is in place and fully operational" (ibid:52). It is thus incumbent upon all parties involved with school sports (in this case athletics), particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, that they endeavour to also strive thereto.

Theoretical framework

With the inception of technology, a new culture has been created and defined, as our way of communication has been reshaped. This calls for a new theory to be created and an emergent theory is that of connectivity ([Carreño, 2014: 107](#)). [Černý \(2020: 7-9\)](#) explains that pedagogical theories always react to other theories (in this case connectivism, "which defines itself against constructivism, cognitivism and behaviourism") and to current social problems and environments. Connectivism responds to great changes in society that are related to developments in new approaches - both in the natural and the technical sciences (the chaos theory) as well as the internet and how it impacts on society. From a phenomenology perspective, knowledge is never complete, but is gradually revealed and the truth happens through our activity. The phenomenological-pragmatists need to be positive towards science as well as technology. [Siemens \(2004: 3\)](#) explains that "We derive our competence from forming connections" and that is defined "as connections between entities". This means that "people, groups, systems, nodes, entities can be connected to create an integrated whole. Alterations within the network have ripple effects on the whole.... connectivism is the integration of principles explored by chaos, network, and complexity and self-organization theories" (ibid. 4). Siemens also includes traditions of constructivism and has phenomenological-pragmatist roots ([Černý,](#)

2020:7). An important element in an organisation's effectiveness is the flow of information, thus the hubs in social networks consist of people who are connected and can sustain knowledge flow. Connectivism starts with the individual as their knowledge, which comprises a network, feeds into the organisation/institution and in turn feeds back into the network. The individual continues to learn and is up to date in their field by means of their formed connections (ibid.4). All aspects of life are implicated by connectivism such as management; media; news and information ("two-way information flow of blogging"); management of personal knowledge (ibid. 5). When we need knowledge and it is not known then it necessitates one to be able to access sources. When new tools are used it alters the way people work and function, hence connectivism allows us to understand learning skills and tasks that we need to flourish in this digital age (ibid. 5). Connectivism is thus characterised "as a network theory of knowledge and learning with an emphasis on the use of digital technology to enhance and extend interaction online" (Downes, 2019: 113). Networks are established in chaotic environments which are complex and not well structured where changes are fast and with little stability (Černý, 2020:12).

Chaos theory forms part of the complexity theory as it is concerned with "non-linear dynamic systems whose behavior does not follow clearly predictable and repeatable pathways". As the environmental factor increases, the system behavior responds to it in a linear way. In a chaotic system the behaviour is unpredictable and the systems that are explored in the chaos theory are dynamic. Connectivism is thus conducted when one understands that a decision is based on principles that change swiftly. By using collaborative technologies, a task can be carried out as though the group is one organism instead of individual agents. (Carreño, 2014: 112-114). When a teacher introduces collaborative tools, for example social networks resulting in a network of various information and the development of learning skills, the outcome is collaborative e-learning. The learning theory namely connectivism theory demonstrates how new opportunities are created via communication and information technology, which allows learners to use social networks to exchange information and progress in e-learning (Alzain, 2019: 48). Social networks such as Google, enable learners to interact with the teacher outside his/her work hours and the latter can check on learners' progress and provide feedback. Equally, they can interact and communicate with one another and have discussions and exchange their different views (Alzain, 2019: 59). Connectivism proposes a methodology which make schools "smart" (Downes, 2019: 116).

Bozkurt et al. (2020: 1-2) claim that since the coronavirus (COVID-19) has interrupted and affected many dimensions of our lives, in particular education. It has necessitated a "pedagogy of care, affection and empathy.... over a need to teach the curriculum" (ibid. 2, 8). However, in order for education to continue, "emergency remote education [ERE] was put in practice in varying delivery modes" as an obligation, which is a survival mode. Different countries opted for delivery modes such as distance education, e-learning, online education and homeschooling (which has the ability to offer caring such as learning in small groups). It is imperative that we be mindful of the proportionality of the socio-economic status where the privileged have "data, device and digital literacy" (ibid. 6) and is able to propel ERE as opposed to those without.

Several years after the launch of the SDGs [Sustainable Development Goals] growing voices called for more emphasis on the need for technology and internet connectivity within the goals. In September 2020, the UN Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development called for digital connectivity to be established as a "foundational Pillar" for achieving all the SDGs. In a document titled "Global Goal of Universal Connectivity Manifesto" the Broadband Commission said: "As we define the 'new normal' for our post-COVID world, leaving no one behind means leaving no one offline" (Wikipedia, 2020).

Technology has the ability to change the way we think and how we behave, solve problems and work with information. Artificial intelligence from machines can also solve problems. Nothing, however, can be predicted in a chaotic system (Černý, 2020: 11). It is thus necessary that structures and practices need to be put in place to not only cater for the academic needs of learners, but also their emotional and their psychological needs during periods of crises (Bozkurt et al., 2020: 4).

Research Method

Research Design

Despite the need for qualitative social research, COVID-19 has been a barrier for researchers to conduct research due to the measures put in place such as social distancing and the closing of Ethics Review Boards (Wa-Mbaleka & Costa, 2020: 16, 18). Nonetheless, we seized the opportunity/took advantage of the pandemic, to conduct a qualitative research, as we identified the problem phenomenon in this study – namely how school athletes are enabled via ICTs to continue their athletic activities during this disruptive pandemic. Fortunately, qualitative research does not need huge numbers of participants and thus research can be conducted in researchers’ respective communities and technology is readily available for collecting data (as discussed in the “instruments” section below).

Most importantly, Wa-Mbaleka and Costa (2020: 19-20) offers five possible qualitative research orientations that researchers need to consider when conducting qualitative research during this pandemic. The first orientation to be considered is how the pandemic has affected people; second is coping mechanisms during the pandemic – how COVID-19 coping mechanisms in one context can be applied to other similar contexts; third, qualitative researchers need to generate new qualitative research methods to continue QR; fourth, weaknesses of qualitative research procedures, methods, designs as well as frameworks; fifth, new QR ethics guidelines and policies need to be used during pandemics such as COVID-19. We choose Wa-Mbaleka and Costa’s (2020: 20) orientations inter alia to determine the effects of COVID-19 and the coping mechanisms people need, which are relevant to this study. These two chosen orientations are indicative of the stage at which Wa-Mbaleka and Costa’s *Crisis Recovery Stages* model (table 1) we are at. We conducted the research and the applicability of the recommendations that were based on the findings of those who find themselves at the same stage or beyond in the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown education in turmoil, globally, resulting in many challenges for quality education and associated activities, such as sports, to continue. With the increased dependency on digitalisation, the education sector needs to be at the cutting edge of information communication technologies’ (ICTs) utilisation for the learners, parents and stakeholders. This study’s foci are on what detrimental effects of discontinued sports (athletics) have on the learner athletes; and how ICTs utilisation can mitigate these effects and enable continued athletics participation and coaching. A qualitative research approach was employed. A purposive, convenient sampling method was used to select the participants. Data was collected by conducting a face-to-face interview with the coach and examining his artefacts (e.g. virtual training sessions); two focus group interviews with learner athletes; and semi-structured questionnaires for their parents to complete. The data was arranged manually according to categories and themes. The findings and recommendations to continue athletics using ICTs during the pandemic were aligned to the third stage (in table 1 below) of the Crisis Recovery Stages model of Wa-Mbaleka and Costa (2020: 22-23), and research questions answered. Ultimately, we positioned ourselves within stage 3 of the *Crisis Recovery Stages*, in table 1 below, with the aim being to “... move effectively in the production mode despite the disaster” (Wa-Mbaleka et al., 2020: 11). COVID-19 protocols were adhered to and ethics were upheld at all times during data collection from participants.

Table 1: Adapted Crisis Recovery Stages model (Wa-Mbaleka et al., 2020: 22-23)

Stage 1: Fear	Stage 2: Acceptance
General manifestations: Fear, frustration, stress, anxiety, sickness, sleeplessness, close crisis monitoring, panic, paranoia. Minimum productivity as the focus is on survival.	General manifestations: Acceptance of crisis, start to adjust, frequent crisis monitoring, daily coping mechanisms are developed, intermittent panic. Minimum productivity as the focus is on survival.
Stage 3: Adjustment	Stage 4: Productive

<p>General manifestations: Some medium-range plans are developed, start new routines, selective crisis monitoring, managed fear, rare panic feelings, temporary health plans, focus on positivity. Things begin to normalise as the realisation of life must continue.</p>	<p>General manifestations: Develop a productivity plan, active life with new normal, consolidated productive routines, selective crisis monitoring, fearlessness, determination, long-term planning, strong health plan, focus on productivity. People are able to develop coping mechanisms which are efficient and effective and self-actualisation can be achieved. In this stage the researcher can begin to embark on qualitative research.</p>
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Ethics

As researchers, we pledged to uphold the “University of South Africa COVID-19 position statement on research ethics”. We applied for ethical clearance from the Unisa Ethics Committee and an ethical clearance certificate was issued, dated 2021-03-10.

Research context

The research took place in the city of eMalahahleni in the province of Mpumalanga. The majority participant learner athletes (Grades 4- 7) attend the primary school where the athletics coach is a teacher, which fall under the jurisdiction of the Mpumalanga Department of Education. The few remaining primary school athletes attend neighbouring public primary schools and one independent school. The Grades 8-10 participants attended this school and now attend one of two secondary schools in the immediate vicinity. Since the athletics coach is a qualified athletics coach, he has produced young athletes who qualify for the National Athletics Championships, hence athletes from the above neighbouring schools are attracted by his coaching. All the athlete participants’ home language is Afrikaans (which a language is unique to South Africa), however they were able to understand the questions and to respond in English/Afrikaans.

Participants

For the purpose of this study, a relatively small sample, (i.e. number of respondents) is required to “yield the saturated and rich data that is needed to understand even subtle meanings in the phenomenon under focus.” (Dörnyei, 2007: 127). As Dörnyei (2007: 127) postulates, relatively quick saturation can be reached by “selecting participants that are similar in some respect”. As a strategy of purposive sampling, we have chosen convenience sampling to select our participants since they are available and willing to participate in the study and had access to ICTs. The participants are set out in table 2 below:

Table 2: Sample of participants

Participants	Number	Participating activities
Athletics coach	1	An individual face-to-face interview, collection of artefacts (see data collection tools)
Learner athletes	5 (grades 4-6 learners); 5 (grades 7-10 learners)	2 Zoom focus groups – FG1 (5 grades 4-6 learners) and FG2 (5 grades 7-10 learners)
Learner athletes’ parents/ caregivers	10 parents (mother/father / caregiver)	Responses to open-ended questions in written form

Each of the focus groups' participants received a tag with a pseudonym/number (to identify a respondent) on it and pinned on their chest in order to facilitate the discussion and ensure confidentiality. The interviewer/s called on the participants by means of their pseudonyms/numbers, to respond to the questions posed.

Instruments

The best data collection strategy is determined by “which source(s) of data will yield the best information to answer the question” (Merriam, 2020: 14). More than one method is used to triangulate and enhance the validity of the findings (ibid.14). In the light of the COVID-19 pandemic challenges for qualitative researchers, we have embraced a new thinking regarding qualitative research (Wa-Mbaleka et al., 2020: 24).

We concur with Agee (2009: 431) that “... the ongoing process of questioning is an integral part of understanding the unfolding lives and perspectives of others”. However, for qualitative researchers, during the COVID-19 pandemic, they are not able to “conduct face-to-face interviews, observations, and they cannot collect documents, except those accessible online... social scientists have limited access to resources they usually depend on in normal life” (Wa-Mbaleka et al., 2020:17). As researchers we need to consider factors such as safety, ethics, efficiency, efficient data collection and qualitative research advocacy (Wa-Mbaleka et al., 2020: 20).

We used Wa-Mbaleka et al. (2020: 22-23) *Crisis Recovery Stages* (see Table 1 above) to gauge at which stage these research outcomes are. At the time, that is May 2021, we needed to decide on the stage and to prepare our data collection tools to suit these conditions. Ultimately, we positioned this research within stage 3 of the *Crisis Recovery Stages*.

With the adherence to COVID-19 measures (e.g. social distancing), we prepared a face-to-face individual semi-structured interview schedule with the athletics coach and collected artefacts such as his diary/log of matters, including his activities and photos. The rest of the data collection tools included: two Zoom focus group interviews i.e. focus group 1 consisting of 5 younger athletes (Grades 4-6) and focus group 2 consisting of 5 older athletes (grades 7-10) in the group (which were recorded); a sheet consisting of 5 open-ended questions and a space for written answers to be completed by the learner participants' parents/caregivers; artefacts such as SMSs containing training schedules and notifications to athletes and their parents; observational data (virtual context) such as examples of virtual coaching sessions and competitions and videos of athletes' home-based training sessions (sent to the coach) and games on line and web pages.

As the COVID-19 pandemic became more invasive on humanity we were compelled to adhere to the president's public announcements via – for example, TV - and the DBE policy documents. This necessitated a change of course in our research from time to time according to the prevailing pandemic circumstances.

Data collection procedures

The interview process

We both (we were two researchers – the authors of this article) conducted the interviews in each focus group. Whilst one posed three to four questions, the other made notes and assisted with the recording devices, and then we would alternate. Before the questions were posed, we introduced ourselves and told them how to address us. For clarity sake, where we felt there was a need for clarity, we code-switched, using Afrikaans to pose the question and learners would either answer in Afrikaans or English - whatever language they preferred. This was made clear to them at the beginning of the focus group interviews and also that their confidentiality was ensured, using pseudonyms, to protect their identity; they had the right to withdraw at any time and there were no right or wrong answers.

We explained why and how research is done. We contextualised the problem, that is, that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, training and coaching athletics was interrupted and could not continue as normal, as schools were closed for a long period of time or sports activities were suspended. Hence alternative ways needed to be sought to continue athletics training, such as the use of ICTs. These included social media, cell phones, computers for Zoom meetings and virtual training sessions and competitions that could be done at home. The athlete participants were also informed what we do with their responses (direct quotes) and how eventually it culminates into an article which gets published to share with the global community. This article will provide an example of how athletics coaching and training gets done in South African schools. An example of such an article in a published journal were shown to the participants.

Data analysis procedures

“Simultaneous data collection and analysis allows the researcher to adjust along the way, even to the point of redirecting data collection, and to ‘test’ emerging concepts, themes, and categories against subsequent data.” (Merriam, 2019: 15). Qualitative data analysis is mainly inductive and begins with “a unit of data” for example, a word, phrase, photo. Then it is compared with another unit of data and at the same time emerging patterns in the different data are refined and adjusted. One moves “from the particular to the general”, which then culminates in the findings (Merriam, 2019: 15).

The recorded focus group (FG) interviews and the coach’s individual interview were transcribed (by a transcriber) and the researchers worked systematically through the transcriptions which were edited, coded and verified. The categories and themes were identified manually with the use of colour coding. The coding was based on a data- and theory-led approach (which is obtained from literature). Categories and theme identification ceased when the researchers reached saturation point. We used the coach’s artefacts (figure 1) and our field notes (where relevant) as substantiating evidence.

After the analysis of the interview transcripts the researchers did member checking with the participants (at their convenience via emails/telephonically) on how they perceive the phenomena and what it meant to them in order to ensure that the transcriptions and their meanings were accurately interpreted. We also referred to the literature to determine what was found by other researchers forming part of the data interpretation. Finally, the research questions were answered with the use of the analysed data and findings.

Findings

Our findings are centered around [Wa-Mbaleka and Costa’s \(2020: 20\)](#) orientations, namely how COVID-19 affected the athletes and coping mechanisms they needed for recovery towards normalcy, which reflects Wa-Mbaleka and Costa’s stage 3 of their *Crisis Recovery Stages model* ([Wa-Mbaleka et al., 2020: 21](#)). The coach, athletes and their parents were able to make medium-range plans; new routines for continued athletics activities were put in place which enabled them to become more positive within a global pandemic. The discussions and recommendations were aligned to address COVID-19 social issues, propose practical recommendations and develop practical frameworks/models for social change, that is, coping mechanisms during the continuing pandemic ([Wa-Mbaleka et al., 2020: 21-22](#)).

With this study’s research questions (RQ) as our compass, we were able to focus on what we could gather via the data collection tools in an effort to answer the RQs. Having decided on Wa-Mbaleka and Costa’s two orientations, they formed our main headings and the emerging themes from the transcriptions of the recorded coach’s interview, while the two focus group interviews with the athletes formed our sub-headings for this section. All other collected data were selected and used under the appropriate headings as substantiating evidence. Hence the findings are reported accordingly. We indicated which sub-research questions were answered as the findings unfolded, accompanied by the evidence.

Table 3: Findings structure

Wa-Mbaleka et al. (2020), Stage 3 - Adjustment	
Wa-Mbaleka et al. (2020) orientations	
Research questions	
Themes	
<p>Orientation A - Affected by COVID-19 Sub-research question 1: How has the pandemic affected the learner athletes, their parents and the coach? Theme 1 – athletes, their parents and the coach affected by COVID-19</p>	<p>Theme 1 categories</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Athletes</i> <i>Experiences of training at home</i> <i>Homework</i> • <i>Parent roles</i> • <i>The impact on the coach</i>
<p>Orientation B - Coping mechanisms Sub-research question 2: How are ICTs as COVID-19 coping mechanisms being utilised by the athletics coach in order to ensure continued athletics coaching and training remotely? Sub-research question 3: What guidelines/recommendations can be offered to athletics coaches, learner athletes and their parents to continue with their athletic activities during the COVID-19 pandemic? Theme 2 – coach’s athletics management</p>	<p>Theme 2 categories</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>COVID-19 safety measures -Government and DBE</i> • <i>Coaching methods changed</i> • <i>Coach solutions</i> <i>ICTs became the mode of communication</i> • <i>The future of athletics</i>

Key

Focus group 1 (Grade 4-6 athletes) – P1, P2, P3, P4, P5
 Focus group 2 (Grades 7-10 athletes) – R1, R2, R3, R4, R5
 Individual interview with coach – Coach

Orientation A - Affected by COVID-19

The main research question: What role does ICTs play to ensure continued athletics activities in South African public schools during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Sub-research question 1: How has the pandemic affected the learner athletes, their parents and the coach?

Theme 1: Athletes, their parents and the coach affected by COVID-19:

Athletes

Experiences of training at home

In response to a question posed with regard to how the COVID-19 pandemic affected their normal athletics activities, FG1 and FG2 participants experienced that they became very unfit as a result of the lockdown initiated in March 2020. Despite having received a training schedule from the coach (from 9:00-11:00), the tendency was to initially adhere to the schedule strictly, but later they became less committed and lazy skipping a few sessions that resulting in unfitness and weight gain. Intrinsic motivation dwindled as this situation made coaching and training difficult. They were not able to train with the coach at certain times and therefore they had to train by themselves, warm up on their own and do stretch exercises or anything else and videotape their home training sessions. For example, they had to depend on

self-discipline and do ten laps around the house (some at least had a sibling/parents, which was not much fun) and the social, competition and fun aspect was absent. R2 said, *“I also wanted to say that mostly everything about training at home is not nice, because you demotivate yourself because you are doing it alone and there are not really your friends to motivate you and to catch up on and as he said you keep procrastinating your practices and, I don’t know, it’s just not that fun anymore.”* P5 explained that, *“We also didn’t have that much space to run and we didn’t see friends, so we didn’t see friends, so we didn’t have competition to push ourselves further... in our backyard.”* Conditions varied for each athlete, that is, some had more space to run, such as on a plot, while others had limited space. Needless to say, R5 revealed that, *“I know a lot of us only about 5 did everything but not everyone because we couldn’t do everything.”* The down side of training at home was, *“You still warm up and you do not train too hard or training activities and 2 sets of that one. It was too boring training at home compared to at school.”* The best thing about training at home was described by P5 who said, *“You don’t have to practise that hard because when we practise with the other kids you have Coach pushes to go further and further.”* Other responses included that training home was fun, one can do it at any time and rest for the rest of the day. You do not have to get up early in the morning and drive to a venue, however, it does lead to laziness, procrastination and even abstaining.

When the restrictions were relaxed, athletes were able to train again with the provision of adhering to safety measures such as wearing masks, social distancing and sanitising. The coach noticed that the athletes became unfit and were not able to maintain their peak times as, *“... it’s just your training friends, your fellow athletes, but if you are better than me, I don’t have to run that fast because I know, I am going to win in any case.”* This was concerning to the coach and he was compelled to take action by grouping the athletes who maintained approximately the same pace together and they had to compete. The results were surprising as the fastest athlete became complacent while those trailing behind were motivated to do their best and in one case the second fastest athlete won the race.

The group as a whole felt that things as they were, were not going to change and that they did not mind, as they were able to get back close to normal training sessions. On Mondays they were able to run cross country at different locations, on Tuesdays they would train on the school’s athletics track, on Wednesdays they rested and on Thursdays they ran cross country, and Fridays they rested. However, there were many interruptions throughout 2020 and 2021 and social gatherings, sports meetings and the like were prohibited. In June 2021 a surge of the COVID-19 pandemic once again struck and the president, in an address to the nation, announced further restrictions (level 4), inter alia, forwarding school holidays and prohibiting sports gatherings and activities. Once again, the coach had to revert to virtual training sessions/schedules and ICT communications, however, the coach had this to say, *“If I take, we had a virtual race last year, a 1.5km and we choose a straight 1.5km, and I told everyone 3:40 for the seniors, 3:40 max and they had 4:10, 4:20 and I asked why?”* They answered, *“No one is pushing me, no one is forcing me, I am just jogging so there is not that competition is – listen there is someone.”*

Homework

When asked whether they were able to manage their homework and also have time to train for athletics, P1 responded, *“Yes, sometimes I go with my friend to his house because my mother works. I think until 16h00 or 15h30 so I go with him home and then they take me to their plot and there sometimes I do my homework but not all the times. But after practise then I have time to do my homework at home.”* P5 said, *“When I come from school I go to the house and start with my homework, when it’s time to practice I go practice, when I come back then I see how much homework I have left, and I just finish it.”* P4 said in 2020 when the lockdown was lifted, she

would change into her training gear and go and train because at their school (neighbouring school to training school) the arrangement was that they had sport activities every alternative day and the other day she did her homework. P5 added, *“I think last week we started to go every day to school but when lockdown happened, we went every second day to school so when we go to school, we do our homework the next day I do the homework and then I go to school then I have finished all the homework.”* R5 responded, *“Well, I think you should have a schedule, such as you wake up in the morning, early morning, go and jog so that you can get it finished and done with and then you can first have breakfast and then start with your school work and homework.”*

Parent roles

Bozkurt et al. (2020:1) found that, *“... parents are overburdened between regular daily/professional duties and emerging educational roles, and all parties are experiencing trauma, psychological pressure and anxiety to various degrees, which necessitates a pedagogy of care, affection and empathy.”* It was evident from the participants’ responses, that the parents played a significant role, especially in terms of preparing for their training sessions, but also having the extra responsibility of monitoring their virtual training programmes, communications via ICTs and also coping with their own work responsibilities. It is challenging managing their work responsibilities, fitting in the training sessions in times when the athletes were allowed to do track training at school, and the everyday mundane chores at home.

As P3 put it, *“They take us to athletics and they pay all my stuff that I need for athletics like tekkies, towels, my bag that I put all my things in, socks, athletic clothes, water bottle.”* P1 plainly said that, *“Sometimes my mother practices with me and my sibling, she wants to practice the whole time, but she says she is too lazy.”* While P5 explained that, *“When I run at home alone, then I ask my mother can she run with me because she also, when she was a kid, she also did running. So, she also runs with me, when I run.”* P1 added that *“Sometimes on the weekends, coach would put 5 children in a group and he and one of our other coaches, her name is C then they drive after us with cars or bicycles and then we ran our kilo’s that way.”* These quotes clearly illustrate the determination of motivated athletes and how they, their parents and the coach could make contingency (compromise) plans during the COVID-19 pandemic. R5 added that, *“I know my mom always runs with me to help motivate me even though she isn’t as fast as me, but she always tries”* and R1 said, *“At my house, my mom she sometimes drags me out of my bed and says come jog around the house just, and then I said why mom and she said just because you don’t jog, just go. Go and jog and then after that you can be lazy, then you can do your homework, just go jog please.”*

The parent responses were very insightful as they reflected on how the pandemic made an impact on their children and their own lives. The response of one parent was very encouraging as she felt that, *“It created distance between coach and athlete with no face to face interaction, but more interaction with parents”* however, *“they remained active, but development was stagnate.”* One parent reported that, *“She did everything the coach communicated with her. She didn’t skip a practice. We run with our children at the sea, in the estate and on holidays... treadmills were used.”* It was interesting that this parent felt that although her daughter was dedicated, *“She listens better what the coach says than what I say... more pressure on parents”*, and another parent explained that, *“...it has been challenging since my child doesn’t practice as hard when I am the coach ... my son is not as fit and up to standard as with other years. It makes a big difference being able to practice with other athletes ... especially on the days that it was raining, and they had to practice indoors or when it was dark when I come from work.”* However, the virtual activities, *“...it hasn’t influenced the relationships we have always had a good coach-athlete – parent relationship ... they play all sorts of sports outside for example rugby, cricket or tennis.*

Playing with our dog also keeps them active and sometimes we will take a walk.” One parent added that, “negatively, as the training on your own does not have the same impact as training with the coach my child will listen to the coach before his parents”. Another parent was very positive as “It was difficult as you had to work on your own. Had to motivate one another, but we have done a lot together as a family.” A parent also mentioned that, “ ...playing with my child soccer and cricket as well... cycling”.

Although most parents felt that the virtual activities were good, *“but still not the same as training together, but the relationship is much stronger... my child was very excited to have these meetings (Zoom meetings). A parent said that, “It brought us close together with lots of communication - ... she made her own obstacles to stay fit and in shape” and there was, “...family participation, goalsetting, she played coach and athlete while training – it was fun and turned into a family activity. Some of the videos we received was family orientated.”* Regarding the team meetings and YouTube videos, which the coach provided, *“it was fun, and everybody participated”.* Another parent said, *“it created a stronger bond.”*

The coach commented that he could immediately detect when parents were involved with their children’s athletics home programme for example, core developments, which he provided. By merely having face-to-face discussions with the athletes and parent and athlete absenteeism during Zoom meetings, *“So that was something that we just have to have on your phone or laptop or tablet and connect and say I am here, and then half of the team was never there. With each one, having their own reason.”* Some of the reasons parents were not involved included disregarding communications, they had to work late, or they live in rural areas and did not have access to data.

It is the opinion of the coach that parents needed *“...to adapt, buy into the whole new era of practising.”* Parents were expected to take more responsibility, understand what was expected of them and to keep their children motivated, since they were now taking on the role of the coach. It was necessary for them to know the outcome of each session of the training programme which he sent with the use of ICTs to them accompanied by his instructions. Some parents needed more clarity and communicated with the coach to explain once again for example, *“They had to learn the different coaching techniques, what was the outcome of each exercise and to be on time now. I personally think they had the challenge of doing 2 jobs now because they went to work in the morning and when they came home, everyone was tired, emotionally as well and now they still have to be motivated and to train their own kids, so I think that was a huge challenge for the parents as well”* (Coach).

According to the coach it was very important to communicate and consult with parents continuously, as he relied on their (as well as the assistant coach’s) advice and feedback and to consult them on important decisions to be made. For example, whether to attend athletics competitions in Bloemfontein, upon which their unanimous response was, *“... listen it’s too far, it’s only for 1 day... it’s not cost effective”*; consequently, he would cancel the arrangements. In the interim, the local athletics training and coaching need to suffice and be supported by the use of ICTs as a vehicle to keep athletes motivated, supported and **to** sustain their athletics activities.

The positive outcome is that, *“...because now we don’t have some parents interfering with coaching in general anymore. Because they are not allowed to be on the premises, so in the past we had a dad or mother who said listen why is he doing this or doing that, and we have a specific plan in place, so I think that is one positive thing, we can coach now. There is no interference anymore”* (Coach).

The impact on the coach

The coach was faced with huge challenges as he explained that, “... now there is protocol that must be in place, there are permission letters, those indemnity forms, and you cannot coach under normal circumstances anymore”. Russo and Rodriguez (2020: 36-37) recommend that there should be an increase of awareness of supervision (with special reference to athletics): athletes should not be left unattended; athletes should not be transported in privately owned vehicles; accidents as well as other incidences should be documented; during the COVID-19 pandemic, visitors and volunteers should not be permitted in the school’s grounds until the risk of transmission is no more. It is important to develop waivers for sport trips where risks regarding participation are fully explained. These forms need to be completed and signed by the parents otherwise athletes will not be able to participate.

The impact of COVID-19 had a negative impact, particularly “socialisation” as the “core of coaching is to interact with one another, not just coaching” (Coach) (with different cultures and genders). Plans were being interrupted, for example, the athletes were looking forward to athletics meeting only to be informed it had to be cancelled and coach says, “... so you have nothing to look forward to and you don’t do what you love anymore, that’s been taken away”. On another occasion, the cross-country camp was cancelled. This was a great disappointment as stringent training takes place at these camps as “we [Coach] make a video where we sit on a bicycle behind one athlete and he/she is running 400/500m, and then we check the video and we show them the video. Check your steps, and then they laugh at themselves and say is it me doing that, and then we start to work on that” (Coach).

Within a matter of a year the athletes were estranged from each another as they did not know one another anymore. In one case an athlete ran extremely good times and he qualified for the South African (SA) Championships, which in the end was cancelled. Coach explains that this “...had a big impact on his personal development, his emotional development, everything because now currently he is not our number 1 athlete anymore. It had a negative, he didn’t qualify this year, so the long term, we have to start, and we had to start from level 1 again.”

On another occasion the female athletes complained that they had gained weight because they were not running anymore, and they were just sitting. This had an emotional effect on them and they felt they were fat/getting fat. The coach explained that they had a coaching platform with a team that set a high standard, and which posed a threat to other competing schools. *Everyone knew if they compete against us and to take a medal you are good.*” This is not the case anymore; as the coach said, “I’ve seen that on the previous championships we are at the bottom now again, and it took me 5 years to get where we are now. So, we know, and I had the discussion with the athletes, it’s not going to happen this year, it’s not going happen next year, we have to build again, in 3 years’ time to say that we are back where we were, 2019.”

Other challenges that the coach faced and continues to experience as long as the COVID-19 pandemic persists are as follows: athletes dismiss safety measures such as social distancing (they hug) and do not wear a mask. The coach says, “... will we make the news for the wrong reasons because these kids just carry on. Yes, because they just don’t care.” Coach is also finding it difficult to monitor social distancing as “...it’s difficult to say warm up – 5 laps – keep social distancing. If we can say there are five tracks and each of you are in your own track, warm up, but the moment we say go, they all just go and then they jog the 5 laps together. It’s a challenge.” In addition, the qualifying times for provincial championships are more stringent so that there are fewer athletes qualifying to compete in the SA Championships. As a result, “... that demotivated a lot of athletes who said I am not able to run that time or I will never jump that high. So, I am not even going to try, because I am going to waste my time.” Coach involvement with athletics

at schools has decreased and they are not willing to put in the extra time and effort, even though the participant coach has made suggestions regarding how to collaborate and find solutions.

Orientation B - Coping mechanisms

Sub-research question 2: How are ICTs as COVID-19 coping mechanisms being utilised by the athletics coach in order to ensure continued athletics coaching remotely?

Theme 2: Coach's athletics management

COVID-19 safety measures - government, DBE and sports authorities

The South African president, President Cyril Ramaphosa made an announcement on the 23 March 2020, that in South Africa a nationwide lockdown (for 21 days) will be affected as from 26 March 2020, in an effort to curb the rapid spread of the coronavirus, COVID-19. Throughout 2020, up to 27 July 2021, several interruptions via announcements were made, which affected the daily living of South Africans. Schools were closed sporadically as the virus posed an uncontrollable threat and schools were either closed for a certain period or alternative arrangements such as remote learning/online learning were made depending on the infection rate of learners, teachers, administration staff and other services. These interruptions also affected sports activities at schools inter alia athletics. For example, at times learners were prohibited from training and coaches had to resort to alternative ways to coach athletes. This included the use of ICTs in order for them to participate in virtual sessions/competitions and training schedules were prepared and sent via emails/ Zoom meetings/ SMSes to athletes to train at home. In response to government directives, the DBE as an executive, was compelled to implement changes in schools relating to alternative teaching and learning arrangements; extra-mural activities; examinations; communications and other school-related issues. It is important to note that *"Return to play guidelines"* needs to be adapted in an effort to accommodate management of complications and to enable a full recovery in order that vigorous activity can be resumed. (Ramagole, Janse van Rensburg, Pillay, Viviers, Zondi & Patricios, 2020: 2).

The coach explained that, *"we all know the guidance we get from the department is grey, we don't actually know what to do, we just do. We had to adapt by working out new programmes and then it was effort again and then you call the top schools in Gauteng, Nelspruit and say what are you doing, how do you do this, and get advice from them."* Coaches should be kept up to date of all COVID-19 related developments by, for example, virtual meetings. It is imperative that school boards' education leaders and others need to collaborate with attorneys and medical practitioners regarding COVID-19 related issues. If these stakeholders do everything in their ability to keep schools safe - especially regarding COVID-19 - by applying safety rules and sufficient learner supervision, costly litigation will be unnecessary, and learners and others will be less likely to test positive for COVID-19 (Russo & Rodriguez, 2020: 36-37).

On a school level, the coach of the hosting school where he does his coaching and the athletes train, the coach is also the head of department of sport and he collaborate with the organisers of the different sport codes. The SGB is also briefed once a month on sport activities during the term regarding challenges, setting goals and how to achieve them, and what improvements can be made. The coach explained that the school sports policy will remain the same *"...because the situation changes too quickly. The one week we are easing the restrictions the next week we are tightening the restrictions again... We handle each code according to the general sport code and we just implement the COVID-19 regulations and requirements put on a separate document and inform*

the parents and the athletes, this is what's in place now, this is what we are going to do. But in general, we did not make any changes to the sport policy, we still keep to the regular guidelines in the policy and we follow the necessary rules and regulations of the policy, but with adaptations to the COVID pandemic."

With the threat of the Delta variant in June 2021, the president made a public announcement on TV on the 27 June 2021, that Level 4 will be adjusted to further restrictions (for 14 days) such as prohibition of gatherings, and the public-school holidays were brought forward, from the 8 July 2021 to 1 July 2021, ending the 30 July 2021. This had a huge impact on the schools' athletics coaching and training and once again coaches needed to go back to the drawing board and find ways and means to keep the athletics activities afloat. They needed to be mindful of the ever-changing conditions that were dictated by the COVID-19 pandemic and new restrictions/relaxing restrictions was enforced by government.

Coaching methods changed

In the focus group interviews, when asked whether the coach has changed his ways of coaching, P4 explained that they had to run on gravel roads and a hill. P3 responded by explaining how they were able to train when allowed to do so at school, for example, use the school grounds and obstacles for example netball fields and low walls to train. The coach indicated that discipline was imperative during this period as athletes had difficulty adapting to the changes made by the coach. For example, he placed them in groups according to the distances they ran, but before long they were mixed and coach had to reprimand them. In order to ensure social distancing athletes had to sit in Hula Hoops and do their warm ups in the confined space and put on their face masks/buffs once done. They were also reminded that, *"you come to practice with a towel, your water bottle and your buff"* (Coach).

During total lockdown exercises where training was done at home, and P5 explained that, *"We did videos, coach sends us a few videos that we had to do at home then we had to run a few kilometres, that's all"*, which was not sufficient, however they were still able to run at the same pace. P1 said the videos contained high intensity exercises with dumbbells and squats but not much, *"running stuff"*. P4 added that the difference in the normal programme was that they *"did hills ... I sometimes jump up and down stairs and run up and down."* R4 said they did *"strength training"* and R1 said they did *"leg training, such as burpees, push ups, sit ups, lunges, squats, that sort of things. Some of them were too hard, some of them can't hurt my legs, no."* One parent mentioned that their son could not wait for the video training, *"as all the family members were training together and motivating one another ... doing training videos together"*.

R1 explained that, *"And, also my thing was our coach he put out some stuff to do like a CrossFit, like bench pressing and mountain climbing, push ups and sit ups and that also helped us for a little bit in the lockdown, just to keep our movement going. For some 2 weeks."* R3 responded by saying, *"Yes, we could but with strict regulations, like no spectators, wearing masks when you are not on the track and stuff like that."* With regard to competitive sporting events, P5 answered that they participated in a few competitions in 2020, but then there was a total lockdown and that is how it is at the moment (May, 2021).

P4 felt that ICTs, *"... did help a lot, because training needs to be done for hours, it helps us stay fit and so on"* and P1 responded, *"It helped a lot because it was much harder than what we do now. Coach makes us jump up and down and here we just like run around the field and then it was much harder than now... because some of the stuff was a little bit difficult"*. Sometimes when we trained on the track on Mondays then we would do a time test to see how much you improved

throughout the week and to see whether you really did your best and trained well” (translation). ... as you run round the bend on the field then you needed to 15-20 metres faster so that the athletes behind you cannot catch up with you and then we had to jump through the sandpit to strengthen our muscles as well as our upper leg muscles. P5 explained, “Like she said, we weren’t that fit when we practiced at home but when we started practising here at school, we got a lot fitter and with also what she said, with that time trial we did one and we rested, then we did another one and then that time you were told to beat that time and then you have to try and beat that time again.” R2 added that, “We also had Zoom meetings to see and to hear a bit from him what’s going on and to hear about our progress at home and if we are all doing fine.”

R1 responded by saying that, *“Sometimes it was Level 3 lockdown, when we could go outside our houses, not all the time, then Coach organised a session with us, just a short one to see how we are doing and how we are at home.”* and R2 said, *“We also had to post some of our videos of our progress on our group to motivate each other. Yes, the ICTs like the videos and the virtual running, the Zoom meetings really helped because you feel like the day when you feel that you don’t really want to go practise, and you see someone else went to practice when you see their videos and something, then you motivate yourself to also go and practise to better yourself.”* R1 felt that *“For me, I think it is still going to carry on if you put effort into keep it alive. Not to say – its COVID-19 I am not going to do this anymore, just hold on and everything will come through, just hold on and put some effort in.”*

As a result of the dynamics of the pandemic, the coach was faced with challenges and needed to put contingency plans in place such as combining three coaching programmes into one programme and harnessing the services of additional coaches to assist with implementing the programme. It was evident that the coach also experienced challenges regarding the management of the video virtual training programmes. Initially it went well with *“lot of plyometrics and heat exercises”* (resulting in core muscle development), which were videotaped and sent to him on a weekly basis. *“But when some parents didn’t send any feedback, we just relied that they are doing that and when we came back, we saw no those athletes didn’t do it”* (Coach).

These communications as discussed above were monitored by the coach as well as the parents, *“I think monitoring is probably one of the key ways of ..., you can’t just let it go?”* The coach reported that returning from lockdown, the aim of the first session was just to get together again, to communicate, to be *“normal again”* and work on their fitness levels – *“start from scratch again...to begin from the basics again”*. This meant preventing injuries by *“slowly building up again ... we are working now a 3-year season to say, if all goes well, we want to perform again in 2023 when we want to have athletes placing on a SA Championships. The preparation is still a long, long road ahead, but everyone is positive, and we will work towards that”* (Coach).

Being faced with this Herculean task, the coach could sometimes consult with other coaches and at other times he was left stranded. Out of desperation he consulted with experienced coaches in top schools in Gauteng who informed him about the virtual races his group of athletes would be able to participate in. These actions resulted in forming good relationships with those coaches. However, *“The challenge again with that was, we had to pay for everything, which was another challenge for some parents-no one invested in that. It was just a school, XX there in Secunda, they also invested, but the rest, I know, were just – its COVID – we are not allowed to do anything and so those schools, those athletes’ development was at a standstill.”* Coach is also concerned about the problem that *“If we take now only in Mpumalanga, I know of 4 dedicated middle distance coaches that will do anything for athletics, only 4, hopefully there are more. The rest, they are nowhere, for some coaches. It’s just an extra mural activity, I’m supposed to do because I am being paid to be a teacher”* (Coach).

Coach solutions

The year 2020, where the COVID-19 pandemic caused great challenges in moving forward with the athletes, such as social distancing and added restrictions. During 2020 there were also opportunities to become more skilled as they conducted online interactions which were safe and social distancing was upheld during training activities – the “new normal” ways (Hurley, 2021, np.). The coach revealed that there are online courses for coaches, however, he feels it is a waste of time as the practicals and demonstrations are limited, it is boring sitting behind a laptop, and one does not progress at a good pace. He uses tracking technology, “Coach Tracker” app, which enables him to communicate with the athletes on an individual basis where they are able to add information such as their videos, their times and distances. If the athlete cannot attend a training session, he/she will be informed what to do and then it is added to the app. The rest of the group do not have access to the individual information, only the coach. As Hurley (2021, np.) posits, “while the cyber world, and advanced technologies, will continue to evolve to the benefit, hopefully of all athletes and their support personnel, no technology will replace the hard work, talent and determination of these individuals”. The goal of the cyber and technology world is to assist athletes when they prepare to perform, should always be “athlete-welfare driven” and to “do no harm”. Caution should be taken that the athletes are not over-burdened with technology and data as it can result in an increase in stress and anxiety levels.

The coach is also involved in cross-coaching, where the athletes and the coach all get together at one venue with another coach, coaches his group, and he observes. It is important that coaches need to understand that “the existence of talent is dependent on others besides the athlete himself and that these actors have the power to determine whether a given talent gains existence.” (Olesen, Nielsen & Søndergaard, 2020: 312). The problem is that coaches are very secretive of their coaching techniques and successes and are not very willing to share it with other coaches, ... “So, it’s about acknowledgement, some coaches want to be known as the best coach and are not willing to share their information - I am the best coach so I am not going to share my information with you or my ideas or I don’t think you will ever get sharing.” (Coach).

Often coaching is done by teachers who love of the sport and the athletes. That passion is more than just winning championships, as athletes are grown by sports and they are also taught life skills, while their characters are developed through sport as the vehicle. It is thus important that teacher-coaches align their athletic programmes with the philosophy of educational athletics. These programmes must provide the athletes with experiences where they can “grow physically, mentally, emotionally, socially and morally” (Flaws, 2021: 84). As Flaws (2021: 96-97) evidenced, the athletes expressed that team building events, dinners after events with their opponents, tournaments during weekends, bus rides to and back from games are important times for the coach to build relationships, communities, and connect with the individual athletes of the team. It is also important that coaches be role models for the athletes – what they do and say, as the athletes internalise these actions and words – sometimes acting as surrogate parents where the parent figures are absent. Fun activities are also important when playing sports and the coach should ensure that all members are included whilst having fun, as positive experiences create positive attitudes and efforts.

The coach has been trying to find an opportunity to do his coaching level 2 qualification but has always missed the opportunity to do so as “...Its always a challenge just to go to a clinic or a course if you don’t know about the information and then you miss out on that.” To make things worse, a condition to do the course is that you need to have coached senior athletes at the SA Championships, which he is not able to do as he teaches in a primary school. The coach opines that Athletics South Africa (ASA) should take control and “implement a platform where coaches have the ability on an open platform to discuss and share their ideas”. The solution would be to

put a proper structure in place where the coaches can develop themselves and to be motivated, “...so they have to get some sort of incentive for coaches who are still working during this time ...”. Hurley (2021, np) recommends that for coaches maintaining “high-quality online coach training initiative and knowledge-sharing” will be beneficial for their professional development and for maintaining new collaborations and friendships.

With regard to athletes and their parents who live in the rural areas and have limited resources – perhaps only a cell phone – the coach accommodates them by sending them individual SMSes, requests them to acknowledge the SMSes and subsequently communicates via telephonic conversations. Despite his limited resources, he needs to make alternative arrangements to accommodate all the athletes. Some athletes need to take a taxi to come to training and he meets them halfway, where he is unable to communicate with them via ICTs he hands the athletes the information in printed format. The condition is that the athlete and his/her parents need to be involved and not to waste everyone’s time – “So, if you are here at practise, I know you have talent to run so then I will walk the extra mile to ensure you succeed in what you want to do.”

ICTs became the mode of communication

The first indicators of the impact of COVID-19 on society were the cancellations and postponements of organised sport competitions. In the wake of these precarious circumstances, Smith (2020: 353) recommends that “*Communication scholars should also continue to investigate the community and social aspects of self-tracking and ‘quantified self, mobile fitness technologies.’*” Tracking technology, e-sports and online courses are on the horizon (Evans et al., 2020: 90): this necessitates establishing “the differences in how the practice of and communication among sporting participants may replicate, replace, or extend community aspects in virtual settings” (Smith, 2020: 357). The Department of Education (2015: 17) explains that, “... education without them [ICTs] is rapidly becoming an incomplete education”.

Due to the increased use of technology and being online and using social media, cyberpsychology has become popular in the sporting world, especially during COVID-19 (Hurley, 2021, np). Communication with participant athletes and their parents were done via Zoom calls. P3 responded that it was the first time he participated in such a meeting and that it was fun as they were able to see their friends and communicate with them. The focus groups all indicated that they missed their coach and their friends the most during suspended training sessions. P5 answered that, “*He [the coach] created a WhatsApp group called LTG and then he talks to the parents about the practice that we had to do. He sent the videos on that.*” and P4 added, that “*Coach said we would always, not always, but sometimes on Wednesday we would do a Zoom call.*” Some participants indicated that their parents were not present during the Zoom meetings. Laptops, cell phones and tablets were used for this purpose. P1 explained that “*We always used my mother’s iPhone because my mom blocked me at 13h00 - Yes, because of that stupid App phoned me. So, our phones where blocked 08h00 and then that’s when we did the Zoom meeting.*” When the coach was informed of this response he said the children say it is a stupid app, but it is the best thing a parent can have as the child’s phone can be monitored and the parent is able to block access – it’s only them that say it is stupid. Parents could communicate with the coach via WhatsApp groups, which made the communication faster. A response from a parent was that, “*the coach sent a physical routine via WhatsApp every day. We – the parents monitored it and took videos and sent it to the coach.*”

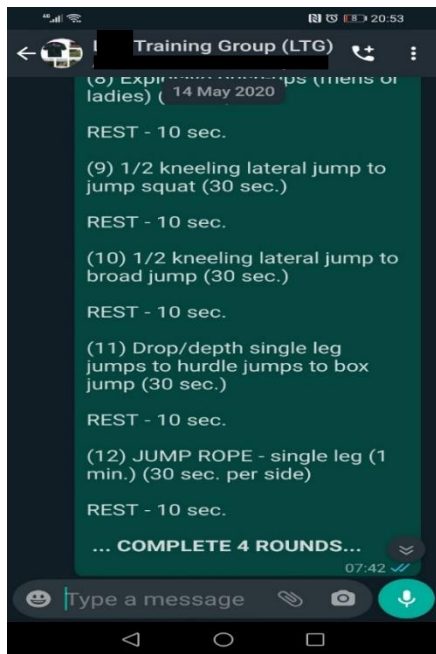
Where emergencies occurred, the coach had to act quickly and consult with the committee to assist in making decisions in the best interest of the athletes. For example, the assistant coach contracted COVID-19 the day before an athletics meeting in Bethel. After consulting with the committee, the coach sent a WhatsApp to all parents informing them that the meeting was cancelled and to check whether all the parents had received the message. On other occasions, if lightning threatened, the

coach would inform the parents that training was cancelled, and again make sure that everybody received the message, even drive to the venue in case somebody did not receive the message and they would arrive there.

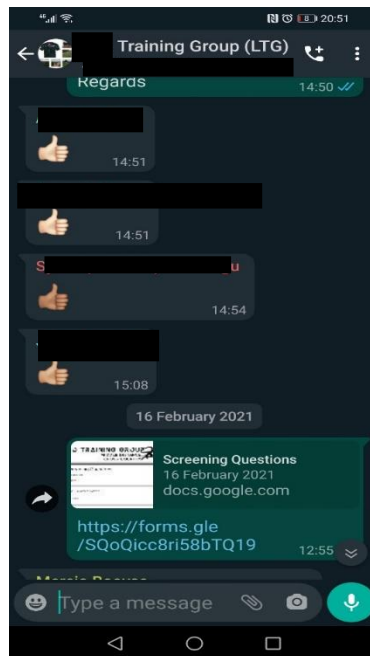
Hurley (2021, np.) found that remote communications were used during the pandemic such as “Zoom, Microsoft teams, Skype, Facetime and Webex”, which helped athletes and their support staff to continue consulting online with the benefit of keeping safe from the coronavirus and doing their jobs mostly from their homes. However, it is important to note that the recording of such online meetings had to comply with all the ethical matters regarding transparency, privacy and having the consent of the people. In this research, the coach adhered to all these ethical matters.

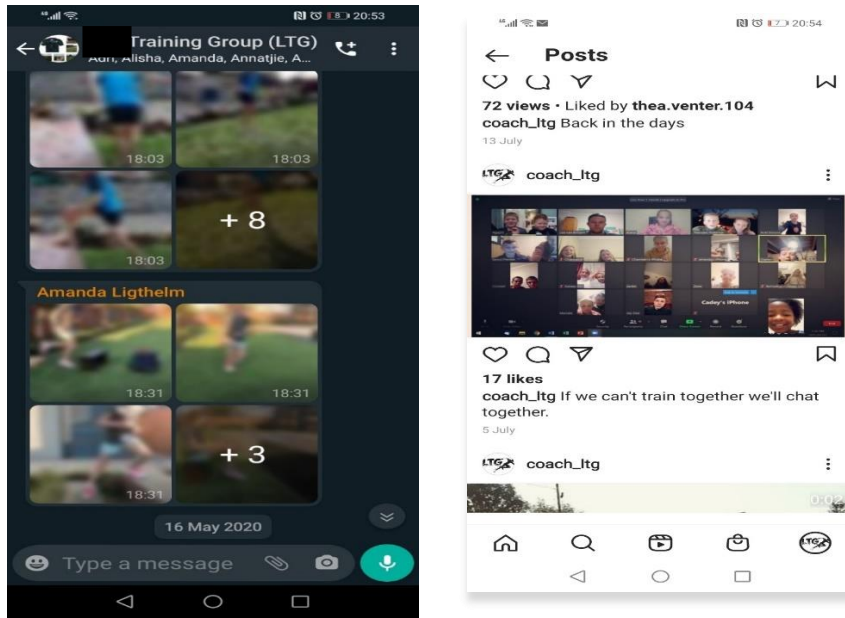
We need to ensure that “no learners are left behind” and understand that one form of technology is not superior to others; it just needs to be used in a purposeful and adequate manner (and the design matters) of which the main ingredient in social learning is communication. Lack of planning, co-ordination, communication and management is a recipe for disaster. It is also not ethical or fair for teachers to shift their teaching responsibilities onto parents and expect them to do the impossible (Bozkurt et al., 2020: 10, 13-14).

Training programme



Coaches AppLTG sms





Athlete's training video

Zoom meeting

Figure 1: Examples of coach's ICT artefacts

Sub-research question 3: What guidelines/recommendations can be offered to athletics coaches, learner athletes and their parents to continue with their athletic activities during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The future of athletics

Sports pedagogy calls for rethinking of sports education in a world permeated by sports during “*the advent of virtual reality, ICTs, and machine technologies*”, ultimately reshaping sports pedagogy. Aspects such as new/reused materials needed in the virtual class; how sports techniques need to be taught; the methodology to be used to assess the athletes’ performances and to improve physical and mental health through the utilisation of digitalisation, ICTs, and the social networks need to be considered. Nevertheless, a virtual sports environment (indoors) does not “*replace the living experience of the human body playing sport and doing physical exercise*” (Isidori, 2020: 145). Therefore, the need to reflect on new forms of virtual education and technologies allowed through distance education, exists (Isidori, 2020: 146). One way for sports coaches to share their challenges is to involve themselves in online community discussions. The upside of the changing coaching programmes is that coaches can use this time to engage with other coaches and reflect on their practices in an attempt to improve their coaching practices (Evans et al. 2020: 90). This study portrays the situation of school sports (athletics) since the beginning of the pandemic to date and the utility of technology as a tool for the continuation of athletics.

As a result of the coach’s positive attitude, motivation, effort and time, the athletes have also developed a positive attitude and are positive about their training during the COVID-19 pandemic as long as they “...*just hold on and everything will come through, just hold on and put some effort in* “. (R1). R5 concurs; “*I think athletics will never die out because there will always be people wanting to run even though it will maybe decrease, and even if you are running a marathon on if you are running in a group.*” This is so true. Sowier-Kasprzyk and Widawska-Stanisiz (2020: 2944) opine that, “*these people are so determined in their activity that they do not abandon an active attitude*”. R3 explains that, “*We can carry on, but we can’t practice in too large groups, we have to be small groups otherwise you can get COVID.*” R1 adds that, “*The thing that has changed through*

everything now is that for lockdown we did the shorter training. Now it is back to full everything pushing hard for SA's because we are now busy with cross country training now for SA's and as good as we look now, I think our group is strong enough to pull through to SA's (recorded in March 2021).

The group of athletes whom the coach coaches vary in ages from 6 years to 16 years. It has become clear to him that the younger athletes benefit by training with the senior athletes as they are their role models. Whereas the younger athletes are more egotistical, for example, "I want to be the best" the senior athletes also strive for excellence on condition it is with their friends. Flaws (2021: 96) reports that in their research the participant athletes never mentioned winning or losing, but they reflected on their experiences, relationships and how they grew and developed as athletes, as friends and as people, and importantly being connected to one another. When the seniors "... decide – today's our lazy day, we can just give up the practice session because it filters down to the rest, but if the seniors perform, the whole group is performing... and that helps with training". Initially some of the younger athletes were inactive, listless and not socialising. However now they are communicating with the other athletes, especially those they look up to "...and that helps with interaction... so that's also one of the things that we are developing, is communication between people you don't really know and communicating with all the athletes in general" (Coach).

Parents were positive about interacting and engaging with coaches and sports organisations via Zoom, WhatsApp, social media e-mail and telephonically, which are very effective. One parent commented that it could be done "by WhatsApp, Zoom and discuss the child's training needs and challenges. The coach also will speak to the athlete to give some motivation." The coach feels that, "... the athletes need their parents as well. They need their support ..." and the coach depends on their assistance. It is unfortunate that when athletes competed at the Mpumalanga Championships, the parents were not allowed to spectate; consequently, most of the athletes who did qualify for the SA Championships were those who were privately coached. As far as the status of school athletics in Mpumalanga is concerned, the coach was told by another coach that "... you are wasting your time coaching in these times ... You are the only idiot coaching in Mpumalanga so, with that attitude from some coaches, athletics is dying in Mpumalanga. We had no leagues, our first one is next Saturday. So, athletics is dying in Mpumalanga. We need the coaches to work together in these times, to develop athletes." It is encouraging though, that the coach and the athletes were invited to participate in a cross country event at Menlo, as it was open to anybody. Fortunately, "...because its now, we share it now on social media platforms ... and now those coaches are communicating with one another", whereas in the past they were not invited. The coach added that "in general ICTs will be the majority, the core of athletics if you do not have virtual meetings. Not like a meeting, an event where coaches can get together and share their information and use that as a platform to communicate to schools all over the country. I am now on a WhatsApp group that all the coaches across the country are sharing information and then you can say I want to go to Nelspruit for this cross-country event or I want to go to Vanderbijlpark for this one."

As a result of this development, during the times when the training and coaching needed to be done remotely, "...we joined challenges from other schools, especially from Gauteng...". A daily video of the best athlete doing HIIT exercises, was submitted by the coach "to the challenge group and the person in charge would have chosen the top performer of the day and everyone can share it on the group and say an athlete from that group or that school was one of the top athletes. So, making use of short video sessions during the time was our main focus and our main coaching method that we used."

Once the restrictions were relaxed and athletics training could resume, it was challenging. Only

a group of seven athletes per session (e.g. starting 14:00 – 17:00) could participate on a rotation basis. To add fuel to the fire, they were not allowed to train on the school grounds and had to find alternative and suitable locations in the city to train... *“We had to travel all around in the town just to ensure that these athletes don’t get lost and still stay focused and in shape. I think in the beginning it was mainly making use of sending videos of short training sessions to the parents and then the parents show them the videos. We also had from here and there challenges when we added for the next practise all the dads must participate and then the next session, we said all the mothers must participate and the week after that, all the siblings, just to keep it interesting and so that it doesn’t get boring at the end of the day”* (Coach). [Smith \(2020: 352\)](#) recommends that “... sport stakeholder communication, digital sporting communities, the use of social media for organising lifestyle sport communities, and sport risk communication are avenues for future research.”

Sometimes coaching can be a thankless job as coaches spend many unpaid hours away from their families performing tasks such as developing practice plans, attending practices and travelling to competitions (Flaws, 2021: 104). The coach opines that *“I think the main thing that must be set in place is coming from ASA themselves. They need to implement platforms where coaches have the ability on an open platform to discuss and share their ideas. We cannot hear the coaches on the ground implement this, there must be a proper structure from ASA itself and the school as well where they implement certain structures where coaches can communicate with one another.*

Discussion and Conclusion

The impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the sports fraternity, and what measures have been taken to continue sports activities in the midst of the pandemic, has been reported in various research papers published in international journals. Notably, the use of ICTs was used effectively and needs continual use to resume sports activities while simultaneously adhering to the control of governments and health authorities. As Garcia-Garcia (2020: 116) states, “When governments around the world started to decide how to control the disease, organized mass sport activities were among the first casualties.” Across the globe, governments were forced to take steps to restrict gatherings as well as movements in an effort to stop the spread of COVID-19. Consequently, schools, playgrounds and other facilities were closed, which ultimately affected children’s mobility and it is believed will result in a decline in their “healthy movement behaviours” ([Mitra, Moore, Gillespie, Faulkner, Vanderloo, Chulak-Bozzer, Rhodes, Brussoni & Tremblay, 2020: 6](#)). Many schools had to discard their “carefully developed plans” in the climate of the coronavirus, which “refuses to cooperate and continues its spread” ([Kennedy, 2020:22](#)), and we concur with Wong et al. (2020: 39) that “staying active is good but staying safe is paramount.”

We chose the first two of the five qualitative research orientations offered by [Wa-Mbaleka and Costa \(2020: 19-20\)](#) to situate our research in, relating to *The role of ICTs in South African schools’ athletics activities during the COVID-19 pandemic*. The first orientation is how the pandemic has affected people (in this case athletes, parents and the coach), and the second is coping mechanisms during the pandemic (in this case the use of ICTs) – how COVID-19 coping mechanisms in one context can be applied to other similar contexts. In this study the first sub-research question and theme 1 and its accompanying categories, which emerged from the findings, came under the first orientation, and the second and third sub-research question and theme 2 and its accompanying categories, came under the second orientation.

The effect of COVID-19 on participant athletes, their parents and the coach in terms of training at home, homework, parent roles, and the impact on the coach, were reflected in athletes’ responses to focus group interviews, an individual face-to-face interview with the coach, and a questionnaire completed by the parents. Where athletes were compelled to train at home due to lockdown measures, their responses were similar. During lockdown periods, the athletes felt that despite a training schedule provided by the coach via ICTs, which included warming up exercises and stretch exercises that they had to video and send to the

coach, they tended to become unfit and picked up weight. They became lazy, skipped or procrastinated sessions, and lacked motivation and self-discipline. They missed their friends as they motivate each other, there are competition and fun elements. In some cases, the home environments were not conducive to training because space was limited. The athletes did admit that the advantage of training at home is that one can train any time of the day and one is not restricted to a set time. Back to normal training sessions, when restrictions were lifted, the coach did notice that the athletes were unfit and were not able to maintain their peak times; he was compelled to take action and put a training plan in place. However, there were many interruptions (lockdown periods) during 2020-2021; sports activities were prohibited, and the coach had to revert to virtual training and use ICT's for communication purposes. Yet despite these actions, the athletes' times did decline as they felt they were not "pushed".

With regard to getting their homework done during lockdown and home training, the athletes were in their own unique ways able to find time to do their homework and also find time to do the training schedule the coach provided (some more than other athletes were committed to it). Much also depended on whether the schools resumed class attendance every other day, which allowed them to attend class teaching the one day, and the next day do their homework at home. Other athletes worked out a schedule that accommodated both athletics training at home and also set aside time for homework. Parents played a significant role in the home training sessions and ensuring that their homework was done. They responded in the questionnaire that it was/is a challenging time as they had to synchronise work responsibilities, ensure that their children do their daily athletics training sessions and find time to attend to household chores. It was evident to the coach that while some parents were more committed to ensure that their children adhered to their daily training sessions and were more disciplined, others were less/or not at all committed. Some parents even joined their children in some of the activities. Most parents found that when their children were at home during lockdown periods, it allowed the family to bond and do activities together, and at the same time be able to stay in contact with the coach with the use of ICTs such as SMSes, emails, Zoom meetings, virtual training sessions and monitoring of the athletes' progress. Once the athletes were allowed to train on the tracks (providing they adhere to safety measures such as wearing a mask), it was relief to the coach because the parents needed to stay in their cars hence there was less parental interference. However, it was helpful when the coach consulted the parents and the sports committee on certain aspects of athletics such as attending competitions in far off cities in other provinces.

The disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the closing of schools, had a huge impact on the training, coaching and management of athletics for the coach. The safety regulations that were dictated by the government and funnelled down to the DBE, were constantly changing as the virus ravaged the country with high infections, death rates and other variants of the pandemic being highly transferrable, and protocols needed to be adhered to (which was often dismissed by athletes who had a no care attitude). The coach was constantly having to adapt his training programmes, training, coaching and competition arrangements (logistics and cancellations), keeping up with the latest trends and novel ways, such as making use of the "Coach Tracker" app, be inventive, and be in constant communication with athletes and parents via ICTs and being members of a WhatsApp group. It was also disheartening for the coach that the top athletes' qualifying times for the SA Championships declined to such an extent that they had to start from scratch and aim for qualifying times, which in the past was done over a period of three years. These challenges put a heavy burden on the coach's private time, resources and finances such as using his own ICTs and transport where the need arose. The majority of the coaches in the local schools were reluctant to continue with athletics training, while those who did continue were from well-resourced schools and were well informed, but not very willing to share their successful methods. However, he and some of his athletes were able to get involved in a cross-coaching group, despite the resistance he experienced. The coach opines that it is imperative that ASA should be more involved and create an open platform where coaches are able to share their ideas with each other – a structure where the coaches can develop.

The participating athletes were optimistic about the future of athletics, providing they continue training and uphold all the protocols that have been put in place to prevent the spreading of COVID-19. It is imperative

that during this time while the COVID-19 is continuing to spread throughout the world, teachers, parents and school administrators need to be vigilant and keep in mind the prevention and control measures recommended, while learners return to their normal lives with daily sports and physical activities (Chen, Mao, Nassis, Harmer, Ainsworth & Li, 2020: 324). The younger athletes look up to the senior athletes as they act as role models and, thus, inspire the younger ones by their persistence, enthusiasm, perseverance, good attitudes and successes. They develop a community where there is a climate of comradeship and good communication. Parental support, the coach's motivation, athletics authorities and the use of social media platforms are needed in athletics where coaches can communicate with each other, share ideas and are kept up to date of issues such as new developments, and local and national competitions in athletics. It also offers opportunities for high-performing athletes to participate in elite competitions. According to the coach, ICTs are essential and play a vital role, as virtual meetings are needed to keep everybody in the loop of athletic activities. By endeavouring to find novel ways, our experiences in the pandemic will play an important part in "creating stronger, healthier and more resilient communities" (Mitra, Moore, Gillespie, Faulkner, Vanderloo, Chulak-Bozzer, Rhodes, Brussoni & Tremblay, 2020: 6). However, "staying active is good, but staying safe is paramount" (Wong et al. 2020: 39).

During athletes' efforts to move forward during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and also in 2021, being positive and progressive as well as focusing on solutions and simultaneously adhering to social distancing and restrictions, is a huge challenge (Hurley, 2021 np). It is encouraging to note though, that during 2020 many athletes became much more skilled to conduct their online interactions and to use novel and safe socially distant measures during their training activities, which are now part of their "new normal" interaction with other athletes. This will help athletes in the future when they get back to their old ways of becoming involved in competitions and training environments. It is possible that online consulting and face-to-face sessions will continue (Hurley, 2021, np). The connectivity theory served as a bedrock for our research, since connectivism has connections to many different theories, but unlikely "that it is the same as any one of them ... and is being used in multiple disciplines ... positive impact of network principles such as autonomy and interactivity ... is being broadly and usefully applied" (Downes, 2019:121, 124).

"Return to play guidelines" needs to be adapted in an effort to accommodate management of complications and to ensure there is full recovery in order that vigorous activity can be resumed (Ramagole, Janse van Rensburg, Pillay, Viviers, Zondi & Patricios, 2020: 2). The coach, athletes and their parents were able to make medium-range plans, new routines for continued athletics activities were put in place with the utilisation of ICTs, which enabled them to become more positive and productive within a global pandemic and the "new normal". Notwithstanding the negative responses regarding home-bound activities during lockdown periods, the most significant outcome of ICT activities was that there was a closer bonding of the family unit, as most family members participated.

Limitations

The focus of the study was on the role that ICTs play in SA public primary schools' athletics during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study was limited to five intermediate phase learners and five senior phase learners and one coach. Seeing that the sample was limited (ten athletes and one coach), the conclusions are only applicable to this study and cannot be generalised to South Africa as a whole. Hence it is recommended that a larger and more representative sample be used for future research in this field.

Recommendations for Future Research

Continued research is needed to find ways for coaches, athletes, parents/caregivers and sports authorities to collaboratively use dynamic ICTs optimally, to ensure continued athletics activities as the global community is endeavoring to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and to adapt to

the new normal. In addition, relevant theories need to be incorporated to undergird the suggested research efforts in order to highlight the pivotal role ICTs play for the survival of future athletics.

Conclusion

Combined with the discussion.

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Conflict of Interest

Author has no conflict of interest to report.

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