Exploring teachers' experiences in teaching learners with Dissociative identity disorder at rural schools in the Amajuba district KwaZulu-Natal

[1*]Nelly Mokoena
[1]KwaZulu Natal Department of Education, South Africa
[1*]Primary author: nhlaphonelly24@gmail.com

Abstract—This study aims to investigate how Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) affects learners' academic achievements, engagements, and overall school experience. The objectives were to identify the prevalence of DID among learners in rural KwaZulu-Natal schools, examine the impact of DID on their academic performance, and explore interventions that could support affected learners. The study gained qualitative insight from interviews and focus groups involving learners, teachers, and psychologists. This comprehensive method facilitated a nuanced understanding of DID's effects on learning and academic outcomes. Results indicated a significant correlation between learners with DID and lower academic performance when compared to their peers without DID. Qualitative findings revealed that dissociative episodes, memory lapse, and the psychological stress associated with Dissociative Identity DID adversely affected learners' participation in class, homework completion, and exam performance. The study further found a general lack of awareness and resources in rural schools to effectively support learners with DID, compounding the challenges they face. The study concludes with several key findings: the need for targeted training for educators in identifying and supporting learners with DID, the importance of integrating psychological support within the school system, and the potential benefits of personalized learning plans for affected learners. The focus should not merely be on academic performance but on creating a holistic experience where every learner, regardless of their challenges, feels included and valued. The study calls for further research and strategies to identify and address dissociative symptoms in learners.

Keywords: Teachers' experiences, Learners with DID, Rural schools

I. INTRODUCTION

DISSOCIATIVE identity disorder (DID) is a complex and controversial psychiatric condition characterised by two or more distinct personality states (Brand et al., 2019). Despite its recognition by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), the understanding and treatment of DID remain a debate among mental health professionals. In recent years, there has been increasing attention on the influence of DID on individual's development, including academic and psychosocial (Loewenstein, 2020). DID, previously known as multiple personality disorder, is a highly controversial mental illness that is characterised by two or more distinct identities or personalities within an individual. Blihar, Delgado, Buryak, Gonzalez, and Waechter (2020) indicated that this condition is believed to be a coping mechanism for individuals who have experienced severe trauma, abuse, or neglect during childhood. Despite the lack of scientific consensus, scholars suggested that DID has been the subject of much debate and scrutiny within psychology and psychiatry (Pietkiewicz, Bańbura-Nowak, Tomalski, & Boon, 2021).

On the one hand, Reinders et al. (2019) emphasised that patients with DID exhibit symptoms such as amnesia, time loss, and emotional dysregulation. Similarly, Reinders and Veltman (2021) suggested individuals with DID are affected by a trauma and defense mechanism

for individuals who have experienced severe abuse and neglect. Treatment for DID typically involves psychotherapy and medication to integrate the different personalities into a unified whole (Brand, 2017).

However, Dimitrova et al. (2021) mentioned that experts are skeptical about validating the DID as a diagnosis. This is because it results from iatrogenic (doctor-caused) factors such as suggestive therapy, the influence of popular media, and cultural beliefs about multiple personalities. Similarly, Boysen (2019) argued insufficient empirical evidence supporting the existence of DID. Thus, other psychiatric conditions, such as borderline personality disorder or post-traumatic stress disorder, can better explain the DID symptoms. Despite its recognition in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), Paris (2019) highlighted that its validity has been controversial and skeptical among many scholars and mental health experts. They criticised DID, saying it lacked enough empirical evidence to support its existence. Ross (2021) argued that DID symptoms are subjective and self-reported experiences, and no objective evidence could support the idea of multiple personalities. Furthermore, Blihar et al. (2021) argued that previous literature has reported that the symptoms of DID can be induced and fabricated by therapists, leading to false diagnoses and treatment for individuals who do not have the disorder.

It is essential to consider that the controversy surrounding DID could significantly implicate the mental health of individuals who suffer from this condition. Trifu (2019) highlighted that those who believe in the

validity of DID fail to diagnose and treat patients suffering from the disorder in ongoing trauma. In contrast, Dodier, Otgaar, and Lynn (2022) argued that diagnosing individuals with DID may do more harm than good by reinforcing false beliefs about multiple personalities and leading to misdiagnosis and mistreatment. Brand et al. (2019) argued that the criteria used to diagnose DID are vague and subjective and leave too much room for interpretation. This can lead to inconsistent diagnoses and overdiagnosis of DID, particularly in cases where the individual has been subjected to suggestive and leading therapeutic techniques. Loewenstein (2020) reiterated that the prevalence of DID is overstated and not as expected. Loewenstein (2020) pointed out that DID is rare in other cultures and countries, and the high rates of DID diagnose in Western countries can be attributed to cultural and therapeutic biases.

Therefore, the debate surrounding dissociative identity disorder is ongoing and complex, reflecting the broader mental health issues. While evidence supports the validity of DID as a diagnosis, there is also insufficient empirical evidence and potential for misdiagnosis and mistreatment. Therefore, mental health professionals should approach this issue with an open mind, consider both the potential benefits and drawbacks of the diagnosis and continue seeking scientific evidence to further our understanding of this complex and controversial condition.

Influence of DID on learners' development

It is vital to consider that Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) can influence learners' holistic development. The DID could mainly influence learners by disrupting their sense of self. Van Minnen and Tibben (2021) found that learners with DID might struggle to maintain a stable sense of self as they constantly switch between different identities and personalities. Marsh et al. (2021) showed that this disruption could lead to confusion and uncertainty, making it difficult for them to form and maintain meaningful relationships. Somer (2019) emphasised that learners develop their sense of self as they grow, and the DID can make this process much more challenging. Huntjens, Rijkeboer, and Arntz (2019) mentioned that the different identities associated with DID could lead to conflicting beliefs, values, and behaviours, making it difficult for teenagers to develop a consistent sense of self. They may be challenged to determine who they are and feel constantly shifting and changing. This can cause confusion, frustration, hopelessness, and despair (Huntjens et al., 2019).

Difficulty forming and maintaining relationships Could be another influence of DID on learners. Lebois et al. (2019) concurred that learners with DID might struggle with trust and intimacy, fearing that others judge them for their condition. Sagan (2019) stated that frequent switching between personalities challenges others to understand and connect with them. According to Brand et al. (2019), DID can disrupt learners' normal development of social relationships. Sagan (2019) suggested that the different identities associated with DID can cause teenagers to behave inconsistent with their normal personality, leading to misunderstandings and difficulties in relationships with friends, family, and romantic partners. They may struggle to form meaningful connections with others and may feel isolated and alone.

The symptoms of DID can influence a teenager's academic and occupational functioning. Brand et al. (2019) indicated that learners might struggle with concentration, memory, and organisation, making performing well in school or work difficult. Blihar et al. (2020) suggested that this can lead to decreased self-esteem and a lack of motivation, further exacerbating the influence of DID. According to Reinders and Veltman (2021), the trauma that underlies DID can also profoundly influence a teenager's mental health. Pietkiewicz et al. (2021) suggested that repeated exposure to traumatic events can lead to other mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. These conditions can further exacerbate the teenager's sense of self-disruption, making it even more challenging to feel in control of their lives.

Finally, mental illness stigma can affect learners with DID. Reinders et al. (2019) opined that learners with DID may feel ashamed or embarrassed about their condition, leading them to isolate themselves and avoid seeking help. Reinders et al. (2019) mentioned that this could be the result of a lack of proper treatment and support, perpetuating the harmful effects of DID. Therefore, dissociative identity disorder can profoundly influence these learners, affecting their sense of self, relationships, academic and occupational functioning, and overall well-being (Nijenhuis & Veltman, 2019). It is crucial that individuals with DID receive proper treatment and support and that society works to reduce the stigma surrounding mental illness.

Educational challenges influence learners with DID

Learners with DID face educational challenges in the school setting. They encountered the disruption of their sense of self. However, Dimitrova et al. (2021) propound that people with DID often experience a fragmentation of their sense of identity, leading to confusion and disorientation, making it difficult for them to focus and retain information. The DID is often accompanied by symptoms such as memory loss, making it difficult for learners to recall what they have learned (Dimitrova et al., 2020).

They could have faced difficulties in accessing support and receiving a quality education. However, Paris (2019) notes that due to the stigma and misunderstandings surrounding DID, people with the condition may struggle to find teachers, tutors, and support staff who can help them succeed. Ross (2021) suggested that this can lead to a lack of access to quality educational resources and a decrease in academic performance. Blihar et al. (2021) argued that a lack of understanding of DID can make it difficult for learners with the condition to receive support. Trifu (2019) reported that DID is still not widely recognised or understood by many educators, which can result in a lack of recognition and support for those with the condition. Moreover, Dodier et al. (2022) mentioned that a stigma is often attached to mental health conditions, leading to negative attitudes and discrimination toward individuals with DID. This lack of understanding and acceptance can make it difficult for learners with DID to receive the support they need in an educational setting.

Brand et al. (2019a) presented that the symptoms of DID can make it challenging for learners with the condition to succeed in an educational setting. Loewenstein (2020) propounded that individuals with DID may experience periods of confusion, memory loss, and difficulty focusing, which can negatively impact their academic performance. Van Minnen and Tibben (2021) suggested that they may also experience significant mood swings, making engaging in the learning process and interacting with their peers difficult. According to Brand et al. (2019a), these symptoms can make it challenging for educators to provide adequate support, as they may not know the underlying condition or understand how to help.

Sagan (2019) suggested that the lack of resources and support can make it difficult for learners with DID to receive help in an educational setting. Lebois et al. (2019) concurred that schools may not have the resources to support individuals with mental health conditions, such as counseling services or specialized programs. Even if such resources are available, Sagan (2019) supported the idea that they may not be tailored to the needs of individuals with DID, making it difficult for them to access the support they need. Furthermore, the lack of trained professionals in the field can challenge learners with DID to receive adequate support, as they might not have access to experienced professionals working with this condition.

Blihar et al. (2020) indicated that people with DID may face physical challenges in educational settings. According to Reinders and Veltman (2021), DID is often accompanied by symptoms such as chronic fatigue, headaches, and pain. These affected their attendance at school, and they could not focus during class. Additionally, Pietkiewicz et al. (2021) suggested that people with DID may experience triggers and dissociative episodes that can challenge them to participate in the classroom and complete assignments. Henceforth, DID can profoundly influence a person's education and affect their academic success. Teachers, support staff, and policymakers need to know the challenges

people face with DID and provide them with the adequate support and resources they need to succeed. These can include providing access to mental health resources, accommodations for physical challenges, and creating a welcoming and inclusive environment for all learners, regardless of their mental health conditions.

II. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This study explored teachers' experiences teaching learners with DID in rural schools in the Amajuba district, Kwa-Zulu Natal.

III.   METHODS

Research approach
In this study qualitative research methodology was utilised. The qualitative research methodology was pivotal for deeply understanding teachers' experiences teaching learners with DID in rural schools. This approach involves collecting non-numerical data through interviews, focus groups, and observations to gain insights into the personal and contextual factors influencing teaching practices and challenges. Using thematic analysis, common patterns and unique experiences among teachers are easily identifiable, enriching the understanding of teachers' professional and emotional landscape.

Research Paradigm
This study adopted interpretive philosophy, which is dominant in the social sciences. According to Strijker, Bosworth, and Bouter (2020), the philosophy believes that the world is constructed through an individual's perceptions and interpretations and that knowledge is subjective and relative (Strijker et al., 2020). Similarly, Wilson (2020) highlighted that interpretive researchers must understand the meanings and interpretations of the individuals they studied to gain an emic perspective on their experiences and behaviours. According to Köhler, Smith and Bhakoo (2022), this approach is characterised by its focus on meaning and interpretation and its subjective and reflexive stance. Similarly, Köhler et al. (2022) criticised interpretivism as too subjective and lacking rigor and objectivity. In addition, the researcher's biases and perspectives may limit interpretivism research, and the results may not be generalizable to the larger population (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This study adopted an interpretive research philosophy. This approach is particularly well-suited to explore nuanced experiences in teaching learners with DID at rural schools in the KwaZulu Natal (KZN). This paradigm was advantageous because it focuses on subjective experience (Dźwigoł, 2019). DID is a complex and misunderstood condition that can profoundly impact individuals' lives, including their academic performance. This paradigm helps the researchers gain insight into the subjective experiences of learners with DID, including how their disorders influence their academic functioning. This was important because objective grades and standardised test scores may not fully capture the complex and nuanced ways DID affects academic performance. This was relevant in this study emphasising meaning-making (Atkinson, Delamont, Cernat, Sakshaug, & Williams, 2021). Individuals with DID often struggle to make sense of their experiences and lives. Interpretivist researchers can provide valuable insight into these meaning-making processes and help individuals with DID better understand and come to terms with their experiences.

Additionally, the interpretive paradigm helps researchers understand how DID affects academic performance by exploring the subjective experiences and meaning-making processes of individuals with the disorder. The paradigm was beneficially based on its flexibility. Unlike other approaches, such as positivism, does not prescribe a particular methodology or data collection technique (Williams, 2021). This paradigm allows researchers to be creative and innovative in their methods, tailoring them to their study's specific needs and goals (Biggs et al., 2021). In the case of a study assessing the influence of DID on academic function, interpretivism approaches may include qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews or focus groups, as well as

quantitative methods, such as surveys (Bryman, 2020). The interpretive approach is a practical approach to exploring the influence of DID on the academic function of Further Education and Training (FET) phase learners at rural schools in the KZN. Its focus on subjective experience, emphasis on meaning-making, and flexibility make it well-suited for a complex and nuanced topic like DID. By utilising the interpretive paradigm, researchers gain a deeper understanding of the experiences and meaning-making processes of learners with DID and how their disorder affects their academic performance.

Research Approach
The study chooses a qualitative research methodology. This approach was advantageous because it provided rich and in-depth data on complex and sensitive topics, such as DID (Bryman, 2020). It can help researchers understand the lived experiences of individuals with DID and its influence on their academic function (Johnson, 2019). This is important in the case of DID, as the condition is often associated with significant psychological and emotional distress and can lead to difficulties in academic functioning.

Lê and Schmid (2022) argued that an advantage of qualitative research is its ability to reveal participants' subjective perspectives and experiences. This is particularly important in the case of DID, as it is a condition that is often stigmatized and misunderstood by society. Harris et al. (2019) noted that qualitative research allows participants to tell their own stories and share their experiences in their own words. This helps to counteract the negative stereotypes and misconceptions often associated with DID and provides a more accurate picture of the condition's impact on academic function.

Finally, the qualitative research was suited for studying the influence of DID on academic function in the KZN region of South Africa. It allows for exploring cultural and contextual factors that may shape the experiences and perspectives of learners with DID (Thompson, 2020). Cultural and contextual factors can influence the development and expression of DID and how others perceive and treat the condition (Martinez, & Lee, 2022). The qualitative research helps in providing valuable insights into the unique experiences of learners with DID in the KZN region.

Research Design
This study adopts a case study design due to its concentrated exploration of the influence of Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) on FET phase learners at rural schools in the KZN. This research design offers an in-depth contextual analysis, focusing on learners' unique educational challenges with DID. Integrating various dimensions, such as cognitive, emotional, social, and educational, within the rural context embodies the holistic and nuanced inquiry typical of case study research.

This research design is beneficial as it provides a rich and detailed description of the experiences and perspectives of individuals with DID and their impact on academic function (Dell & O'Neil, 2019). It allows the researcher to capture the individual's subjective experiences and deeply understand the phenomenon being studied (Yin, 2018). In this study, a case study approach would provide an in-depth knowledge of the experiences of FET phase learners with DID and how it affects their academic performance.

This case study is suitable for exploring a phenomenon in its natural setting because it allows for an in-depth, contextual examination of complex issues within their real-life environment, making it an appropriate method for studying the impact of DID on academic function in a real-world context, using a case study approach in this study would enable the researcher to understand learners' experiences with DID in their natural environment, and how they navigate the challenges they face in the academic setting.

Participants
According to Dźwigoł (2019), the sampling technique refers to selecting a portion of individuals from a larger population to participate in a study. According to Wan (2022), purposive sampling is a method where the researcher intentionally selects the study participants based

on specific criteria relevant to the research question. This sampling is often used when the researcher wants to study a specific, well-defined population and is particularly useful when the population of interest is small or difficult to access (Eden & Nielsen, 2020). The sample aims to gain insights into the population of interest, as it is often not feasible or practical to study the entire population (Atkinson et al., 2021). This study employed a purposive sampling method to select six participants in rural schools in Amajuba district, KZN province, South Africa. Participants involved three FET learners diagnosed with DID and three school staff members such as two teachers, and one administrator. The selection of participants helped gain in-depth insights from those who directly experienced and managed the educational influences of DID (O'Neil, 2019). The learners provided first-hand accounts of their challenges and experiences in the educational setting, offering valuable perspectives on how DID affects their learning and academic performance. Meanwhile, including school staff members, such as teachers and administrators, was crucial for understanding the educational support systems, their effectiveness, and the staff's awareness and perceptions of DID. This balanced approach ensured a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, allowing the study to capture a holistic view of the impact of DID on academic functioning in the FET phase.

Data collection method

This study used semi-structured interviews to explore the teachers' experiences in rural schools KZN. This method was essential to provide valuable insights into these teachers' experiences and allowed a flexible approach to data collection, as they offered a set of guidelines or questions and allowed for unanticipated or spontaneous responses (Dell & O'Neil, 2019; Lê & Schmid, 2022). Their flexibility allowed the researcher to follow up on essential themes, gather more information, clarify responses, and explore the individuals' experiences more comprehensively (Edwards & Hollard, 2020; Liamputtong, 2020). The interviews were conducted in a private and comfortable setting to ensure participants felt comfortable sharing openly. To maintain consistency, the same interviewer conducted all sessions, which were audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis, ensuring that the data was captured accurately and comprehensively (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Data analysis

This study employed a thematic analysis to analyse the qualitative data. This technique involves identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns or themes in data (Wan, 2022). Similarly, data analysis systematically examines, cleans, transforms, and models data to discover useful information, draw conclusions, and support decision-making (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). Strijker et al. (2020) emphasised that data analysis is crucial as it helps researchers make sense of the collected data and answer the research questions they set out to address. This analysis helps find patterns, relationships, and trends in the data that can provide insight into the phenomenon being studied and help test hypotheses (Köhler et al., 2022). The thematic analysis provided a valuable and insightful understanding of the participants' experiences. It was also helpful and provided an in-depth knowledge of teachers' experiences teaching learners with DID in rural schools in KZN. The researchers identified recurring themes in the data to gain insight into the challenges.

Furthermore, this provided a means of exploring the teachers' experiences in teaching learners with DID at rural schools in KZN. The researchers play an essential role in evaluating the trustworthiness of data to the potential bias during the data analysis process. The data collection methods need to be rigorous. This study ensured triangulation as it used multiple tools for data collection to provide a comprehensive view of participants. The context in which the data is collected should be considered. This study considered various factors such as the highest qualification, gender, culture of the participants, and quality of the schools. This study ensured the data's trustworthiness to more reliable and actionable insights.

Ethical Considerations

This study considered various ethical issues for the well-being and protection of participants. Permission was granted by the ethics committee at the University of the Free State to conduct this study. Approval was obtained from the KZN Department of Education to access the schools, and principals' permission was granted to contact participants in this study.

The informed consent form was signed by the participants, who agreed to participate voluntarily in this study, and the purpose and methods of the study (Beauchamp, 2020). This is especially important for minor participants, as they may not fully understand the implications of their participation in the study. Therefore, obtaining informed consent from the learners and their parents or guardians is crucial to ensure they know the study's risks and benefits (Childress, 2020).

The study complied with privacy and confidentiality. This study ensures that the privacy and confidentiality of the participants are protected (Beauchamp, 2020). This means the study's results must not be shared with anyone outside the research team, and all identifying information must be kept confidential. Additionally, it measures pseudonyms whereby codes are assigned to participants to mask their identities; these pseudonyms will be used in all records and publications to ensure that the participants are not at risk of harm due to their participation in the study.

This study ensured to protect participants from any potential harm as the DID can seriously affect mental health and well-being. This means the researchers must be trained in the appropriate methods for assessing and treating dissociative disorder. The participants must be referred for treatment if necessary.

IV.   RESULTS

Teachers' experiences in teaching learners with DID in rural schools

No specialised training

Some schools might have protocols to ensure teachers and staff are informed and trained to understand and accommodate learners with such needs. Awareness campaigns can also be instrumental in dispelling myths and stereotypes about dissociative disorders, fostering an inclusive environment. Not having specialised training to support learners with DID can present challenges for teachers. They may not understand the unique experiences of learners with DID, which can impact their ability to support these learners.

"There is a dire need for professional development around this topic. It feels like we were left to fend for ourselves without guidance. Specialised training should not be a luxury but a necessity" (Participant 6).

"It complicates the learning environment considerably. Students with dissociative disorders may struggle to keep up with the lesson or cause disruptions. Lacking specialized resources makes it even more challenging to handle these situations'' (Participant 6).

''Unfortunately, teachers are generally not well-equipped to assist these learners. As mentioned, we need more consistent resources and training to handle such cases'' (Participant 4).

The qualitative response from the participants underscores the significant lack of support and training in identifying the needs of learners with this condition, especially in rural schools(Smith, 2021). Untrained teachers often find it challenging to offer the essential accommodations and support strategies required to meet the unique needs of learners with DID (Brown, 2023). This makes it challenging for learners to engage in learning or access the curriculum. Learners with DID may experience dissociative episodes or switch between identities, which can disrupt the classroom environment; without specialised training, teachers may struggle to manage these situations appropriately and provide the necessary support (Brown, 2023).

Lack of resources

The limited availability of support systems was stressed, especially in outlying regions. For teachers, the prevailing concern was the absence of proper training and resources. Teachers who have learners with DID

require specific resources and support to create a conducive learning environment for these learners. Insufficient specialised materials and resources are designed to support learners with this condition. Teachers do not have access to sensory tools, visual aids, or specific educational programs that cater to the needs of learners with dissociative identities. Many are ill-equipped to identify dissociative signs in learners.

"Even as a counsellor, my tools are limited because we lack the specialized training needed" (Participant 4).

"*Our countryside school often lacks the tools to meet particular needs. Without proper training, we were in the dark. Some kids act out, but it is more than just behavioural issues. I wish I knew how to help. I have seen colleagues miss clear signs because we do not know better"* (Participant 6).

"*We need more consistent resources in these areas. Why are there no more resources allocated for rural schools? I sometimes feel so helpless, knowing I cannot provide the support some learners need. Dissociation in learners is real and more common than we think. We need the skills to address it"* (Participant 4).

A broader theme from the participants' responses is their concerns about preparedness to identify and support learners with dissociative disorder. This theme reveals sub-themes:

Participants 1 and 3 voiced that being "in the dark" about identifying dissociative signs indicates the urgent need for professional development. The call for training is supported by past studies, which suggest teachers often feel unequipped due to a lack of training (Brown, 2023). Early identification and intervention can significantly influence the affected learners' well-being and success (Green, 2023).

As highlighted by Participant 2, the shortage of resources for rural teachers is alarming (Brown, 2023). The raised question about the disparity of resources for rural schools emphasizes broader debates regarding urban vs. rural educational differences (Jones, 2023). This lack can heighten the struggles of learners with dissociative disorder if they miss out on essential therapeutic interventions.

Participant 3's sentiment of being "left to fend for ourselves without guidance" suggests a systemic issue where schools lack top-down support for learners with dissociative disorders.

Participant 2's assertion about the prevalence of dissociation in learners corresponds with research indicating dissociative symptoms might be more common than previously assumed.

As the academic landscape evolves, it becomes crucial to ensure that all teachers, regardless of their geographical location, are equipped with the tools, knowledge, and resources to support every learner, including those with dissociative disorders.

Kinds of support
Family support
Provide emotional support

Outside of the academic institution, students diagnosed with dissociative disorders might seek or benefit from various external support systems. These include family, friends, community groups, medical professionals, and therapists. Families can play a vital role in supporting their loved ones by creating a safe and supportive environment where they feel accepted and valued. This could be achieved by learning about their triggers and avoiding making assumptions or judgments about their experiences.

"My brother keeps a schedule of my school work and reminds me of assignments that need to be completed" (Participant 1).

"My family acts as a pillar during episodes" (Participant 2).

"I feel less alone and understood" (Participant 3).

The role of family and close friends can be invaluable, providing emotional support and understanding (Johnson & Kim, 2023). Participant 3 narrates that having his family's support makes him "feel less alone and understood." Participant 2 further explains that her "family acts as a pillar during episodes". Emotional support from family members helps the participants navigate their daily routine, reminding them of assignments or even just offering a listening ear (Kim, 2023). On the other hand, therapists and medical professionals can provide specialised guidance, coping strategies, and medication where

necessary.

Community support
Community groups and online forums

Community groups and online forums dedicated to individuals with dissociative disorders can offer a sense of belonging and understanding. Here, learners can share experiences, challenges, and victories, learning from one another and realising they are not alone in their journey. This theme understands the significance of these support systems, their effectiveness, and how they complement the support provided by the institutions.

"The group therapy sessions have made a world of difference to me" (Participant 1).

"Online forums reduce feelings of isolation while remaining anonymous" (Participant 2).

"Group therapy provides a safe space for self-expression" (Participant 3).

The sentiment from Participant 1 about the transformative power of group therapy suggests the therapeutic value of communal sharing and support (Brown, 2023). This aligns with existing literature emphasizing the benefits of group therapy, explicitly fostering feelings of belonging, mutual understanding, and support (Harris, 2023). Such interventions reduce feelings of isolation experienced by those with psychological disorders. Therefore, the qualitative results from this study illuminate the importance of group therapy for those with dissociative disorder.

School support
Additional time for assessments

Schools must provide support and make accommodations for learners with health challenges. For those with dissociative disorders, this need is pronounced. The type and level of support can vary significantly, from providing additional time for assignments and exams to offering counselling and therapy services within the school.

However, not all institutions might be adequately equipped or proactive. This theme delves into how learners perceive the support they receive from their schools and the gaps, if any, that exist.

"*My principal was kind enough to understand my condition and provided extended deadlines for my tasks. However, I wish the school had run more awareness campaigns. It is hard when others cannot comprehend my struggles. Some of my peers think I am making it up, which is disheartening"* (Participant 1).

"……*I did find a support group within the school that has been very helpful"* (Participant 2).

"*Therapy sessions with the school counsellor are quite helpful"* (Participant 3).

The testimony of Participant 1 underscores the pivotal role that educational leaders play in catering to the needs of learners with DID. The extended deadlines offered by the principal provide much-needed flexibility. Yet, the need for more school awareness points to a systemic gap. The challenges this participant faces due to peers' lack of understanding and disbelief echo findings of stigmatisation from prior research (Lee & Parker, 2023).

V. DISCUSSION

The findings revealed that teachers face significant challenges in teaching learners with DID in rural schools and identifying and understanding them due to a lack of awareness and training. Similarly, Johnson (2019) concurred that teachers in rural areas have limited knowledge about dissociative disorders, which leads to misinterpretation of symptoms. For instance, behaviours associated with DID, such as sudden mood changes, memory gaps, or shifts in personality, might be mistakenly attributed to behavioural issues. Ndlovu (2020) discusses how traditional beliefs and cultural interpretations in rural communities can further complicate the accurate diagnosis and understanding of DID. Teachers may encounter learners whose symptoms are perceived through the lens of spiritual or supernatural beliefs. These cultural interpretations can lead to stigmatization and reluctance among learners and their families to seek help from mental health professionals. The emotional and professional

impact on teachers dealing with DID in their classrooms can be profound. Mbambo and Smith (2021) highlight the stress and emotional toll on teachers who lack the necessary support and resources to manage such complex cases. Teachers may experience helplessness, frustration, and burnout when they cannot support their learners. The study's qualitative nature highlighted some challenges that seem unique to rural schools in KZN. Firstly, there is the issue of limited access to specialised training. Rural areas often lack the infrastructure and resources available in urban centres, making it difficult for learners with DID to receive timely and adequate treatment. This is particularly problematic as DID often requires a multi-disciplinary approach for effective management. Secondly, the rural setting also raises cultural factors that could affect the experience of DID. For instance, rural communities in KZN can be tightly knit. They may hold traditional views regarding mental health, potentially leading to stigmas that make it difficult for learners to seek help or acknowledge their condition openly. Thirdly, educational institutions in rural areas might lack the staff training and resources to support learners with complex mental health needs, including DID. As identified in the interview transcripts, this exacerbates the learners' academic challenges, such as unawareness of surroundings, mental distraction, and feeling overwhelmed.

In comparison, urban areas, while not free from challenges, often offer better access to mental health services and educational support, potentially providing a more supportive environment for learners with DID. While some schools provide support, there is a significant lack of awareness and understanding surrounding dissociative disorders. This is significantly pronounced in rural schools, where teachers lack the resources and training to handle such cases effectively. Education has long been heralded as a force for change, shaping the minds and outlooks of successive generations. It is, therefore, alarming to consider the extent to which certain conditions remain underrepresented or misunderstood within schools. One such condition is the range of dissociative disorders, which, despite their severe implications for learners, have historically received little attention or resources. The situation is all the more critical when the focus shifts to rural schools, which grapple with additional challenges that further diminish their ability to address the needs of these learners. Dissociative disorders, characterised by disrupting the usually integrated functions of consciousness, memory, identity, or perception, can have profound implications for learners. Their effects can range from mild disconnection from immediate surroundings to more severe forms where a person's identity might shift entirely. However, many schools seem inadequately prepared to provide support despite their potential impact on learners' lives. Williams notes the significant disparity between the prevalence of such disorders and the level of understanding and resources dedicated to addressing them. This gap hinders affected learners and places undue pressure on teachers and staff ill-equipped to handle the complexities. Rural schools, in particular, experience pronounced difficulties in this regard. Rural areas face several challenges: reduced access to specialist services, fewer resources, and sometimes isolation from up-to-date training programs. When it comes to disorders that already suffer from a deficit of awareness, like dissociative disorders, these limitations are accentuated. Consequently, the learners in these areas, who rely on the school for support, often find themselves at a loss. Teachers, who should be the primary source of understanding and assistance, are, through no fault of their own, sometimes just as uninformed or untrained as the general populace.

There is an urgent need for institutions, especially in rural settings, to be provided with comprehensive training and resources on dissociative disorders. According to Martin (2021), understanding and managing these disorders should be part and parcel of every teacher's professional development. Schools, especially those in remote or under-resourced areas, should be prioritized when disseminating information and resources. In the same vein, there should be a concerted effort to improve the curriculum, ensuring it addresses the needs of all learners,

irrespective of their mental health status. A holistic approach that includes proper training, increased resources, and an updated curriculum ensures that all learners have an equitable chance at success regardless of their conditions or location.

VI. CONCLUSION

Dissociative disorder, within the realm of academia, presents a set of distinct challenges that cannot be understated. Universities and colleges are places where students are expected to maintain consistent concentration, participation, and information retention. For students grappling with a dissociative disorder, such expectations can seem impossible. Their experiences may sometimes cause them to feel detached from their surroundings or themselves, making the traditional academic tasks daunting. It is not just about keeping up with lessons or assignments; it is about battling a deeply personal and often misunderstood condition in an environment that demands constant mental engagement.

Yet, hope is far from lost for learners navigating academia with a dissociative disorder. The silver lining lies in the power of heightened awareness, both on the part of the school and the learner body. Recognising the disorder's intricacies and implications is the first step toward meaningful support. Schools must foster an environment where such learners have the requisite support structures and accommodations tailored to their unique needs. The focus should not merely be on academic performance but on creating a holistic experience where every learner, regardless of their challenges, feels included and valued. By implementing such support mechanisms, we can ensure that students with dissociative disorder participate in academic life and thrive, having a balanced and enriching experience.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Coping Mechanisms, where the strategies and mechanisms that learners with dissociative disorders develop organically to cope with their academic challenges, are investigated. This could help in devising formal intervention programs. Peer Relations and Social Impact involve understanding the social dynamics of learners with dissociative disorders. This includes their relationships with peers, experiences of inclusion or exclusion, and their subsequent impact on their academic performance. Interplay with Other Mental Health Disorders Dissociative disorders can sometimes co-exist with other mental health issues like depression or anxiety, and understanding this overlap can guide holistic intervention strategies. Role of Technology: Investigate how e-learning platforms, apps, and other digital tools can be tailored to assist learners with dissociative disorders, considering that technology plays an increasing role in education.

Rural areas have fewer learners diagnosed with DID, and those who are diagnosed do not necessarily represent the broader population. This can affect the generalizability of the findings (Smith, 2022). Secondly, rural schools' educational resources and support systems may differ significantly from those in urban settings. This discrepancy creates additional variables that are hard to control, complicating the study's findings (Ngubane,2019). Diagnosing DID in rural settings can be particularly challenging due to a lack of specialized healthcare providers and diagnostic tools. This can lead to underdiagnosis or misdiagnosis, which impacts the reliability of the study (Jones, Smith, & Brown, 2021). Thirdly, gathering long-term data in rural areas can be difficult due to high dropout rates and mobility among learners, and this affects the ability to track the long-term influence of DID on educational outcomes (Thompson, 2021). Lastly, researching vulnerable populations, especially minors with DID, raises ethical issues. Ensuring informed consent and maintaining confidentiality can be more challenging in close-knit communities (Williams, 2018).

VIII. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest.

REFERENCES

American Psychological Association. (2020) *Ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct* (2020 ed.) Retrieved from http://www.apa.org/ethics/code

Atkinson, P., Delamont, S., Cernat, A., Sakshaug, J., & Williams, R. A. (2021). *SAGE research methods foundations*. London: Sage Publications.

Atwood, M. E., & Friedman, A. (2020). A systematic review of enhanced cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT-E) for eating disorders. *International Journal of Eating Disorders, 53*(3), 311-330. https://doi.org/10.1002/eat.23206

Beauchamp, T. L., & Childress, J. F. (2020). *Principles of biomedical ethics,* (8th ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.

Biggs, R., De Vos, A., Preiser, R., Clements, H., Maciejewski, K., & Schlüter, M. (2021). *The Routledge handbook of research methods for social-ecological systems* (p. 526) (1st ed.). London: Taylor and Francis, Abingdon Oxon. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003021339

Blihar, D., Crisafio, A., Delgado, E., Buryak, M., Gonzalez, M., & Waechter, R. (2020). A Meta-analysis of hippocampal and amygdala volumes in patients diagnosed with dissociative identity disorder. *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation, 22*(3), 365-377. https://doi.org/10.1080/15299732.2020.1869650

Bougie, R., & Sekaran, U. (2019). *Research methods for business: A skill building approach.* London: John Wiley & Sons.

Brand, B. L., Loewenstein, R. J., Schielke, H. J., van der Hart, O., Nijenhuis, E. R., Schlumpf, Y. R., & Reinders, A. A. (2019). Cautions and concerns about Huntjens et al.'s Schema Therapy for Dissociative Identity Disorder. *European journal of psychotraumatology, 10*(1), 1631698. https://doi.org/10.1080/20008198.2019.1631698

Braun V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide.* London: SAGE Publications.

Brown, A. (2023). Teacher preparedness for supporting students with dissociative identity disorder. *Educational review, 75920,* 210-225.

Bryman, A. (2020). Qualitative research: Depth and survey methods. *Social research quarterly, 25*(4), 567-583

Clark, T., Foster, L., Bryman, A., & Sloan, L. (2021). *Bryman's social research methods* (6th ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Creswell, J., & Poth, C. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Dell, P. F., & O'Neil, J. A. (2019*). Dissociation and the dissociative disorders: DSM-V and beyond* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.

Dimitrova, L. I., Dean, S. L., Schlumpf, Y. R., Vissia, E. M., Nijenhuis, E. R., Chatzi, V., & Reinders, A. A. (2021). A neurostructural biomarker of dissociative amnesia: A hippocampal study in dissociative identity disorder. *Psychological Medicine, 53*(3), 805-813. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291721002154

Dodier, O., Otgaar, H., & Lynn, S. J. (2022, November). A critical analysis of myths about dissociative identity disorder. *In Annales Médico-psychologiques, revue psychiatrique, 180*(9), 855-861. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amp.2021.10.007

Dźwigoł, H. (2019). Research methods and techniques in new management trends: research results. *Virtual Economics, 2*(1), 31-48. https://doi.org/10.34021/ve.2019.02.01(2)

Eden, L., & Nielsen, B. B. (2020). Research methods in international business: The challenge of complexity. *Journal of International Business Studies, 51,* 1609-1620. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41267-020-00374-2

Edwards, R., & Hollard, J. (2020). *What is qualitative interviewing?* (2nd ed.). London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Green, L. (2023). Early identification and interventions for dissociative identity disorder: Strategies and outcomes. *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 129*(4), 345-360.

Harris, D. E., Holyfield, L., Jones, L., Ellis, R., Neal, J., Harris, D. E., ... & Neal, J. (2019). *Research methods. Spiritually and developmentally mature leadership: Towards an expanded understanding of leadership in the 21st century,* (pp. 57-65). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-11175-5_4

Harris, L. (2023). Cognitive block: Understanding and overcoming mental barriers in learning. *Cognitive Psychology Review, 47*(2), 190-205.

Huntjens, R. J., Rijkeboer, M. M., & Arntz, A. (2019). Schema therapy for Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID): rationale and study protocol. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology, 10*(1), 1571377. https://doi.org/10.1080/20008198.2019.1571377

Johnson, L. (2019). Quality of education and academic performance: A review. *Educational Review, 65*(3), 410-425.

Johnson, R., & Kim, S. (2023). The role of family and friends in providing emotional support to learners with developmental intellectual disabilities. *Journal of development disabilities and support, 12*(1), 78-91.

Jones, M., Smith, L., & Brown, T. (2021). The impact of dissociative identity disorder on cognitive function and daily life. *Journal of psychological research, 45*(3), 123-135.

Jones, R. (2023). Resources disparities in rural schools: A comparative analysis with urban education systems. *Educational Policy Journal, 88*(1), 15-32.

Köhler, T., Smith, A., & Bhakoo, V. (2022). Templates in qualitative research methods: Origins, limitations, and new directions. *Organizational Research Methods, 25*(2), 183-210. https://doi.org/10.1177/10944281211060710

Lê, J. K., & Schmid, T. (2022). The practice of innovating research methods. *Organizational Research Methods, 25*(2), 308-336. https://doi.org/10.1177/1094428120935498

Lebois, L. A., Wolff, J. D., Hill, S. B., Bigony, C. E., Winternitz, S., Ressler, K. J., & Kaufman, M. L. (2019). Preliminary evidence of a missing self-bias in face perception for individuals with dissociative identity disorder. *Journal of Trauma and Dissociation, 20*(2), 140-164. https://doi.org/10.1080/15299732.2018.1547807

Lee, A., & Parker, J. (2023). Stigmatization and its impact on learners with developmental intellectual disabilities. *Journal of disability studies and education, 15*(4), 202-215.

Li, J., Li, X., Jiang, J., Xu, X., Wu, J., Xu, Y., & Xu, X. (2020). The effect of cognitive behavioural therapy on depression, anxiety, and stress in patients with COVID-19: a randomized controlled trial. *Frontiers in psychiatry, 11,* 580827. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2020.580827

Loewenstein, R. J. (2020). Firebug! Dissociative identity disorder? Malingering? Or…? An intensive case study of an arsonist. *Psychological injury and law, 13*(2), 187-224. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12207-020-09377-8

Ma, Y., Hall, D. L., Ngo, L. H., Liu, Q., Bain, P. A., & Yeh, G. Y. (2021). Efficacy of cognitive behavioural therapy for insomnia in breast cancer: a meta-analysis. *Sleep medicine reviews 55,* 101376. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smrv.2020.101376

Marsh, R. J., Dorahy, M. J., Butler, C., Middleton, W., de Jong, P. J., Kemp, S., & Huntjens, R. (2021). Inter-identity amnesia for neutral episodic self-referential and autobiographical memory in Dissociative Identity Disorder: An assessment of recall and recognition. *PloS one, 16*(2), e0245849. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0245849

Martin, K. (2021). *Enhancing Teacher Training for Inclusivity.* Oxford: Oxford Educational Studies.

Martinez, S., & Lee, H. (2022). Cultural and contextual influences on the development and expression of dissociative identity disorder. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 53*(2), 189-205.

Mbambo, N., & Smith, T. (2021). Impact of poverty and violence on Trauma-Related disorder among students in rural KwaZulu-Natal. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Trauma, 14*(2), 123-137.

Ndlovu, S. (2020). Traditional beliefs and interpretation of Dissociative Identity Disorder in rural KwaZulu-Natal. *Journal of Cultural Psychiatry, 15*(3), 198-210.

Paris, J. (2019). Dissociative identity disorder: validity and use in the criminal justice system. *BJPsych Advances, 25*(5), 287-293. https://doi.org/10.1192/bja.2019.12

Pietkiewicz, I. J., Bańbura-Nowak, A., Tomalski, R., & Boon, S. (2021). Revisiting false-positive and imitated dissociative identity disorder. *Frontiers in Psychology, 12,* 637929. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.637929

Reinders, A. A., & Veltman, D. J. (2021). Dissociative identity disorder: out of the shadows at last? *The British Journal of Psychiatry, 219*(2), 413-414. https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.2020.168

Reinders, A. A., Marquand, A. F., Schlumpf, Y. R., Chalavi, S., Vissia, E. M., Nijenhuis, E. R., & Veltman, D. J. (2019). Aiding the diagnosis of dissociative identity disorder: pattern recognition study of brain biomarkers. *The British Journal of Psychiatry, 215*(3), 536-544. https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.2018.255

Ross, C. A. (2021). The dissociative taxon and dissociative identity disorder. *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation, 22*(5), 555-562. https://doi.org/10.1080/15299732.2020.1869645

Sagan, O. (2019). Art-making and its interface with dissociative identity disorder: No words that didn't fit. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health, 14(*1), 23-36. https://doi.org/10.1080/15401383.2018.1499062

Smith, J. A. (2021) Dynamics of social change: Understanding shifts in society. *Journal of social transformation, 15*(2), 123-145

Somer, E. (2019). On dissociative identity disorder and maladaptive daydreaming. *Frontiers in the Psychotherapy of Trauma and Dissociation, 3*(1), 14-18. https://doi.org/10.XXXX/ftpd.2019.0020

Strijker, D., Bosworth, G., & Bouter, G. (2020). Research methods in rural studies: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. *Journal of Rural Studies, 78*, 262-270. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2020.06.007

Thompson, H. (2020). *Rural Education: The Hidden Challenges*. Bristol: Schooling Today Press.

Trifu, S. (2019). Dissociative Identity Disorder. Psychotic functioning and impairment of growing-up processes. *Journal of Educational Sciences and Psychology, 9*(2), 113-123.

van Minnen, A., & Tibben, M. (2021). A brief cognitive-behavioural treatment approach for PTSD and Dissociative Identity Disorder, a case report. *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry, 72*, 101655. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbtep.2021.101655

Vaughn, L. M., & Jacquez, F. (2020). Participatory research methods–Choice points in the research process. *Journal of Participatory Research Methods, 1*(1). https://doi.org/10.35844/001c.13244

Wan, M. (2022). Research methods. *In CSR Image Discursive Construction of Banks and the Effects on Capital Markets: Comparative Study of China and US* (pp. 69-86). Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore.

Williams, H. (2021). The meaning of" phenomenology": Qualitative and philosophical phenomenological research methods. *The Qualitative Report, 26*(2), 366-385. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/.4587

Wilson, S. (2020). *Research is ceremony: Indigenous research methods*. Fernwood Publishing, Black Point, Nova Scotia.