Effects of COVID-19 on learners' wellbeing in a rural high school district

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Abstract—In December 2019, COVID-19 quickly spread across various regions, and its effects devastated the educational system globally and locally. The wellbeing of learners has been linked to various aspects of their lives, such as their mental health and academic performance. Therefore, this study investigates the effects of COVID-19 on learners' wellbeing in a rural high school. It adopted a qualitative approach and phenomenology research design within the interpretive paradigm. Data were generated from telephone in-depth interviews using the WhatsApp social media platform as participants were isolated due to the lockdown regulations that had been imposed as a result of the pandemic. Six learners and two teachers were purposively selected from a rural high school in the Thabo Mofutsanyane District of the Free State province. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that poor academic performance, loss of loved ones, learners developing mental health issues, and the "new normal" could be the effects of COVID-19, which could affect the learners' wellbeing. This study recommended that teachers and learners should be trained to gain the digital skills and knowledge needed for successful teaching and learning on online platforms in cases such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Psychological Effects, Learners' Wellbeing, Rural School, COVID-19 Era, Online Learning, Social Inequality

I. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

THE world has been challenged with brutal and harsh viruses that halted human movements and caused social and economic disruptions before (Shumba, Nyamaruze, Nyambuya & Meyer-Weitz, 2020, p. 271). For instance, the Zika virus (ZIKV), as indicated by Gorshkov et al. (2019), was similarly declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern by World Health. However, when the Coronavirus hit the world in 2019 and affected educational, socioeconomic, and health sectors; its ramifications on human wellbeing were global (Buck, Arnold, Chazan & Cookson, 2020). Many countries worldwide closed schools and suspended face-to-face classes 'to flatten the curve' that affected almost ninety-five percent of the student population worldwide (Giannini, 2020). In South Africa, a nationwide lockdown was initiated to mitigate the virus's spread by closing the normal face-to-face teaching platforms to transition to online learning (Kwok, Wong, Wei, Wong, & Tang, 2020). The pandemic had devastating effects. It killed over 290,000 individuals globally in less than two years and instigated over 4.3 million infection cases (UNESCO, 2020). Teachers and learners were restricted from travel, and social distancing between individuals and self-isolation were introduced. The pandemic also led to massive job losses in the attempts to curb its spread among individuals (Hallgarten, 2021). The restrictions raised concerns about the consequences on learners' academic performance and holistic wellbeing (Engzell, Frey & Verhagen, 2021). The pandemic transformed society and exacerbated economic and social inequality (UNESCO, 2020a).

It is essential to consider the significant impacts of the conversion from face-to-face to online platforms on learners' lives, particularly those from disadvantaged households and rural areas in South Africa. This is mainly because this epidemic necessitated that for schooling to continue, learners had to possess or at least have access to certain resources, such as laptops and data, thus widening the gap between the haves and have not (Dube, 2020). Some learners have limited access to connectivity in their homes; some do not have adequate Information Technology equipment to attend online classes, and others cannot afford the extra data (Mukuna & Aloka, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). As a result, some learners faced unprecedented challenges, including psychological breakdowns, social isolation, and suicidal ideation, affecting almost every aspect of their wellbeing (Kohls, Baldofski, Moeller, Klemm, & Rummel-Kluge, 2020).

The concept of wellbeing is a broad and multidimensional concept that is often referred to as the positive emotions of an individual and could be studied thoroughly and extensively in different fields, with each discipline holding its definition of the term (Lyubomirsky, King & Diener, 2005). The learners' wellbeing, in particular, is a complex psychological state that explains how learners feel and function in education (Rees & Dinisman, 2015, p. 4). Learners' wellbeing is affected by the capability to bounce back from adversities caused by COVID-19 both educationally and socially, which is their resilience. Learners' emotional vigour to withstand the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and overall happiness and contentment with their lives are paramount.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Many studies have been conducted on the effects of COVID-19 on learners' wellbeing at rural high schools. For example, Noltemeyer, Bush, Patton, and Bergen (2020) studied the cultural and psychological effects of social distancing on learners in Zimbabwe. Their results suggested that learners are among the people most affected psychologically by the sudden outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and its requirements and restrictions set by different governments to cope with the virus. The rapid emergence and spread of the COVID-19 pandemic prompted the introduction of social distancing and staying-at-home orders to reduce the spread of the virus (Dube, 2020). This strategy could have detrimental effects on learners' mental health. Due to the lockdown implemented by different states, many children's activities were temporarily suspended. This could negatively affect their psycho-social development and confidence due to changing their routines (Noltemeyer et al., 2020; He, Gou, & Chang, 2014). Ranscombe (2020) found that learners felt forced to shift to home learning without adequate facilities and infrastructure. A lack of resources in their homes might result in psychological discomfort, unnecessary pressure, and anxiety (Ranscombe, 2020).

A study conducted in China and a similar one in Zimbabwe revealed that anxiety and depression among adolescent learners increased during the pandemic (Noltemeyer at al., 2020; Hawke et al., 2020). It also found that suicidal ideation and plans increased significantly between pre- and post-COVID-19. Other studies in the United Kingdom revealed that implementing social distancing affected adolescents' wellbeing (Serafini et al., 2020). Loneliness among young adults during the pandemic was higher than before stay-at-home orders were implemented (UNESCO, 2020). According to He et al. (2014), social development can occur mainly within the family, but as children age, their peer group becomes more critical. This suggests that social distancing and lockdown measures could have a significant impact on the development of children. Research conducted by Van Manen (2020) on the effects of COVID-19 on education in South America during the pandemic revealed that learners were not coping with the changes brought about by the outbreak, such as school closures and the implementation of quarantines at home. Some issues that intensify anxiety among learners include food insecurity and the lack of literacy skills and internet access (Van Manen, 2020). Studies show that children and youth might experience increased anxiety and stress due to the effects of the outbreak (Polit & Beck, 2012; Prime, Wade, & Browne, 2020).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the closure of schools in Nepal affected the students' skills and knowledge development (Sievertsen & Burgess, 2020). According to Sievertsen and Burgess (2020), attending school is an excellent public policy tool that can help raise social awareness and improve a child's academic performance. They also add that it is essential to note that school time can be enjoyable and raise various social skills. In comparison, missing school for a short period can harm a child's skills development. According to Bergman, Feijter, Frambach, Godefrooij, Slootweg, and Stalmeijer (2012), the pandemic affected education institutions in Nigeria. Besides the lockdown of schools, other factors, such as the cancellation of international conferences and the reduction of the academic calendar, caused a teaching and learning gap and decreased human resources. Buckler, Chamberlain, Stutchbury and Hedge (2020) studied the impacts of COVID-19 on learner wellbeing. They reported that the dropout rate increased significantly in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Guinea (Buckler et al., 2020). They further stated that the longer schools were closed, the higher the rate of dropouts. The longer the learning programmes were suspended, the harder it would be for learners to re-learn and become more engaged (Krishnakumar & Rana, 2020), thus resulting in high school dropout rates.

In their study Food Insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic, Fang, Thomsen, Nayga and Yang (2022) argued that the pandemic significantly increased food insecurity despite emergency legislation that put more resources into food assistance programs, increased unemployment benefits and provided stimulus payments. The survey they conducted in Canada on food insecurity among low-income Americans during the early months of the pandemic indicated that those who lost their jobs due to the pandemic reported the highest level of food insecurity. Their data highlighted the importance of school meal programs during normal times. Those learners who took advantage of school meals before the outbreak were more likely to have experienced food insecurity during the pandemic-related school closures (Fang et al., 2022). This also affected the childcare costs of families with young children (Kobia & Gitaka, 2020). There is a wide disparity between the populations with higher income and those with low income, as well as those who can use technology to ensure that their education continues digitally (Muzungu, 2020). In Dubai, over 13,900 individuals signed a petition calling for reducing independent school fees by 30% due to the high cost of living and the recent pay cuts (McKibbin & Fernando, 2020). Implementing social distancing and lockdown measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 raised concerns about increased child abuse (Kawuki, Sserwanja, Obore, Wang, & Tak Fai Lau, 2021). One of the UK's leading domestic abuse charities, Refuge, reported a 25% increase in calls following the lockdown (Sher, 2020). The research by Sserwanja et al. (2020) in Uganda reported that before the outbreak of COVID-19, the hotline received around a hundred calls a day, reporting various forms of violence against children. Following the lockdown measures implemented on April 10, 2020, the number of calls received by the helpline increased by over 13 times. A report by Save the Children indicated a 60% increase in sexual violence against children since the lockdown (Sserwanja et al., 2020).

III. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The study's objective was to explore the effects of COVID-19 on learner wellbeing in a rural high school. The research question was: What are the effects of COVID-19 on learner wellbeing in a rural high school?

IV. METHODS

Research approach

A research approach is a process that describes the steps involved in carrying out a study (Creswell, 2013). According to Creswell (2013), it is a procedure that involves developing a set of plans and procedures that are designed to guide the study. This study adopted a qualitative approach. This approach is used to understand participants' reasons, opinions, and motivations. Its methods relate to words, sounds, emotions, colour, and other non-quantifiable elements (Mkandawire, 2019). Its advantage is that it provides insights into the phenomenon of interest and helps develop ideas about it (Slevitch, 2011). This research approach is relevant for this study because the study's main objective was to inquire about participants' opinions, experiences, and insights about the phenomenon of interest (COVID-19).

Research Design

This study falls under a phenomenological design. This design was deemed to be an appropriate one because it helps researchers to understand a specific phenomenon in detail and reach the essence of the experience that the participants had with it (Creswell, 2013). This concept is based on the idea that every experience has a material and an ideal component (Leavy, 2017).

Data collection Instrument

This study employed telephonic in-depth interviews, which enabled the researcher to collect data via social media platforms (WhatsApp) with participants. They were in the comfort of their homes as COVID-19 necessitated less contact between people. An in-depth interview is a qualitative data generation method involving rigorous interviews with a few individuals (McMillan & Schumacher, 2012). It allows researchers to explore participants' perspectives on a particular idea or situation. In-depth interviews are open-ended techniques that enable researchers to

collect detailed information about a topic (Rossouw, 2010). The goal of in-depth interviews is to explore the perspectives and experiences of the respondents. The type of in-depth interview the researcher utilised was one-on-one interviews (Rahi, 2017), which were the most suitable, as rural school learners face many challenges in their daily lives. One-on-one sessions are appropriate to enable them to speak freely without fear and embarrassment. COVID-19 came with some devastating effects, including the loss of life; in such cases, the researcher had to have a psychologist on standby to assist the learners who might need assistance. Due to the COVID-19 regulations, interviews were conducted on WhatsApp's telephonic platform. Forbes (2015) referred to the telephonic platform as a cross-platform app that allows users to send and receive free media files and text messages. It was advantageous in ascertaining rapport with the participants (Rahi, 2017). Interviewers can achieve this by making participants feel more comfortable and generating more insightful responses.

Data analysis

This study employed thematic data analysis for analysing qualitative data. Thematic analysis is a process utilized in qualitative research to identify and report on repeated patterns (Cullen, Gulati & Kelly, 2013; Luo, Guo, Yu, & Wang, 2020). It involves searching an extensive data set to find and analyse various information pieces. According to Rubin and Rubin (2005), thematic analysis allows one to identify emerging themes and concepts in the interview. This study analysed the transcripts multiple times to develop analysable themes. The researcher opted for this kind of data analysis because of the nature of the study, which required participants to articulate their views about the phenomenon of interest. Thus, the researcher could identify recurring themes from all the participants and make meaning.

Ethical considerations

For purposes of this study, informed consent was attached to the document regarding the nature of the research. In adherence with the ethical considerations of the study, the researcher applied for ethical clearance from the University of Free State Ethics Committee (UFS-HSD2021/1318/22) to conduct the study. The researcher also obtained gatekeeper permission from the Free State Department of Education and the school principal from which the participants were drawn. The participants were given informed consent forms explaining that their participation was voluntary, without material benefits, monetary or otherwise attached to their participation, that they could withdraw at any time, and that no physical or psychological harm would be inflicted on them by the study in any way. The use of pseudonyms instead of real names was implemented to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. The interview took place on a social media platform, WhatsApp, to adhere to COVID-19 regulations and ensure the participants' safety. The researcher also asked for assistance from Manapo Regional Hospital's Clinical Psychology Unit in case some questions affected them negatively. The researcher stored hard copies of the participants' answers in a locked cupboard for five years at the University of the Free State for future research or academic purposes. Future use of the stored data will be subject to further Research Ethics Review and approval if applicable. After five years, the hard copies will be shredded, and the electronic copy will be deleted.

V. RESULTS

Biographic information of the participants
From teachers

Table 1 shows the profiles of the two teachers who participated in the research. It illustrates the experience, qualifications, age, years of teaching experience, culture, marital status, residential area, and the subjects they were teaching.

Table 1: Results from teachers

Participants	Teacher 1 (HOD)	Teacher 2
Pseudonyms	Zulu	Ramorapedi
Gender	Male	Female
Age	37	29
Culture	Sesotho culture	IsiZulu culture
Marital status	Single	Single
Years of Teaching experience	12	5
Qualifications	B. Ed, Hon.Ed	B. A, PGCE, Hon.Ed
Teaching subject	Accounting and Business	Geography
Residential area	Makwane Witsieshoek	Phuthaditjhaba

*Qwaqwa is a place in the central part of South Africa, Free State province. It is also called Basotho Qwaqwa, the home of Sesotho-speaking people, and was formerly known as Witsieshoek. Many still use the name. Qwaqwa encompasses many villages and towns, including Phuthaditjhaba and Makwane. Phuthaditjhaba is the number one town in Qwaqwa, where many businesses and stores are.

Results from learners
Table 2 depicts the profiles of the learners who constituted research participants.

Participants	Learner 1	Learner 2	Learner 3	Learner 4	Learner 5	Learner 6
Pseudonyms	Lefa	Morena	Modiehi	Sbonga	Puseletso	Pinkie
Gender	Male	Male	Female	Male	Female	Female
Age	18	17	17	18	18	17
Grade Level	12	12	12	12	12	12
Residential area	Kestell	Kestell	Kestell	Kestell	Kestell	Kestell
Culture	Sesotho	Sesotho	Sesotho	isiZulu	Sesotho	Sesotho
Guardians	Mother	Grandmother	Aunt	Grandmother and uncle	Aunt	Aunt
Years in phase	4	3	3	4	4	3

*Kestell is a small maize farming settlement in Free State Province, South Africa

Thematic results

Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on learners' wellbeing

The study focused on several effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on learner wellbeing in the rural high school. These effects include alternating class practices, unfamiliar new school routines, delays in covering certain topics, being overwhelmed with schoolwork, pressure, frustration, losing loved ones (developing mental health issues), and adapting to a new normal life. These effects might affect the students' wellbeing and academic performance at the rural school.

Psychological effects
Alternating classes practices

The results showed that alternating classes due to the COVID-19 pandemic affected learners' wellbeing in the rural high school and could affect their academic performance.

"*My academic performance was negatively affected during lockdown due to the practice of alternating classes. Our studies were badly affected since we had to study independently, and teachers could not go the extra mile because of COVID-19 restrictions. They could not thoroughly explain topics due to limited time, and they overloaded us with many tasks. I could not get any help at home because no one studied to the level I was doing. That affected me badly, and my performance dropped dismally*" (Pinkie).

Although these practices may affect the learners' academic performance, one teacher indicated that alternating could reduce class overcrowding, especially in public schools. The following response from an in-depth interview with one of the teachers supports this view:

"*The challenges they encountered in their learning were exacerbated by the practice of alternating classes to facilitate social distancing in classrooms. The learners had to rotate to reduce overcrowding in our classes*" (Zulu).

Unfamiliar new school routine

The finding showed that learners struggled to familiarise themselves with the new school routine during COVID-19. This is what they had to say:

"*In terms of academic performance, I always relied on teacher's exposition, and when we were made to stay at home, I struggled with my studies because*

there was no one who could assist me with schoolwork, which frustrated me a lot. When we returned to school after lockdown, we no longer went to school daily but alternated" (Sbonga).

"Moreover, it was tough to work alone at home, especially because I had been used to depending on the teacher's clarifications. I had no help at home because no one knew what I was doing. In addition, lack of interaction with my classmates or friends made things more difficult because study groups help a lot, but studying alone is difficult" (Modiehi).

The interviews with the learners and the two teachers show that these could affect their academic performance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Other participants mentioned that the alternating days or weeks approach was necessary as the Department protected learners and teachers from getting infected; however, this new strategy negatively impacted the learners and the teachers.

"Covid-19 affected my academic performance a lot because we were alternating classes at school. That put much pressure because teachers would give us 'tons of work' with limited face-to-face interaction. Working under that kind of pressure was difficult because teachers struggled to finish topics due to limited time, pushing us to finish the topics independently" (Modiehi).

"We were under severe pressure because we were given many tasks to complete and submit in such a short space" (Lefa).

"My academic performance was negatively affected during lockdown due to the practice of alternating classes. Our studies were badly affected since we had to study independently, and teachers could not go the extra mile because of COVID-19 restrictions. They could not thoroughly explain topics due to limited time, and they overloaded us with many tasks. I could not get any help at home because no one studied to the level I was doing. That affected me badly, and my performance dropped dismally" (Pinkie).

The teachers repeated the same lessons twice because learners came in small groups of twenty-five or fewer to reduce overcrowding in public schools.

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"The alternating of classes was necessary as we have overcrowding at our schools. However, that had its disadvantage because exhaustion would kick in when repeating the same lesson with different groups, resulting in us not overemphasizing certain topic" (Zulu).

All these factors caused emotional exhaustion, which might affect their wellbeing and lead to differences in how teachers delivered their lessons in different groups.

Delays in covering certain topics

Most learners stated this when they highlighted that their teachers were no longer covering certain topics.

"Working under that kind of pressure was not easy because teachers struggled to finish topics due to limited time, pushing us to finish the topics independently" (Lefa).

This affected their academic performance because there was no assistance at home since most learners in rural areas live with people without formal education.

Pressure

The results showed that learners experienced pressure due to COVID-19. The learners agreed that due to the amount of work given as they were alternating classes, they struggled to cope because of the amount of work they had to do alone or having heard little in class. This is what they had to say:

"We were under severe pressure because we were given many tasks to complete and submit in such a short space" (Lefa).

"Covid-19 affected my academic performance a lot because we were alternating classes at school. That put much pressure because teachers would give us 'tons of work' with limited face-to-face interaction. Working under that kind of pressure was difficult because teachers struggled to finish topics due to limited time, pushing us to finish the topics independently" (Modiehi).

The participant learners indicated they had to deal with lots of work, most of which they did not understand thoroughly as teachers would give them a lot of work to make up for days they did not go to school.

Frustration

The "new normal" that learners had to familiarise themselves with caused frustration on learners. Suddenly, learners and their families had all these educational changes they were not prepared for financially or otherwise. These changes affected a lot of their educational experiences, and this is what they had to say:

"In terms of academic performance, I always relied on teacher's exposition, and when we were made to stay at home, I struggled with my studies because there was no one who could assist me with schoolwork, which frustrated me a lot. When we returned to school after lockdown, we no longer went to school daily but alternated" (Sbonga).

"Not good, because I failed grade 11, which I was doing in 2020" (Morena).

"…the loss of teaching and learning time due to rotations, problems of social distancing due to overcrowding frustrated us too as teachers because we are aware of our learners' economic status; many rely on school provisions" (Ramorapedi).

It is evident from the collected data that learners' academics were affected during the COVID-19-induced lockdown as the world, including South Africa, attempted to find ways to mitigate the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, like most aspects of human lives, the learners' academic cycle was affected negatively, as they had to stay home for quite some time. When they returned to school, things were no longer the same. They had to maintain a certain distance between one another, wear masks, and sanitise endlessly.

Loss of loved ones

Losing loved ones could affect learners' wellbeing due to COVID-19 in a rural high school. Most learners lost their close relatives and family members. Some learners were severely affected because of this, as they had lost their guardians due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The following responses from in-depth interviews support this:

"COVID-19 threatened my health, as well as my family. My aunty died because of it, so we lived in the fear that someone else in the family might contract it again" (Puseletso).

"We relied on my sister, who was the breadwinner working in the factory, but due to this pandemic, she contracted a high fever and unfortunately died" (Morena).

This greatly impacts the learners' wellbeing because many issues arise in the death of a loved one, especially a parent or a guardian. Learners end up dropping out of school to help care for their younger siblings or due to a lack of certain resources to continue with education. Furthermore, the sudden death of a family member on its own induces emotional and psychological effects on the learner. This negatively affects their psychological, social, or physical wellbeing.

Business lockdown

During the pandemic, businesses were halted for an extended period due to the COVID-19-induced lockdown. Most people in rural areas had to depend on piecework or temporary jobs. Thus, losing their jobs due to the COVID-19-induced lockdown meant that breadwinners were no longer receiving payment.

"During the lockdown, my mother lost her job. That made things difficult for us at home. We had to rely on my child's grant and my grandmothers'. Life started changing for the worse, and that affected us badly. While trying to adjust to such a lifestyle, my grandmother died due to COVID-19; the very same person we depended on" (Modiehi).

The findings revealed that the virus instilled fear and panic in participants due to its nature and the pace at which it infected people, as well as the overall impact on the lives of these learners, considering the state of their contextual conditions.

Developing mental health problems

The results showed a high prevalence of mental health problems in rural high schools due to the effects of COVID-19. Most participants found it hard to deal with the impact of COVID-19 in their lives.

"I started developing depression and anxiety, always asking myself who will die next, my mother or me" (Modiehi).

"I was always worried and wondering what would happen to our education, which developed into anxiety. I also experienced stress due to the fear of the virus, and the loneliness I felt as I could not see my friends like before" (Puseletso).

"My mother lost her job due to COVID-19 induced lockdown, which worsened things. We were now relying only on child support grant, which engendered stress, leading to depression" (Pinkie).

"I was in grade 11 when COVID-19 first hit the nation, and I was busy thinking that I would be doing my matric the following year, but suddenly everything changed. Now I find myself dealing with anxiety, stress, and depression because of the problems brought on by this virus. I realized there was no way I would succeed" (Sbonga).

"I experienced depression and stress, as mentioned earlier, because of finances at home" (Morena).

The data revealed that as much as the Department of Education was looking for better ways to mitigate the spread of the virus while ensuring learning takes place, there was an oversight on their part. They overlooked that many schools in South Africa are classified as rural, signifying that most learners depend heavily on the provisions schools provide.

Trauma

The learners were traumatised as the COVID-19 pandemic led to mental health problems, especially in rural schools; they also had to contend with the challenges of living in rural areas.

"COVID-19 threatened my health, as well as my family. My aunty died because of it, so we lived in the fear that someone else in the family might contract it again" (Puseletso).

"We relied on my sister, who was the breadwinner working in the factory, but due to this pandemic, she contracted a high fever and unfortunately died" (Morena).

"During the lockdown, my mother lost her job. That made things difficult for us at home. We had to rely on my child's grant and my grandmothers'. Life started changing for the worse, and that affected us badly. While trying to adjust to such a lifestyle, my grandmother died due to COVID-19; the very same person we depended on" (Modiehi).

Many learners develop mental health issues because of the state of affairs at their homes. The absence of resources, teachers' lack of technical skills, and inadequate assistance from other stakeholders exacerbated their conditions.

Lack of support

The findings showed that the lack of support influenced learners' wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic, as learners faced these hardships without assistance. The shortage of school therapists or professional counsellors could also be a challenge, as most public schools in South Africa do not have residents to help in such cases. Both learners and adults had to worry about what they would eat now that schools were closed, family members were dying or losing their jobs, and employment opportunities were scarce. The participant learners indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic indeed affected their mental wellness. The following responses from in-depth interviews support this:

"I started developing depression and anxiety, always asking myself who will die next, my mother or me" (Modiehi).

"I was always worried and wondering what would happen to our education, which developed into anxiety. I also experienced stress due to the fear of the virus, and the loneliness I felt as I could not see my friends like before" (Puseletso).

"My mother lost her job due to COVID-19 induced lockdown, which worsened things. We were now relying only on child support grant, which engendered stress, leading to depression" (Pinkie).

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thinking that I would be doing my matric the following year, but suddenly everything changed. Now I find myself dealing with anxiety, stress, and depression because of the problems brought on by this virus. I realized there was no way I would succeed" (Sbonga).

"I experienced depression and stress, as mentioned earlier, because of finances at home" (Morena).

Therefore, in-depth interviews revealed that the learners were mentally affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Adapting to a (new way) of life

The findings indicated that a new normal life could be affected by the COVID-19 pandemic on the learners' wellbeing in a rural high school, so everyone adapted for the sake of their safety. This new normal life came with many prerequisites and requirements that people had to abide by to ensure their safety and that of their loved ones. It required that people should behave appropriately in line with the COVID-19 conditions. All these sudden changes were difficult for people to understand and follow, and for most people, they were unbearable. Learners, too, struggled as they could no longer see their friends. Moreover, they now had to contend with domestic chores they previously managed to escape through school. The following responses from in-depth interviews support this:

"COVID-19 has brought havoc in our lives, especially for us learners. It caused a lot of stress, especially after the re-opening of schools in 2020" (Lefa).

"Ok, when COVID-19 arrived, it changed my life. I had to adjust to the fact that it is here. It first brought lockdown, where people had to stay home, no school, or work" (Modiehi).

"…when COVID-19 arrived, it changed our mindset. To adjust our mind to the conditions of Covid-19" (Pinkie).

"COVID-19 has affected my entire being badly. Because it hit us when we least expected it, it came with lots of challenges" (Morena).

This new normal negatively affected learners' lives as it restricted them from being in groups and imposed curfews, wearing masks, sanitising hands, and social distancing.

The interviewed teachers indicated that everyone had to get used to the new normal, which was also challenging. One participant shared the following:

"...leaners had to adapt to a new normal and a new way of doing things. For instance, having to wear a mask daily and to keep on sanitising after every few minutes" (Zulu).

The new order negatively affected them, and most struggled to get used to it. Learners worked to obtain decent meals, as they were used to getting food from school. Others felt stuck at home with no way out because school was their haven, while others who relied on the help they got from school found the Covid-19 restrictions a formidable challenge.

VI.   RESULTS

This study demonstrated that the Covid-19 pandemic affected the wellbeing of learners and teachers at a rural high school. Its effects included alternating class practices, unfamiliar new school routines, delays in covering specific topics, being overwhelmed with schoolwork, frustration (developing mental health issues), and adapting to a new normal life. These findings concurred with the literature, which indicated that several reasons were associated with poor performance, including mostly the fear that had stricken many people because of the outbreak of the novel virus (Dube, 2020; David, Pellini, Jordan, & Phillips, 2020). This virus affected not only learners' academics but also their socioeconomic lives as their parents and guardians lost their jobs, loved ones got infected by the virus, and some even lost their lives. It is apparent from the collected data that developing mental health issues was inevitable for these rural learners, thereby affecting their overall wellbeing. This is also supported by the studies that indicated that rural areas seem to battle many factors that work against their development, including unemployment, underdevelopment, poverty, segregation, and minimal political power (Witte & Sheridan, 2011; Msila, 2012; Maringe, Masinire & Nkambule, 2015). The results indicated that the

learners' wellbeing was affected in the COVID-19 era as some lost their loved ones. This was consistent with previous studies showing that the death of a child's parent is a strong predictor of poor schooling outcomes (Rees & Dinisman, 2015). They further argued that orphans were significantly less likely to be enrolled in school and tended to complete fewer years of schooling than children whose parents were alive. The CDC (2020) suggested that higher COVID-19 morbidity and mortality rates among minority and low socioeconomic status populations have magnified stress and mental health risks in these groups.

Furthermore, many families face economic insecurity as unemployment rates increase. People residing in rural settings are already experiencing financial stress, which the economic downturn may further impact. These disturbances could negatively affect adolescent mental health, particularly among disadvantaged populations.

Literature reflected on the several effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on learner wellbeing. Dube (2020) posits that rural school learners face unprecedented challenges, including harsh contextual factors, yet COVID-19 exacerbated the daily difficulties that these learners must deal with. As stated above, most of them did not fare well academically. The findings revealed that the pandemic severely affected rural learners in almost every aspect of their lives. This is due mainly to some of the strategies implemented by the Department of Basic Education (2020), including social distancing, which compelled learners to own some digital devices to continue schooling at home.

Given that most rural areas are plagued with the abovementioned challenges, many learners faced yet another challenge that negatively impacted their lives. Most concurred that they were negatively affected psychologically, academically, and socially. Regarding the psychological effects, all participants agreed that the school provided no psychological support to ensure they kept up with schoolwork at home or counselled them for any difficulties they might have faced during the lockdown or when the infection rates were still high.

Consequently, some learners developed serious mental health issues like anxiety, depression, and stress. According to David, et al. (2020), this novel virus widened the gap between the haves and have-nots, i.e., the rich and the poor. Learners in more privileged settings continued with schooling reasonably. Yet, in rural contexts, many people who are the parents or guardians of the poor learners work the crop fields, sell food at the roadside, and are house helpers who lost their jobs as their jobs are often not permanent. Due to unstable health infrastructure and services, many learners became orphans unexpectedly, yet no help was offered to ease their pain (Higbee, Nava, Kwong, Dodd, & Granell, 2021). The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic that the teachers identified were the new normal the learners suddenly faced. Another impact they endured was that they could no longer benefit from the help offered by the teachers and other assistance they usually got during weekends and school holidays, as social distancing had to be observed and maintained. Unlike the learners from advantaged schools, the learners in rural areas had to adjust to alternate school attendance to observe social distancing as there are few schools and many learners, leading to overcrowding of classes (Quyen & Khairani, 2017; Gross, 2015).

VII. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the effects of COVID-19 on learner wellbeing in a rural school. To achieve its aim, the study posed questions on the challenges the learners encountered during COVID-19. The researcher used qualitative phenomenology to realize the study's objectives, with eight purposively selected participants: six learners and two teachers from one rural high school. In-depth interviews were used to generate data, which was qualitatively analysed through thematic analysis. The findings demonstrated that learners encountered many challenges in the context of COVID-19. The learners indicated that their entire wellbeing was badly affected because of the outbreak of COVID-19,

which culminated in many restrictions and mandated a new way of life. Many people were not ready for the new way of life and thus experienced enduring negative effects on their wellbeing. The study concluded with recommendations that schools in rural contexts should be afforded the same opportunities as schools in towns and cities to close the gap between the haves and have-nots. The researcher believes that if every learner could be given an equal chance as anyone, regardless of their social, economic, and geographic status, the learners in rural areas would be able to show their capabilities and maximize their chance to change their living conditions.

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