



Exploring factors triggering mental health issues among adolescent learners at a rural school in the Thabo Mofutsanyana district

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Abstract—It is difficult for an individual to understand mental health issues and their triggers. Mental health affects an individual before birth, in early childhood, in the adolescent stage, and even in adulthood. This study used a qualitative approach through an interpretive paradigm. It used a phenomenological design. Eight participants were purposively and conveniently selected, and they were teachers at a rural school in the Thabo Mofutsanyane district, Free State Province, South Africa. It employed semi-structured interviews as instruments for data collection. It used a narrative analysis to analyse data. This study found that multiple interrelated factors, including home dynamics, teacher behaviour, social violence, trauma, substance abuse, and cultural discrimination, play a critical role in shaping learners' mental health in rural areas. Interventions must be multifaceted and sensitive to these contextual realities.

Keywords: Adolescent learners, Mental health issues, Rural school

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I. INTRODUCTION

RESEARCH has shown that 10%-20% of adolescents experience mental health issues that are left untreated and undiagnosed (Jain & Nebhinani, 2019). The common mental health issues that adolescent learners experience are depression and anxiety. Jain and Nebhinani (2019) support the above statement by saying that school-going children are more vulnerable to depression and anxiety due to the lack of knowledge about mental health education. Granrud (2019) has illustrated that mental health issues appear in two forms, which are the internal form and the external form. Behavioural disorders, substance abuse disorders, and eating disorders, etc, characterise the external form of mental health. Office of the Surgeon General (OSG) (2019) subsequently reported that adolescents have a high rate of suicidal attempts, with 36%. Suicide is one of the forms in which mental health issues present themselves in an internal form. There is a district in the Free State called Thabo Mofutsanyane, which has a high number of adolescent learners who are affected by mental health issues. The parents of the learners from this part of the Free do not have sufficient knowledge of mental health and its issues. Their only experience is that their children behave surprisingly from 12 to 19. For instance, the children become disobedient, they use drugs and alcohol, and even engage in unsafe sexual activities that lead to teenage pregnancy. Since mental health is not taken seriously in rural areas, they do not know what causes this unacceptable behaviour of their children and how they can help them.

Stubbing et al (2023) have mentioned that before intervention can occur, there should be a clear understanding of what mental health is and what is causing its issues. This study mainly focuses on the factors that trigger mental health issues, so that people from rural communities get a clear understanding of what mental health issues are. Black illiterate people dominate the rural communities of the Thabo Mofutsanyane district. OSG (2021) has shown that the suicide rates among black children are higher than those of white children. The main

problem in these rural communities is that parents are stigmatised when it comes to mental health issues, and they are not aware that it is one of the main issues that is rapidly growing among adolescent children. The main issue is that mental health is regarded as the least essential issue in the black society, and there is still a lot of stigmatisations about it. The research should be conducted regarding mental health, as adolescent learners from this community are negatively affected by the lack of knowledge and ignorance that people have when it comes to mental health. The South African education system is designed in a way that it does not teach learners about mental health and human psychological issues. There are no policies that are designed to prioritise the mental health of learners. Stubbing et al (2023) have elaborated that if mental health issues are not treated in the adolescent stage, the children grow up with that issue untreated up until they become adults. The parents of the learners must also be taught about mental health education. The communities should be taught about this issue and its intervention strategies. The annual budget should also be put into place for mental health, as it not only affects adolescent learners, but the entire community is affected by mental health issues.

II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Mental health is a very complex topic. Granrud (2019) elaborates that mental health should be regarded as the umbrella where there are other complex terminologies such as mental disorder, mental disease, mental illness, and mental distress. As a result of the statement mentioned above, it is difficult for an individual to understand mental health issues and their triggers. Mental health affects individuals before birth, early childhood, adolescence, and even adulthood (Stubbing et al., 2023). For that reason, every individual must learn about mental health issues, as they affect every human being in the world. We live in a digital world where technology has taken control of most life forms. OSG (2021) explained that social media is one of the most contributing factors to adolescent mental health as it affects their self-confidence and self-esteem by telling them that they are not good-looking, smart, popular, or rich. Young people, especially adolescents, are more affected by

mental health issues as they are the ones who are more reliant on technology and social media. Stubbing et al. (2023) emphasise that priority should be given to improving youth's mental health to face the challenges of their world. Thabo Mofutsanyane is regarded as one of the most academically performing districts in the Free State province.

In the same way, there are many expectations from parents and teachers concerning the learners' academic performance. Depression and stress are the most common problems among school-going children. In addition, depression causes behavioural disorders and substance abuse disorders (Jain & Nebhinani, 2019). However, the mental health issues must be addressed in our schools because learners who have mental health problems are likely to drop out of school or develop learning disorders (Granrud, 2019). Granrud (2019) further explains that the school is where mental health problems are identified through the learners' behaviour and academic performance. Teachers, learners, and parents must be taught about factors that trigger mental health for the benefit of the learners under the Basic Department of Education, especially in the rural areas of the Thabo Mofutsanyane district. The school's SGB should create a policy that prioritise the mental health of all the stakeholders in our rural schools.

III. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

According to OSG (2021), there are biological and environmental factors that contribute to the mental health challenges of adolescent children, which are family, individual, community environment, and society. Based on this, I am inclined to believe that the study benefits all community members. Everyone learns from this study of the factors that affect the mental health of a human being. However, different people are going to benefit in various ways. People whose mental health problems are triggered find ways to treat them and to learn to live with their mental disabilities. In addition, the study encourages them to seek psychosocial support by attending therapy sessions and engaging in support groups that help people deal with their mental health issues. People who are not yet triggered by mental health issues find possible ways to prevent them. For example, mental health is put as the main agenda in the communities by promoting mental health awareness campaigns and teaching them about the intervention strategies they can use to support individuals with mental health challenges. Education professionals, such as teachers and district officials, also benefit from this study. Granrud (2019) mentioned that the school is one of the social spaces for adolescents, which provides the teachers with possible ways of supporting the learners with mental health issues. The teachers also support their colleagues who are affected by this problem. The study motivates district officials to get professionals who train and teach learners and teachers about their mental health. Granrud (2019) has shown that the heavy load of schoolwork is associated with mental health problems in adolescents. The study helps them with the coping mechanisms of working under pressure without triggering their mental health issues. The study is helpful to the school-based support team (SBST) to identify possible ways to help and support learners with learning disability to deal with emotional challenges, such as jealousy of other academically performing learners, and the urge to give up at school since they are not doing well academically.

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

Teacher experiences dealing with adolescent learners with mental and behavioural health needs at schools

Masedi et al. (2023) have mentioned that behavioural disability is a serious problem in high school learners both nationally and internationally. There is a close relationship between mental health and the behavioural health of adolescent learners in rural high schools. Schools are the social space for identifying mental and behavioural health issues (Granrud, 2019). OSG (2021) made an essential point by agreeing with the above scholar that schools have an important role in dealing with the learners' mental and behavioural issues. The statement

means that the teachers are the ones who are responsible for catering to the mental and behavioural health of their learners. Masedi et al. (2023) have shown that 12.2% of high school teachers have experienced violence, such as fights with their learners, because of their mental and behavioural difficulties. The scholar mentioned above has further explained that the teachers are no longer productive in their workplace as they work with disrespectful learners, whom the South African education system protects even when they have violated some school policies. The teacher experiences frustration and burns out because of the unrealistic expectations placed on them when dealing with the learner's mental and behavioural difficulties. Caldwell (2019) has shown that teachers are expected to give learners basic counselling when they have problems, which overwhelms them since they are not trained as counsellors. The teachers in the rural high schools are faced with a lot of confusion and struggle about their work as they have to offer professional counselling to the learners with behavioural disorders. There is a lack of psychological services in those areas. Dey et al. (2022) have portrayed that the teachers struggle to balance offering support to the learners and dealing with the consequences of being close to them. For example, the male teacher can find it more difficult to counsel the female learner than the male teacher, as they might be easily accused of having a romantic relationship with that specific learner. Therefore, teachers must be trained in basic counselling skills and cater to their mental health to support their learners when needed.

Sources of mental and behavioural health issues among adolescents' learners in schools

The most common mental health issues adolescent learners experience are depression and anxiety (Granrud, 2019). Jain and Nebhinani (2019) agreed with the statement of the above scholar. Further, they explained that depression and anxiety are characterised by behavioural patterns such as suicidality, substance abuse, and unhealthy sexual behaviours. The male learners are known to use substance abuse, which leads them to drop out of school, and the female learners engage in unhealthy sexual behaviours, which leads to them becoming pregnant and dropping out of school (Granrud, 2019). These unhealthy behaviours are a clear indication that the learners have mental health issues, which have an impact on their behaviours. Stubbing et al (2023) have indicated that early life influences, the adolescent learner has support, and the difficulties they experience when they grow up are the main sources affecting their mental and behavioural health. The biological and environmental factors greatly influence the learners' thinking and behavioural patterns (OSG, 2021). The scholar further explains that family issues, such as the divorce of the parents, do have an impact on the learner's behaviour and their mental health. Community conditions such as lack of access to water and loadshedding impact the learner's mental health. It is stressful for them to do homework without electricity and to go to neighbouring communities to fetch water, as it is time-consuming and expensive. Jain and Nebhinani (2019) have shown that the stigma that teachers and parents have on the mental and behavioural health of learners can be one of the sources for these psychological problems. The rural people still believe in craziness and witchcraft, and mental health education has not been taught to the people and the children in those areas. For example, suppose a person who lives in rural areas attends psychological services such as counselling sessions. In that case, they are regarded as weak and crazy, and for that reason, it gets difficult for an individual to address their mental health issues, and most of them remain untreated. This behaviour makes it a culture for adolescents that being strong in their communities means internalising their problems without diagnosing and addressing them.

Enhancing adolescent learners' mental and behavioural health care in schools

Stubbing et al. (2023) support that mental and behavioural health issues should be clearly understood before intervention occurs. Intervention strategies promote the learners' daily lives and protect their holistic well-being as young people. One of the ways to enhance

adolescent mental and behavioural health is to have safe and supportive relationships (Granrud, 2019). The scholar further explains that the relations that can improve learners' mental and behavioural well-being are families, peer groups, and schools. With the schools, the teachers are one's expected to support the learners with their problems. The mental health education should be promoted and given importance in the rural communities (OSG, 2021). To elaborate on the previous statement, it means that all the community members in the rural areas should be taught about mental health education and intervention strategies to help adolescents overcome the issues they are experiencing in life. It is important that the people in the rural areas are offered psychosocial services, and they are encouraged to attend therapy sessions and to engage in support groups when diagnosed with mental health issues. OSG (2021) promotes active family communication for healthy psychological well-being. The scholar encourages parents to have time with their children and create a safe space to talk about life problems with their children, as he has portrayed that the loneliness that adolescents experience has a huge impact on their mental and behavioural health. Granrud (2019) has shown that policies should prioritize students' mental health in schools. The scholar further explained that a budget should be allocated to care for the learner's mental and behavioural health. In addition, I believe that each high school in rural areas should have a school psychologist to support teachers and learners' mental health. The learners can also be encouraged to actively participate in sports, as it is believed that sports need discipline and commitment, and these can help the mental and behavioural well-being of learners, especially in rural communities.

V. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Resilience theory

Background to the theory

Dr Norman Garmezy was a clinical psychologist who pioneered research on resilience. Resilience is maintaining competent functioning in major life situations (Shean, 2015). Bertsia and Poulou (2023) further explain it as self-righting tendencies. Norman Garmezy founded the project competence focusing on children at risk. Shean (2015) has shown that the research was conducted in the United States of America at the University of Minnesota. The research was initially focused on schizophrenia. Secondly, it focused on mental illnesses, and he lastly shifted his research to stress, resistance, and competence (Shean, 2015). The competence project was based on two groups. It was based on two groups of children of the same age. It was based on children with mothers with schizophrenia and those with mothers without schizophrenia (Shean, 2015). The research took place in the late 60s, and the first research was published in 1973.

Objectives and assumptions of the theory

The basic assumption of this theory is that resilience helps people to overcome hardships in life. According to Shean (2015), resilience is assumed based on three factors. Firstly, it is the individual factor. The power a person has when they meet challenges in life, and how they survive under those circumstances. Secondly, it is the family factor. This is the motivation and power given to a person with problems by people close to that person to keep on surviving and living under those stressful circumstances. Lastly, it is the support factors. This is the support that is found outside of the family. For example, they can get support from the church and a psychologist. The objective of the theory is for an individual to bounce back to a normal life after being in a stressful situation. The objective means that an individual must be able to adapt to a new life condition after a stressful situation.

Relevance to the study

This theory is chosen because it is relevant to the study as it focuses on overcoming challenges that negatively impact high school learners' mental and behavioural health. This theory gives the teachers the emotional strength to cope with the trauma that they experience when meeting learners who have behavioural and mental health issues. The mental health and behavioural health of the learners are impacted by

social issues such as substance abuse and poverty. The theory helps them survive and motivates them to succeed academically despite life's challenges. It also allows the parents to be resilient, as they also stress the mental health and behavioural health of their children, as the behaviours they portray at school are more likely to be portrayed at home as well.

VI. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This study determines the factors triggering mental health issues among adolescent learners at a rural school.

VII. METHODS

Research approach

This study adopted a qualitative approach, which studied human experiences about others or an individual self through interviews, observations, field notes, and written and visual materials (Xiong, 2022). This approach is advantageous as it helps participants describe their feelings, opinions, and experiences in detail, and the meaning of their actions can be interpreted easily. It provides the researcher with the specific data as it relies more on the truth and the reality of the events and the participants' perceptions. Secondly, it indicates how meaning is shaped throughout the culture, which cannot be achieved by numbers as is done in the quantitative approach. The qualitative approach is essential because it explains more complex things for other people to understand and does not have a specific formula to follow. This means it allows the researcher to learn new things based on other people's experiences and perceptions. In addition, one can say it is a flexible way of receiving participant data.

Thus, Xiong (2022) highlighted its disadvantages as it is a complex approach, which is time-consuming to interpret and analyse data. It limits the researchers' expectations, which sometimes are affected by their personal experiences and knowledge of those phenomena. In addition, the researcher should present a detailed description of the data collected from the participants, regardless of whether they agree.

Research paradigm

This study used the interpretive paradigm. According to Maree (2019), the interpretive paradigm is constructivist because it emphasises the ability of the individual to construct meaning. This paradigm assumed that peoples' perceptions, ideas, thinking, and the meanings that are important to them can be understood through researching their cultures (Mokhtar & Pervin, 2022). Human life is assumed to be understood from within (Maree, 2019). This explains that it supports the qualitative approach chosen for this project, as it relies on the individual's personal experiences and constructions of the social world. Secondly, it assumes that human behaviour is affected by the knowledge that they have based on their social world. This simply means that it believes there are many explanations rather than a single explanation for each phenomenon. It further explains that explanations differ based on the time and place of the research. Lastly, it assumes that the human mind is the purposive source or origin of meaning. It still supports the qualitative approach because to understand complex phenomena, we must interact with others to get their insight based on the specific phenomenon.

It is disadvantageous as it is biased and only depends on the researchers' interpretation. Consequently, the data collected is not valid and reliable. It is criticised because of its subjective notions, beliefs, and perspectives of participants (Mokhtar & Pervin, 2022).

Research design

Maree (2019) defines phenomenological design as the focus on deepening human experiences and understanding people's meaning of those experiences. The main reason for choosing this research design is that the data collected from it is authentic and not easy to manipulate, as it is the stories or the information from individuals' personal experiences. The data collected is valid and reliable. Maree (2019) has portrayed that the advantage of the phenomenological design is that it

allows the researcher to interact with participants. It is flexible, allowing the participants to reveal data in their own words. Lastly, the narrative reporting of results is easy to understand. The disadvantages of phenomenological design are as follows: it is hard to find the researchers' bias, it is also hard to make copies of the study as they are, and it is time-consuming to interact with the data.

Data collection instruments

This study employed semi-structured interviews as instruments for data collection because they are an easy way of collecting data. Consequently, they are straightforward in collecting data, making it easier for participants to provide positive feedback during the interview. The researcher and the participants form a relationship as they bond during the interview, and both parties enjoy it. Lastly, it is chosen because it is one method of collecting data in qualitative studies. Bearman (2019) explains semi-structured interviews as a structured way of asking questions about the topics that the researcher asks the participants.

There are numerous advantages of semi-structured interviews. Maree (2019) explains that one of the advantages of semi-structured interviews is that they are transparent. This means that the participants can see the interview questions and not answer some questions they are uncomfortable answering if they do not feel like it. Secondly, the semi-structured interviews are reproducible, meaning someone else could use the same questions on the same topic to generate similar information. The disadvantage of the semi-structured interviews is that they are time-consuming. They require a lot of time to prepare for questions and the setup for doing the interviews. Bearman (2019) highlighted that they require some budget so the researcher can get the resources needed for the interview. For example, the researcher may need an audio or video camera to conduct the interview. The participants may not attend the interview and can withdraw at any time.

Participants

This study selected eight purposive and convenient male and female participants who were teachers at a rural school in the Thabo Mofutsanyane district, Free State province, South Africa. This study considered their teaching experiences, highest qualification, specialisations, home language, and residential areas.

Research site

This study was conducted at a rural high school in the Thabo Mofutsanyane district, South Africa, in the Free State province. The school is found in Qwa-Qwa, Mandela Park area. The school admits 14-year-old learners in grade 8, and it ends with grade 12 classes. It is composed of learners from the neighbourhood communities, such as Katlehong. It is not a boarding school as the teaching and learning times start at 08:00 and end at 15:00. The school operates from Monday to Friday, and grade 12 learners are expected to attend the extra classes on weekends.

Data analysis

Maree (2019) refers to narrative analysis as a variety of procedures for making meaning of the stories generated in research. This means the data is analysed by making stories based on the participants' experiences. There are several advantages of using narrative analysis to analyse data. The first one is that it acknowledges the constant change in learning. Secondly, there is a relationship between living the story, telling the story, retelling the story, and reliving the story. Lastly, it allows the researcher to explore the participant's personal and social life. The disadvantages of the narrative analysis are as follows: the main disadvantage is that it is easy for people to get into a misunderstanding, and when the misunderstanding occurs, the participants withdraw from the research. Secondly, the researcher depends on the participants' stories, and they have more power than the researcher. Lastly, the researcher should respect the participants' privacy and not discuss what they discussed with anyone without the participant's consent.

Ethical considerations

Ethics and morals are used as synonyms by many scholars. The rules, values, and guidelines determine an individual's actions. Nafsi (2022)

defines ethical considerations as concepts and beliefs that the researcher and the participants should uphold when conducting research. Maree (2019) has illustrated that three ethical principles are essential when formulating the ethical considerations: beneficence, respect, and justice. The researcher needs to set ethical rules that forbid nasty behaviour among individuals who participate in research. Similarly, they ensure the study's success, and the data collected is valid and reliable (Maree, 2019). In this study, the researcher obtained approval from the high school's principal, who requested that research be conducted there. The principal announced the letter to the teachers and learners interested in participating in the study.

The participants aged 14 to 18 were requested to provide a well-written informed assent. The researcher explained aspects such as the study goals, nature of the intervention, and the research language in simple language at their level. Secondly, the participants who are above the age of 18, such as the teachers, learners, school principal, and the district officials, were provided with consent forms by the researcher explaining aspects such as the goals of the research, nature of the intervention, and the language of the research in a language at their level. Thirdly, this study ensures that the identity and data collected from the participants are confidential and not made available to any unauthorised persons. Consequently, this study explains to the participants that they have the right to withdraw from the research at any time they wish to withdraw, and they are not forced to participate in the study even when they do not feel like continuing with it. The researcher was sensitive to the participants' well-being, especially their emotional well-being, as some participants are minors. After that, the researcher did not add or reduce any data provided by the participants. To show transparency, the researcher does not submit or publish anything before letting the participants read all the research data and get their permission to submit the data. First, last, the research has a common goal for all, as it benefits every community member. It teaches the learners to be aware of their mental health triggers. The teachers find ways to work and support the learners with mental health issues from this project, and lastly, the parents learn about mental health education. Lastly, this study ensures that participants who might be emotionally affected during this research were provided with counselling, especially the learners who were participants. The researcher works collaboratively with the social worker assigned to that school, just in case one of the participants needs psychosocial help.

VIII. RESULTS

Biographic results

Table 1: Biographic results

Participants	Gender	Age	Marital status	Highest qualifications	Language	Religion
Participant 1	Male	26	single	BEd degree	Sesotho	Christian
Participant 2	Female	28	Divorced	Postgraduate	Sesotho	Christian
Participant 3	Female	29	Single	Postgraduate	Setswana	Christian
Participant 4	Female	30	Single	Postgraduate	Sesotho	Christian
Participant 5	Male	33	Single	BEd degree	Sesotho	Christian
Participant 6	Male	27	Single	BEd degree	Sesotho	Christian
Participant 7	Female	51	Married	Teacher's College	Sesotho	Christian
Participant 8	Male	28	Single	BEd degree	Sesotho	Christian

The biographic results in Table 1 indicated that participant 1 was a male teacher aged 26. He is a single man with a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) degree. His home language is Sesotho, and he is a Christian. Participant 2 was a female teacher aged 28 years 28-years-old. She is a divorcee with postgraduate qualifications. Her home language is Sesotho, and she is a Christian. Participant 3 was a female teacher aged 29 years 29-years-old. She is a single lady with postgraduate qualifications. Her home language is Setswana, and she is a Christian. Participant 4 was a female teacher who was 30 years old. She is a single lady with postgraduate qualifications. Her home language is Sesotho, and she is a Christian. Participant 5 was a male teacher aged 33 years 33-

years-old. He is a single man with a B.Ed degree. His home language is Sesotho, and he is a Christian. Participant 6 was a male teacher aged 27 years 27-years-old. He is a single man with a B.Ed degree. His home language is Sesotho, and he is a Christian. Participant 7 was a female teacher aged 51 years 51-years-old. She is a married woman with a diploma from teachers' college. Her home language is Sesotho, and she is a Christian. Participant 8 was a male teacher aged 28 years 28-years-old. He is a single man with a B.Ed degree. His home language is Sesotho, and he is a Christian.

Narrative results

Factors triggering mental health issues among adolescent learners at your school

Home background

The results showed that the home background could be one of the contributing factors that trigger's mental health among high school adolescent learners in rural areas. Participant 1 mentioned that the domestic violence that is happening within their families contributes to their mental health. Participant 3 noted that the learners are neglected by their parents, resulting in them being raised by their parents and not receiving parental love. Participant 4 mentioned that in these learner's parents are into substance abuse, and they are unemployed, and they cannot take care of the needs of their children. Participants mentioned that the learners are neglected by their parents, and there is a lack of parental involvement in their upbringing.

"...Child neglect is one of the triggers of mental health because you get to find that the learners are dirty and most of them are coming to school without having breakfast..." (Participant 6).

This means that many different sub-factors fall under home background, which trigger the learner's mental health issues. It could be the domestic violence between parents, child neglect, the substance abuse of parents, and parents being unemployed, which results in them going to other provinces to look for employment, and children being on their own at home.

Teachers' attitudes toward learners

The results showed that the teacher's attitude towards learners could trigger their mental health issues. When the teachers abuse their power by not showing respect to the learners when communicating with them, reprimanding and even humiliating them, which triggers aggressive behaviour within them, the learners seem like disrespectful individuals under those circumstances.

"...one of the factors that triggers the mental health of adolescent learners is the teacher's attitude towards them; the lack of respect that teachers portray to these young people triggers aggressive behaviour within them. The abuse of power from teachers to learners can trigger their mental health issues..." (Participant 1).

This shows that it is essential that teachers portray respectful behaviour towards learners, as learners are not the same. They have different defensive mechanisms when being attacked, so teachers must be role models of respective behaviour in the classroom so that learners can follow that behaviour.

Domestic violence

The results showed that domestic violence could be a factor that triggers mental health issues among adolescent learners at your school. Participants mentioned that parents who physically fight at home and affect the learners negatively end up doing the same to their peers or teachers. The abstract form of one participant said this.

"... the family background also contributes to the learner's mental health as most of them are from the rural areas where there is a lot of domestic violence in their communities, especially from the families they come from..." (Participant 1).

This means that the rural areas have a high rate of domestic violence happening within their homes. The parents are unaware of this because people in rural areas do not know how to resolve their family issues as parents when they are living with children.

Substance abuse

The results showed that substance abuse is one of the factors that can

trigger a learner's mental health. The most common substances that learners use are alcohol, cigarettes, and dagga. Participant 1 explained that learners use substances to fit into social groups. The excerpt of one participant illustrates this.

"...the use of substances which impacts their thinking and decision-making in their brains..." (Participant 5).

This means that substance abuse affects the mental health of adolescent learners, and that is the reason why learners who use substances have poor academic performance. They do not have good school attendance and are always tired in the classroom.

Past traumatic events

The results showed that past traumatic events could leave emotional scars on an adolescent learner. In addition, this can trigger mental health issues in the learner. Participant 1 has shown that some of these learners lose their parents while still in school. The passing of their parents triggers their mental health. Participant 8 has shown that there is one learner who lost her home through fire, and this traumatic event triggered some mental health issues in him as the learner had to stay in a children's home away from his parents.

"...One of his learners went through a traumatic experience where his household was set alight by their neighbour, and that family had nowhere to live, and they lost everything that they had as a family. The teacher realised that this event had triggered some mental health issues, such as stress and anxiety, in this learner. The learner was not coping at school as he was now staying at one of the children's homes around Qwa-Qwa without his parents..." (Participant 8).

This means that some of the life problems that the learners come across in life have a huge contribution to their mental health issues. The learning areas taught in the school, such as life skills and life orientation, are the solutions as they give learners problem management skills.

Culture

The results showed that different cultural groups in a single school setting can trigger a person's mental health. In South Africa, there are various cultural groups and different religious practices. Some people still do not understand and are unwilling to understand other people's culture. One participant has shown that a lack of understanding of other people's cultures in a school can trigger a person's mental health.

"...there is a learner who practices and believes in traditional African customs in the school. Other learners discriminated against the learner and most of the teachers because of her religious practices..." (Participant 7).

This means there is still discrimination against learners because of their religious and cultural practices. This lack of understanding causes conflicts among people, and learners who are mainly discriminated against are the ones who are experiencing mental health issues.

IX. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirm that the home background is a significant factor in learners' mental health. Many learners reported being raised by grandparents due to parental neglect, which aligns with current evidence indicating that parental absence and emotional unavailability are key contributors to emotional and behavioural challenges in children (Durevall et al., 2024). Where parents are present, they are often emotionally abusive or engaged in substance abuse, which further deteriorates the home climate. Jacobs and Slabbert (2019) highlighted that children from homes where alcohol and drug abuse are prevalent often experience neglect, verbal abuse, and emotional trauma, leading to anxiety and depression. Another finding is that teachers' attitudes play a critical role in either aggravating or buffering learners' mental health. Learners coming from authoritarian or abusive homes are more sensitive to how they are treated at school. When teachers replicate the power dynamics learners experience at home through yelling, disrespect, or punitive discipline, it can retraumatise the learners, often resulting in aggressive or withdrawn behaviours. Soldaat (2019) found that negative teacher-learner interactions can worsen mental health symptoms, particularly in learners from vulnerable backgrounds.

Domestic violence is also on the rise in rural areas, and learners are frequently exposed to interparental conflict. Scholars reported that witnessing such violence contributes to a cycle of emotional dysregulation and school-based aggression (Flannery et al., 2004; UNICEF South Africa, 2023). These children often replicate what they see at home by fighting with peers or resisting authority figures at school.

Substance abuse among learners is a growing concern. This study identified alcohol, dagga, and cigarettes as the most abused substances, consistent with data from Mohale and Mokwena (2020), which links adolescent substance use with poor school attendance, low participation, and declining academic performance. Substance use also contributes to emotional numbing and poor impulse control, exacerbating existing mental health conditions.

Past traumatic experiences, such as the loss of parents, fires destroying homes, or displacement to children's homes, were also found to be major triggers of mental health issues. These findings align with research by van der Westhuizen and Pretorius (2022), which showed that bereavement, sudden loss, and forced relocation create sustained anxiety and depressive symptoms in adolescents, especially when support systems are weak or absent.

Finally, cultural alienation and discrimination emerged as significant stressors. Learners from minority cultural groups often experience exclusion, stereotyping, and bullying, which leads to internalised shame and social withdrawal. According to Dlamini and Mahlangu (2023), a lack of cultural inclusion in rural schools contributes to identity confusion and psychological distress among learners.

X. CONCLUSION

This study revealed that numerous factors affect the mental health of adolescent learners who are in high school and rural areas. These triggers include home backgrounds, teachers' attitudes towards learners, domestic violence, substance abuse by learners, past traumatic events, and culture. These triggers hurt the learner's mental health. However, the participants who are teachers have recommended strategies to confront these mental health issues. These include implementing mental health education in schools, having mindfulness meditation practice, having access to a psychologist at school, and ensuring that the learners are actively involved in sports. Rural communities are sidelined by the government and the Department of Education in terms of providing them with enough education on mental health. Our people in the rural communities are still stigmatised, as the mental health issues only affect people from the urban areas, without realising that they affect every individual in the community. The government should invest more in mental health because anxiety and depression are the most common mental health issues that are experienced by learners in schools. The purpose of this section is to recommend strategies that the government can take to educate and minimise the triggers of mental health issues in rural communities. The teachers felt that the government should invest more in teaching learners and teachers about mental health education in schools, as we are all affected by it. The teachers recommended that there should be a mindfulness practice period in their school, as it is believed that mindfulness meditation can reduce the strong forces of anxiety and depression in a human being. The teachers recommended that there should be an accessible school psychologist who can be used to refer learners, because they are the ones who are counselling these learners with mental health issues without having proper training to do that. The teachers recommended that the learners actively participate in sports, as they believe that sports can be one of the strategies to deal with or reduce mental health issues in adolescent learners.

XI. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest in this study.

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