




Exploring adolescent learners' mental and behavioural health challenges at a rural high school: Behavioural and support needs

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Abstract— Adolescent learners' mental and behavioural health issues have been the primary concern over the past few years, specifically in rural high schools that are sometimes referred to as disadvantaged schools due to a lack of infrastructure, study materials, teaching staff, and services at large. This study explored adolescent learners' mental and behavioural health issues and their behavioural and support needs in a rural high school setting. It adopted a qualitative approach and interpretive paradigm. Eight participants were purposively selected at a rural school. This study used a semi-structured interview instrument to collect data. Narrative results revealed that adolescent learners seek help for their mental and behavioural health needs by sharing with their educators in school and consulting with the representative council of learners. At the same time, some prefer to talk with their peers because they feel comfortable and free to share their difficulties with them. It is essential to consider that rural schools need support systems, which help educators and learners to cater to their mental and behavioural health issues.

Keywords: Adolescent learners, Behavioural and support needs, Mental and behavioural health challenges, Rural high school

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I. INTRODUCTION

ADOLESCENTS with mental and behavioural health issues in rural high schools tend to be problematic not only to their peers but also to their educators, community, and overall academic performance. Learners with mental health issues are more likely to bully other learners. According to Qwabe et al. (2022), ill-discipline, including bullying in schools, interrupts the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process and puts school safety in question. Victims of bullying in rural high schools are being affected academically and are associated with the action of dropping out of school. Educators are also bullied by adolescents with mental health issues, and Adewusi (2021) mentioned that this action has been proven to make teaching a high-risk occupation/profession in South Africa. Some educators are even afraid to reprimand a certain unwanted behaviour from learners, only because they fear for their well-being. As it was mentioned, adolescents with mental health issues not only distract the process of schooling in the school premises, but they also cause havoc in the community in the form of gangsterism and going around vandalising small businesses and mugging people in the street.

In most cases, rural high schools are not equipped with quality professional educators who can point out and help learners with their mental health issues that lead to unwanted behaviours on school premises. According to Dunge (2022), high schools in rural areas lack proper training to provide educators with enough skills and intelligence to point out and do justice in giving the affected learners support and provide them with coping mechanisms. It is also ideal to consider that the school alone cannot help and support adolescents with mental and behavioural health issues; all education stakeholders need to intervene and play their part to ensure improved quality of education and safety in school. Learners must see the need for themselves to evolve and become obedient adolescents who behave accordingly, like normal

human beings. Educators must know that this is a process, not an overnight change. Eventually, the study is all about the educational barriers that come.

II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

In rural areas, children often face problems that they sometimes cannot find a proper and productive way to deal with. It might be because they lack the necessary skills, mechanics, and knowledge to tackle and cope with encountered problems. As a result, they misbehave. In this study, adolescent learners in a rural high school setting in the Thabo Mofutsanyana district in Free State province seek help with their mental and behavioural health issues. Adolescent learners at rural high schools seek help because they seem to struggle to cope with the numerous situations they encounter in their educational journey. They fail to think critically and devise calculated solutions and techniques to deal with problems they encounter in their schools. Some learners behave unacceptably on school premises and in the community because they struggle psychologically to maintain their best behaviours. These adolescents misbehave and make decisions that ruin their lives, destroy their educational journey, and jeopardise their future. Hence, learners in such circumstances in a rural school setting seek help to better deal with unfavourable situations and get help to try and eliminate/reduce difficulties they are going through daily.

Mental and behavioural health issues are a concern for adolescent learners at rural high schools in the Thabo Mofutsanyana district, costing these learners their promising future. They drop out of school because they see no importance in attending. If they do not drop out, they become problematic in such a manner that they cause destruction everywhere in the school yards, only because they are no longer thinking clearly. All in all, adolescent learners in rural high school settings with mental and behavioural health issues disrupt the process of teaching and learning in the South African curriculum, which puts the quality of education in question in the province. Therefore, the

research explores the causes and effects of inappropriate behaviours in adolescent learners at rural high schools in the Thabo Mofutsanyana district, Free State, South Africa, and develops solutions to help secure their future, and most importantly, the quality of education.

III. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Learners' mental health is essential to ensure a smooth academic or educational journey. Adolescent learners who are psychologically healthy can think critically and come up with calculated decisions and solutions. They are in a favourable mental state that boosts their academic and school performance. They behave outstandingly, avoiding unhealthy arguments and unnecessary conflicts with their peers and educators. As a result, it is crucial to conduct a study that determines adolescent learners' challenges in mental health and behavioural needs and finds solutions to enhance their psychological wellness.

Rural high school adolescent learners go through many situations that potentially disturb them psychologically and lead to unwanted behaviours. The majority of them are from a disadvantaged background where they do not even get enough to eat, and some are from homes where parents are always drunk and fight every little time they get. Chances are slim for learners who go through such experiences to behave accordingly and show a sense of mental wellness. They always find themselves in trouble with their educators because they specialise in destroying the teaching and learning process. Other learners see themselves as victims of bullying and assault because of those learners who are mentally disturbed. All of these can affect the overall school performance and put safety in question; hence, conducting research that responds to learners' complications and improves their thinking abilities is essential.

The study brings about change if it can be implemented and practiced at rural high schools in the Thabo-Mofutsanyana district. Adolescent learners with mental and behavioural health issues are equipped with the necessary techniques to deal with challenging situations without reacting in a manner that is not acceptable in school premises. Learners who find themselves as victims of bullying from those who do not think clearly before they act should be free and able to enjoy schooling without having to think of the bullying perpetrators. Educators enjoy teaching learners who are more determined and motivated to be educated and mentally ready to try and learn. The school premises should be safe for learners and educators because learners' behavioural and psychological needs are met. The school performance improves as learners are mentally stable and hungry to succeed. Therefore, the study was crucial as it brought about change for learners with mental and behavioural issues, and the quality of education provided to all.

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

Signs of mental and behavioural health issues

There are different signs of mental and behavioural health issues among learners, and the first step as a qualified educator is to be able to recognise and single out those who need help. Firstly, Wallén et al. (2021) pointed out that learners who isolate themselves from others may be suffering from emotional issues such as depression and anxiety. It is unusual for an adolescent learner in high school not to interact with others. During this stage, learners form social relationships as part of development and enjoy mates' company as much as possible. Secondly, learners may sometimes struggle to remember the information or content that the educator taught. When this happens, the learner is more likely to struggle with memory issues. Thirdly, the safety of learners is always the primary concern. When a learner steals and assaults others in the classroom, it raises questions about that learner's mental health. Students grow up in different households or communities. Suppose they witness the behaviours of physical abuse and assault during their development. In that case, they are likely to adopt that behaviour from their peers, thinking it is the right way to communicate. In addition,

Hughes et al. (2023) argued that suicidal comments and social media posts from learners seemed to depress others as they end up not sure whether they are joking or not. Adolescent learners who always make suicidal comments whenever things are not going well in their lives end up losing it and try to commit suicide. These signs indicate if adolescent learners are seeking help for their mental and behavioural health issues.

Causes of mental and behavioural health issues

Adolescent learners in rural high schools do not misbehave in school premises without any reason; many life experiences trigger them to show unwanted behaviours even in the community. Rural high schools are primarily located in disadvantaged areas with low socioeconomic status and a lack of education. Poverty in such areas contributes to a high crime rate in the community and schoolyards. Learners who come from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to bully others and take their pocket money to try to cover their own basic needs. These behaviours are not tolerated in the context of education. Struggling to meet daily expenses may increase feelings of hopelessness and decrease learners' self-esteem; therefore, poverty increases the vulnerability to develop substance abuse disorders (St. Joseph Institute, 2018). It is stressful for the adolescent learners who live in homes where poverty dominates, and this might cause uncalculated decisions to arise in learners, such as abusing substances in the community and the school yards. Negative peer pressure can also lead to misbehaviour in rural high schools and cause severe consequences. According to Liu (2022), peer pressure in rural high schools can lead to anxiety and emotional pressure, and it can also behaviours such as participation in social activities, misconduct, and obedience to peer norms. The need to fit in a certain peer group to avoid being bullied or wanting to be superior to others can be dangerous among adolescent learners, because a learner might behave in a certain way, leading to expulsion. For example, a learner might decide to join a gang that is well known for bullying and end up unintentionally assaulting another learner badly, to the extent of facing a disciplinary hearing. As a result, poverty and negative peer pressure may cause inappropriate behaviours in rural high schools.

In rural communities, most adolescent learners are living with their grandparents, and this is another factor that might lead to inappropriate behaviour in schools. When children reach adolescence and attend high school, it is hard for grown grandparents to have control of their grandchildren; that is when they get out of hand and behave as they please. In such households, the supervision is no longer adequate, and children slowly lose focus on crucial aspects of daily life, like having to write homework daily. In their article, Das et al. (2023) found that inconsistent discipline and poor parental supervision negatively impacted emotional and behavioural problems in learners. It is ideal for adolescent learners to stay under adequate parental supervision, as this is a stage where they are more likely to be tempted by inappropriate social behaviours.

Lack of punishment for certain unwanted behaviours contributes significantly to rural high school adolescent learners. Since corporal punishment has been banned in South African schools, educators have found it difficult to control misbehaving learners in rural high schools. According to Cherry (2023), Skinner's behaviourism learning theory mentioned that school punishments are negative reinforcements that weaken a certain unwanted or unpleasant behaviour. Corporal punishment used to send a clear message to learners that certain behaviours are prohibited in school premises, and educators in rural high schools were not struggling much with factors such as bullying, substance abuse, and classroom destruction among learners. Therefore, inadequate punishment in high schools may lead adolescent learners astray.

Effects of mental and behavioural health issues

Adolescent learners in rural high schools are affected negatively by inappropriate and unwanted behaviours in the educational context. Firstly, victims of bullying go through mixed emotions and end up reacting in a way that they might regret in the future. Similarly, Wang et al. (2022) argued that bullying showed significant consequences on

student's educational experience, and learners end up avoiding school or having poor attendance. It is not a good experience for a learner to attend a place where he/she is exposed to bullying; hence, such learners are hesitant to participate. Poor attendance is sometimes the least of the problems compared to other decisions taken by the victims of bullying in rural high schools; some learners conclude that they even drop out early from school because they feel like schools are not a safe place for them. The moment learner's drop out, their future starts to be blurry since we live in a country that promotes education more than anything, and their lives are undecided. All of these happen because of the perpetrators who decided to bully their peers in schools and automatically destroy their future in the educational field. Therefore, bullying is one of the worst experiences a learner can be exposed to in rural high schools.

Wang et al. (2022) also mentioned that learners with mental and behavioural health issues are accompanied by an inability to concentrate during educational content. Concentration and adequate focus during the lesson are keys to academic excellence, as those who have acquired these characteristics perform well and get good grades. Inability to concentrate affects not only learner's performance but also the school pass rate and the quality of the teaching and learning process in the South African curriculum. As mentioned above, poverty increases the vulnerability to substance abuse disorders; it also affects learners' ability to receive quality education in school. It is disturbing for a high school learner to attend confidently without stationery such as a pen, pencil, or ruler. Not being able to afford educational resources and attending a disadvantaged school that fails to provide full resources can harm learners' performance. As a result, inability to concentrate and exposure to poverty are psychological and social issues that harm student performance in rural high schools.

Enhancement of learners' mental and behavioural health wellness

Learners' difficulties and barriers to learning in rural high schools must be reduced and resolved to maintain mental wellness. Inappropriate and unwanted behaviours must be eliminated for better high school experiences and improved academic performance among adolescent learners. According to Sagin et al. (2022), the school management team must practice inclusion and discussion where learners, parents, educators, and psychologists are invited to a forum devoted to bullying and other mental health disturbing factors and form a policy to address these factors and their impact on learners. In this way, learners are aware of the consequences they may face if they attempt to bully others; eventually, the rate of bullying in rural high schools decreases, and schoolyards are safe. Educators working in rural high schools must be provided with an opportunity to learn more about learners who live in households dominated by poverty. This gives educators relevant strategies and techniques to deal with something they have adequate information about. They can use different approaches both in the classroom and outside the classroom to accommodate and mentor their learners and lead them in the right direction, where they can deal with their diverse differences in a better way. In situations where adolescents live with their grandparents, neighbours should help with the supervision where needed, because it is a cultural norm that it takes a village to raise a child. Educators should incorporate movement and breaks during the lesson to help learners concentrate longer. Some learners cannot sit down and listen for an extended period; as a result, it is wise for an educator to implement breaks and talk about life experiences that do not concern the content of the day, so that they can listen for the whole period. This helps learners psychologically. Therefore, educators' different strategies to present content and academic support from the parents, neighbours, and peers can enhance adolescent learners' mental wellness in rural high schools.

V. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Resilience theory

Background to the study

The concept of resilience is complex because many researchers have

defined it uniquely, and according to van Breda (2018), resilience theory has its roots in the study of adversity and interest in how adverse life experiences harmfully impact people. Resilience theory explores how individuals, communities, and systems can adapt and thrive despite significant challenges. It emphasises the ability to bounce back from unfavourable situations, maintain functionality, and grow stronger through adversity. It refers to the ideas surrounding how people are affected by and adapt to challenging things like adversity, change, loss, and risk, and argues that it is not the nature of significant challenges that is most important, but how we, as individuals, deal with them. Lastly, resilience theory is the ability to rebound from unfavourable situations, strengthen, be resourceful, and be more powerful than before (Van Breda, 2018). People are sometimes exposed to feelings of fear and low self-esteem after they experience a painful or emotional situation. Still, in the context of resilience theory, people can stand on their feet again and strive for success no matter how bad the situation they have gone through. They come back stronger than before and more experienced this time.

Relevance to the study

Adolescents in rural high schools go through many painful and emotional situations that break them down to the point that they struggle to behave appropriately in both school premises and the community. Some adolescent learners fail to come back and live their normal lives full of potential and goals to achieve soon; in other words, they lose hope and never see a brighter direction for their lives, while some adolescent learners successfully bounce back and pick up their school journey where they left off. Being resilient does not mean individuals do not go through stress, anxiety, and depression. Still, it refers to the ability to go through all kinds of adversities, eventually find a breakthrough, and come back stronger than before. Hurley (2024) argued that resilience theory refers to the ideas evolving around how people are affected by and adapt to adversities such as loss, change, and risk. This theory allows me to explore how rural high school adolescent learners experience unforeseen circumstances and how they adapt to challenges they go through and eventually come back to their senses, strengthened and powerful. It allows me to witness the participants' experiences closely and how they adapt and deal with them in a specific period. Some adolescent students are equipped with skills and knowledge to deal with their breakdowns, and this theory provides me with an opportunity to witness learners utilising their skills to overcome diversity.

VI. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This study explores how adolescent learners seek help for their mental and behavioural health needs in a rural high school setting. It also determines their challenges in mental and behavioural health needs when seeking help in a rural high school setting.

VII. METHODS

Research approach

The study used a qualitative approach. According to Aspers and Corte (2019), the qualitative approach involves collecting various empirical materials, such as case studies, personal experiences, interviews, historical texts, etc., that describe routine and disadvantaged moments and meanings in individuals' daily lives. Eze and Ugwu (2023) mentioned that qualitative research is more concerned with feelings, ideas, or life experiences, and it is about gaining an accurate and deep understanding that can prove the hypothesis of the study and collect the information mostly using a narrative form. It is about the study's practical steps to gather credible information that leads to conclusions and new knowledge. The qualitative research approach consists of several research designs to allow the study to have many options while collecting, analysing, interpreting, and presenting data.

This approach is advantageous because it helps to observe the group culture and customs closely and clearly understand how adolescent

learners at rural high schools behave and interact with others in certain situations (Eze & Ugwu, 2023). Observing closely and learning more about learners' cultures and routines is advantageous. It further allows us to witness learners' experiences in their daily lives so that we can collect the data based on what we see rather than speculation. It is beneficial for its flexibility and allows for quickly adapting questions or changing any variable to enhance participants' responses if the insights are not met, as well as finding data/information that is accurate and credible easily. Therefore, this approach has limitations and disadvantages since it allows researchers to conduct several interviews with the participants, and it is a time-consuming and tiring process (Mwita, 2022).

Research paradigm

This study uses an interpretive paradigm. For Alharahsheh and Pius (2020), the interpretivist considers human experiences to create further depth in meanings, assuming that human beings cannot be explored similarly to physical phenomena. This means conclusions are subjected to improvement and enhancement through different experiences of different participants in a study; hence, the data need to be interpreted to get multiple results or realities. It is beneficial as it allows researchers to understand a specific context deeply. The interpretive paradigm also has limitations, as it provides for interviews with the participants, the data collected may be too much, making it hard for me to record. It can unintentionally be not very objective to the participants in a way that is not fair. This may happen when the researchers adjust questions to extract relevant information from my participants.

Research design

The study uses a phenomenological design, which is described as a qualitative research approach that seeks to explore the nature of things in the way people experience them (Good, 2023). This research design enables an understanding of experiences from the participants' point of view during the interviews. It further allows for setting aside biases and preconceived assumptions about young adolescent learners' experiences and feelings about a certain situation. It involves a small sample of participants using eight learners from a rural high school.

Data collection instrument

The study uses a semi-structured interview instrument to collect data. These interviews allow the participants to think critically and elaborate their responses instead of answering questions using 'yes' or 'no'. Its usage was essential in collecting data while conducting a study. This study interviewed learners from a rural high school. It allows for the collection of more information about the participants' experiences. The interactions with the participants enable me to grow as a researcher and improve my communication skills. These techniques are advantageous as they are flexible and offer an opportunity to revisit questions to draw relevant information from the participants. Thus, it can be disadvantageous as it is time-consuming to sit down with different participants, conduct open-ended interviews, and provide enough time for participants to share their experiences.

Participants

Eight participants were purposively and conveniently selected because they are easily accessible. This technique is cheap and straightforward to implement and usually requires less time to acquire than other sampling techniques. It allows me to identify and select participants based on my judgment that they can provide the best information to achieve study objectives. Its flexibility allows me to maintain a focused data collection approach and save time and costs. Four boys and four girls were adolescent learners at a rural school, Tsheseng village, in the Thabo Mofutsanyana district.

Research site

My study is based on a rural high school in Thabo Mofutsanyana district, located in a deep rural area. Learners are exposed to unfavorable schooling conditions and unfortunate backgrounds, making it difficult to excel and reach their full academic potential. The school is far from other learners, and they must wake up early to walk kilometers on dangerous-looking roads passing through the forest. This

is not even close to safety for every girl child walking that path every morning to make it to school. It is worse during thunderstorms and cold weather since the infrastructure is not in good condition. Therefore, the research site is not the best in catering to all learners' diverse needs.

Data analysis

The study uses narrative analysis to analyse all the collected data. Narrative analysis focuses on interpreting individual experiences and motivations by closely looking at the stories people tell in the study. According to Kaluza (2023), it allows the researcher to use first-person narrative to acquire and analyse data to understand how participants experience certain situations. It can let the researcher know how participants construct stories and narratives from their experiences. Using narrative analysis to analyse the collected data during my study is essential. It helps not only to focus on the words used during the interview but also allows me to compile data based on how the participants expressed themselves, what language they used to express their feelings, and the thoughts and motivations they experienced. It offers me the potential to analyse data creatively, reveal truthful information, and give me authority as a researcher to be the voice for the participants. However, diverse methods and analytic procedures used in narrative analysis can make it difficult to understand as a new researcher.

Ethical considerations

This obtained the permission and approval to conduct the study from the University of the Free State, the Free State Department of Education, and the school's principal, where the research sample was obtained. The study does not force anyone to participate, but participants must provide informed consent to participate in the study. In this way, participants can volunteer and take part willingly. Participants are not deceived in any way so that the collected data can be trustworthy, and they were informed that they can withdraw from the study at any time they feel uncomfortable. Finally, a written consent form reassures participants that their identity and names will be kept confidential.

VIII. RESULTS

Biographic results

Table 1: Biographic results

Participants	Age	Gender	Grade level	Home language	Religion
Participant 1	18	Male	12	Sesotho	Christian
Participant 2	19	Male	12	Sesotho	Christian
Participant 3	18	Female	12	Sesotho	Christian
Participant 4	18	Female	11	Sesotho	Christian
Participant 5	17	Female	11	Sesotho	Christian
Participant 6	17	Female	10	Sesotho	Christian
Participant 7	16	Male	10	Sesotho	Christian
Participant 8	16	Female	10	Sesotho	Christian

Seeking help for mental and behavioural health needs

In this study, it is crucial to determine how adolescent learners in a rural high school seek help for their mental and behavioural health needs in their respective educational setting. The extract of one participant elaborates on this.

"Sir, it is not easy to seek help for our mental and behavioural health needs in the school premises. I am saying this because it is difficult to find an educator we think is the right person to talk to during difficult situations. But it is best to talk to an educator I trust, as he/she can listen, talk, and provide solutions like an adult" (Participant 1).

Participant two explains:

"The productive way that usually works for me when seeking help for my mental and behavioural health is to communicate with my close friends in school and sometimes consult with the Representative Council of Learners (RCL)".

Participant three added that:

"Meneer, to seek help for sensitive aspects such as mental and behavioural health issues, we need to talk with people we feel comfortable with. So, sharing stories with my peers in the classroom helps a lot. Talking about our difficulties makes us realise that some face worse situations, and we encourage each other

that we get through such problems" (Participant 3).

Participant four mentioned that:

"My brother, in this school, every classroom has a class educator who I think is responsible for learners' needs. The best way to seek help in difficult situations is to be brave enough to approach the class-educator and tell him the problems that disturb our mental health" (Participant 3).

Participant five states:

"Sir, we grew up knowing that a way to better things is being asked from the elders who went through it. So, in this instance, it is better to have a conversation with educators or even the principal, because I believe they are experienced and can come up with better solutions to our different problems" (Participant 5).

Participant six says:

"Mister, I am not a person who simply talks and opens up to others about my difficulties. I can describe myself as an introvert. So, when facing rough situations, I take my Life Orientation textbook, read about how to deal with stress, and sometimes search for ideas online. In this way, I can enhance my mental well-being" (Participant 6).

Participant seven indicates:

"There is this one educator who is the school's soccer coach; he is like a parent to every team member. When I am mentally disturbed by certain unfavourable situations, I go to him after soccer practice and explain everything. He comforts and motivates me to conquer" (Participant 7).

Participant eight further explained:

"To be honest with you, my brother, I do not seek help here at school for my mental and behavioural health issues. Instead, I go to a nearby public clinic and she gives me strategies to deal with my mental health issues, such as meditating and exercising more often" (Participant 8).

Analysing the data I have collected from the participants in this research, most adolescent learners from Masopha Combined School, located in a rural area, seek help for their mental and behavioural health issues by talking to their respective educators about unfavourable situations they experience daily. Some prefer to talk with their peers because they feel comfortable and free to share the difficulties they face in their homes and social interactions. Therefore, rural high school learners believe that talking about situations that are more likely to affect ones' mental and behavioural health helps the individual to enhance their mental health and awareness. They take being open as a strategy and a technique to fight and overcome their mental and behavioural health issues.

Behavioural health challenges when seeking help

This study found that adolescent learners experienced behavioural health challenges at a rural school.

Learners' behaviours in a rural high school have been in question for the past several years, and research has been conducted to address the issues associated with inappropriate behaviours in educational settings. In this research, it is vital, as per the initial objective, to gather information regarding mental health challenges faced by adolescent learners in a rural high school when seeking help. Participants in this study shared their experiences regarding the behavioural health challenges they go through when seeking help in school.

Participant one responds:

"As I have said, it is not easy to seek help in our school, it is scary to approach an educator to have a conversation about my stuff that disturbs my mental health and academics. I never know the educator's reaction and response when I tell them what I am going through. So, that fear in me is my challenge" (Participant 1).

Participant two shared that:

"I can say that most of our friends and classmates here at school do not take sensitive matters as seriously as they should; they are insensitive. They make fun of others' difficulties, which demotivates me from sharing some of my issues. These behaviours bring low self-esteem" (Participant 2).

Participant three further explained:

"Sir, people are so judgmental out there; they define us through home situations and personal problems. Fear of judgement is my challenge, and I would rather bottle up my problems than share" (Participant 3).

Participant four elaborates:

"Speaking for myself, Mr., I am not good at expressing my feelings and emotions, especially when facing a difficult situation. I honestly do not know how to express my concerns, and our school does not provide a safe space for learners like me" (Participant 4).

Participant five mentioned:

"Some situations are heavy and embarrassing simultaneously, sir. I am sometimes ashamed to share my struggles because I find it hard to trust my peers and educators" (Participant 5).

Participant six states:

"Meneer, there is this saying in the community that mental health issues, such as depression, are for white people, which is wrong. This stigma prevents us from expressing our emotions because our school does not provide access to mental health resources and services" (Participant 6).

Participant seven says:

"I think our respective educators in this school are not trained well enough to help us deal with different mental and behavioural health issues. They do not honour confidentiality and privacy; they share our problems, discouraging me from sharing my life experiences and crisis in the school" (Participant 7).

The information presented above shows that adolescent learners at rural high schools face certain challenges when seeking help in their educational setting. Their major behavioural challenge is the fear of judgement from peers, educators, and the school society. Rural high schools do not provide access to a safe space for learners to freely ask for help when needed, which tells me that learners' diverse needs are not fully attended to or catered to. The school lacks efficient resources and techniques to help learners with their mental and behavioural health needs. Therefore, adolescent learners from a rural high school are not comfortable enough to seek help from their respective educators and fellow learners, leading to unwanted behaviours on the school premises. According to Tang et al. (2021), bottling up difficulties causes mental health problems that can affect learners' overall performance in school.

Mental health challenges when seeking help

Mental well-being is vital for learners to cope and deal with stress from disadvantaged personal situations and academics. Mentally healthy learners usually go to school with intentions to learn and use appropriate problem-solving skills when needed. Still, learners who suffer mentally cannot think critically when they go through certain difficulties, and they are more likely to misbehave and struggle academically (Grové & Laletas, 2020). As a result, this section explores the mental health challenges adolescent learners at rural high schools are exposed to when they are seeking help. Participants in this research shared their daily experiences about the mental health challenges they face in their school.

Participant one says:

"Sir, fear of judgment is a problem because it leads to mental disturbance. The moment a learner is afraid to share the difficulties he/she come across, he/she become stressed to the point that it leads to anxiety and depression. So, it is dangerous to us when it reaches that level" (Participant 1).

Participant two explained:

"Like I have said, our peers and friends are insensitive and make fun of our problems, which affects us mentally. It brings the feeling of anger, and we find ourselves making wrong decisions like smoking and drinking alcohol. We do that to release stress, but it does not help" (Participant 2).

Participant three shared that:

"My brother, this thing of educators not respecting the concepts of privacy and confidentiality affects our mental health. For example, if I share my problems with a certain educator and he goes on sharing with others, and they look at me in a way that they feel pity for me, that can lead to trauma because now I am aware that all educators know what I am going through" (Participant 3).

Participant four states this.

"I can say that as learners, our personal and social problems are not the same. If we do not feel free and accommodated when seeking help from our schoolmates and educators, we end up having thoughts of dropping out. I have witnessed my brothers dropping out of school because they felt uncomfortable attending anymore" (Participant 4).

Participant five added that:

"Meneer, some learners do not know how to express their emotions, and it is a problem because our school does not provide appropriate support and assistance to them. Certain situations are heavy to some learners, and they are likely to have suicidal thoughts and attempts. I have witnessed such incidents in this school" (Participant 5).

Rural high school adolescent learners are going through a lot mentally, which is quite evident from the responses I have received from different participants in this study. Rural high schools lack sufficient resources, techniques, and support to help learners overcome difficulties that affect their mental health. Adolescent learners end up dropping out of school, attempting to commit suicide, and abusing substances. Therefore, rural high schools should acknowledge these mental health challenges and implement productive solutions to decrease such incidents.

Enhancement of behavioural health care

Rural high schools must acknowledge learners' mental and behavioural health challenges and introduce effective solutions to ensure learners access the efficient resources and support they need for their mental well-being. It is essential to hear from learners who experience these challenges what solutions are available and how they think their respective schools should innovate to enhance their behavioural health care. Participants were interviewed, and they had something to say about this matter.

Participant one entailed that:

"I think it is in our best interest if the school management can consider introducing an anonymous reporting system where learners who find it hard to communicate their emotions easily report their concerns through anonymous writing. In this way, educators can address anonymous issues and provide solutions" (Participant 1).

Participant two shared that:

"Sir, I believe there are professionals in behavioural health care. I have heard about educational psychologists in Life Orientation class, so I think the school management should at least bring us that kind of psychologist once or twice a month to educate us about the necessary precautions to follow to ensure our behavioural health care" (Participant 2).

Participant three says:

"Meneer, I think enhancing our behavioural health care is beyond educators. The school should engage our parents, address our challenges, and give them tips about approaching their children. I am saying this because sometimes it is hard to talk to our parents about our difficulties. So, I think starting from home is better" (Participant 3).

Participant four elaborates:

"Educators should raise awareness about issues that affect our behaviours and provide solutions for dealing with or overcoming such issues. The school management should also train educators to recognise and address mental health issues that lead to ill-behaviour in school. In that way, educators acquire skills to accommodate all learners' diverse needs, and we feel free to share our painful stories with them" (Participant 4).

Participant five further explained:

"Sir, it would be best if the school could create a supportive and open environment where learners feel comfortable seeking help. They can achieve this by introducing learner support groups where it is safe for everyone to share his/her concerns. I believe this helps us a lot" (Participant 5).

South African rural high schools should work towards revolution and assist adolescent learners in enhancing their behavioural health care. Based on the above data from participants, learners are not comfortable enough to share some of their difficult life experiences, and they suggest that the school management should introduce and enforce an anonymous reporting system. Learners need support and a safe space to share their emotions freely. It is convenient for the schools to promote learner support groups where everyone is safe and allowed to share whatever they are going through. Lastly, it is a good idea for the schools to bring educational psychologists once or twice a month to educate learners and equip them with professional skills and techniques to maintain the best behavioural health care. As a result, adolescent learners in rural high schools behave appropriately and reach their higher academic potential.

IX. DISCUSSION

In rural areas, children often face problems that they sometimes cannot find a proper and productive way to deal with. It is because they are not equipped with the necessary skills, mechanics, and knowledge to tackle and cope with encountered problems successfully, and as a result, they misbehave. Adolescent learners in a rural high school setting are seeking help for their mental and behavioural health issues because they seem to struggle in coping and dealing with the numerous situations they come across in their educational journey. The study used a qualitative research approach, a phenomenological design, purposive and convenience sampling techniques, semi-structured interviews, and narrative analysis to ensure fully conducted, credible, and trustworthy research.

This study found that adolescent learners in rural high schools seek help for their mental and behavioural health needs by talking to their respective educators about unfavourable situations they experience in their daily lives. At the same time, some prefer to talk with their peers because they feel comfortable and free to share the difficulties they are exposed to in their homes and social interactions. When learners seek help in rural high school, their major behavioural challenge is the fear of judgement from peers, educators, and the school society. The other challenge is that their school lacks efficient resources and techniques to help learners with their mental and behavioural health needs. To enhance learners' behavioural health care in rural high schools, the management should introduce and enforce an anonymous report system to allow learners to comfortably and freely share their difficulties. Furthermore, it is a good idea for the schools to bring educational psychologists once or twice a month to educate learners and equip them with professional skills and techniques to maintain the best behavioural health care. Therefore, adolescent learners in rural high schools behave appropriately and reach their higher potentials in their respective academics through the support from their educators and innovative skills and techniques introduced to help them.

Rural high schools should be vigilant when addressing learners' mental and behavioural health issues in the educational setting. Some adolescents are sensitive when sharing their daily difficulties, so they need well-trained and sympathetic educators to address and find solutions before they make decisions that can ruin their academic journey and goals. Services in rural areas are poor, and the school management is fully aware of that; therefore, it remains the department of education's responsibility to introduce electric support systems such as generators to ensure the continuation of a smooth and effective teaching and learning process. Parents should also play their part in supporting their children's academic life. Therefore, these recommendations enhance learners' behavioural health.

X. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study proved that adolescent learners in rural high schools seek help for their mental and behavioural health needs by talking to their respective educators about unfavourable situations they experience in their daily lives. At the same time, some prefer to talk with their peers because they feel comfortable and free to share their difficulties with them. Rural schools have no other support systems except educators and fellow peers to cater to learners' mental and behavioural health issues. It needs patience and perseverance to conduct a study of such calibre in high schools in deep rural areas. There are factors such as language barrier and relevant time for the availability of every participant while collecting data from the school, which made it tiring and time-consuming. Addressing and developing solutions to enhance adolescent learners' mental and behavioural health issues in rural schools is essential to ensure the quality of education in the South African curriculum.

XI. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest in this study.

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