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Teachers' perceptions of the psycho-social effects of COVID-19 on learners' well-being in South African schools

Abstract

The lockdown the South African government implemented in 2020 to contain the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in school closures. During this time, and also when learners were allowed to attend school again, the focus was on the physical health and safety of the learners. However, in the process, schools might have neglected the psycho-social and mental well-being of learners, which is a state in which learners are able to manage stress and function optimally. This paper reports on a study that investigated teachers' views on how learners' psycho-social and mental well-being was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews to gather data from 17 teachers from five schools in two districts of the North-West Province in South Africa. The school mental health theoretical framework was used for the study because of its focus on the psycho-social mental health of learners and the role of institutions in supporting mental health. The findings indicate that learners experienced a higher level of emotional distress during the lockdown. This was caused by an increase in fear, stress, anxiety, uncertainty, frustration, anger and aggression during the pandemic. Although learners from all the schools were negatively affected by COVID-19, learners from low-income schools that had limited access to resources were affected more due to the limited professional psycho-social support they received. This highlights the need for Education Departments to build the capacity of all South African schools to address the emotional and psycho-social well-being of their learners. It is vital that schools commit themselves to enabling learners to develop a high level of resilience and antifragility at all times, not just during major crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: *COVID-19, learners, mental health, psycho-social well-being, schools, South Africa*

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis affected most countries across the world, including South Africa (Hedding *et al*., 2020). To inhibit the spread of infection, the South African government declared COVID-19 a national disaster and instituted a national lockdown in March 2020, which resulted in the closure of schools. At that time, the Department of Basic

Education (2020) in South Africa outlined the roles that schools were expected to play in promoting learners' security, safety and health once schools reopened. These guidelines may inadvertently have led to the neglect of the mental health of learners by prioritising the prevention of COVID-19 infections and the treatment of infected learners (DBE, 2020). This study investigated teachers' perceptions of the psycho-social effects of COVID-19 on learners' well-being in South African schools. For the study, we selected teachers who spent considerable time with learners prior to, during and after the pandemic to provide their insight into this phenomenon.

2. Background of the study

Mental health refers to a state of individual well-being during which it is possible to manage stress, function optimally and realise potential (WHO, 2005). A threat such as COVID-19 can have negative psychological, social and emotional consequences or post-traumatic effects on individuals in schools (United Nations, 2020). Varma *et al*. (2021) conducted a systematic review of literature across the globe, which indicated that young people were more vulnerable to anxiety, stress and poor sleep during the COVID-19 pandemic. Approximately 70% of the overall population experienced moderate stress, 59% experienced anxiety and 39% experienced moderate depression; however, it was found that children had less resilience to emotional distress than adults (Varma *et al*., 2021). The same study reveals that individuals with underlying mental health conditions were affected more because of the high levels of poor sleep, low levels of resilience and loneliness associated with depression, stress and anxiety they experienced (Varma *et al*., 2021). Vulnerable children, such as those with a history of being abused, were at a higher risk of experiencing severe, complex post-traumatic stress disorder because of the COVID-19 pandemic (Botha & Gore, 2020). This had particular implications for South Africa, where there is a high incidence of child abuse and domestic violence.

Young people who suffer from post-traumatic effects commonly exhibit irritability and rebelliousness (Pisano, Galimi & Cerniglia, 2020). Furthermore, Pisano *et al*. (2020) observe that young people displayed gloominess, nervousness, isolation, weariness and fear (internalising), and physical and verbal aggression (externalising). Prolonged and repeated incidents of trauma during childhood contribute to violent behaviour, the abuse of alcohol and drugs, smoking, and increased risk of diseases such as obesity, cancer, heart-related illnesses, diabetes and mental illness (Cavioni, Grazzani & Ornaghi, 2020; Spratling *et al*., 2019). Regardless of its effect on the well-being of individuals, mental health has received only minimal attention in recent research, especially in the context of disasters such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Danese *et al*., 2020).

South Africa has a legal framework and guidelines for schools and primary health centres aimed at increasing the chance that learners' mental health problems are detected early and receive appropriate treatment. This legal framework includes the *South African Schools Act* 84 of 1996 (DoE, 1996), the *Mental Health Care Act* of 2002 (DoH, 2002a) and the *Policy Guidelines: Child and Adolescent Mental Health* (DoH, 2002b). The term 'learner' is used in this paper to refer to pupils and students enrolled in schools.

Section 10A(3)(b) of the *South African Schools Act* 84 of 1996 (DoE, 1996) addresses children's mental health issues and ensures their safety. The South African government uses a harmonised approach to promoting the mental health of learners by integrating schools

and local primary health institutions. Schools are required to work with healthcare personnel to manage the mental health of children (DoH, 2002a). The *Mental Health Care Act* of 2002, which was developed to articulate the psychological and mental needs of children (DoH, 2002b), emphasises the importance of all-inclusive, community-based health care of the whole population (DoH, 2002a). The *Policy Guidelines: Child and Adolescent Mental Health* (DoH, 2002b) aims to ensure that children are mentally supported. Accompanying that is the *Care and Support for Teaching and Learning Policy Framework* (MIET Africa, 2021), which is mainstreamed in the sector for schools to support learners and ensure that their safety and mental health are maintained. Some of the underpinnings of the *Care and Support for Teaching and Learning Policy Framework* (MIET Africa, 2021) are the offering of psycho-social support, parental involvement, teacher professional development to adequately support learners and community involvement. During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the capacity of the local health centres and schools to handle the mental health of learners appears to have been diminished by the pressure to prevent infections in schools (UN Sustainable Development Group, 2020).

3. Problem statement

Several studies indicate that mental health problems among children may have increased due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Danese *et al*., 2020; Pisano *et al*., 2020; Spratling *et al*., 2019; Varma *et al*., 2021). Many learners in South Africa experience mental health challenges. A study conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic indicates that learners manifested a diminished capacity to control their emotions in the form of temperamental behaviour, irritability and surges of anger (Mfidi, 2018). Research on learners' experiences during the COVID-19 crisis in South African schools suggests that the pandemic had psycho-social effects on learners' mental health. Emotions such as fear, sadness and worry, for example, affected children in residential care facilities during the pandemic (Haffejee & Levine, 2020). Haffejee and Levine (2020) further reveal that children in the general population experienced psychological effects such as anger, frustration, hopelessness and discomfort. Pre-existing challenges, such as poverty, loss of employment and the difficulties of meeting basic needs in townships, exacerbated the psycho-social challenges experienced by learners in some rural schools in South Africa (Omodan, 2020). This finding suggests that mental health problems among children could have increased due to the pandemic.

With regard to COVID-19, learners appear to constitute the least vulnerable group because of their low rate of COVID-19 infection compared to the other age groups in the population (UN Sustainable Development Group, 2020). While it is well known that children in South Africa are susceptible to post-traumatic stress disorder, including depression and anxiety disorders, little is known of the extent to which these challenges manifested themselves among learners in schools because of COVID-19. Few studies have focused on investigating learners' emotional and psycho-social well-being in South African schools (Omodan, 2020). The study reported in this paper addressed the research question: *What are teachers' perceptions of the effect COVID-19 had on the psycho-social and emotional health of learners?* It investigated teachers' views concerning learners' mental and emotional health because of the limited attention given to this matter by caregivers who focused on the physical safety of the learners, according to the UN Sustainable Development Group (2020).

4. Literature review

A review of the literature suggests that learners were vulnerable to severe psycho-social challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic (Duby *et al*., 2022; Haffejee & Levine, 2020; Omodan, 2020; Spaull & Van der Berg, 2020). The imposed lockdown affected the well-being of learners, who then had to spend more time at home (Widnall *et al*., 2020). Feelings of hopelessness, boredom, loneliness, isolation and frustration were reported among schoolgirls in South Africa during the hard lockdown (Duby *et al*., 2022). During the soft lockdown, when schools were still closed, 25% of learners experienced loneliness because of being left alone when their caregivers returned to work when the economy opened (Spaull & Van der Berg, 2020: 10). Omodan (2020) indicates that learners in low-resourced and marginalised rural schools experienced anxiety and stress because they lacked information about COVID-19 and on whether they had missed lessons during the lockdown. At the same time, the routine of going to school, which supported learners with underlying mental health problems, was disturbed, which resulted in their being affected more (Spaull & Van der Berg, 2020). Apart from the psycho-social problems already mentioned, inadequate opportunity to develop social skills was another prominent effect of the COVID-19 pandemic (Maree, 2022).

Being confined to their homes had negative mental health effects on some learners, especially those who were physically and mentally abused by family members during the hard lockdown (Haffejee & Levine, 2020). South Africa had a high incidence of violence before the COVID-19 pandemic; for example, 1 014 deaths of children because of violence were reported between 2017 and 2018 (Africa Check, 2020). In addition, gender-based violence was prevalent, where one in three girls was a victim of some form of violence involving perpetrators known to them (UN Children's Fund, 2020). Botha and Gore (2020) claim that some South African learners were directly and indirectly victimised by family members, and even more learners were victims of home-based violence during the lockdown. Although the reviewed literature shows that some research has been done on the challenges that affect learners, the focus of this study is the nature and severity of the emotional and psycho-social well-being of learners as a result of COVID-19.

5. School mental health theoretical framework

This study is informed by the school mental health theoretical framework of Cavioni *et al*. (2020) and Taleb's (2012) concept of antifragility. The study drew on the concepts of "promoting social and emotional learning", the "prevention of social and behavioural problems", "developmental systems – family, community and policy" and "promoting resilience" in the school mental health theoretical framework of Cavioni *et al*. (2020: 68-71). We specifically drew on these concepts to identify the psycho-social challenges experienced by learners and ways of preventing these, including the collaborative role of the school, the family and the community in promoting mental health in schools. Taleb's (2012) antifragility concept helps us to view the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity for schools to develop effective and systematic mechanisms for dealing with current and future mental and emotional health problems. Each of these concepts is expanded on below.

The concept of "promoting social and emotional learning" targets the development of competencies such as positiveness, enhanced social skills and mature social behaviour (Cavioni *et al*., 2020). This includes developing self-esteem, a sense of belonging in a particular school and the ability to improve academic performance, behave acceptably in class

and reduce emotional distress (stress, anxiety and depression). This concept was employed in the study to identify the specific psycho-social challenges that learners experienced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and which schools should focus on to reduce emotional and social distress among the learners.

"Preventing social, emotional and behavioural problems" encompasses interventions to contain problems such as social withdrawal, anxiety, depression, misconduct, aggression and the use of drugs and alcohol (Cavioni *et al*., 2020). Through this concept, specific social, emotional and behavioural interventions are explored to prevent social and emotional problems.

The concept of "developmental systems – family, community and policy" underscores the collaboration of the family and the community as a way of supporting the system in reducing the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder among learners (Cavioni *et al*., 2020). The collaborative role of the family, the community and policy in managing the psycho-social effects that resulted from the COVID-19 crisis is explored by using this concept.

"Strengthening resilience" among learners to help them understand and manage their problems is another aspect of the theoretical framework that is emphasised (Cavioni *et al*., 2020). Focusing on resilience is vital to reduce the effects of social and emotional stressors such as depression and anxiety disorders in children. An aspect that was added to the concept of strengthening resilience is Taleb's (2012) concept of antifragility, which is the ability of organisations such as schools, to leverage uncertainty for their gain. This concept emphasises that institutions should be able to benefit from shocks and thrive when they are exposed to unpredictable, risky, stressful and volatile situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Taleb's (2012) antifragility concept helps us to view COVID-19 as an opportunity for schools, families, communities and policymakers to develop effective and systematic mechanisms for dealing with current and future mental and emotional health problems. Studies such as those by Munoz, Billsberry and Ambrosini (2022) and Munoz, Todres and Rook (2021) have shown how this concept can be employed to improve the robustness of organisations and assist in their survival and capability to deal with future uncertainty within the context of adversity, as presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

6. Empirical investigation

The study employed a qualitative research methodology to gain a deeper and more complex understanding of teachers' views regarding the effect COVID-19 had on the mental health of learners (Creswell, 2014). Data were generated through online interviews via Zoom using semi-structured interview schedules with 17 teachers from five schools. The schools were conveniently selected from two districts in North-West. To ensure that the participants were diverse, the selection of schools took into account the socio-economic divides as reflected in the categorisation of schools in the Constitution of South Africa (RSA, 1996). Schools in Quintiles 1 to 3 are poorly resourced, often located in townships or rural areas and categorised under Section 20 of the *South African Schools Act* of 1996 (DoE, 1996). On the other hand, Quintile 4 and 5 schools, which fall under Section 21 of the *South African Schools Act* of 1996 (DoE, 1996), charge fees and usually attract middle-income learners. An all-inclusive sampling strategy was employed to select the participants, and so, all the teachers at each of the sampled schools were asked to participate. This ensured that diverse views of teachers in different grades and disciplines were obtained. A sample size of 17 participants was deemed adequate for the study, as the data then reached saturation; that is, the point when the interviews no longer produced new information (see Mason, 2010).

After the data collection, all the interviews were transcribed verbatim before open coding was done. Open coding involves assigning descriptive codes to the text in the transcripts (Saldana, 2009). This was followed by conceptual coding, where predetermined codes identified from the school mental health theoretical framework of Cavioni *et al*. (2020) and Taleb's (2012) antifragility concept were used to code the data (closed coding). The data were thematically analysed by merging the codes into subthemes. These subthemes were merged into overarching and consolidating themes. The themes that emerged from the analysis are as follows: emotional reaction, social reaction, and strategies implemented by the teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. These themes are explored in the findings section, supported by verbatim excerpts from the data.

The study was ethically rigorous. Ethical clearance and permission to conduct the study were obtained from the Department of Education. The participants voluntarily signed informed consent forms after the study had been explained to them. The information sheet explaining the study and the consent form were sent electronically to the participants for them to read and provide consent. Any questions that the participants had were addressed via Zoom before they consented to participate. To maintain privacy and confidentiality, the data collected from the participants were only shared with people involved in the project and subsequently stored securely. Pseudonyms were used instead of the names of the schools and the participants to ensure their anonymity in the reports. As the study was conducted during the COVID-19 lockdown, the interviews were conducted online to prevent potential harm that physical contact with the participants would have entailed. Trustworthiness was enhanced in the study by ensuring that the findings were reliable and credible. To ensure that the findings were reliable, we piloted the topic guide with two participants and obtained their feedback on the flow, accuracy and appropriateness of the questions. Reliability was achieved by reducing bias and being transparent in the analysis and reporting of the data. An independent coder was employed to verify the accuracy of the coding process and thereby enhance the credibility of the findings.

7. Findings

Apart from the challenges learners experienced related to controlling their emotions, some learners experienced significant emotional and psycho-social effects as a result of the hard lockdown of the pandemic. These include feeling overwhelmed by fear, anxiety, frustration and aggression and exhibiting a lack of social skills, such as being unable to concentrate in class and interact with peers. Although teachers sought to improve the psycho-social and educational well-being of learners, the strategies employed, and the effectiveness thereof, were dependent on the resources schools had available.

7.1 Promoting emotional and social learning

Promoting emotional and social learning includes taking learners' emotional and social reactions as a result of COVID-19 into account.

Emotional reaction

The changes that resulted from the COVID-19 lockdown regulations in schools, for instance social distancing, significantly affected the learners who were used to having physical contact with their peers. When they returned to school after a long period of isolation during the hard lockdown, learners wanted to reconnect emotionally with their peers. One of the teachers observed:

> *They [the learners] say, "This COVID-19 must end, we are so tired." … I see that they are very overwhelmed because it has destabilised their whole functioning. Now they can't see their friends anymore because they attend classes in different groups and days. Now they can't do sports anymore because it doesn't allow us to do that … I think they are very sad because of how unstable their life is.* [Teacher 2, female, Mimosa School, Quintile 3]

Besides the above, fear and anxiety were other effects the pandemic had on learners. The participating teachers indicated that most learners were afraid of being infected by their classmates and becoming ill or even dying. The teachers commented as follows:

> *Some of the kids didn't want to be close to their peers when they returned from the lockdown [isolation in their homes] because they wondered if their peers were really in good health … But the more anxious children feel, the more fearful they become. They are scared of getting infected as well.* [Teacher 12, female, Mahogany School, Quintile 4]

> *… at the beginning of COVID-19, learners were anxious, and a little bit confused about what was happening*. [Teacher 9, female, Baobab School, Quintile 3]

Some learners were anxious because of the uncertainty that COVID-19 had brought into their lives and were traumatised by the loss of family members. Because of this fear, learners were often stressed. One of the teachers explained:

> *… stress a lot, uhm, because it was something new now. They have this fear not about them just getting sick but about their families and friends. They were in contact with people who have [sic] COVID-19; they were in contact with people who died from COVID-19, and [they] didn't know how to handle that kind of stress.* [Teacher 16, female, Mopane School, Quintile 4]

Consequently, many learners were stressed about their well-being and that of their family members. One of the teachers said the following about a learner:

> *She then made up a story that her grandmother died of COVID-19, and she was very emotional. So, we realised that she is [sic] scared to come to school.* [Teacher 7, female, Baobab School, Quintile 3]

The above extract shows that some learners feared contracting COVID-19 at school to such an extent that they played truant. This is a matter of concern, as not attending classes has a negative effect on learners' performance.

The teachers also mentioned that the uncertainty surrounding COVID-19 caused learners to feel anxious about their future. They noted the following:

> *Generally, learners were uncertain about their future. They were worried about whether they would go [sic] for high school*. [Teacher 13, female, Mahogany School, Quintile 4]

> *The uncertainty had an effect on learners: Can we share a ball? Can we play together? Can we do this or that? Uncertainty had a massive effect on learners, especially the younger children, Grades 1 to 3*. [Teacher 11, male, Mahogany, Quintile 4]

Furthermore, some learners were anxious about the health of their friends who were isolated after contracting COVID-19. This indicates that the pandemic discouraged some learners from working to achieve their educational aspirations, as they were unsure about whether they would complete their education. Equally important, some of the learners were confused, as they did not understand why the COVID-19 lockdown and the regulations confining them to their homes and schools were enforced. This was particularly true for Foundation Phase learners who did not understand why they had to wear masks. A teacher mentioned:

> *I think the learners are struggling; most of them don't understand the whole thing about COVID-19, not socialising with their friends and not coming to school … their universe was shut down; they don't understand why everything is changing and nothing is normal for them anymore.* [Teacher 10, female, Mahogany School, Quintile 4]

This lack of understanding can be attributed to the inadequate information about the pandemic the learners received from their schools and parents, or to the rapid pace of the change that was taking place. Their lack of understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic increased their uncertainty, anxiety, worry, fear and stress.

The teachers noticed that some learners could not concentrate in class and lost interest in academic activities. They lacked vitality, did not participate in class activities and did not pay attention during lessons. This emerged in comments such as the following:

> *They do not concentrate in class. They look so lazy and tired.* [Teacher 8, female, Baobab School, Quintile 3]

> *… insecurity meant that learners couldn't concentrate and work normally.* [Teacher 14, male, Mahogany School, Quintile 4]

While a lack of concentration was mainly evident in Mathematics classes, reportedly, a few learners were unwilling to read and write in other subjects. Because some learners had become used to the greater flexibility of being at home, they found it difficult to pay attention during class time. In addition to these challenges, some learners did not even attempt to do their homework and did not remember what they had been taught a few days before.

The teachers were also of the view that the learners experienced frustration, anger and aggression. The learners resented the school regulations that restricted them from taking part in the social activities that they previously had been free to do. The following remarks were provided in this regard:

> *We had a lot of kids that were aggressive because of uncertainty; a lot of aggression happened [sic].* [Teacher 17, female, Mopane School, Quintile 5]

> *Like slapping their hands on the table or shouting; they were frustrated. They didn't know how to cope with the frustration, yes.* [Teacher 2, female, Mimosa School, Quintile 3]

Apart from referring to frustration (as in the above excerpt), some teachers reported high levels of aggression in the form of physical fighting among boys and verbal assaults perpetrated mostly by girls. It can be deduced that aggression was the way the learners expressed their frustration and anger. The teachers blamed the learners' increase in aggressive behaviour on their being prevented from engaging in physical and social activities and their exposure to violence and gangsterism, especially in low-income communities.

The teachers revealed that some learners engaged in disruptive behaviour to a greater extent than before the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the teachers said:

> *So, what I think is, since they have been at home, they [think they] can do whatever they want. They can't differentiate that they are now at school where there are rules again. You can't go to the bathroom or eat whenever you like.* [Teacher 4, male, Acacia School, Quintile 5]

The learners' indiscipline was attributed to the lack of parental supervision in the prolonged period of the hard lockdown when learners were confined to their homes.

Some learners were also affected negatively by their parents' loss of jobs and income. The following remarks were made in this regard:

> *And now even the Grade 2s tend to be more anxious and aware of stuff that they have never actually been aware of, like the parents' finances and a lot of stuff like that. They're more mature than they used to be*. (Teacher 15, male, Mopane School, Quintile 4)

> *…. because of the lockdown and the difficult economy, there is more stress at home.* (Teacher 9, Female, Baobab School, Quintile 3)

Because the learners' parents spent longer periods together at home, there was an increase in domestic violence and divorce, which affected the emotional and psycho-social well-being of the learners negatively.

Overall, emotional well-being is critical for learners to have a positive attitude towards the self and others. Therefore, reduced internalisation and externalisation of behaviour, decreased academic motivation and the reported emotional behaviour all indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative effect on learners.

Social reaction

Some learners struggled to engage with their peers when they returned to school because of the limited development of their social skills as a result of their time of isolation in their homes. The rotation system of attending classes aimed at reducing the risk of contracting COVID-19 meant that learners' opportunity to reconnect with friends they had not been able to see during the lockdown was reduced. This constrained the development of their social skills. A teacher gave the following explanation:

> *You have been with this person in the same class since Grade 1; they are your friends but now suddenly you don't see them anymore. They [learners] now ask [sic] that they haven't seen their friends in a year. And for me, the group that I am with now, it's so difficult to engage with them because the learners are not friends with each other … So, I think that is why some learners are very quiet these days. They don't even participate in class.* [Teacher 1, female, Mimosa School, Quintile 3]

Hence, the teachers observed learners' reduced participation in class and limited interaction with their peers compared to the period before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Alongside that, the teachers reported that some Foundation Phase learners exhibited a longing to touch others as a way of expressing their emotions even though were not allowed to do so. One of the teachers said,

> *One that was very common was the need for physical touch after isolation … They really wanted to suddenly use that elbow the whole time or give themselves a hug or the teachers would have done that as well; so, the need for physical touch was a big thing we started seeing*. [Teacher 14, male, Mopane School, Quintile 4]

It seems that learners wanted to express their emotions physically towards their peers and teachers, as they had missed them for a long time during the hard lockdown of the pandemic.

Apparent in the above extracts is the constrained social development of competencies among the learners because of the COVID-19 hard lockdown. These social competencies are essential for learners' self-esteem, positive attitude towards others and good classroom behaviour.

7.2 Developmental systems: family, community and policy

What emerged is that schools adopted particular collaborative strategies with parents to promote the well-being of their learners, including communicating with parents. In some schools, teachers shared information with parents about how they could help to make their children feel safe. The following explanation was given by a teacher:

> *We really also sent out a lot of information to parents to help them. We tell [sic] them that we have to take hands together in the support of the child when they are at home. The teachers reached out to the children via WhatsApp and asked them, "How are you doing?", "Are you still fine at home?" So, we had open communication between the teachers and students.* [Teacher 12, female, Mahogany School, Quintile 4]

Simultaneously, some schools, such as Acacia School, collaborated with the community to support learners and families that were experiencing financial and psycho-social challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic to promote the learners' well-being.

The divide between the middle-income Quintile 4 and 5 schools and the low-income schools in Quintile 3 was apparent in their access to professional emotional and psycho-social support. The teachers from Quintile 4 and 5 schools indicated that their learners enjoyed the benefit of access to mental health services by professional psychologists who were employed by the schools or specifically hired to offer services during the COVID-19 pandemic. In contrast, the teachers from Quintile 3 schools, who had not received the necessary training, found themselves having to offer support to their learners. A teacher explained the situation as follows:

> *I always tell the children that at school I am their mommy, so they could speak to me. … I must react to help them, so, uhm, I gave them emotional support at school, and then if it really became a big problem, I would contact the parents and then we would work together on that need.* [Teacher 6, female, Acacia School, Quintile 5]

Moreover, Quintile 3 schools did not receive professional assistance from the few social workers placed in their districts because these professionals were overwhelmed with caseloads during the COVID-19 pandemic. The unequal access to professional psycho-social services, therefore, determined the quality of services the learners received.

The above information points out the collaborative relationship between schools, families and communities in managing the psycho-social effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on learners. Nevertheless, the role of schools in supporting learners' mental health was constrained in low-income Quintile 3 schools, as they lacked access to professional psycho-social services.

8. Discussion

The findings reveal that learners experienced several psycho-social challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participating teachers perceived that the effects of the pandemic on learners included feeling overwhelmed, sadness, anxiety, fear, inability to concentrate in class, frustration and aggression. The loss of family members, increase in divorces and domestic violence and the loss of jobs exacerbated the emotional and psychological challenges learners experienced. These psycho-social challenges are wide-ranging and more intense than those reported by Mfidi (2018) before the COVID-19 pandemic. The psycho-social effects of the pandemic were reported among learners at all the schools; hence no differences were observed between middle-income Quintile 4 and 5 schools and low-income Quintile 3 schools.

Although the findings demonstrate that learners from schools in all the quintiles were affected by the pandemic, learners from low-income Quintile 3 schools were worse off because of their failure to access professional support for their psycho-social well-being. These findings corroborate observations by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2020) that the COVID-19 pandemic widened inequality in the educational sector in most countries, with low-income learners being affected the most. Furthermore, a key finding that emerged from the study is that learners were overwhelmed and felt hopeless because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This points to the need for schools to build resilience and antifragility among their learners and put structures in place to manage the effects of disasters such as COVID-19 (Cavioni *et al*., 2020). The prevalence of mental health challenges at schools before COVID-19 and their increase during the pandemic suggest a need for schools to adopt a proactive approach in preventing psycho-social problems in future. Central to Taleb's (2012) antifragility theory is the idea that institutions such as schools should learn and improve themselves for the future to protect themselves against shocks and disasters like COVID-19. Thus, the pandemic flagged the under-preparedness of schools to manage shocks such as COVID-19 and the unequal access to resources to support the mental and educational well-being of learners. These are essential points of intervention for the South African Department of Basic Education to ensure that learners have equal access to resources to enhance their well-being and ensure success during pandemics and other disasters.

These findings have implications for the nature of interventions to implement for the prevention of behavioural, emotional and social problems in schools (Cavioni *et al*., 2020) in times of difficulty. We recommend that schools employ strategies to keep learners socially and physically active in such times and thereby minimise the psycho-social problems learners experience. These strategies should focus on ways of enabling learners to be positive and motivated, including providing adequate information and skills for learners to cope with the situation and to prevent confusion and uncertainty. Teachers should have open communication with their learners and encourage parents to address their children's concerns. Teachers need training in handling learners' psycho-social issues and developing structures that will help learners to develop resilience. Professional psycho-social services ought to be available for all learners, including those from low-income schools. These interventions align with the *Care and Support for Teaching and Learning Policy Framework* (MIET Africa, 2021), which emphasises the promotion of peer support groups, embedding emotional and social health in the curriculum, strengthening the referral system and enhancing the professional development of teachers. Considering the prevalence of domestic violence, divorce and child abuse that affect learners negatively, schools should be actively involved in efforts to create environments that are conducive to families. Lastly, the collaboration between schools and communities should be strengthened to meet learners' psycho-social needs.

9. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic meant that all learners experienced emotional and psycho-social problems on some level because of the pandemic, which affected their well-being. This study not only emphasises teachers' perceptions of the severe emotional and psycho-social effects the pandemic had on learners, but also highlights the opportunities that schools have to serve learners better. Little attention has been paid to this matter in other studies. The devastating effects the COVID-19 pandemic had on learners mean that schools should now be positioned better to build the resilience of their learners and manage future pandemics.

Conflict of interest

None of the authors has a conflict of interest to declare.

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