



PERCEPTIONS OF EDUCATORS IN IDENTIFYING LEARNERS WITH MENTAL HEALTH-RELATED ISSUES

A report or dissertation on a research study presented to

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for the degree Master of Arts in Social Work in the field of School Social Work

by

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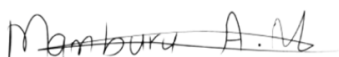
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviations	Full Name
WHO	World Health Organization
CBT	Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy
SIAS	Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support Policy
HRSA	Health Resources and Services Administration
DBE	Department of Basic Education
SIAS	Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
SACE	South African Council for Educators
GDE	Gauteng Department of Education
BEAM	Basic Education Assistance Module
P	Participant
LSAs	Learner Support Agents

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This Chapter introduces the study, outlining the context, background, and rationale for exploring educators' perceptions of mental health-related issues in schools. This chapter highlights the increasing importance of addressing mental health within the educational environment, emphasizing the role of educators in identifying and supporting learners who may be experiencing Mental health-related issues. It also presents the research objectives, questions that guide the study, and definitions of concepts, establishing the foundation for understanding the key factors that influence educators' practices concerning mental health concerns. The chapter concludes with an overview of the structure of the study, providing a roadmap for the upcoming chapters. The chapters that follow will provide a comprehensive overview of the research background and context, review relevant literature, detail the research design and methodology, present the findings, and discuss their implications. By shedding light on educators' perceptions, the study seeks to contribute to the development of more responsive and inclusive school-based mental health strategies.

In recent years, heightened attention has been directed towards the acknowledgment of mental health-related issues among learners within the realm of education (Atkins et al., 2022; Reinke et al., 2019). This increased focus stems from a growing body of research underscoring the significant ramifications of Mental health-related issues on learners' academic performance, general well-being, and prospects (Brückner et al., 2022; Suldo et al., 2022). Educators, positioned as frontline professionals in learners' lives, are increasingly tasked with a pivotal role in the identification and support of those vulnerable to mental health-related issues (Froese-Germain & Riel, 2022; Weston et al., 2022). Their perceptions, attitudes, and comprehension regarding the identification of learners with mental health-related issues stand as crucial determinants in fostering a supportive and inclusive educational environment (Berger et al., 2021; Jagers et al., 2022).

In the contemporary educational landscape, early intervention for mental health needs in schools holds paramount significance. Alarming statistics from the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2022) disclose that globally, 1 in 5 children and youths contend with diagnosable emotional, behavioural, and mental health-related issues. Moreover, a study by Polanczyk et al. (2021) demonstrates that 1 in 10 young individuals grapple with severe Mental health-

related issues, significantly impeding their functioning across various domains of life, including home, school, and the community. An examination of classrooms worldwide reveals the pervasive nature of mental health-related issues among children aged 6-17 years. As many as 5 out of every 30 learners in a typical class are likely to confront a mental health-related issue (Kieling et al., 2022; Shorey et al., 2022).

Despite educators' central role in mental health identification and support, scant research comprehensively scrutinizes their perceptions regarding this responsibility (Kidger et al., 2016). Delayed identification or misapprehensions about their role could impede timely assistance for learners contending with mental health-related issues. Moreover, (Teixeira et al., 2020) observed a gap in educators' awareness of mental health-related matters, potentially hampering their efficacy in recognizing and supporting learners adequately. These challenges emphasize the need for investigating educators' perspectives on their role in identifying and supporting learners at risk of mental health-related issues. The findings from such research have the potential to inform more efficacious policies and practices beneficial to both learners and educators (Weare & Nind, 2011).

1.2 Background of the Study

Mental wellness is a crucial aspect of learners' well-being, playing a significant role in determining their academic performance and personal development. Learner's mental health issues often go undetected, even in resource-concentrated regions like Gauteng, where educators still face challenges in identifying and supporting affected learners due to systemic gaps. According to Paul (2024), while there is growing awareness of learners' mental health problems, educators lack mandated training and school organizational support necessary to address the problems effectively. This highlights the need for school-based mental health interventions and policies that prepare educators with the competence and knowledge needed to recognize and respond to learners' mental health needs.

Although some efforts have been made under South Africa's Integrated School Health Policy (ISHP), which includes mental health as a component and has led to the training of selected educators in certain provinces (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2012), such initiatives remain inconsistent and insufficiently scaled. Moreover, while Learner Support Agents (LSAs) are deployed in some schools to provide psychosocial support, their reach is limited, and they often face high caseloads and lack formal mental health training (Hall & Giese, 2009).

Therefore, empowering educators who interact with learners daily, remains essential to creating a sustainable and proactive school-based mental health support system.

Globally, mental disorders in adolescents are on the rise, with 31% of children and adolescents found to have depression, 31% to have anxiety, and 42% to have sleep disturbances (Deng et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic worsened the condition, with school closures, social distancing, and increased screen time causing worsening mental health (Masshera et al., 2022). In sub-Saharan Africa, to take one example, a quarter of adolescents have mental health-related issues, often coupled with poverty and limited access to mental health treatment (Hunduma et al., 2021). Historical trauma and social inequalities also remain in South Africa, influencing adolescent mental health, with school interventions needed to provide early intervention (Allman et al., 2022).

Educators are typically the first point of contact for learners with mental health-related issues, but frequently are not trained or equipped to do so efficiently (O'Farrell et al., 2022). There is evidence that educators perceive themselves as connectors, awareness raisers, referrers, and guardians in supporting learner mental health (Douwes et al., 2024), but are unclear about their role and how they can best act. Educators working in impoverished populations report that they observe learners being subjected to severe levels of distress from experiences of poverty, trauma, and abuse but that they themselves have no skills in which to neutralize this form of stress independent of professional mental health interventions (Skinner et al., 2019). Educator programs like BEAM (Basic Education Assistance Module) have enhanced educators' sense of confidence in relation to recognizing and responding to children's mental health concerns (O'Dea et al., 2023), again emphasizing the importance of formal teacher training.

While awareness of mental health-related issues among learners is growing, access to care remains inadequate. In South Africa, for instance, only a small proportion of university learners diagnosed with mental health-related issues receive professional assistance (Bantjes et al., 2020), and in India, e-learning has increased learners' psychological distress, which further underlines the need for mental health promotion in schools (Fatema, 2023). School-based interventions, such as an eight-session cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) program, have had positive effects in helping primary school pupils manage emotional distress (Coetzee et al., 2023). However, due to the lack of clear professional roles and schools' coordination with mental health professionals, the majority of learner support initiatives remain unstructured and ineffective (Beames et al., 2020).

Keeping these issues in view, this study tries to explore perceptions of educators about their role in the identification of learners with mental health issues, their awareness levels about mental issues at school level, and pinpointing major hurdles that hinder them in addressing such issues. Suggesting measures on how support structures can be strengthened within the educational system, this study can contribute towards an improved systematic and effective approach to learner mental health. Having well-trained and supported educators is not only needed to advance the well-being of learners but also to enhance academic performance, to prevent school dropping out, and to establish a positive school climate (Paul, 2024; O'Farrell et al., 2022).

1.3 Problem Statement

Mental health challenges among South African school learners is increasing, with issues such as depression, anxiety, and behavioural issues disrupting studies and general well-being (Jörns-Presentati et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2021). Issues such as childhood maltreatment, emotional abuse, and family pathology also compound such issues (Myers et al., 2021; Warnick et al., 2024). Despite the important role that schools play in early intervention, educators might not be adequately trained and supported to identify and address learners' mental health problems (Coetzee et al., 2023).

Despite evidence indicating the effectiveness of school-based mental health programs, these interventions are nevertheless limited in South Africa, and even more so in resource-limited schools (Sibanda et al., 2022). Educators face problems such as stigma, institutional constraint, and poor formal training, which further limit effective support to struggling learners (Paton et al., 2022; Gore et al., 2023). Besides, the scarcity of school psychologists and social workers complicates educators' emotional load and stress and restricts their capacity to cope effectively with mental health problems (Mahwai & Ross, 2023). Although attempts like the 4 Steps to My Future program are promising, their feasibility and integration into the education system are uncertain (Coetzee et al., 2023). The 4 Steps to My Future is a school-based psychosocial life skills intervention aimed at Grade 8 learners, designed to strengthen emotional resilience, goal-setting, and coping mechanisms among adolescents in disadvantaged communities (Cluver et al., 2020). While such programmes positively impact learners' well-being, they often rely on external facilitators or short-term implementation, limiting their sustainability and integration into the school environment.

Despite the critical importance of school-based mental health interventions, there is limited research in South Africa that explores educators' knowledge and understanding of their role in identifying and responding to learners' mental health challenges. It is essential to examine educators' perceptions of their capacity, preparedness, and institutional support to address mental health issues in the classroom (Pillay et al., 2022). Understanding these perceptions can inform the development of targeted interventions aimed at improving educators' mental health literacy, enhancing institutional support structures, and strengthening their ability to recognize early signs of emotional distress among learners. This study seeks to fill this gap by exploring educators' perceptions of their roles and responsibilities in supporting learner mental health, identifying barriers they face, and recommending strategies to improve their capacity, ultimately contributing to better learner well-being and academic outcomes.

1.4 Rationale

Within the South African context, the significance of this study is underscored by the growing recognition of mental health issues among learners, which have become increasingly urgent. A comprehensive national investigation conducted by Shung-King et al. (2019) has disclosed a disturbingly high prevalence of mental disorders among children and adolescents, with prevalence rates estimated between 17% and 22%. Additionally, the research has illuminated the scarcity of accessible mental health services, noting that only a minimal portion of those affected receive appropriate care. These stark figures highlight the critical need for pre-emptive measures in educational environments that would enable early detection and intervention.

The role of educators as frontline figures in supporting learners' mental health cannot be overstated. Educators often serve as the first point of contact for learners exhibiting signs of distress, and their ability to identify these issues can significantly influence the outcomes for affected learners. However, as highlighted by Teixeira et al. (2020), many educators feel inadequately prepared or supported in addressing mental health concerns, which can lead to missed opportunities for early intervention. This study, therefore, sought to uncover the barriers educators face and provide insights into the kind of support and training needed to empower them in this critical role.

An examination of educators' perceptions within the South African educational sphere has revealed valuable insights that can shape relevant policies, practices, and support mechanisms. The findings from this study suggest that although there is awareness of mental health issues

in schools, many educators report feeling inadequately trained or supported. These gaps align with the findings in the Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) Policy (2014), which identifies the need for strengthening educators' roles in identifying barriers to learning, including mental health-related issues. The SIAS policy emphasizes the necessity for educators to identify, assess, and support learners experiencing barriers, underscoring the importance of early intervention and appropriate referral mechanisms (Department of Basic Education, 2014). Furthermore, the policy advocates for developing more inclusive educational environments, which aligns with the goals of this research to ensure equitable access to education for all learners, especially those facing Mental health-related issues.

The outcomes of this analysis have the potential to drive the development of customized professional development programs and cooperative frameworks, equipping educators with the skills necessary to identify and address mental health issues among learners (Naidoo & Naidoo, 2021). Additionally, the findings from this study may contribute to the development of more inclusive and supportive educational environments, thereby enhancing the well-being and academic performance of learners. This aligns with the initiatives of the Department of Basic Education, which prioritizes mental health literacy and psychosocial support within educational settings (Department of Basic Education, 2015).

Additionally, addressing the gaps in educators' perceptions regarding their role in identifying and supporting learners with mental health-related issues has broader implications for national mental health strategies. By fostering a deeper understanding among educators and empowering them through targeted interventions, the study could contribute to national efforts to mitigate the prevalence of Mental health-related issues within the school-aged population. Such efforts align with the goals of the Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support Policy (SIAS, 2014), which emphasizes the importance of identifying learners' barriers to learning and development to ensure equitable access to education

1.5 Research Aims and Objectives

1.5.1 Research Aim

The study examines educators' perceptions of their role in identifying learners with mental health-related issues within the school and the support needed to enhance their role in performing successfully.

1.5.2 Research Objectives

- i. To determine educators' perceptions of their role in identifying learners with mental health issues.
- ii. To examine educators' understanding of mental health issues within the school.
- iii. To establish educators' difficulties in recognizing and addressing learners' mental health issues.
- iv. To provide recommendations on the assistance needed to enable educators to identify and act upon mental health issues.

1.6 Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study were:

- i. How do educators perceive their role in identifying learners with mental health-related issues in schools?
- ii. What is educators' understanding of mental health-related issues within the school environment?
- iii. What difficulties do educators face in recognizing and addressing learners' mental health issues?
- iv. What methods or resources can be provided to help educators effectively recognize and identify learners with mental health-related issues at an early stage?

1.7 Definition of concepts

- Educator: A person who provides instruction or education, a teacher or a person involved in the process of teaching and facilitating learning, especially in a formal educational institution or setting (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023). Educators are responsible for imparting knowledge, skills, and guidance to learners to help them acquire information and develop their intellectual, social, and practical abilities (UNESCO, 2020). For this study, the above definition of an educator by the Oxford Dictionary (2023) will be adopted as it is.
- Learners: Typically refer to individuals who are actively engaged in an educational or learning process (UNESCO, 2020). These individuals are often learners/learners

enrolled in formal educational institutions such as schools, colleges, or universities (UNESCO, 2020).

- **Mental Health:** Mental health is defined as a state of well-being in which the individual realizes their abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and can contribute to their community (World Health Organization, 2022).

For this study, mental health refers to the psychological and emotional well-being of learners within a school setting. It also involves the identification, prevention, and early intervention of mental health-related issues that can impact a learner's overall functioning and academic performance.

- **Perceptions:** Refers to an individual's subjective interpretations, beliefs, and understanding of various aspects of a particular topic or phenomenon. Perceptions are shaped by an individual's personal experiences, cultural backgrounds, knowledge, and context. (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023).

For this study, perceptions encompass a wide range of elements, such as attitudes, opinions, judgments, and feelings, related to identifying learners with mental health-related issues.

- **South Africa:** Refers to a country in Southern Africa, officially the Republic of South Africa. (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023).

For this study, South Africa refers to the country in which the study population is located.

1.8 Theoretical Framework

This study is based on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. Ecological Systems Theory offers an insightful perspective by emphasizing the influence of various environmental systems on human development. The theory recognizes that individuals exist within nested systems, each with varying levels of impact on behaviour and development (Cross, 2017). This study examines how various classroom factors impact educators' understanding of learners' mental and emotional health issues. The microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem are all interconnected, influencing how people think, feel, act, and perceive the world (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In this context, educators' perceptions are shaped by direct

classroom interactions (microsystem), collaboration with parents and school personnel (mesosystem), external policies and resources (exosystem), societal attitudes towards mental health (macrosystem), and temporal changes in mental health awareness (chronosystem). This framework examines how environmental factors collectively influence educators' capacity to identify and assist learners with mental health issues.

1.9 Methodology

This study utilises a qualitative research methodology within the constructivist framework, employing a case study design to examine educators' perceptions regarding their role in identifying learners with mental health issues. Purposive sampling was employed to select 12 educators from a primary school in Midrand, Gauteng, guaranteeing a variety of experiences in mental health identification. Data were gathered via semi-structured interviews, facilitating a comprehensive examination of educators' viewpoints, obstacles, and support systems. Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke (2006) six-phase framework, was employed to discern patterns and themes in the data. Trustworthiness was established through credibility measures including member checking, triangulation, and an audit trail, guaranteeing that the findings accurately represent educators' lived experiences.

1.10 Chapter outline

Chapter 1 presents the study by offering contextual information, delineating the research problem, objectives, and enquiries that direct the investigation of educators' perceptions regarding mental health issues in educational settings. It delineates the study's importance and offers a summary of its extent. Chapter 2 delineates the theoretical framework and conducts a literature review. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory examines the diverse factors that shape educators' perceptions and reactions to learner mental health concerns. The literature review analyses current research on global and South African viewpoints regarding learners' mental health, the function of educators, the challenges encountered, and strategies for enhancing mental health support in educational institutions.

Chapter 3 describes the research methodology. It talks about the study's design, how the data will be collected, how samples were chosen, and any ethical issues that need to be thought through. This chapter talks about the methods that were used to make sure that the research is credible and reliable. Chapter 4 summarises the study findings and also uses participant data to show how educators view and handle learner mental health issues. Chapter 5 presents the

main findings of the study, together with clarifying their relevance. Apart from defining the consequences for practice, policy, and upcoming studies, it provides suggestions for educators to more precisely recognise and handle mental health problems among their pupils.

1.11 Summary

This chapter gave a synopsis of the study by explaining its rationale, research problem, aims, objectives, and important questions that would later guide the investigation of how school personnel see mental health issues. Educators must fill voids in training, institutional resources, and awareness while also recognising the growing importance of learner mental health issues and providing early identification and support. Key terms like "mental health," "perceptions," "educators," and "learners" were defined to set the tone for the conversation. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory was used as a basis for the study. This theory helps us understand how educators' environments affect their thoughts and actions. A concise synopsis of the research methodology was given, outlining the steps taken to gather data and conduct the case study. At the end of the chapter, we laid the groundwork for Chapter 2, where we present the theoretical framework and literature review, by outlining the study's structure.

CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the theoretical framework for this study, providing the foundation for understanding the complex factors that influence educators' perceptions and practices regarding mental health-related issues in schools. This chapter explores Ecological Systems Theory, which offers a comprehensive lens to examine the interactions between various environmental systems and their impact on educators' ability to identify and support learners facing Mental health-related issues. By applying this theory, the chapter aims to highlight the multifaceted nature of mental health issues in educational settings and frame the research within a broader theoretical context. This framework will guide the analysis of the factors influencing educators' roles in addressing mental health concerns in schools, setting the stage for the literature review.

This chapter further provides a comprehensive examination of existing research related to mental health-related issues in educational settings. This chapter explores the various perspectives on how educators perceive and address mental health concerns among learners, highlighting key studies that have investigated the role of educators in identifying and supporting learners with mental health-related issues. The review will also examine the importance of mental health awareness, training, and support for educators, as well as the impact of mental health-related issues on academic engagement and overall well-being. By synthesizing current research, this chapter aims to build a strong foundation for the study, offering context and insights into the relevant factors that shape educators' practices in supporting learners with mental health-related issues.

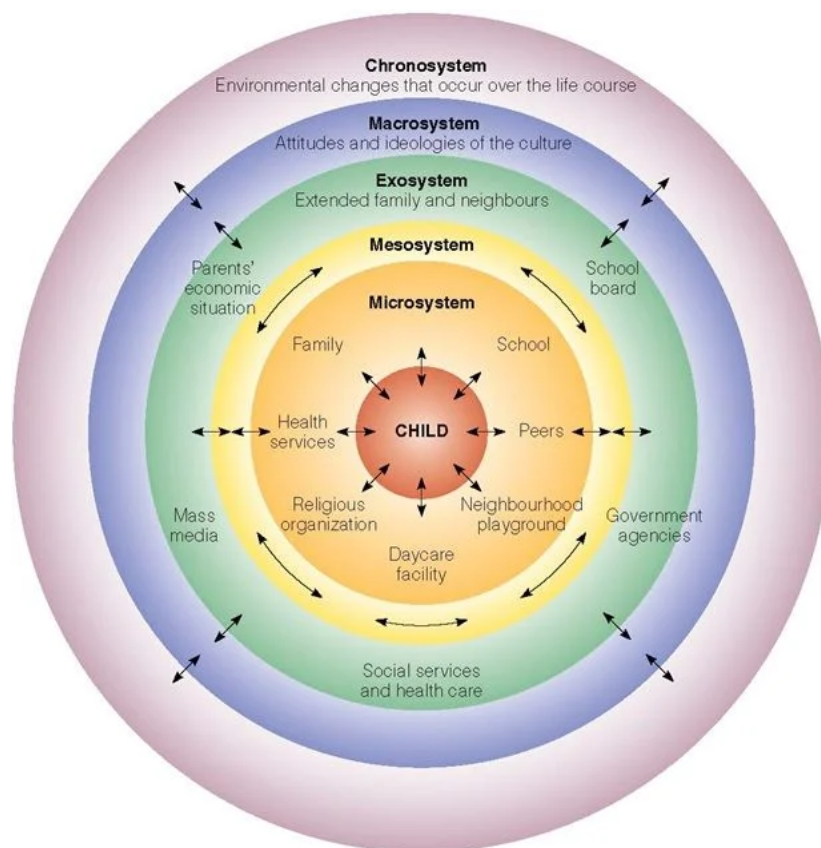
2.2 Theoretical Framework underpinning the study

This study investigates educators' perceptions of their role in identifying learners with mental health-related issues within the school setting. A central aspect of understanding these perceptions is the theoretical framework that underpins the research. For this study, Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) provides a comprehensive lens through which the complex interactions and multi-level influences on educators and learners can be understood. Ecological Systems Theory offers an insightful perspective by emphasizing the influence of various environmental systems on human development. The theory recognizes that individuals exist within nested systems, each with varying levels of impact on behaviour and development

(Cross, 2017). The context of this study allows for a holistic understanding of the factors that shape educators' perceptions and responses to mental health-related issues in learners, considering both the immediate classroom environment and broader societal influences.

Developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner, Ecological Systems Theory posits that human development is the result of interactions within several layers of the environment, ranging from immediate settings to broader societal structures (Paquette & Ryan, 2001). These systems are categorized as microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, macrosystems, and chronosystems, each influencing the individual in distinct ways (Bluteau et al., 2017). In this study, Ecological Systems Theory is applied to explore how the interaction of these multiple systems shapes educators' perceptions of learners with mental health-related issues, and how they influence their practices in addressing these issues. Figure 1 illustrates these systems and show case their interconnectedness.

Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory



2.2.1 Microsystems: Immediate Environment

The microsystem refers to the immediate environments where individuals directly engage with one another, such as the classroom and school setting (Johnson & Cooke, 2020). For educators, the microsystem consists of the daily interactions with learners in the classroom, shaping their perceptions and responses to mental health-related issues. Educators' roles and practices regarding mental health in learners are influenced by their direct experiences with learners, the dynamics within the classroom, and the resources available for mental health support (Kallitsoglou & Mahmud, 2023). As the primary environment where educators observe learners, the quality of teacher-learner relationships plays a significant role in shaping how educators recognize and respond to Mental health-related issues. This study will explore the specific ways in which microsystem factors, such as classroom dynamics and available support, impact educators' perceptions of learners with mental health issues.

2.2.2 Mesosystems: Interactions between Microsystems

The mesosystem refers to the interconnections between two or more microsystems in an individual's life (Kaushik et al., 2023). In this study, it focuses on how the classroom environment (microsystem) interacts with other influential environments, such as the home, other educational professionals, and the broader school community. Educators' perceptions of learners with mental health-related issues may be influenced by their interactions with parents, school counsellors, or school administrators (Moon et al., 2017). These interrelationships are crucial for fostering a collaborative approach to addressing mental health concerns. For instance, a teacher's perceptions may be shaped by the communication between home and school, the involvement of parents, or the presence of support systems such as school counsellors. According to Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey (2018), a collaborative approach between educators and these other microsystems is essential for creating a comprehensive support network for learners with mental health issues. This study will investigate how mesosystem interactions influence educators' perceptions and how collaboration between different stakeholders can improve mental health identification and support.

2.2.3 Exosystems: Indirect Influences

The exosystem encompasses the external environments or settings that do not directly involve the individual but still have an indirect influence on their experiences and development (Delany & Cheung, 2020). For educators, exosystem factors include policies, community resources,

and societal norms that shape their ability to recognize and address learners' mental health needs. Exosystem elements such as district-level mental health policies, funding for mental health services, and the availability of community resources play a critical role in how educators perceive and manage mental health concerns (O'Malley et al., 2018; So et al., 2019). For example, the presence or absence of professional mental health services in the community can significantly influence the educator's capacity to support learners adequately. Neal and Neal (2013) note that exosystem influences can affect educators' perceptions and resources, ultimately impacting the support they provide to learners with mental health-related issues. In this study, the impact of exosystem factors on educators' practices will be explored, including how policies, resources, and community infrastructure shape their perceptions and responses to Mental health-related issues.

2.2.4 Macrosystems: Cultural and Societal Influences

The macrosystem refers to the overarching cultural and societal norms, values, and beliefs that shape individuals' behaviours and attitudes (Jackman et al., 2022). In the context of this study, macrosystem factors include societal attitudes toward mental health, which can influence how educators perceive and respond to learners with mental health issues. Societal norms, values, and cultural perceptions about mental health often determine whether mental health is openly discussed, stigmatized, or prioritized within educational settings (Hansen et al., 2021). As Patel (2018) highlights, societal stigmas and the extent to which mental health is normalized can significantly affect the willingness of educators to engage in mental health-related conversations. Understanding these macro-level influences is critical for developing strategies that aim to reduce stigma and foster a supportive environment for addressing mental health in schools. This study will examine how macrosystem factors, such as cultural attitudes toward mental health, impact educators' practices and the school's approach to Mental health-related issues.

2.2.5 Chronosystem: Temporal Changes and Transitions

The chronosystem represents the dimension of time and how changes in the environment, societal events, or transitions over time influence development (Yang & Oh, 2024). In this study, the chronosystem can be used to explore how changes in societal attitudes toward mental health, as well as policy changes, have influenced educators' perceptions and practices regarding learners with mental health-related issues. Over time, shifts in mental health

awareness, policy reforms, and cultural perceptions may have shaped how educators recognize, address, and support learners with Mental health-related issues. Rosa and Tudge (2013) argue that changes in societal contexts, such as the introduction of mental health policies in schools, can impact the responses and perceptions of educators. In the South African context, for example, the introduction of policies such as the Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) Policy (2014) has influenced how educators address learners' mental health and learning barriers. This study will explore the influence of temporal factors on educators' perceptions, including how the evolving mental health landscape has shaped their understanding and practices.

2.3 Literature Review

2.3.1 Global Mental Health of Learners

Mental health-related issues among children and youth are a significant global concern, with the World Health Organization (WHO) estimating that approximately 1 in 5 children and adolescents experience diagnosable emotional, behavioural, or mental health-related issues (HRSA, 2022). These issues can range from mild to severe, affecting learners in various contexts such as at home, school, and in their communities. Mental health-related issues are often invisible, making it difficult to identify and address the challenges faced by these learners. As these issues frequently go undiagnosed, they can interfere with a learner's ability to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

In the classroom context, Mental health-related issues among learners are widespread. A study by the HRSA (2022) found that approximately 1 in 10 youth experience mental health issues that significantly impact their daily functioning. This highlights the extent of the problem, particularly in educational settings, where learners often struggle to focus, engage with content, and maintain positive relationships with peers and educators. Although these challenges are common, research indicates that over 80% of these learners do not receive adequate mental health support, exacerbating the issue (HRSA, 2022). The consequences of this gap in support can be long-term, affecting learners' academic outcomes and overall well-being. Educators, being in frequent contact with learners, are in a unique position to recognize and respond to Mental health-related issues. However, their role in mental health promotion is often undervalued and under-supported. Despite the increasing acknowledgment of the link between

mental health and academic performance, educators are still expected to manage complex mental health issues with limited training. This has led to a situation where educators are overwhelmed, and the critical role they could play in addressing learners' mental health issues remains unfulfilled (Andrews et al., 2014). As a result, the need for educators to be equipped with mental health literacy and the skills to address mental health concerns in the classroom is becoming increasingly urgent.

2.3.2 Mental Health Statistics for South African Learners

The mental health of South African learners is a growing concern, with various studies highlighting the prevalence of mental health disorders in children and adolescents. Research conducted by Shung-King et al. (2019) revealed that the prevalence of mental disorders in South African children and adolescents ranges from 17% to 22%. This statistic underscores the widespread nature of mental health issues among young people in South Africa. However, a significant portion of these learners do not receive the necessary mental health support, often due to limited access to services and the stigma associated with mental health (Shung-King et al., 2019).

A 2023 UNICEF U-Report poll found that 60% of children and youth in South Africa reported needing mental health support within the past year, a slight improvement from 73% in 2022 (UNICEF, 2023). Despite this positive shift, the data underscores the ongoing mental health crisis among South African learners, particularly within the 15–24-year-old demographic, where up to 70% reported requiring assistance. Untreated mental health conditions during adolescence are linked to long-term consequences such as reduced academic achievement, substance use, and higher risk of school dropout (WHO, 2021). The South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) similarly notes that 1 in 4 learners have shown symptoms of depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress at some stage of their schooling (SADAG, 2021), further reinforcing the magnitude of the issue.

Barriers to accessing mental health services are substantial. Socioeconomic factors such as poverty, high unemployment, and limited public healthcare resources significantly hinder access, particularly in rural and underserved communities (Hall et al., 2017). Geographic disparities compound these issues, leaving many schools without on-site mental health professionals or referral pathways. Although the Integrated School Health Policy (ISHP) includes mental health as a component of school health services, its implementation has been

uneven across provinces (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2012). Moreover, while Learner Support Agents (LSAs) exist in some schools to address psychosocial needs, their limited training and high caseloads reduce effectiveness (Shung-King et al., 2021). These challenges signal the urgent need for well-resourced, school-based mental health interventions and targeted strategies that empower educators to support learner well-being, especially in the most disadvantaged contexts.

2.3.3 Treatment of Mental Health for Learners in South Africa

Despite the alarming prevalence of mental health issues among learners in South Africa, access to treatment remains limited. According to a study by Wits University in 2022, there is a significant shortage of mental health services in primary healthcare facilities across the country. Many learners lack access to the support they need due to limited resources, especially in rural or economically disadvantaged areas. This shortage is compounded by a lack of trained mental health professionals in schools, leaving educators to manage mental health issues with little to no support (Wits University, 2022).

The South African Department of Basic Education (DBE) has prioritized mental health literacy and psychosocial support as part of its efforts to address the mental health crisis in schools. The DBE's focus on integrating mental health into the school environment is crucial, as it provides a foundation for better support and intervention for learners (Naidoo & Naidoo, 2021). Programs such as these can help identify and address mental health concerns at an early stage, preventing more severe outcomes down the line. However, the gap between policy and implementation remains significant, with many schools still lacking the necessary resources and training to effectively support learners' mental health.

Research by Naidoo and Naidoo (2021) advocates for a more robust approach to teacher-centred mental health training, emphasizing the need for professional development programs that equip educators with the skills to identify and address mental health issues in the classroom. Such programs are essential in bridging the gap in mental health support within schools, particularly in areas where mental health professionals are scarce. By providing educators with the tools to manage mental health issues, schools can create a more inclusive and supportive environment where learners feel understood and supported.

2.3.4 Effects of Early Identification of Mental Health Concerns

Early identification of mental health concerns in learners plays a critical role in preventing the escalation of issues and promoting overall well-being. According to Jorm et al. (2010), timely intervention is crucial in preventing mental health issues from becoming more severe. Early identification allows for the implementation of targeted support strategies, which can reduce the negative impact of mental health issues on a learner's academic and social development. By addressing mental health concerns at an early stage, educators and mental health professionals can help learners develop coping mechanisms and resilience, minimizing the long-term consequences of untreated mental health issues.

Studies by Suldo et al. (2022) highlight that learners who receive early intervention for mental health issues are better able to focus on their studies and experience improved academic performance. This is particularly important, as mental health issues can significantly affect a learner's concentration, motivation, and overall engagement with their education. When learners feel supported and understood, they are more likely to succeed academically and develop the social-emotional skills necessary for life beyond school.

Furthermore, early identification of mental health concerns can help prevent the development of more serious issues, such as substance abuse, self-harm, and behavioural disorders (Brückner et al., 2022). When mental health issues are not addressed in their early stages, they can escalate into more severe conditions that are more difficult to treat and manage. Early intervention, therefore, not only supports academic success but also plays a key role in preventing long-term mental health problems that can affect learners well into adulthood.

2.3.5 Educators' Preparedness for Dealing with Learners' Mental Health Issues

Educators are often at the forefront of identifying and addressing mental health issues among learners, yet many feel ill-equipped to handle these challenges. Research by Kidger et al. (2016) reveals a gap between educators' perceptions of their role in addressing mental health issues and their actual capacity to manage these concerns. Many educators view mental health as the responsibility of specialized professionals and feel that they do not have the necessary knowledge or training to address such issues effectively. This perception creates a barrier to early intervention, as educators may not feel confident in identifying mental health concerns in the classroom.

Studies by Weston et al. (2022) emphasize that many educators lack the confidence to address mental health issues due to insufficient training, overwhelming workloads, and a lack of

resources. As the demands on educators increase, their ability to focus on mental health issues becomes increasingly limited. Without proper support, educators are left struggling to balance their teaching duties with the emotional and psychological needs of their learners. To bridge this gap, comprehensive mental health training programs are essential, equipping educators with the skills and confidence they need to support learners effectively (Teixeira et al., 2020). The growing recognition of mental health as a critical component of education calls for a shift in how educators are prepared for their roles. Incorporating mental health training into teacher education programs and providing ongoing professional development opportunities are essential steps in ensuring that educators are equipped to support the mental well-being of their learners. This shift would not only improve the overall learning environment but also contribute to the long-term mental health of learners, fostering a more supportive and inclusive educational system.

2.3.6 Schools and Educators' Roles in Mental Health Support

Schools play a pivotal role in addressing mental health issues, as they provide a structured environment where learners spend a significant portion of their time. The role of educators extends beyond academic instruction to include the emotional and psychological well-being of learners. Research by Reinke et al. (2011) suggests that educators play a crucial role in identifying and supporting learners with mental health concerns. However, many educators report feeling unprepared to manage these issues, often due to a lack of training and resources. As the link between mental health and academic performance becomes more widely recognized, educators need to develop a greater understanding of how mental health affects learning and behaviour.

High levels of school connectedness, which refers to learners' sense of belonging and engagement in the school community, are associated with lower rates of mental health issues, including depression and anxiety (García-Moya et al., 2019). Educators can foster school connectedness by building positive relationships with their learners and creating an inclusive classroom environment that promotes well-being. When learners feel connected to their school, they are more likely to engage in their studies and develop the social-emotional skills necessary for academic and personal success (Govere & Govere, 2016). However, the demands placed on educators, such as large class sizes, heavy workloads, and the need to address behavioural issues, often leave them with little time or energy to address mental health concerns. To support educators in fulfilling this role, it is essential for schools to prioritize the well-being of

educators themselves, providing them with the tools, resources, and professional development they need to support their learners' mental health. Schools must also collaborate with mental health professionals and community organizations to create a comprehensive system of support for learners (Atkins et al., 2017).

2.3.7 Challenges in Addressing Mental Health in Schools

Several challenges hinder the ability of educators and schools to effectively address mental health issues. One of the most significant barriers is the lack of formal mental health training for educators. Research by Kidger et al. (2016) and Weston et al. (2022) highlights that many educators feel ill-equipped to identify and support learners with mental health issues due to insufficient training. The lack of mental health literacy means that educators may overlook early warning signs or struggle to provide appropriate interventions. The pressure of managing large classrooms, delivering curriculum content, and addressing behavioural issues leaves educators with limited time and resources to focus on mental health. Reinke et al. (2011) point out that many educators are overwhelmed by their workload, which makes it difficult for them to engage with learners on a personal level or address emotional or psychological concerns.

This is especially true in under-resourced schools, where educators may lack the support and resources, they need to address mental health effectively. Furthermore, the shortage of school-based mental health professionals, particularly in underserved areas, adds to the challenge. Without access to trained counsellors or psychologists, educators are often left to manage mental health issues with little support. Naidoo and Naidoo (2021) argue that schools must collaborate with mental health professionals and community organizations to ensure that learners receive the support they need. To overcome these challenges, mental health training should be integrated into teacher education programs, and schools must prioritize mental health as a core component of the educational experience.

2.3.8 Educators' Perception of Their Role in Mental Health-Related Issues in Schools and the Importance of Early Identification

Educators' perceptions of their role in addressing mental health-related issues in schools significantly impact the identification and management of such concerns. A study by Vostanis et al. (2015) found that while many educators recognize the importance of mental health in the school setting, they often feel unprepared to address the mental health needs of their learners. Educators may be unaware of how to identify mental health issues early, and the stigma

surrounding mental illness may further prevent them from seeking help for learners. In contrast, research by Weston et al. (2022) suggests that educators who have received mental health training are more likely to identify signs of distress and intervene early, helping to prevent the development of more severe mental health issues. Educators who are trained to recognize early warning signs and understand the role of mental health in academic and social development are better equipped to support their learners effectively. This highlights the importance of ongoing mental health education for educators, as it can significantly improve their ability to address mental health concerns in the classroom.

The importance of early identification cannot be overstated. Studies have shown that learners who receive early intervention for mental health issues are less likely to experience long-term difficulties, including academic failure, substance abuse, and self-harm (Brückner et al., 2022). By identifying mental health issues early, educators can provide timely interventions that help learners build resilience, improve their emotional regulation, and achieve academic success. Thus, early identification should be a priority for educators, school leaders, and mental health professionals working together to support learners' mental well-being.

2.4 Summary

Using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory as a guiding framework, this chapter has examined important literature about educators' views of their responsibility in spotting learners with mental health problems. Emphasising the great frequency of mental health problems among learners worldwide and in South Africa, the review underlines the pressing need of intervention and support. It is clear that early detection and intervention depend much on the guidance of educators. Conversely, it acknowledges the several challenges they encounter—including inadequate funding, prejudice, and poor education. Furthermore, emphasised in the chapter is the need of cooperation among several entities to address these problems. It pushes for better collaboration and increased awareness of mental health issues among institutions, doctors, and educators. This literature review establishes a framework for future studies by focussing on educators' points of view and the resources they need to cope with Mental health-related issues.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research design, methodology, and procedures employed to investigate educators' perceptions in identifying learners with mental health-related issues. The study is grounded in the constructivist paradigm, which emphasizes understanding how individuals construct meaning from their experiences within specific social and cultural contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By adopting this paradigm, the research focused on exploring the subjective realities of educators, acknowledging that their perceptions are shaped by personal experiences, interactions with learners, and the broader school environment. The constructivist approach enabled a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding mental health identification in educational settings, recognizing that knowledge is co-constructed through dialogue and reflection with participants.

The methodology employed in this study aligns with the qualitative research tradition, which is best suited to explore nuanced perceptions and lived experiences. A qualitative approach allows for rich, descriptive data to be gathered, offering insights into how educators interpret and respond to learners exhibiting signs of mental health-related issues. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary data collection method, providing flexibility for participants to express their thoughts while ensuring that key topics were covered. The population targeted for this study includes educators from public schools within delineated geographical areas, selected through purposive sampling to ensure participants have relevant experience and insights. Data analysis followed a thematic approach, allowing patterns and themes to emerge organically from participants' narratives. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw, were strictly adhered to, ensuring the research upheld the highest ethical standards. Measures to ensure trustworthiness—credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability—were integrated throughout the research process to enhance the study's validity and reliability.

3.2 Research Paradigm

The constructivist research paradigm guided this study, paralleling its qualitative nature by emphasizing the exploration of educators' experiences and understanding of their roles in identifying learners with mental health-related issues. Unlike positivism's objective of creating objective realities through hypothesis testing and statistical inference, constructivism focuses

on the social construction of reality, arguing that knowledge arises from people's interactions, experiences, and reflections (Shah, 2021). This paradigm acknowledges that meaning is not invariant but is socially co-constructed by human beings and social processes. According to Darby et al. (2019), constructivist research treats participants as co-builders of knowledge rather than as subjects. This establishes an even more partnership-based relationship between participants and researchers. This method allows for rich insight into how educators think, recognizing their responses as valued data for the study's results. Additionally, Scauso (2019) identifies that constructivism provides methodological flexibility that accommodates the complex nature of social behaviour and allows for a sensitive investigation of how educators experience and respond to mental health-related issues within schools.

With the employment of the constructivist paradigm, this study sought to uncover subjective meanings that educators ascribe to their experiences, providing rich contextual data rather than searching for universal laws or statistical generalizations. Alharahsheh and Pius (2020) add that constructivism enables researchers to engage with participants' social realities, developing deep knowledge about their lived experiences. This paradigm is most suitable for exploring the role of educators and what aid they require, while it explores their beliefs about mental health-related issues and how they cope with them. Junjie and Yingxin (2022) also emphasize the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of constructivist research to ascertain that the findings are genuine and relevant. The study, therefore, adopted a constructive stance to capture the richness and subjective quality of educators' experience, per the research aim of gaining an understanding of their perceptions and developing avenues to optimize their capacity to address learners' mental health-related needs.

3.3 Research Approach

The study utilized a qualitative research approach exploring the views of educators on their role in identifying learners with mental health-related issues and the type of support to enhance their capacity to carry out this role. The utilization of a qualitative approach is due to its ability to capture the lived experiences of the participants and provide an in-depth understanding of what they believe and the problems they encounter (Adewole, 2021). Qualitative research is particularly appropriate for social issues because it allows researchers to explore how individuals perceive and interpret their work in their natural settings. According to Wieland et al. (2024), qualitative approaches allowed for a more in-depth examination of intricate experiences and connections, which is appropriate for the aim of this study to reveal educators'

internal meanings of mental health issues in schools. Using methods such as semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, this research aimed to gather rich, descriptive data directly from educators about their knowledge, concerns, and perceived support networks related to the identification and intervention of mental health issues.

Furthermore, this study acknowledged the significance of stakeholder engagement in addressing complex issues, a hypothesis supported by Kaur et al. (2024), who emphasized the importance of stakeholders' perceptions in determining the success of interventions. Just as interventional measures in supply chains encourage sustainable behaviour, similarly, the cooperation between educators, school officials, and mental health professionals is essential for accurate mental health identification and response. This research accordingly employed the same cooperation and common responsibility assumptions, which it identifies that more educators' potential must be supplied by a model of multiple stakeholders. In addition to guaranteeing the educators' voice, the qualitative approach allowed elucidation of limitations in the organisation and co-design of a practical solution, demonstrating range and depth methodologically mandated by Shah (2023) and Samani et al. (2023). In the end, this method guaranteed that the research remains solidly anchored in the practicalities of teaching experiences, bringing about meaningful and actionable suggestions.

3.4 Research Design

The study adopted a case study design to investigate how educators perceive and identify mental health-related issues among learners. The case study design is a qualitative approach that allows for a deeper exploration of a specific phenomenon in its real-world context (Yin, 2018). This qualitative explorative approach allowed a comprehensive examination of the participants' lived experiences, perspectives, and contextual factors influencing their perceptions and identification processes (Yin, 2018). The case study design provided a holistic understanding of how various elements, such as school culture, available resources, and interactions with stakeholders, shape educators' awareness and response to learners' mental health concerns. This method is particularly valuable for investigating complex social phenomena within their natural settings, enabling the researcher to capture the nuanced and multifaceted nature of mental health identification in schools (Yin, 2018). Through a semi-structured interview schedule, the case study approach facilitated an in-depth exploration of educators' day-to-day experiences, their strategies for recognizing mental health-related issues, and the barriers they encounter in the process.

The selection of an explorative case study design was further influenced by its capacity to reveal the intricate dynamics within public schools that affect educators' understanding and recognition of learners' Mental health-related issues (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This approach acknowledges that educators' perceptions are shaped not only by individual knowledge and beliefs but also by broader contextual factors, including institutional policies, community influences, and the availability of mental health resources. By examining these interconnected elements, the case study provides rich, contextualized insights that can inform targeted interventions and policy development aimed at improving mental health support within schools. Additionally, the method's emphasis on thick description and detailed analysis aligns with the study's objective to capture the depth and complexity of educators' experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Ultimately, this design choice ensures a comprehensive understanding of how mental health-related issues are perceived and addressed in the educational context, offering valuable implications for practice and future research.

3.5 Population and Sample

3.5.1 Population

The study population comprises educators working in a public school within delineated geographical areas, specifically targeting those teaching at the primary and intermediate school levels at a primary school in Midrand, Gauteng. These educators play a pivotal role in learners' academic and psychosocial development, particularly in identifying mental health-related issues (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2019). Primary and intermediate phase educators are often the first point of contact when behavioural or emotional changes arise in learners, positioning them as key figures in the early detection of Mental health-related issues. Their daily interactions and sustained engagement with learners enable them to observe patterns in academic performance, social interactions, and emotional regulation that may signal underlying mental health concerns (World Health Organization (WHO), 2021). By focusing on this specific population, the study aims to gain nuanced insights into how these educators perceive, interpret, and respond to mental health-related issues within their classrooms, considering both their professional responsibilities and personal attitudes toward mental health.

The school has a total of 65 staff members, of which 38 are educators. The selection of a primary school in Midrand, Gauteng, as the research setting offers a unique opportunity to explore educators' perceptions in an urban environment characterized by socio-economic

diversity. Midrand is a rapidly developing area with learners from various cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds, factors that can significantly influence the identification and management of mental health issues in schools (South African Council for Educators (SACE), 2022). Educators in such contexts may face distinct challenges, such as limited mental health resources, varying parental involvement levels, and the complexities of addressing stigma associated with mental health within diverse communities. These dynamics underscore the importance of understanding how socio-economic factors shape educators' approaches to recognizing and supporting learners facing Mental health-related issues (DBE, 2020). By focusing on this urban school setting, the study seeks to highlight the interplay between environmental influences, educator preparedness, and the effectiveness of existing support mechanisms, providing valuable insights to influence policy development and targeted interventions aimed at enhancing mental health support in South African schools.

3.5.2 Sampling Technique and Sample Size

Purposive sampling was used to select participants with relevant experience and knowledge regarding the identification of mental health issues in learners. This non-probability sampling technique is appropriate for qualitative research as it allows the researcher to intentionally select individuals who can provide in-depth and meaningful insights into the phenomenon being studied (Palinkas et al., 2015). In this study, twelve educators were selected from one public primary school in Midrand, Gauteng, to ensure a comprehensive and diverse range of perceptions. The chosen participants included both primary and intermediate phase educators, as they are directly involved in the academic and psychosocial development of learners. The selection criteria required educators to have a minimum of one year of teaching experience and to have encountered learners exhibiting signs of mental health-related issues. This criterion ensured that participants had adequate exposure to the school environment and first-hand experience with the identification and management of mental health concerns among learners. By selecting participants based on their direct involvement with learners facing psychosocial challenges, the study aimed to capture rich, context-specific insights that are critical for understanding the complex processes of mental health identification within the school setting.

The purposive sampling strategy also facilitated the inclusion of educators with varying years of experience, subject specializations, and roles within the school, thereby providing a more holistic understanding of how mental health issues are perceived and addressed at different educational levels. Such diversity among participants helped in capturing a wide spectrum of

experiences, from novice educators who may face challenges in recognizing early warning signs to more experienced educators with established strategies for addressing mental health-related concerns. Additionally, the inclusion of educators who have previously referred learners for mental health support or collaborated with school-based support teams enriched the data by offering insights into the existing referral pathways and intervention mechanisms within the school system. Purposive sampling thus enabled the researcher to gather data that is not only relevant but also reflective of the multifaceted nature of mental health identification in an educational context (Palinkas et al., 2015). By focusing on participants who are well-positioned to observe behavioural, emotional, and academic indicators of mental health issues, the study ensures that the findings are grounded in practical, real-world experiences that can inform effective interventions aimed at enhancing mental health support in South African schools.

3.6 Data Collection Methods

3.6.1 Research Instrument

Data was collected using a semi-structured interview schedule specifically designed to elicit detailed and comprehensive responses regarding educators' perceptions, experiences, and processes involved in identifying learners with mental health-related issues. This method was chosen for its balance between structure and flexibility, allowing the researcher to maintain consistency across interviews while providing participants with the opportunity to elaborate on their personal experiences (Kallio et al., 2016). Before the actual main data collection, the guide for the interviews was pretested on a pilot sample of three educators who were not members of the final study population but shared similar professional backgrounds. Pretesting was utilized in the testing of the clarity, appropriateness, and completeness of the queries, ensuring that they were recording the anticipated information. Feedback from participants identified slight ambiguities in a few of the questions, namely those related to the distinction between behaviour and emotion-based indicators of mental illness. To that end, some questions were revised to make them clearer. The pretest also showed that certain participants required prompting so that they would fully detail their experiences, so more specific follow-up probes were added. This exercise not only strengthened the interview guide but also prepared the researcher more effectively to carry out successful discussions, subsequently resulting in the collection of richer, more nuanced data.

3.6.2 Data Collection Procedure

Face-to-face interviews were conducted at the participants' schools in a private setting to ensure both comfort and confidentiality. Conducting the interviews in familiar environments allowed participants to feel at ease, facilitating open and honest communication. Privacy was prioritized to encourage participants to share their personal experiences and perceptions without fear of judgment or external pressures. Interviews were conducted at the school after school hours in the vice principal's office. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and spanned two weeks, allowing sufficient time to explore key themes while accommodating participants' schedules and workloads. Prior to the interviews, participants provided informed consent, which included approval for audio recording. Audio recording ensured accurate data capture for subsequent transcription and analysis, allowing the researcher to focus on the conversation while preserving the integrity of participants' responses (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

In addition to audio recordings, field notes were taken during the interviews to document non-verbal cues, environmental factors, and other contextual details that could provide valuable insights into the participants' responses. These notes captured observations such as body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, and any signs of hesitation or emphasis, which enriched the interpretation of the verbal data. For example, an educator might verbally express confidence in identifying mental health issues but display uncertainty through nervous gestures or pauses. Such non-verbal cues provided a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in the identification process. Furthermore, taking note of the school environment—such as interruptions, resource availability, or visible support materials—helped contextualize educators' perspectives and highlighted factors that may influence their ability to recognize and address mental health-related concerns.

To build rapport and minimize social desirability bias, several strategies were employed. At the outset of each interview, participants were assured that there were no right or wrong answers and that their honest perspectives were valued. This reassurance aimed to reduce pressure on participants to provide socially acceptable responses and instead focus on sharing their genuine experiences. The researcher maintained a non-judgmental and empathetic demeanour, encouraging participants to speak freely and reflect on both positive and challenging aspects of their roles in identifying mental health issues. Establishing a comfortable conversational flow further helped participants relax, which was especially important when discussing potentially sensitive topics related to learners' well-being. By

fostering an atmosphere of trust and respect, the data collection process was able to yield rich, authentic insights into educators' perceptions, experiences, and the contextual factors shaping the identification of mental health-related issues among learners.

3.7 Data Analysis

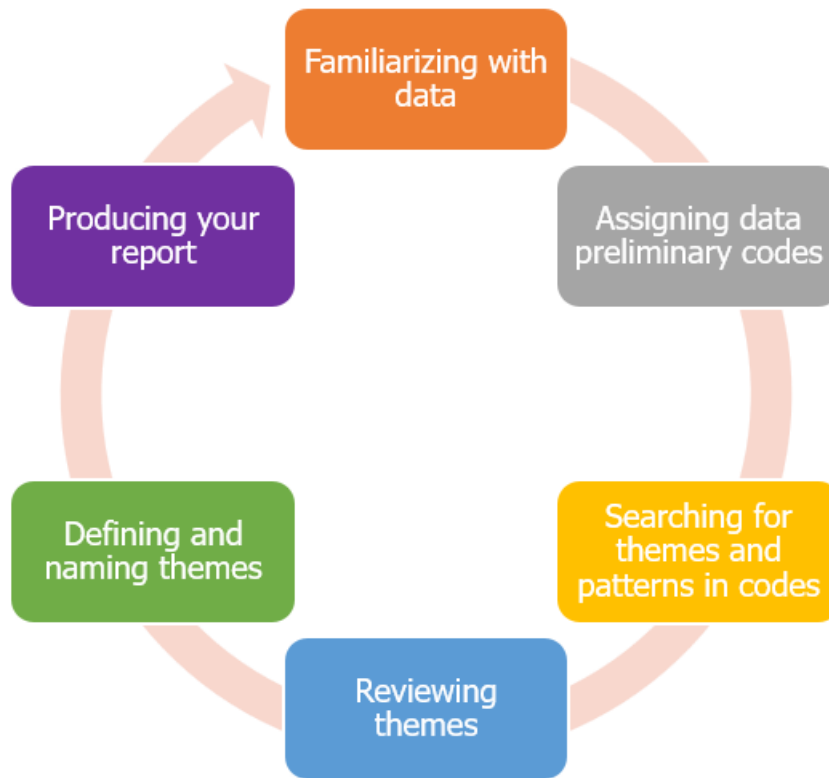
Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the collected data, following the structured six-phase approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method was chosen for its flexibility and suitability in identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data. The first phase involved familiarization with the data, where the researcher engaged in repeated reading of the interview transcripts and field notes to gain an in-depth understanding of the content. Listening to the audio recordings during transcription further enhanced familiarity with the participants' narratives, allowing for the recognition of subtle nuances and contextual details. This phase was critical in ensuring that the analysis was grounded in the participants' lived experiences and perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The second phase, generating initial codes, involved systematically coding significant features of the data across the entire dataset. Codes were derived both inductively from the data and deductively based on the research questions. The computer-aided program ATLAS.ti v 8. was utilized during this phase to manage and organize the data efficiently, enabling the researcher to collate all relevant extracts under specific codes (Woolf & Silver, 2017). The program facilitated the visualization of relationships between codes, which proved instrumental in identifying overlapping or interconnected areas of interest. In the third phase, searching for themes, codes were grouped into broader categories reflecting recurring patterns. This process involved examining how different codes could be combined to form overarching themes that encapsulated key aspects of the participants' experiences.

During the fourth phase, reviewing themes, the preliminary themes were refined by checking their coherence in relation to both the coded data extracts and the entire dataset. This step ensured that each theme was meaningful and distinct while capturing a comprehensive representation of the participants' perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The fifth phase involved defining and naming themes, where each theme was clearly articulated, detailing its scope and focus. This process included writing detailed descriptions of how each theme related to the research questions and the overall dataset. The final phase, producing the report, entailed weaving together the themes into a coherent narrative, supported by direct quotations from

participants to illustrate key points and enhance the credibility of the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The figure below illustrates the utilized six step thematic data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Figure 2: The six step thematic data analysis



Emerging themes centred on four primary areas: how educators perceive mental health-related issues in learners, the indicators used to identify these issues, the challenges encountered during the identification process, and the support mechanisms necessary to empower educators. Educators' perceptions were influenced by factors such as personal experiences, cultural beliefs, and professional training. Indicators identified included changes in learners' behaviour, academic performance, and social interactions. Challenges faced by educators ranged from limited training and resources to the stigma surrounding mental health discussions within the school environment. Participants also emphasized the need for continuous professional development, access to mental health professionals, and stronger collaboration with parents and external support services to enhance their capacity to identify and support learners with Mental health-related issues. These themes provided a comprehensive understanding of the complexities involved in the identification process, highlighting areas for intervention and support to improve learners' mental well-being (Woolf & Silver, 2017).

3.8 Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, the four criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, as proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), were addressed. These criteria ensure that the research findings are robust, reliable, and accurately represent participants' experiences.

3.8.1 Credibility

Credibility refers to the confidence in the truth of the data and the interpretations of participants' experiences. To enhance credibility, member checking was employed by sharing preliminary themes and interpretations with participants for feedback (Birt et al., 2016). This process allowed participants to validate whether the findings accurately reflected their perspectives. If discrepancies arose, participants provided clarifications or further details, ensuring that their voices remained central to the research. This iterative process not only strengthened the authenticity of the data but also built rapport and trust between the researcher and participants, fostering an open environment for honest feedback.

Additionally, triangulation was used by comparing data collected from interviews, field notes, and observations to corroborate findings. This method minimized potential biases that could stem from a single data source. Prolonged engagement with participants ensured a deeper understanding of the context and reduced the risk of misinterpretation. The researcher also engaged in peer debriefing, discussing emerging themes with colleagues to challenge assumptions and refine interpretations. These combined strategies ensured that the study findings were credible and reflective of the participants' lived experiences.

3.8.2 Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which the study's findings can be applied to other contexts or settings. To facilitate this, detailed and thick descriptions of the research context, participants' demographics, and interview settings were provided. By outlining the socio-cultural and educational contexts of the participants, readers can assess whether the findings are applicable to their specific settings. For example, information about the schools' resources, community dynamics, and participants' roles within the educational system was thoroughly documented.

Furthermore, the research included in-depth descriptions of the data collection process, ensuring transparency regarding how information was gathered and interpreted. By providing comprehensive accounts of the participants' backgrounds and the settings in which the interviews took place, readers are equipped with sufficient information to judge the applicability of the findings to similar environments. This approach empowers others to transfer insights from the study to their contexts, promoting broader applicability while acknowledging the uniqueness of the research setting.

3.8.3 Dependability

Dependability focuses on the consistency and reliability of the research process. To ensure dependability, an audit trail was maintained throughout the study, documenting all research decisions, data collection methods, and analysis steps (Nowell et al., 2017). This trail included detailed records of how interview guides were developed, how themes emerged, and the rationale behind methodological choices. The audit trail allows external reviewers or researchers to follow the research process and assess its consistency over time.

Additionally, the study incorporated peer examination, where colleagues with expertise in qualitative research reviewed the research process and provided feedback. This external scrutiny ensured that methodological decisions were sound and that interpretations remained grounded in the data. By clearly documenting changes in research direction, coding adjustments, and decisions regarding theme development, the study maintained a transparent and replicable process. These measures contributed to the reliability and stability of the findings, ensuring that similar results could be obtained if the study were repeated in a comparable context.

3.8.4 Confirmability

Confirmability ensures that the study's findings are shaped by participants' responses rather than researcher biases or preconceived notions. To address confirmability, the researcher engaged in reflexivity throughout the research process, continuously reflecting on personal assumptions, beliefs, and potential influences on data interpretation. A reflexive journal was maintained, where thoughts, decisions, and reactions during data collection and analysis were recorded. This practice helped the researcher remain aware of personal biases and actively work to minimize their influence on the study's outcomes.

Moreover, the audit trail served as a confirmability tool, providing a transparent account of how data were interpreted and how conclusions were drawn. By documenting coding decisions and theme development processes, the researcher ensured that findings were grounded in participants' accounts rather than personal perspectives. Peer debriefing sessions further enhanced confirmability by challenging the researcher to justify interpretations and remain faithful to the data. These combined efforts ensured that the study's conclusions reflected the authentic voices of participants, bolstering the overall trustworthiness of the research.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

Conducting research involving human participants necessitates strict adherence to ethical principles to protect participants' rights, well-being, and dignity. In this study, comprehensive ethical measures were implemented to ensure transparency, respect, and integrity throughout the research process. Ethical approval, voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality, avoidance of harm, non-financial incentives, and the principle of beneficence were all carefully considered and applied.

3.9.1 Ethical Approval

Before commencing the study, approval was sought and obtained from the Wits Ethics Non-Medical Committee by submitting a detailed research proposal to ensure full compliance with ethical standards. Following this, formal permission was secured from the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) to conduct the research within public schools under its jurisdiction. Subsequently, the researcher approached the principal of the selected Midrand primary school, providing a clear explanation of the study's purpose, significance, and procedures to gain authorization to conduct research within the school environment. This process underscored the importance of institutional transparency and compliance with governing educational authorities.

3.9.2 Voluntary Participation

Voluntary participation was a fundamental principle of this research. Educators were given the autonomy to decide whether to engage in the study, free from any form of pressure or coercion. Participants were thoroughly informed about the study's objectives, research methodologies, and any potential risks or benefits associated with their involvement (Resnik & Dinella, 2007). They were assured that participation was entirely voluntary, with the right to withdraw at any

point without facing negative consequences. This approach aimed to empower participants to make informed decisions regarding their involvement.

3.9.3 Informed Consent

In alignment with ethical research practices, informed consent was obtained from all participating educators. Participants received a comprehensive written Participant Information Sheet and informed consent form detailing the study's aims, and data collection methods, including the use of semi-structured interviews, potential risks and benefits, and data storage and usage protocols (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The form emphasized the voluntary nature of participation and explicitly stated that educators could withdraw at any stage without repercussion. To ensure clarity and understanding, participants were given ample opportunity to ask questions and seek further explanations before signing the consent form.

3.9.4 Anonymity and Confidentiality

Protecting participants' identities and personal information was paramount throughout the study. To preserve anonymity, educators were encouraged to use pseudonyms of their choice every time they had to use names, ensuring that individual identities were not disclosed in interview transcripts, data analysis, or any published reports (Petrova, Dewing, & Camilleri, 2016). Audio recordings of the interviews were securely stored on a password-protected device, accessible only to the researcher. Upon completion of the study, all audio files will be permanently deleted to maintain confidentiality and uphold data protection standards.

3.9.5 Avoidance of Harm

Recognizing the sensitivity surrounding discussions of mental health, measures were implemented to mitigate any potential emotional discomfort or distress participants might experience during interviews. The interview guide was carefully designed to avoid triggering negative emotions, and educators were informed of their right to pause the interview or withdraw at any point if they felt uncomfortable (Doody & Noonan, 2016). Additionally, the school counsellor's contact information has been included in the Participant information sheet documentation to provide participants with access to appropriate assistance if needed.

3.9.6 Non-Financial Incentives

No financial incentives were provided to educators for participating in this study. Instead, participation was framed as a valuable professional contribution, offering educators an opportunity to reflect on their experiences and support the broader understanding of their roles in identifying learners with mental health concerns (Diane, 2008). This approach upheld the principle of voluntary engagement without undue influence.

3.9.7 Beneficence

Guided by the principle of beneficence, the study aimed to maximize potential benefits while minimizing any risks to participants. By exploring educators' perceptions of identifying mental health-related issues among learners, the research sought to contribute to the enhancement of supportive environments within schools (Pretorius, 2023). Findings from the study will be disseminated through appropriate academic channels, with the potential to inform professional development initiatives and improve early identification and support for learners experiencing Mental health-related issues.

3.10 Limitations of the Study

During the data collection process, several delimitations and limitations were encountered. The study focuses exclusively in a public school under the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE), excluding private schools and schools outside Gauteng. This geographical delimitation ensures feasibility within the available timeframe and resources but limits the diversity of educator experiences and may affect the generalizability of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Additionally, the research concentrates on educators' perceptions of learners' mental health, intentionally excluding other stakeholders such as parents, learners, and mental health professionals. This narrow focus allows for an in-depth exploration of educators' insights within the classroom setting but may limit the broader understanding of the issue (Simon & Goes, 2013). The study also uses qualitative methods, specifically interviews, which provide rich data but restrict generalizability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). By focusing on a specific point in time rather than adopting a longitudinal design, the research limits the ability to explore changes in perceptions over time.

Several limitations were acknowledged in this study. The relatively small sample size of twelve educators may limit the generalizability of the findings to other settings. Sampling bias was also a concern, as participation was voluntary, and educators who chose to participate may have been influenced by personal interest or experiences with mental health issues among

learners, potentially skewing the range of perspectives captured (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). Subjectivity and researcher bias also posed challenges during data collection and interpretation, with the risk of socially desirable responses influencing the interview process. The reliance on self-reported data may not fully capture the complexities of identifying mental health issues among learners (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Logistical constraints, such as educators' limited time for interviews due to their teaching responsibilities, further complicated data collection, potentially leading to brief responses that affected the depth of the data. Finally, the study's external validity is limited because it focuses on a single urban region in Gauteng. Future research could extend to rural schools, private institutions, or schools in other provinces to expand the understanding of educators' perceptions of mental health in diverse educational environments (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Future research could also incorporate observational methods or triangulate data sources to enhance the robustness of findings.

3.11 Summary

This chapter provided a comprehensive overview of the research methodology employed to investigate educators' perceptions of identifying learners with mental health-related issues. The research design was carefully chosen to align with the study's aims, ensuring that the data collection methods were appropriate to capture educators' views and experiences. The sampling strategies used aimed to select a diverse range of participants, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the perceptions held by educators from various backgrounds. Additionally, the chapter outlined the data analysis procedures, specifically the use of thematic analysis, which facilitated the identification of key themes and patterns in educators' responses. Ethical considerations, including informed consent and confidentiality, were strictly adhered to, ensuring the integrity of the research process and the protection of participant rights.

In the next chapter, the findings from the data analysis will be presented, offering insights into the various factors that shape educators' perceptions of mental health-related issues in the classroom. Thematic analysis has provided a structured approach to analysing the data, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities in identifying and supporting learners with mental health-related issues. The findings will highlight key themes emerging from the data, shedding light on the barriers faced by educators, their attitudes toward mental health, and their experiences with early identification and support strategies. These findings will serve as the foundation for the subsequent discussion, where implications for practice and programs will be explored.

CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from interviews with twelve primary school educators in Midrand, exploring their perceptions of identifying learners with mental health-related issues. The data, collected through semi-structured interviews, revealed key themes related to educators' understanding of mental health, their ability to recognize early signs, and the challenges encountered in the identification process. Factors influencing these processes included limited resources, insufficient training, and varying levels of support from stakeholders. The constructivist approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of how educators interpret mental health within their school context.

The thematic analysis highlighted both barriers and enabling factors affecting the early identification of mental health concerns among learners. Educators acknowledged the importance of awareness but cited challenges such as stigma, lack of knowledge, and environmental factors within the school setting. Despite these obstacles, supportive collaboration with colleagues and access to external resources were noted as facilitating elements. The chapter is structured around these key themes, providing direct participant quotations to reflect their authentic experiences while aligning the findings with the study's objectives and relevant literature.

4.2 Demographic Profile of Participants

Participants in the study consisted of twelve educators with diverse demographic characteristics, contributing to a broad perspective on identifying mental health issues among learners. The participants' ages ranged from 25 to 50 years, providing insights from both early-career and veteran educators. The group included a balanced representation of genders, with nine female and three male educators, reflecting the gender distribution within the school's teaching staff. Most participants were of African descent, with minimal representation from other ethnicities, including Coloured, Indian, and White backgrounds. This demographic composition primarily reflects the local community's population, providing valuable insights into how cultural perspectives within the predominantly African context influence the identification of mental health issues in educational settings.

Teaching experience among the participants ranged from 2 to 25 years, allowing for the inclusion of both fresh perspectives from newer educators and seasoned insights from more experienced staff. The educators taught across various grade levels, from Grade R (reception year) to Grade 8, ensuring that the study captured the nuances of mental health identification across different developmental stages of learners. Their professional roles varied and included class educators responsible for overall classroom management, subject specialists focusing on specific areas such as mathematics, languages, and life skills, and senior educators involved in curriculum planning and mentorship. Some senior educators also held leadership positions, offering administrative viewpoints on school policies related to learner well-being. This demographic diversity provided a comprehensive understanding of the complexities and varying experiences involved in identifying mental health issues within the primary school context. Information is also presented in a table form below.

Table 4.2: Profile of Participants (N=12)

Participant	Gender	Race	Age	Years of Teaching Experience	Grade Level/Age Groups	Roles and Responsibility
1	F	Black African	28	3	5 & 6	Teaching Mathematics and classroom management
2	M	Black African	40	4	4 & 5	Teaching, supporting curriculum development
3	F	Black African	33	6	1 & 2	Teach Life Skills
4	F	Black African	49	22	5 - 8	Supporting curriculum planning, teaching Maths, mentoring and guiding educators

5	M	Black African	39	11	1	Teaching Languages
6	F	White	42	15	5 - 7	Teach, instil discipline, and communicate with parents
7	F	Black African	35	7	4	Senior educator, support learners
8	F	Black African	37	12	2 & 3	Teaching and class management
9	F	Black African	42	13	4 & 5	Class management and teaching
10	F	Black African	53	24	6 & 7	Vice principal, teach English
11	F	Black African	38	9	3 & 4	Organise extramural activities and teach Life Skills
12	M	Black African	46	20	5 - 7	Teaching Natural and Social Sciences

4.3 Presentation of Themes

This section defines and analyses the key themes of the research. Among these topics are educators' views on their role in identifying children with mental health problems and the tools required for this job. By providing insights into the knowledge, issues, and support systems connected to mental health among learners, the themes found by data analysis helped to attain the research objectives. This paper addresses the following topics: educators' comprehension of mental health issues, indicators and manifestations of mental health concerns, educators' responsibilities in recognizing and assisting learners, challenges in identifying and supporting learners, institutional support, and requisite modifications. These categories provide a comprehensive understanding of the elements affecting educators' ability to identify and address the mental health needs of their learners.

The research on educators' knowledge and comprehension of mental health examines the extent of educators' understanding of mental health concerns and their perception of the significance of mental health awareness. The Signs & Indicators of Mental Health Issues analyse learners' emotional, behavioural, and academic alterations that may signify mental health concerns. Educators' responsibilities in seeing and helping pupils go beyond their classroom, including accepting challenging learners and supplying necessary help. The challenges in identifying and supporting learners highlight the ones educators face: parental stigma, learner reluctance to reveal, and inadequate training. Support from Schools assesses the accessibility of school-based resources, including counsellors and supplementary institutional assistance. Needed Improvements delineate strategies to enhance mental health treatment in educational institutions, including the recruitment of specialized personnel, such as social workers, the enhancement of stakeholder collaboration, and the provision of supplementary training for educators. Table 4.3.1 below delineates the themes along with their respective subthemes.

Table 4.3: Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subthemes
1. Educators' Awareness and Understanding of Mental Health	1.1 Importance of Mental Health Awareness
	1.2 Understanding of Mental Health Issues
2. Signs and Indicators of Mental Health Issues	2.1 Emotional and Behavioural Changes
	2.2 Academic Struggles
3. Educators' Role in Identifying and Supporting Learners	3.1 Identifying Learners with Mental health-related issues
	3.2 Additional Responsibilities Beyond Teaching
4. Challenges in Identifying and Supporting Learners	4.1 Learners Not Opening Up
	4.2 Parental Resistance and Stigma
	4.3 Limited Training for Educators
5. Support from Schools	5.1 Availability of School Counsellor
	5.2 Lack of Additional School Support
6. Needed Improvements	6.1 More Training for Educators

6.2 Collaboration Between Stakeholders

6.3 Hiring More Social Workers

4.3.1 Theme 1: Educators' Knowledge and Awareness of Mental Health

Educators play a major role in observing and acting on learners' mental health problems. Their level of awareness and knowledge influence their ability to make early warning detection and appropriate intervention. The significance of mental health awareness and differing perceptions of mental health were what this study's participants highlighted, and the reasons why they did so are presented in the following sections.

4.3.1.1 Subtheme 1.1: Importance of Mental Health Awareness

A majority of the respondents in this research indicated that knowing about mental health is essential in attaining learners' well-being and academic achievement. Seven out of twelve respondents indicated that recognizing mental health problems is essential to provide the necessary help. A teacher emphasized the same as *"I think it is very important; if we don't take notice of their mental health, then how can we assist them?" (P6).*

This perception is argued to convey that instructors view awareness as the first step in intervention and reinforcement of their identification of learners at risk. This was supported by another respondent who stated, *"As educators, we are the first point of contact for learners, so we should know about these problems." (P7).*

This reply indicates that educators are aware of their position within learners' lives and understand that, quite often, they are the first to notice signs of distress. The role of mental health awareness among educators can be described with the help of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which operates in the microsystem in which there is direct interaction between the teacher and learners (Johnson & Cooke, 2020). The educators who are empathetic towards the emotional state of learners will have an easier time detecting early warning signs and providing appropriate support. However, without proper training and infrastructure, their efficiency is restricted (Naidoo & Naidoo, 2021). Heavy workload and absence of support services in the majority of school environments hinder the capacity of educators to react to learners' mental health problems (Reinke et al., 2011). Closing the gap

and facilitating educators to respond to learners' mental health problems holistically requires formal training programs and school-level mental health initiatives that raise awareness.

4.3.1.2 Subtheme 1.2: Understanding of Mental Health Problems

While almost all the educators agreed on the importance of mental health, their view of what constitutes it was varying. Nine of twelve participants saw mental health encompassing emotional, cognitive, and behavioural aspects, while three provided a lesser or inaccurate definition. One teacher summarized their findings as follows, *"I have seen some problems such as depression, tiredness, loneliness, you see, these types of things."* (P6)

This definition suggests that some educators recognize common mental health issues in learners, namely those of an emotional nature. A second interviewee provided a more general definition, responding, *"Mental health issues affect a person's emotions, thoughts, and behaviour that's what I know."* (P7).

This response is in keeping with research that mental health affects various aspects of a learner, including mood, cognition, and interpersonal relations (Suldo et al., 2022). Despite observations like these, some instructors showed misperceptions regarding mental health. One of them perceived it as mere lagging behind in development, the term used being, "Mental health is primarily a lag in the mental growth of learners... some learners do not understand at their expected age." (P2). Such an observation implies no understanding about mental health as an intellectual issue alone and not an emotional and psychological one. These myths highlight the work of outside forces, as articulated in Bronfenbrenner's exosystem, which includes policies, professional development initiatives, and societal assumptions that impact what educators believe (Delany & Cheung, 2020). Without accurate knowledge among educators, they may miss early warning signs of mental health problems and cannot provide the appropriate help. Mental health literacy training packages can also be used to close these gaps so that educators will better understand learners' well-being and be able to respond more appropriately to their needs (Kidger et al., 2016; Weston et al., 2022).

4.3.2 Theme 2: Indications and Signs of Mental Illness

Educators are in a unique position to be able to recognize early warning signs of mental health issues in learners. Observation and interaction with learners by educators provide them with opportunities to see behavioural and performance changes that may point to underlying

psychological distress. Findings show that educators most commonly associate concerns regarding mental health with emotional and behavioural changes, as well as academic challenges.

4.3.2.1 Subtheme 2.1: Emotional and Behavioural Changes

Nine out of twelve interviewees identified that they detect new mental health issues through the apparent emotional and behavioural signs within learners. Withdrawal, mood swings, aggressiveness, and not being able to participate in activities are those signs. It was noted by one teacher while he stated, *"I've noticed a lot of withdrawal from class participation and absenteeism from school."* (P12)

This is in accord with findings stating that social disengagement and withdrawal are common symptoms of emotional distress among learners (Reinke et al., 2011). One participant pointed out sudden changes in demeanour, stating, *"Some learners suddenly become aggressive or very silent—it's the drastic change in conduct."* (P5)

Sudden changes in behaviour show that learners are in distress internally and cannot engage in class activities. From the perspective of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, these changes occur in the microsystem, where day-to-day interactions between educators and learners occur (Johnson & Cooke, 2020). Educators' ability to observe and respond to such cues relies on the school climate, available mental health resources, and their own awareness level about mental health issues (Kallitsoglou & Mahmud, 2023). But without adequate training, some educators may misinterpret these cues or be unclear on how to address them effectively (Kidger et al., 2016). Enhancing educators' mental health literacy is essential for improving early detection and intervention in schools.

4.3.2.2 Subtheme 2.2: Decline in Academic Performance

Ten out of the twelve respondents opined that abrupt academic decline is generally an immediate indicator of learners' mental health problems. A previously performing learner who starts failing or experiencing difficulties with concentration is most likely facing emotional problems. The trend was illustrated by one teacher as, *"A learner who used to perform well suddenly begins failing—this is frequently a sign of hidden mental health issues."* (P7)

This finding is in alignment with the facts that stress, anxiety, and depression also influence cognitive skills and academic performance quite extensively (Suldo et al., 2022). One of the participants further elaborated, *"I have seen high achievers not be able to concentrate or complete tasks due to anxiety or stress."* (P4)

This means that poor performance in school does not always result from the lack of ability but is a reflection of some psychological issues. All this is in line with Bronfenbrenner's theory on the level of the mesosystem where interactions between various systems, such as school, family, and social relationships, influence learners' performance (Kaushik et al., 2023). The learner may bring it in terms of school work if he or she experiences stress at home or in friendships.

Besides, studies indicate the necessity of early academic interventions since failure to address such challenges may lead to a long-term disengagement and increased school dropout risk (Brückner et al., 2022). Educators, therefore, need adequate training and support to distinguish between academic challenges owing to cognitive issues and issues owing to mental health problems. Specific interventions and a favourable classroom environment have the potential to minimize the impacts of Mental health-related issues on learners' academic work.

4.3.3 Theme 3: Role of Educators in Learner Identification and Support

Educators play a major role in identifying and supporting learners with mental problems, which they perceive as a part of their professional responsibility. Through regular interaction with learners, they are in a position to identify early manifestations of emotional turmoil and provide necessary assistance.

4.3.3.1 Subtheme 3.1: Identification of Students with Mental Health Problems

Educators recognize that as well as academic training, their professional brief is to be able to detect learners with mental health problems. Participants emphasized the way the teacher is most often the one to identify changes in learners' behaviour, attitude, and well-being. The testimony below illustrates the point nicely: *"If we don't spot these things, who will? Educators work with learners the longest."* (P10) Another added, *"It's not just teaching; we must also pay attention to when a child is struggling emotionally."* (P6).

This perspective supplements Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the microsystem in particular, with emphasis on the significance of teacher-learner interaction in determining pupil outcomes (Johnson & Cooke, 2020). Educators' ability to identify mental health problems early is lauded by research highlighting early intervention as being central to prevent academic and social difficulties (Jorm et al., 2010). Schools are essential environments where initial signs of mental distress are seen, which even further establishes the significant role of educators in instilling learner wellness (Suldo et al., 2022).

4.3.3.2 Subtheme 3.2: Other Responsibilities Outside Teaching

Some educators indicated that their work extends beyond teaching lessons, as they identify themselves as guardians who assist in the wholesome development of the learners. They see mental health counselling as an extension of their job towards establishing a positive and encouraging learning environment. One of them added, *"Being an educator means caring for a child holistically, not just concentrating on marks."* (P11) Another asserted, *"We should see to it that their well-being is given the right attention."* (P8)

This understanding encapsulates the mesosystem in Bronfenbrenner's framework, emphasizing the necessity of collaboration between educators, parents, and other school professionals to promote learners' mental health (Kaushik et al., 2023). Research also points to schools' necessity to promote emotional resilience, with evidence indicating that high school connectedness reduces learners' anxiety and depression levels (García-Moya et al., 2019). By taking an active role in learners' emotional health, educators help create a school climate that weighs both academic success and mental health.

4.3.4 Theme 4: Challenges of Identifying and Supporting Learners

Participants encounter a range of challenges in trying to identify and assist learners with mental health problems. They occur at both an individual and systemic level, including learners not being willing to disclose their problems, parent resistance, and educators lacking training. The findings show how they impede early identification and intervention activities, impacting the academic and emotional well-being of learners.

4.3.4.1 Subtheme 4.1: Students Not Opening Up

One of the significant challenges that instructors encounter is that learners do not usually openly articulate their mental difficulties. Six of the 12 participants indicated that they find it difficult to identify the learners who need assistance because most of the learners do not want to reveal their difficulties. As one instructor put it, *"Some learners hide their struggles, and it becomes difficult to know when they need assistance."* (P11). One of the respondents pointed out the communication barriers and stated, *"Even when we try to come near them, they close down and won't discuss what is wrong."* (P3)

This issue can be illustrated in Bronfenbrenner's microsystem, where immediate interactions between learners and educators influence support structures (Johnson & Cooke, 2020). Research indicates that most learners with mental health issues go undetected because they fail to seek them out (HRSA, 2022). Additionally, societal and cultural stigmas that are components of the macrosystem may discourage learners from sharing their issues (Hansen et al., 2021). In the absence of good communication, early intervention is compromised and results in escalating academic and emotional challenges (Suldo et al., 2022).

4.3.4.2 Subtheme 4.2: Parental Stigma and Resistance

Parental attitudes towards mental health emerged as the greatest barrier to educators' capacity to provide support for learners. Nine of the 12 participants discussed how parents tend to dismiss the issues raised by educators or do not see mental health difficulties as real problems. One participant said, *"Parents often dismiss our concerns, saying their child is just 'lazy' or 'not trying hard enough'."* (P1)

Another educator described, *"Many communities still believe mental health issues don't occur with children, so they won't get involved."* (P8).

This agrees with the mesosystem, i.e., interactions between microsystems such as parents and educators (Kaushik et al., 2023). Parents not willing to see mental illnesses make it an obstacle to adequately intervention. Empirical studies report that social stigma discourages parents from obtaining mental health interventions for their children (Jackman et al., 2022). Mental healthcare is underutilized in South Africa due to stigma, lack of awareness, and limited access, particularly in vulnerable communities (Shung-King et al., 2019). Enhancing partnerships

among schools, families, and mental health professionals is critical in the face of such shortcomings (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018).

4.3.4.3 Subtheme 4.3: Limited Training for Educators

Lack of training of educators was a pervasive theme throughout the study. Eleven of the 12 participants explained that they do not feel well enough trained to identify and support learners with mental health problems. One participant stated, *"I would say very little. Yes, we have workshops at times, but it is not enough."* (P5)

Another contributor put in, *"If we don't get the training, how do we know the best way to support learners with mental health?"* (P9)

This is linked to the exosystem, for example, overall policies, professional training, and access to resources that indirectly affect educators' ability to support learners (Delany & Cheung, 2020). Educators are frequently left feeling unprepared since they do not receive formal mental health training (Kidger et al., 2016; Weston et al., 2022). Studies suggest that incorporating mental health literacy in teacher education programs can boost the confidence and competency of educators to identify and address learner issues significantly (Teixeira et al., 2020). Also, the chronosystem is implicated since policy evolves—such as South Africa's SIAS Policy (2014)—which has aimed to incorporate psychosocial care in schools but has had implementation gaps (Naidoo & Naidoo, 2021).

4.3.5 Theme 5: Support Available in Schools

Educators identified the level of support available in schools as a key factor in their capacity to assist learners who have mental health problems. While some schools provide access to counsellors, the majority of participants suggested that the services provided are insufficient to meet the growing demand. This theme includes two subthemes: the availability of school counsellors and the lack of other school support.

4.3.5.1 Subtheme 5.1: Availability of School Counsellors

Seven out of the twelve participants affirmed that their schools indeed had a counsellor but explained that one counsellor was not enough to handle the number of cases effectively. The high caseload given to school counsellors limits the amount of assistance they can provide to learners. As one participant put it, *"We have a school counsellor, but she is overwhelmed."*

(P1) Another participant stated, *"The counsellor is good, but one person can't do all the cases in a big school."* (P3)

This relates to the exosystem in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory because school policy and resource allocation at the district or provincial level determines the level of mental health support that exists in schools (Delany & Cheung, 2020). Evidence indicates that even though school counsellors play a key role in identification and support of learners with mental health problems, inadequate staffing prevents them from providing long-term interventions (Reinke et al., 2011; Weston et al., 2022). Underprivileged communities in South Africa experience a lack of mental health workers in schools most significantly (Naidoo & Naidoo, 2021). Expanding mental health services and having manageable caseloads for school counsellors can make them more effective in working with learners.

4.3.5.2 Subtheme 5.2: Lack of Additional School Support

Six out of twelve participants were disappointed by the absence of additional mental health assistance beyond the school counsellor. Most of the educators had reported feeling bogged down by tasks that fall outside the professional training of the educators. One participant observed, *"Besides the in-house counsellor, we get no support."* (P6) Another participant opined, *"Educators are meant to handle these issues on their own, which is unrealistic."* (P2)

Ecological Systems Theory mesosystem occurs in this scenario since it encompasses interactions within, and between school counsellors, out-service mental health practitioners, and school educators (Kaushik et al., 2023). Lack of interaction between schools and external agencies causes delays in efforts to intervene in mental health issues. Literature shows that the integration of mental health professionals in the school system can significantly improve the identification and treatment of mentally challenged children at an early stage (Andrews et al., 2014; Teixeira et al., 2020). South Africa remains a cause of worry with the absence of mental health services, particularly in rural South Africa (Shung-King et al., 2019). The solution to this issue requires a policy-level change to increase investment in school-based mental health services and interdisciplinary coordination between educators and mental health specialists.

4.3.6 Theme 6: Areas Needing Improvements

Educators identified several areas of need in which they could increase their ability to support learners who have mental health problems. Some of these areas were additional training,

increased collaboration with stakeholders, and the use of more social workers to provide expert support.

4.3.6.1 Subtheme 6.1: Extra Training for Educators

Among the serious issues brought up by eight of the twelve participants was the inadequacy of training to prepare educators to identify and support learners who suffer from mental health problems. All believed that professional development available at the time was inadequate, providing theoretical data with no heed given to the complexities of real-world classroom situations. *"We could use more training," (P5).* Another participant said, *"Workshops help, but they don't address real-life issues that we encounter in the classroom." (P7)*

Ecological Systems Theory microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) underscores the importance of direct contact between educators and learners in shaping the learners' ability to recognize mental health concerns (Johnson & Cooke, 2020). But without proper teacher training, educators might not perceive early warning signals, and they may miss out on early interventions (Kallitsoglou & Mahmud, 2023). Training programs have been shown to boost educators' confidence in addressing mental health concerns and improve their ability to provide supportive assistance (Weston et al., 2022).

4.3.6.2 Subtheme 6.2: Collaboration Between Stakeholders

Nine of the twelve all emphasized how critical it was that there be more collaboration between parents, educators, school counsellors, and mental health professionals. The majority believed that mental health support shouldn't rest solely with educators but rather a joint effort between parties. One of the educators had to say, *"We need more collaboration, you know, with parents, learners, all the stakeholders involved." (P2)* Another participant reflected on this view by saying, *"Mental health is not a school issue—it's a community issue, so we need to work together." (P3)*

The mesosystem in Ecological Systems Theory illustrates how related settings, like families, schools, and extra-system support services, influence the learners' experience (Kaushik et al., 2023). With the presence of well-established connections between them, the learners become empowered with integral assistance, which benefits their overall health and education results (Moon et al., 2017). Educators nevertheless face significant difficulty in harmonization with other partners from the outer world as they lack standard framework systems to undertake joint

ventures successfully (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Building school-community partnerships can reinforce intervention efforts by providing learners with the support they need both in and out of the classroom.

4.3.6.3 Subtheme 6.3: Hiring More Social Workers

All twelve participants emphasized the need for additional social workers in schools to help handle mental health-related issues. The majority of educators indicated that they felt burdened with the duty of addressing learners' psychological concerns without professional training or adequate assistance. A respondent commented, *"I would suggest more social workers in this situation."* (P7). Another pointed out, *"We need professionals who are trained specifically to deal with mental health in schools."* (P12)

The exosystem in Ecological Systems Theory refers to outside influences, such as policies, grants, and resource availability, that indirectly influence individuals' experiences (Delany & Cheung, 2020). A shortage of mental health professionals within schools means educators will have to deal with these problems with little assistance, increasing stress and decreasing the efficacy of interventions (O'Malley et al., 2018; So et al., 2019). The absence of trained mental health practitioners has a direct effect on under-resourced schools, where educators may not have access to external professional networks (Naidoo & Naidoo, 2021). Expanding the number of social workers available in schools would take this responsibility away from educators, giving learners specialist intervention and releasing educators to focus on their core teaching responsibilities.

4.4 Summary

The researcher can safely gather that educators with different experiences believe that identifying learners with mental health-related issues is an essential part of their overall role. This interpretation answers the study's research question 1, which explored how educators perceive their role in identifying learners with mental health-related issues.. The findings reveal a unanimous recognition among participants that mental health plays a vital role in shaping learners' academic performance, emotional well-being, and social development. Educators expressed a strong sense of responsibility toward supporting learners facing mental health-related issues. However, many highlighted that their current knowledge and skills are insufficient to fully support these needs. This finding addresses research question 2, which enquired about educators' understanding of mental health-related issues in schools.

While they demonstrated a basic understanding of mental health issues, primarily through observable behaviours like isolation and emotional distress, there is a notable gap in their ability to identify specific mental health conditions. This gap can be attributed to the limited training provided to educators, which many participants described as inadequate. The data also revealed that stigma surrounding mental health within the school community, especially among parents, often hinders early identification and intervention. Without the necessary training, educators rely on generalized understandings rather than a more comprehensive approach to supporting learners with mental health-related issues.

The findings further highlight systemic challenges that limit educators' capacity to respond effectively to mental health issues. While the schools provide access to a school counsellor, these services are often overstretched, leaving many learners without adequate support which is in line with the study's research question 3 enquiring about the difficulties educators face in recognizing and addressing learner's mental health-related issues. Educators consistently called for more resources, including the presence of specialized professionals such as social workers, additional counsellors, and stronger collaboration between schools, parents, and mental health experts. Early intervention was emphasized as crucial, with educators acknowledging that timely support could prevent long-term negative effects on learners' academic and emotional outcomes. Participants recommended comprehensive training programs tailored to equip educators with practical tools for identifying, referring, and supporting learners facing mental health-related issues. Additionally, fostering collaborative partnerships with stakeholders and reducing the stigma surrounding mental health emerged as essential strategies to create an inclusive and supportive school environment. Overall, the data indicates that while educators are committed to supporting learners' mental health, significant improvements in training, resources, and systemic support are necessary to enhance their effectiveness in fulfilling this critical aspect of their role in line with the study's research question 4, what resources can be provided to help educators to effectively recognize and identify mental health-related issues in learners. The next chapter presents the main findings, conclusions, recommendations, and suggestions for further research studies.

CHAPTER FIVE: MAIN FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

The main results, conclusions, and pragmatic suggestions of the research on educators' impressions on spotting learners with mental health problems at a Midrand middle school are compiled in this chapter. The results highlight how educators' views on mental health influence their approaches of identification, support, and intervention in view of the constructivist theory and the corpus of current research. Data revealed important themes and subthemes including educators' awareness, role perceptions, identification problems, and demand of institutional support. These components influence how learners identify and respond generally to mental health issues in the classroom. These results provide a broad view of the possibilities and difficulties the classroom presents, so stressing the areas requiring development as well as the shortcomings in present methods. The results lead to significant interpretations that link the themes to more general trends in inclusive education and mental health consciousness. The study underlines the need of focused interventions supporting parents as well as educators in creating an environment where mental health problems are found and resolved early on. The results guide suggestions for more inclusive educational policies, better teacher training, and more parental participation campaigns. These suggestions seek to provide school personnel with the tools they need to assist learners experiencing mental health issues. This chapter calls for educators, parents, and mental health professionals working together to create a more inclusive and encouraging learning environment for every learner, so confirming that mental health is a necessary component of thorough learner well-being.

5.2 Summary of study

The research investigated educator's opinions about their responsibilities for mental health screening in learners, along with identifying required assistance to increase their identification performance capability. The research sought to determine how educators view their identification duties regarding mental health disorders and their comprehension of school-based mental health problems together with their encountered obstacles and required support systems that would empower them to address learner's mental health needs.

The study adopts a constructivist paradigm using qualitative research and implements a case study design to achieve its aims and objectives. Primarily, the study aims to examine educators'

perceptions of their roles in identifying learners with mental health-related issues within the school and the support needed to enhance their effectiveness in this area. It specifically seeks to determine educators' views on their role in identifying learners with mental health issues and to explore their understanding of these issues in the school context. Furthermore, the research aims to identify the challenges educators face in recognizing and addressing learners' mental health concerns and to offer recommendations for the support needed to ensure educators can effectively identify and assist with mental health issues in schools.

Twelve primary school staff members from Midrand Gauteng participated in the study through purposive sampling to gain a wide range of experiences related to mental health detection. Semi-structured interviews served as the data collection method to engage in comprehensive discussions about participant viewpoints. The research used thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework to break down the data collected and extract essential themes which described educators' awareness and their challenges as well as support requirements. The researchers evaluated the findings by matching them against Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and existing literature to establish a full understanding of the elements influencing educator mental health identification beliefs.

5.3 Key Findings

This study illustrates that while educators acknowledge the importance of mental health awareness, they are impeded from identifying and assisting learners by limited training, myths, and institutional non-support. Parental opposition and cultural stigma also render early intervention difficult. Teacher, parent, and mental health practitioner collaboration is necessary to build increased learner support. These results are elaborated on in light of the aims of the research and the literature in the proceeding sections.

5.3.1 Educators' Conceptions of Their Role in the Identification of Students with Mental Health Needs

The study showed that educators in general are cognizant of their role in sustaining learners' mental health but vary in terms of how they recognize and deal with mental health problems. Most of the participants concurred that, as first-line caregivers in the school environment, the teacher is most likely to be the first to notice learners' behaviour and emotional changes. This aligns with previous work that observed the important role educators play in early identification

and intervention (Reinke et al., 2011; Suldo et al., 2022). However, while some of the educators expressed a strong feeling of responsibility, others were mixed about the degree to which they were engaged, believing mental illness was best managed by qualified specialists.

The educators' role ambiguity aligns with a study conducted by Weston et al. (2022), which proved that educators have experienced role ambiguity in identifying mental health due to a lack of clear guidelines and well-organized support systems. In the majority of cases, educators did not feel that they were adequately prepared to deal with mental health problems, a concern also noted by Kidger et al. (2016), who indicated that educators are often not trained to distinguish between typical variation in behaviour and early signs of mental health problems. This uncertainty suggests a high demand for more clearly defined policy and professional development programs to enable educators to feel supported and empowered in their role.

5.3.2 Educators' Awareness of Mental Health Issues in Schools

Although educators in general recognized the importance of mental health awareness, their understanding of mental health issues was extremely variable. Although some participants demonstrated awareness of emotional, cognitive, and behavioural aspects of mental health, others had incorrect concepts, such as recognizing Mental health-related issues as solely cognitive delays. This finding is in congruence with research done by Naidoo and Naidoo (2021), wherein it was found that educators lack comprehensive knowledge about mental health, and consequently, they misdiagnose signs and lose the opportunity for early intervention.

Educators in this study indicated primary warning signs like behavioural changes, mood swings, aggression, and withdrawal, which support previous research on the early identification of mental health disorders (Kaushik et al., 2023; Brückner et al., 2022). However, despite the presence of awareness of these signs, confidence in distinguishing between mental health disorders and common behavioural problems was a lack of mental health literacy among certain educators. This is echoed in a study that was carried out by Kidger et al. (2016), which explained that unless trainers are adequately prepared, they could overestimate or underestimate the extent of a learner's mental health needs. Sufficient knowledge regarding mental health very much advocates for the use of systematic training sessions to provide trainers with a more precise model on how to diagnose and respond to learners' mental well-being.

5.3.3 Challenges Faced by Educators in Identification and Management of Learners' Mental Health Issues

Educators in the study pointed out a number of challenges in identifying and supporting learners with mental health problems, including heavy workloads, poor training, and insufficient support from institutions. A number of educators bemoaned the limited time devoted to track and support struggling learners, an issue that has been widely documented in previous research (Weston et al., 2022; Reinke et al., 2011). Large group sizes and academic pressures exacerbated these issues, hindering educators from being able to give the individual learners with mental health issues the attention they needed.

Parental resistance was also a key barrier that was found, with educators reporting that parents would sweep aside concerns over their children's mental health and attribute them instead to laziness or lack of discipline. This is consistent with a study conducted by Shung-King et al. (2019), which found that stigma and cultural myths about mental health are likely to lead to parental resistance towards the identification of mental health issues in children. The lack of willingness of parents to talk about mental health is a huge blow to early intervention, and more parent-teacher collaboration and awareness programs need to be done to bridge the gap between home and school support systems.

Another critical challenge highlighted was the insufficient number of trained school-based mental health professionals. A number of educators indicated that although there were counsellors in some schools, the need for mental health assistance was far greater than available. This is consistent with research by Naidoo and Naidoo (2021), who pointed out that despite policies in South Africa acknowledging the significance of psychosocial support in schools, actual implementation is still poor because of a lack of trained personnel. Without adequate institutional backing, educators cannot provide the necessary interventions and exacerbate mental health problems among learners.

5.3.4 Support Needed to Develop Educators' Capacity for Identification and Response to Mental Health Needs

Educators emphatically stressed the need for additional training to be more effective in recognizing and assisting learners with mental health problems. They emphasized that while some workshops are available, they are too brief and not grounded in practical, real-world

experience. This is seconded by Teixeira et al. (2020), who recommended that effective mental health training should be incorporated into teacher training programs rather than being presented as sporadic workshops. The educators in this study suggested periodic, structured training sessions through case studies, role-playing, and interaction with mental health professionals.

Another key recommendation that was uncovered by the research was the need to have more mental health professionals at schools. Educators pointed out that the current over-dependence on one counsellor or social worker per school was not sufficient with the rising mental health needs of learners. This aligns with research conducted by Reinke et al. (2011), where it was established that having mental health services within schools remains an essential issue to help assure that learners have timely and sufficient access to intervention. Therefore, increasing government revenue and policy interest in school-based mental health services is pivotal for addressing such a challenge.

5.4 Implications of the findings.

The implications of the findings from the study on mental health issues in educational settings are multifaceted, with significant implications for both practice and program development. The identification of early signs of mental health-related issues in learners underscores the need for a proactive, rather than reactive, approach to mental health support. This means that schools and psychosocial service providers must implement systematic screening tools and integrate mental health training into their professional development programs (Smith & Jones, 2020). The findings suggest that early intervention can prevent the escalation of mental health issues, reduce the stigma associated with seeking help, and ultimately support learners in achieving academic success while maintaining their well-being (Green & Thomas, 2021).

The findings further emphasize the importance of a collaborative approach involving not just school social workers or counsellors but also educators, parents, and community mental health professionals. Collaboration ensures that mental health support is consistent, comprehensive, and holistic, addressing not only the immediate needs of the learner but also the systemic factors that may contribute to Mental health-related issues (Miller & Davidson, 2022). This approach strengthens the school's role as a central hub of support for learners, where mental health issues are recognized and addressed in an inclusive and non-stigmatizing environment (Johnson, 2023). Schools must create stronger channels of communication and collaboration

with external service providers to ensure that appropriate resources are available to support learners and families (Parker & Lee, 2021).

Moreover, the findings highlight the need for culturally competent interventions, recognizing that learners from diverse backgrounds may experience and express mental health-related issues differently. This underscores the importance of school social workers and mental health professionals being trained to understand cultural influences on mental health, providing services that are sensitive to these differences (Kumar & Singh, 2022). Additionally, involving parents in the process of mental health support ensures that interventions are aligned with the family's understanding and practices, which increases the likelihood of success (Parker & Lee, 2021). This highlights the importance of school systems not only promoting mental health awareness within the school but also extending support into the home and community, making mental health care a shared responsibility.

5.5 Conclusions

The research indicated that while educators recognise the need of recognising mental health disorders in learners, they encounter considerable difficulties in doing so successfully. Numerous educators conveyed a feeling of obligation to identify early indicators of mental health issues; nevertheless, they also emphasised ambiguities over their role, mostly owing to insufficient formal training and institutional support. The absence of clear laws and structured support systems intensified this uncertainty, impeding educators' capacity to act with assurance. A notable finding was that educators rely on observable behavioural and emotional changes to identify potential mental health concerns. Nevertheless, their ability to assess these cues varied, with some educators seeing themselves as more adept than others. Numerous participants expressed that while they recognised certain mental health indicators, they often struggled to distinguish between transient behavioural alterations and manifestations of more profound mental health issues. This highlights the need for more organised professional development programs to assist educators in gaining a greater understanding of mental health within the educational environment. The research also highlighted structural obstacles that impede the identifying process. Educators indicated substantial workloads, elevated class sizes, and restricted access to mental health practitioners, all of which constrained the time and resources necessary for effective learner assistance. These institutional limits established obstacles to early detection and intervention, underscoring the need for enhanced resources and comprehensive school-wide methods to tackle mental health issues.

Parental opposition and cultural shame surfaced as other impediments. Numerous educators observed that parents often exhibited reluctance to recognise or engage in discussions about mental health difficulties, perhaps ascribing behavioural alterations to disciplinary problems or disregarding them entirely. This hesitance was associated with wider social views on mental health, thereby postponing possibilities for early intervention. The study recommends that parents unite with educators to establish culturally receptive awareness programs that will cultivate collaborative frameworks for children. The study notes that resolving these problems needs an extensive strategy that would enhance instructor training while building institutional backing and fostering joint work between mental health professionals and parents plus educators. Educational institutions should develop clear policies for identification and intervention, provide continual mental health training customized to classroom dynamics, and include mental health professionals within the school structure to improve help. Furthermore, eliminating stigma and supporting a cohesive approach to assist learners depending on parents in honest talks about mental health. By concentrating on five basic areas, schools might foster a more inclusive and responsive environment where mental health concerns are rapidly and satisfactorily identified and addressed.

5.6 Recommendations

The identification of and support for learners with mental health issues demands an education-stakeholder-collateral-parent partnership. The following recommendations prioritize the improvement of instructor training programs as well as school support services while actively engaging parents and identifying ways to obtain extra resources to guide upcoming research.

5.6.1 Enhanced Professional Development for Educators

To improve the identification of learners with mental health-related issues, it is crucial to enhance the professional development of educators by offering regular and context-specific training workshops. These workshops should focus not only on general mental health awareness but also on practical strategies for recognizing early signs of mental health issues and providing appropriate interventions in the classroom. Patel et al. (2018) emphasize the importance of professional development that equips educators with actionable tools for early detection, as well as the ability to respond appropriately to learners' mental health needs. Tailored workshops should focus on common mental health issues in children, such as anxiety,

depression, and behavioural disorders, providing educators with clear indicators and appropriate strategies for support.

Additionally, the provision of ongoing support through mentorship programs and access to mental health professionals is essential. Educators should be able to consult with school counsellors, psychologists, or external mental health professionals who can offer guidance and resources. This support system would not only help educators gain confidence in addressing mental health concerns but also ensure that they have access to expert advice when dealing with complex cases. As noted by Kader et al. (2020), continuous collaboration with mental health professionals can facilitate a more informed and coordinated approach to supporting learners. Mentorship programs can further empower educators by providing them with opportunities for reflection, feedback, and professional growth in mental health literacy.

Furthermore, it is vital that mental health training includes culturally sensitive approaches to engaging learners from diverse backgrounds. South Africa's multicultural society means that learners may experience Mental health-related issues differently depending on their cultural context (Burns, 2011). Educators should be trained to recognize how cultural factors influence the expression and perception of mental health issues. This training should equip educators with the skills to engage families and learners respectfully and sensitively, taking into account cultural norms and values. By incorporating cultural competence into professional development, educators will be better positioned to support learners from diverse backgrounds, reduce stigma, and improve communication with parents and caregivers about mental health. Research by Mji and Bhana (2021) suggests that culturally aware approaches can lead to more effective identification and intervention of mental health-related issues in learners, fostering a more inclusive and supportive school environment.

5.6.2 Strengthening School-Based Support Systems

To improve the identification and support of learners with mental health-related issues, it is essential to strengthen school-based support systems through the establishment of clear protocols and better collaboration among school staff. Schools should develop and implement clear, standardized protocols for identifying and referring learners with mental health concerns. These protocols should outline specific steps for educators to follow when they suspect a learner may be struggling with mental health issues, ensuring that there is a consistent and systematic approach to referral and intervention. Such protocols would help mitigate the

uncertainty educators often face in addressing mental health-related issues in the absence of formal guidelines. According to Maphosa and Shumba (2010), a lack of clear procedures often leads to delayed interventions, which can exacerbate learners' Mental health-related issues. Well-defined referral pathways would also ensure that learners receive timely and appropriate support from mental health professionals.

Moreover, it is vital that schools advocate for more counselling services to reduce waiting periods and enhance the accessibility of mental health support. The study highlighted that one counsellor in the school often faced overwhelming demand, which resulted in delays in providing support to learners. As the World Health Organization (2021) suggests, mental health services are often under-resourced, especially in schools, and employing more counsellors would significantly increase access to services. The adequate number of counsellors would be better able to manage the caseload, establish ongoing relationships with learners, and provide regular support, preventing long delays that may negatively impact learners' well-being. Additionally, having dedicated professionals on-site would help build a proactive mental health culture within the school, where mental health concerns are addressed immediately and holistically.

Lastly, schools should encourage greater collaboration between school leadership, educators, and support staff to ensure that mental health is prioritized and integrated into the school culture. This collaboration would involve fostering open communication and shared responsibility for mental health, ensuring that all staff members are involved in supporting learners. According to a study by Kader et al. (2020), effective collaboration between educators and support staff leads to more comprehensive and coordinated responses to mental health issues. By creating a culture where mental health is viewed as a collective responsibility, schools can break down silos and ensure that learners receive a more integrated and holistic approach to support. Encouraging regular meetings between educators, counsellors, and school leadership would enable them to discuss mental health concerns, share insights, and collaborate on interventions that best meet the needs of learners. This collective approach helps to build a more responsive and inclusive school environment, ultimately improving the early identification and support for learners facing mental health-related issues.

5.6.3 Promoting Parental Engagement and Awareness

To improve the identification and support of learners with mental health-related issues, it is essential to promote parental engagement and raise awareness about the importance of mental health in children. One effective strategy would be to organize regular workshops for parents that specifically address the stigma surrounding mental health and encourage early intervention. These workshops could provide parents with practical tools to recognize mental health-related issues in their children, foster open dialogue about mental health in the home, and explain the importance of seeking professional help when necessary. As Burns (2011) suggests, cultural and societal stigma around mental health can be a significant barrier to seeking appropriate care for children. By educating parents about mental health and dispelling myths or misconceptions, schools can help create a more supportive environment where children's mental health is acknowledged and addressed without fear of judgment or discrimination. These workshops should also provide strategies for parents to support their children's emotional well-being, reducing the stigma and fostering a more collaborative approach to mental health.

In addition to workshops, establishing consistent and open communication channels between the school and families is crucial for improving the identification of learners with mental health-related concerns. Schools should ensure that parents are regularly updated on their child's progress, both academically and emotionally, through parent-teacher meetings, digital platforms, and newsletters. These communication efforts can help create a partnership where parents feel informed and empowered to take proactive steps when mental health issues arise. Vygotsky's (1978) theory emphasizes the importance of social and cultural contexts in shaping interactions, highlighting the need for schools to recognize and respect the unique circumstances of each family. Clear, consistent communication between school staff and parents fosters trust and ensures that mental health concerns are addressed in a timely and sensitive manner. This communication should also include providing resources or referrals to mental health services, where necessary, to ensure parents are equipped with the knowledge and support to act effectively.

Lastly, it is essential to involve parents in the development of individualized support plans for learners experiencing mental health difficulties. By including parents in the planning process, schools can ensure that the strategies developed are relevant, realistic, and sensitive to the child's home environment. This collaborative approach helps create a more holistic and supportive intervention that takes into account both school-based and home-based strategies

for mental health support. According to Kader et al. (2020), involving parents in the decision-making process can lead to more tailored, effective support plans that reflect the learner's needs both at school and at home. Parents can provide valuable insights into their child's behavior, triggers, and emotional state, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the learner's mental health issues. By working together with families, schools can build a stronger support network that enhances the overall well-being of learners and facilitates early identification and intervention.

5.6.4 Resource Mobilization and Community Partnerships

To address the resource limitations that hinder the identification and support of learners with mental health-related issues, it is critical for schools to partner with local mental health organizations and governmental agencies. Such partnerships can expand access to professional mental health services, provide training for school staff, and offer additional resources to support the mental health needs of learners. By collaborating with organizations such as the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) and other mental health NGOs, schools can access expertise, materials, and funding that may not be available within the school system itself. According to the World Health Organization (2021), partnerships with external mental health professionals are essential for addressing the growing mental health needs in schools, particularly in under-resourced environments. Collaborating with these organizations can also help schools to remain updated on best practices in mental health intervention, ensuring that their approaches are evidence-based and culturally appropriate. These partnerships can foster a more integrated approach to mental health, where schools are supported by external specialists who can guide and support both educators and parents in supporting mental health-related issues.

In addition to partnerships, schools should actively seek funding and support from external stakeholders, including local businesses, philanthropic organizations, and government entities, to improve mental health infrastructure within the school. Securing more resources can help schools employ counsellors, purchase relevant resources (e.g., books, mental health toolkits), and create spaces within the school dedicated to mental health services. Schools should develop proposals and outreach programs to attract funding from a variety of sources, including government grants and corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives. Such efforts can help schools address gaps in service provision and ensure that mental health is integrated into the broader educational environment.

Finally, schools can utilize community health workers (CHWs) to bridge the gap between schools, families, and mental health services. CHWs, trained to work in local communities, can help identify mental health issues in learners, facilitate referrals to mental health professionals, and provide follow-up care. According to a study by Schuler et al. (2017), CHWs have proven effective in connecting communities to health services and promoting mental health awareness. Their knowledge of the local context, cultural understanding, and rapport with families make them ideal candidates to serve as liaisons between the school and external mental health resources. By involving CHWs in the identification process, schools can enhance their ability to detect early signs of mental health issues and ensure that families are actively engaged in supporting their children. CHWs can also assist in reducing stigma by normalizing conversations about mental health and providing families with the information they need to seek professional help. Ultimately, the use of CHWs can help create a more inclusive, supportive network for learners with mental health-related issues, strengthening the school-community connection and ensuring that mental health care is accessible to all learners.

5.6.5 Recommendations for Future Research

To enhance the identification of learners with mental health-related issues, it is crucial to develop a systematic approach that involves educators, mental health professionals, and parents. It is recommended that schools establish a comprehensive screening program that incorporates both formal and informal assessment methods. Educators should be trained to recognize early signs of mental health difficulties, such as changes in behaviour, social withdrawal, or academic challenges (Smith & Jones, 2020). Implementing regular check-ins and using standardized questionnaires can help learners who are at risk. Furthermore, collaboration with counsellors and mental health professionals can ensure that proper support is provided to those who need it (Miller & Davidson, 2022).

Additionally, it is vital to create a school culture that promotes mental health awareness and encourages open conversations around mental well-being. By integrating mental health education into the curriculum, learners and educators alike can gain a better understanding of mental health issues and their impact on academic performance and social interactions (Green & Thomas, 2021). This initiative will not only aid in the identification of learners who may need further evaluation but also reduce the stigma associated with mental health, making it easier for learners to seek help when necessary (Taylor et al., 2020). In addition to awareness

programs, schools should foster a supportive environment where learners feel safe discussing mental health concerns without fear of judgment (Johnson, 2023).

Finally, involving parents in the identification process is crucial. Educating parents about the signs of mental health issues in children and encouraging regular communication between home and school will create a more comprehensive support system. Parents can provide valuable insights into a child's behaviour outside of school, offering a fuller picture of their mental health (Parker & Lee, 2021). Parent-teacher collaboration, facilitated by clear communication channels and regular updates, will help identify early warning signs and intervene before issues escalate. Additionally, incorporating culturally sensitive practices when discussing mental health with parents from diverse backgrounds can further enhance the effectiveness of these interventions (Kumar & Singh, 2022).

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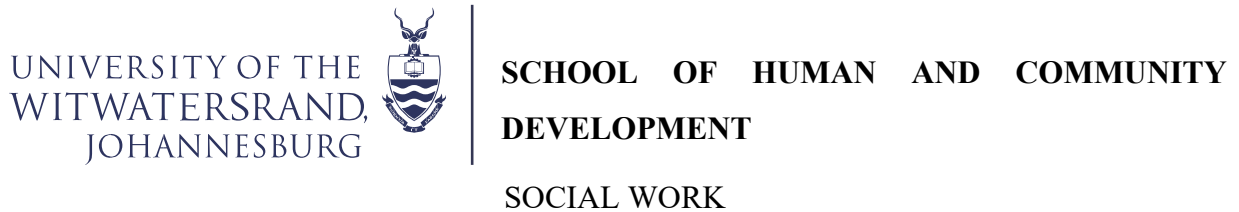
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APPENDIXES

Appendix A Participant Information Sheet



Title of project: Perceptions of Educators in Identifying Learners with Mental Health-Related Issues.

Good day,

My name is Awelani Muriel Mamburu, I am a Master's student in School Social Work at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. I am conducting a research study exploring educators' perceptions in identifying learners with Mental Health-Related issues in the school setting with Dr. Laetitia Petersen as my supervisor. The interview will focus on your experiences and views regarding identifying and supporting learners with mental health-related issues.

Due to your experience as a teacher, you are invited to take part in an interview session that will take approximately 30 minutes. The interview will take place at a mutually agreed-upon time and location. With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded to ensure accuracy in data collection.

Your responses will be kept confidential. Any identifying information will be removed from the transcripts. The data collected will be used solely for research purposes, including writing the research paper, and may be published in academic journals. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

Your insights will contribute to a better understanding of the role of educators in identifying mental health-related issues in learners and may promote inclusive practices in school environments. There are no significant risks associated with participating in this study. However, discussing mental health-related issues may bring up sensitive topics. You are free to skip any questions you do not wish to answer. This research study will be written up as a research report, and the report will be available on the university library website. Additionally, should you need emotional support or a safe space during the study, the school counsellor Mrs. Tania will be available to provide emotional support in her office and ensure your well-being throughout the process.

If you have any questions during or afterward about this research study, feel free to contact me or my supervisor, Dr Petersen at the details listed below. If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical procedures of this research study, you are welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), telephone +27(0) 11 717 1408, email hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za.

Yours sincerely,

AM Mamburu

Researcher:

Awelani Muriel Mamburu, 2703810@students.wits.ac.za | +27793333664

Supervisor:

Dr. Laetitia Petersen (PhD), laetitia.petersen@wits.ac.za | +27117174474/2

Appendix B Consent Form

Study Title: Perceptions of Educators in Identifying Learners with Mental Health-Related Issues

Researcher: Awelani Muriel Mamburu

I,, agree to participate in this research project.

I agree to the following:

(Please circle the relevant options below)

The research study was explained to me. I understand what this study is about.	YES	NO
--	-----	----

I understand that I am volunteering to take part in the study	YES	NO
---	-----	----

I agree that the interview may be audio recorded	YES	NO
--	-----	----

I agree that direct quotations from my interview may be used by the researcher in their research report	YES	NO
---	-----	----

I agree that my participation will remain anonymous (my name or other identifying data will not be used by the researcher in their research report)	YES	NO
---	-----	----

I agree that other researchers may use the information I provide in my interview (depending on their own ethics clearance being obtained) but my name and any personal information will not be used or passed on	YES	NO
--	-----	----

Participant's Name: _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix C Interview Guide



**SCHOOL OF HUMAN AND COMMUNITY
DEVELOPMENT**
SOCIAL WORK

Title of project: Perceptions of Educators in Identifying Learners with Mental Health-Related Issues.

Background Information

1. How do you identify your race/ethnicity?
2. What is your age?
3. How many years have you been working as an educator?
4. What grades or age groups do you typically work with?
5. Can you please describe your current role and responsibilities in class?

Views on Identifying Learners with Mental Health-Related Issues

4. In your opinion, how important is it for educators to be aware of their learners' mental health? Why?
5. How would you describe your understanding of mental health-related issues among learners?
6. What signs or behaviours do you typically see that might indicate a learner is experiencing mental health-related issues?

Role of Educators in Identifying Mental Health Issues

7. Do you view identifying learners with mental health-related issues as part of your role as an educator? Why or why not?
8. How does this responsibility fit into your overall duties as an educator?
9. What challenges do you face when trying to identify and support learners with mental health-related issues?

Equipping Educators to Recognize and Identify Mental Health Issues

10. What kind of training have you received, if any, related to identifying and supporting learners with mental health-related issues?
11. Do you feel that the training provided is adequate? If not, what additional training or resources would be helpful?
12. What kind of support do you receive from your school when dealing with learners with mental health-related issues?
13. What improvements do you think are needed in your school to better support educators in this role?

Understanding of Mental Health-Related Issues Within Schools

14. How would you describe the overall understanding of mental health-related issues within your school community?
15. What initiatives, if any, has your school implemented to address mental health-related issues among learners?
16. How effective do you think these initiatives have been?

Additional Information

17. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experiences or views on this topic?
18. Do you have any questions for me about the study or the interview process?

Thank you for your time and valuable contributions to this study. Your insights are greatly appreciated.

If you are interested in receiving the results of the study or have any further questions, please feel free to contact me at 2703810@students.wits.ac.za | +27793333664.

I will be happy to share the findings with you once the study is complete.

Appendix D GDE approval letter.



GAUTENG PROVINCE
Department: Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

8/4/4/1/2

GDE RESEARCH APPROVAL LETTER

Date:	20 September 2024
Validity of Research Approval:	08 February 2024– 30 September 2024 2024/370
Name of Researcher:	Mamburu AM
Address of Researcher:	86 San Ridge Village Carlsward/ Midrand
Telephone Number:	079 333 3664/ 083 251 3200
Email address:	2703810@students.wits.ac.za
Research Topic:	Perceptions of Educators in Identifying Learners with Mental Health-Related Issues.
Name of University:	Wits
Type of qualification	Masters
Number and type of schools:	1 Primary School
District/s/HO	Johannesburg East

Re: Approval in Respect of Request to Conduct Research

This letter serves to indicate that approval is hereby granted to the above-mentioned researcher to proceed with research in respect of the study indicated above. The onus rests with the researcher to negotiate appropriate and relevant time schedules with the school/s and/or offices involved to conduct the research. A separate copy of this letter must be presented to both the School (both Principal and SGB) and the District/Head Office Senior Manager confirming that permission has been granted for the research to be conducted.

The following conditions apply to GDE research. The researcher may proceed with the above study subject to the conditions listed below being met. Approval may be withdrawn should any of the conditions listed below be flouted:



1

Making education a societal priority

Office of the Director: Education Research and Knowledge Management

7th Floor, 17 Simmonds Street, Johannesburg, 2001

Tel: (011) 355 0488

Email: Faith.Tshabalala@gauteng.gov.za

Website: www.education.gpg.gov.za

Appendix E Study Approval



Student: Miss Awelani Muriel Mamburu
CC. Supervisor: Dr Laetitia Petersen

Student Number: 2703810

22 October 2024

Dear Miss Awelani Muriel Mamburu

DECISION ON RESEARCH PROPOSAL SUBMITTED FOR THE MASTER OF ARTS IN SOCIAL WORK BY COURSEWORK AND RESEARCH REPORT

I am pleased to advise you of the decision reached by the reader/readers of the Graduate Studies Committee on your proposal entitled: "*Perceptions of Educators in Identifying Learners with Mental Health-Related Issues.*"

Readers' decision on proposal:

Accepted.

I confirm that Dr Laetitia Petersen has been appointed as your supervisor.

Please take note of the information on the Criteria for submitting research for examination which is attached and ensure that the Faculty is informed of any changes of address during the year.

Kindly note that all MA and PhD candidates who would like to graduate as soon as possible must ensure that they meet the ETD requirements within six (6) weeks of receipt of the examiners' reports by the supervisor. **A student is required to remain registered in the Faculty until his/her graduation.**

Yours Sincerely

M Ntseare

Mpho Ntseare (Ms)
 Faculty of Humanities
 Private Bag X 3
 Wits, 2050

Appendix F School Permission Letter



Midrand Primary School

P.O. Box 4715 Halfway House 1685 • Poplar Street, Noordwyk, Midrand
Tel: 011 318 1021 • Fax: 011 318 2486 • www.midrandprimary.co.za



Midrand Primary School
35 Poplar Rd, Noordwyk

Midrand
1685

To: Awelani Muriel Mamburu
University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg
Student No: 2703810

RE: Permission to Conduct a Study at Midrand Primary School

Dear Awelani,

On behalf of Midrand Primary School, I am pleased to grant you permission to conduct your study titled "*Perceptions of Educators in Identifying Learners with mental health Related Issue*" at our institution. We understand that the purpose of your research is to explore educators' perceptions regarding their role to early identify learners with Mental Health-related issues within the school setting.

You are authorized to engage with educators and to use interviews as part of your study. Please ensure that your research activities do not disrupt the school's daily operations or the learning process.

Kind regards

M. Mulaudzi
Principal



Appendix G Ethics Certificate



SCHOOL OF HUMAN AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ETHICS COMMITTEE
CONSTITUTED UNDER THE UNIVERSITY HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

PROTOCOL NUMBER: SW24/10/04

PROJECT TITLE

Perceptions of educators in identifying learners with mental-health related issues

INVESTIGATOR

MAMBURU A

SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT OF INVESTIGATOR

SOCIAL WORK

DATE CONSIDERED

15 NOVEMBER 2024

DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE

APPROVED UNCONDITIONALLY

RISK LEVEL

MINIMAL RISK

EXPIRY DATE

19 NOVEMBER 2027

ISSUE DATE OF CERTIFICATE

19 NOVEMBER 2024

CHAIRPERSON

(DR L PETERSEN)

cc: Supervisor: DR L PETERSEN

DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR

To be completed in duplicate and **ONE COPY** returned to the Chairperson of the School/Department ethics committee.

I fully understand the conditions under which I am authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure to be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I/we undertake to resubmit the protocol to the Committee.

Mamburu A.M.

Signature

Date

15 / 11 / 2024

PLEASE QUOTE THE PROTOCOL NUMBER ON ALL ENQUIRIES

Appendix H Turnitin Report

Research Report Draft Turn.docx

ORIGINALITY REPORT

12%	5%	8%	2%
SIMILARITY INDEX	INTERNET SOURCES	PUBLICATIONS	STUDENT PAPERS

PRIMARY SOURCES

1	Griffin, Megan Lee. "Teacher Perception of Student Mental Health: A Qualitative Study.", Missouri Baptist University, 2024 Publication	1%
2	wiredspace.wits.ac.za Internet Source	1%
3	Allen, Meka. "Action Research: Promoting Mental Health Literacy in a Charter School", Capella University, 2022 Publication	<1%
4	Dongcheng Li. "Research Design in Chinese Medicine - Linking Social and Health Sciences", CRC Press, 2025 Publication	<1%
5	Edilma Yearwood, Vicki Hines-Martin. "Routledge Handbook of Global Mental Health Nursing - Evidence, Practice and Empowerment", Routledge, 2019 Publication	<1%
6	Desbois-Ramsden, Angèle C.. "Mental Health Literacy in Educational Practice: A Qualitative Study Exploring New Elementary Teachers' Reasoning When Identifying Students With Mental Health Concerns and Choice-Making in Supporting Referrals.", University of Toronto (Canada), 2024 Publication	<1%