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UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

EXPLORING THE MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING EXPERIENCES OF HIGH SCHOOL LEARNERS DURING COVID-19 IN SEBOKENG, VANDERBIJLPARK.

A research report presented to the Department of Social Work

School of Human and Community Development

The University of the Witwatersrand.

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree Masters of Arts in Social Work.

By:

Nkomo Andile Prudence

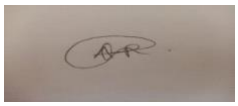
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DECLARATION

By submitting this report, I, Andile Prudence Nkomo, declare that it is entirely my original work and that I am the sole author of it. I also affirm that its reproduction and publication by the University of the Witwatersrand will not violate the rights of any third parties and that I have not previously submitted it to obtain any qualification.



30-June-2023

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ABSTRACT

The coronavirus that causes COVID-19 is an acute infection that affects people. The World Health Organization declared it a pandemic on March 11, 2020, and an international public health emergency on January 30, 2020. Residents of Sebokeng in South Africa suffered throughout the lockdown stages brought by COVID-19, finding it difficult to maintain a regular way of life in the face of the unique circumstances due to a shortage of money and business closures.

The pandemic caused unimaginable disruptions in many aspects of society, including interruptions for learners in the classroom. It presented high school learners with challenges that increased their likelihood of developing mental health issues. Thus, the study aimed to explore high school learners' experiences of mental health and well-being during COVID-19 in Sebokeng, Vanderbijlpark. Against this background, the objective of the study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of high school learners in Sebokeng Vanderbijlpark during COVID-19 and, explore the perceived influence of the pandemic on learners' mental health and well-being.

The study used semi-structured one-on-one interviews to gather data. The framework for analysing and comprehending the results of my research was provided by the social context perspective, a subset of the ecological systems theory method. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The key themes and subthemes that emerged from the data are presented in this study, along with the research findings. The impact of COVID-19 on the learner's mental health will be investigated initially. The impact of COVID-19 on participants' academic progress, financial losses as a result of COVID-19, and overall COVID-19 experiences are then explored.

Therefore, there has never been a more ideal time to investigate how learners' COVID-19 experiences may have affected their mental health. This study provides some insight into the use of support treatments for mental health issues.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

COVID-19	: Coronavirus
DMR	: Disaster Management Regulation
DOE	: Department of Education
DSTV	: Digital satellite Television
GDE	: Gauteng Department of Education
HREC	: Human Research Ethics Committee
PIS	: Participant Information Sheet
SA	: South Africa
SACE	: South African Code of Ethics
UNESCO	: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	: United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
WHO	: World Health Organisation

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The COVID-19 pandemic caused disruptions in every aspect of society that no one could have predicted, including difficulties for learners at school. Being out of school results in learning loss, mental suffering, and a decrease in the development of social skills in addition to learning loss (Taylor et al., 2020). The pandemic brought about a complicated range of challenges that had an impact on mental health and caused everyone, even children and adolescents, to experience considerable school changes.

Hafeez et al. (2020) describe COVID-19 as an acute coronavirus-related illness in humans that is largely characterized by fever and cough and has the potential to cause serious symptoms, including death, particularly in the elderly and people with underlying medical disorders. The SARS-CoV-2 virus, which transmits between humans in a variety of ways, causes it to be contagious and can be detected through a test. It was initially identified in China in 2019, and a pandemic was declared in 2020 (Hafeez et al., 2020).

On January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 pandemic an international public health emergency, and on March 11, 2020, it proclaimed it a pandemic (World Health Organization, 2021). More than 180 million individuals had been infected by COVID-19 as of June 26, 2021, and more than 3.9 million have passed away as a result of the illness (Coetzee & Kagee, 2020). The South African government enacted a strict and militarized "national lockdown" policy on March 26, 2020, restricting residents from leaving the nation to obtain food, medicine, and essential labour. The danger of mental distress and illness has been dramatically increased worldwide as a result of several aspects of forced confinement, including restricted physical mobility, emotional pain, and, for some, real survival threats (Coetzee & Kagee, 2020).

Countries used numerous measures to limit the movement of people and hence the transmission of highly contagious viruses to reduce the spread of highly infectious viruses. These tactics include erecting barricades, prohibiting rallies, wearing face masks, sanitizing hands, and etc. (Coetzee & Kagee, 2020). According to the 2002 Disaster Management Act, South Africa declared a national state of disaster on March 15, 2020, when there were 61 afflicted people. According to President Ramaphosa, the main purpose of this Act was to provide the government with an integrated, coordinated crisis management structure that would put a special emphasis on avoiding and limiting the outbreak of this virus (2004, Disaster Management Regulations (DMR).

Mental health is a state of internal and external equilibrium. It influences our ideas, feelings, and actions and involves our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It is a crucial and integral component of overall health, which can be described in at least three different ways: as the absence of disease, as an organism's condition that permits the full performance of all its functions, or as a state of balance within the individual as well as between the individual and their physical and social environments (Sartorius, 2002). Mental health is more than just the absence of a mental condition, it is also the capacity to reason, pick up new information, and understand one's feelings, as well as other people's reactions.

Concerns have been made about how the COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect learners' mental health and general well-being, including school closures, social isolation, family financial hardships, illness or death in the family, and limited access to healthcare. Every stage of life, from childhood and adolescence to maturity, places a premium on mental health. Biological variables, like genes or brain chemistry, life experiences, such as trauma or abuse, and a family history of mental health issues are only a few of the many elements that affect mental health (Piya et al., 2022).

Even though some research studies were undertaken to explore the mental health of learners during COVID-19, there are only a small number of qualitative studies that focus on this topic in the SA context. This study could provide insight into how the prevalence of learner's well-being & mental health can be better controlled and prevented as well as what intervention strategies may be successful in assisting learners in a South African context by examining high school learners' experiences with mental health.

While working as a school social worker observing learners navigating their emotional exhaustion as a result of COVID-19 and at the same time attending to school needs, I became mindful of how the pandemic has affected the mental health of learners, and I was motivated to explore their experiences of mental health and wellbeing during COVID-19. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore how COVID-19 affected (and continues to affect) the mental health and well-being of high school learners in Sebokeng, Vanderbijlpark in the Gauteng province.

1.2 STATEMENT AND RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

Before the pandemic, a mental health crisis was already brewing among children in South Africa who were experiencing abuse, eating disorders, bullying, and racism in addition to known or unknown mental health conditions (Victoria, 2021). Children were affected mentally, physically and emotionally, also those who are anti-social by nature, struggled with socializing even before the pandemic and, COVID-19 has made them to become even more reserved. Several schools worldwide closed in March 2020 as a precautionary measure in response to the COVID-19 virus's quick spread. The abrupt change from physical school attendance and regular engagement with peers and teachers to online learning and quarantining at home was a difficult adjustment for many pupils across grade levels (Magson et al., 2021). According to Victoria (2021), there is growing evidence that despair and anxiety, particularly among young students, have significantly grown throughout the pandemic.

The virus has infected many individuals worldwide and has so far disrupted a thriving economy in South Africa, resulting in economic loss. Around the world, social isolation and blockade were the only means to delay infection, but very little has been published about the methods, risks, obstacles, and opportunities encountered (Victoria, 2021). The pandemic was another setback as many communities including Sebokeng, were already vulnerable communities with high levels of poverty, adult unemployment, and violence which all affect the mental health of individuals. In Sebokeng, learners could not stream hours of content or tuning in to online sources as it was just not financially possible for them to do so. Unlike learners from well to do families, learners in Sebokeng were affected academically due to lack of resources and, they behind where they should be with their school work.

Also a study was conducted at the University of Cape Town by Silbert et al. (2021). The preceding school year (2021) was especially tough for South African students due to the terrible effects of the COVID-19 epidemic. Anxiety levels have risen, particularly among young South Africans in school, as a result of persistent isolation, uncertainty, financial struggle, bereavement, and loss. Increased levels of worry are associated with much higher work demands, as well as disease, grief, anxiety, tiredness, and dread associated with a higher likelihood of contracting the virus (Silbert and Mzozoyana, 2021). The impact of emotional and psychological stress on school-aged children is a growing concern. This is related to several issues. First, learners are concerned about their development and growth at a time when their daily routines have undergone significant upheaval. Learners lost around 70% of a complete years' worth of information between March 2020 and June 2021, and they were also absent frequently, which had a major detrimental influence on their ability to read and write (Silbert and Mzozoyana, 2021).

Experiences of high school learners in Sebokeng, Gauteng province, regarding mental health during COVID-19 will differ, the conducted study served as a discussion board for learners to discuss their in-depth lived experiences of their mental well-being during COVID-19. The study's findings contribute to a better knowledge of learner experiences, which may allow social work support to be tailored to the learners' individual needs. In poorer areas like Sebokeng, children could not stream hours of content or tuning in to online sources as it is just not financially possible. In South Africa, during the lockdown phases brought on by COVID-19, the township's residents also took a hit, struggling to maintain a normal way of life in the face of the unusual conditions due to a lack of money and company closures.

Social workers need to do qualitative research to establish suitable support service delivery strategies in enabling schools to offer support to learners with mental health difficulties triggered by COVID-19. The study was carried out to determine the gaps in the influence of COVID-19 on the mental health and well-being of learners.

The opportunity to examine how learners' COVID-19 experiences affected their mental health has never been greater. The study offered some insight into the use of preventative measures to protect learners from mental health issues, and it may one day assist in the development of interventions for mental health care that are especially directed at South African high school learners as well as in the planning for potential pandemics.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTION

The study sought to answer the following question**:**

- What are the experiences of high school learners in Sebokeng, Vanderbijlpark on mental health and well-being during COVID-19?

1.4 AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Aim:

- The primary aim of the proposed study was to explore high school learners' experiences of mental health and well-being during COVID-19 in Sebokeng, Vanderbijlpark.

Objectives:

- To gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of high school learners in Sebokeng Vanderbijlpark during Covid-19.
- To understand the support needs of high school learners post-COVID.

1.5 LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study's foundation was a review of the literature on how high school learners perceived the impact of COVID-19 on their mental health. This study concentrated on high school learners' experiences of mental health during COVID-19 at a public school in Sebokeng, Vanderbijlpark in the Gauteng province. There were various limitations and delimitations to this study:

LIMITATIONS	**DELIMITATIONS**
Limited sample size.	The study was limited to issues with sample and selection, which involved a small number of high school learners. The study can be improved by increasing the sample size. E.g. adding another group (teachers) to get a balanced view of the experiences of Mental-health during COVID-19.
Each participant was interviewed once.	Participants were only interviewed once for this study; a longitudinal study that interviews participants more than once might have improved the research.
The study had only one method of data collection.	The researcher could have added another method of data collection e.g. focus groups.
Lack of previous research studies on this topic in South Africa.	There weren't as many studies on this topic currently accessible. This restriction likely exists because it is difficult and time-consuming to gain ethical approval for the collection of data on children.

1.6 DEFINITION OF CONCEPTS

This section emphasizes important definitions and concepts used in this study. The definitions and concepts are listed in order of significance in the study.

- **COVID-19**

COVID-19 is a coronavirus-induced acute human sickness that is mostly characterized by fever and cough. It can cause significant symptoms and even death, especially in older people and people who already have a pre-existing condition. It is a test-detectable infection caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus and spreads among people in a variety of ways (Nabavi, 2020).

A potentially dangerous illness caused by the coronavirus that mostly affects the respiratory system and is characterized by fever, coughing, and shortness of breath. Some patients with the illness may also have harm to vital organs including the heart or kidneys (Nabavi, 2020).

- **High school**

High school is a secondary school that prepares young people for Higher Education or the workforce. Five numbered classes, from Grade 9 to Grade 12, are the norm for high schools. According to Jackson (2014), Middle school should be completed before high school.

A high school is a place where secondary education is provided entirely or in part. Additionally, the term "secondary school" is used in various nations or regions. The name of the secondary institution frequently includes the word "high school" (Snyder & Dillow, 2014).

- **High school learner**

Refers to a learner enrolled full-time in grades eight through twelve at a high school (Jackson, 2014). Depending on when a kid entered preschool and primary school, the average age of a high school learner can vary.

Depending on the laws of the government, some learners begin school younger than others. A high school learner is typically between the ages of 13 and 18 years old (Snyder & Dillow, 2014). The Code of Professional Ethics (SACE, 2021) defines a high school learner as, a student or child at any early learning facility or school. In contrast, the SA Schools Act defines a high school learner as "any person" who is enrolled in school or who is required by this Act to be enrolled in school.

- **Health**

According to the World Health Organization, health is a complete condition of physical, mental, and social well-being, not only the absence of sickness and disability. The World Health Organization established the present definition of health as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, rather than merely the absence of sickness or infirmity (Baldwin et al., 2021).

- **Mental health**

Mental health is the foundation for an individual's well-being and efficient functioning. It involves more than just not having a mental disease; it also involves the capacity for thought, learning, and understanding one's own feelings as well as those of others. It is a state of mind in which everyone is aware of their full potential, capable of coping with challenges, and able to work effectively and productively for the good of their community (Slade, 2010).

- **Well-being**

Well-being is the experience of health, happiness, and prosperity. It includes having good mental health, high life satisfaction, a sense of meaning or purpose, and the ability to manage stress. It is a state of being comfortable, healthy, or happy (Kiefer, 2008).

1.7 OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

Chapter 1: Introducing the study

Chapter 1 introduces the study and includes the background, statement, and rationale for the study, research aims and objectives, literature review, definition of concepts, and the limitations of the research study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Chapter 2 provides the theoretical frameworks guiding and contextualizing the research. The purpose of the literature review is to provide an extensive and critical overview of the existing literature about learners' experiences of mental health during COVID-19 within the South African context.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

A comprehensive description of the research process and approach, which will include the research paradigms, research methodology, and research design, is offered in Chapter 3. An elaboration on the procedures for participant selection, data collection, and data analysis, as well as ethical considerations that are taken into account in the research process, are included.

Chapter 4: Research Findings

Chapter 4 focuses on the research findings in the form of themes that came to the fore during the research analysis phase. A detailed discussion and analysis of the recurring themes and subthemes are presented.

Chapter 5: Conclusions, limitations, and further research

The final chapter presents a summary of the research findings of the study and compares findings to the extant literature on the research topic and the context of the research problem. The limitations and strengths of the study, as well as recommendations for future research in the field, are discussed.

CHAPTER 2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to explore learners' experiences of mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, this chapter presents a review of the literature to provide an understanding of how high school learners managed to sustain/cope with learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The introduction (COVID-19 background), learners' experiences of mental health during COVID-19, Related studies, and Findings/importance of the study are the order in which this review of the literature is structured.

2.2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.2.1 Background to COVID-19

The virus reportedly began to spread on a modest scale in November 2019, and the first significant cluster of cases emerged in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. It was first thought that SARS-CoV-2 transferred to humans at one of Wuhan, China's outdoor "wet markets." The World Health Organization recommends the following wording be used in connection with the virus, which was initially known as Novel Coronavirus. The infection's origin has been determined to be the severe acute respiratory syndrome-related coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). The illness caused by an infection is known as coronavirus disease (COVID-19).

The coronavirus that causes COVID-19 is an acute infection that affects people. It is typically characterized by fever and cough, but it can also cause other severe symptoms and even death, especially in the elderly and people with underlying medical issues. The SARS-CoV-2 virus, which transmits between people in numerous ways, causes it to be contagious and can be detected through a test. It was initially identified in China in 2019, and it was declared a pandemic in 2020 (Hafeez et al., 2020).

If one is close to a person who has COVID-19, they can become infected by breathing in the virus or by touching a surface that contains the virus before touching their eyes, nose, or mouth. The virus is more easily transferred indoors and in busy areas (Hafeez et al., 2020).

More than 1.6 billion pupils' lives and educational experiences were significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic at its height (UNESCO, 2021). Like many other countries, the United States also approved a policy to shut down schools starting in mid-March 2020 to prevent the pandemic. As a result of the lockout, schools soon embraced and pursued remote learning via video conferencing tools. Teachers, learners, and their families have experienced several other challenges in addition to increased stress and worry that has damaged mental health (UNESCO, 2021).

In Africa and the rest of the world, South Africa implemented one of the tightest pandemic response strategies. On March 15, 2020, a national state of emergency was announced, and on March 26, a tier-based system of nationwide lockdowns level 5 being the highest and tightest level was put into effect. China was the first nation to experience the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The outcome has been the publication of numerous studies looking at how the pandemic has affected learners' mental health. Hou et al. (2020) talked about the issue of mental health issues and suicidality among Chinese senior high school learners during the COVID-19 outbreak. Of 859 high school learners who took part in their study 61.4% of them were included. Whereas Xiong et al., (2020) talked about the mental health of students during the COVID-19 pandemic in Bangladesh, which provides fresh insights into depression and the rarely highlighted issues of student mental health.

Due to declining rates of infections, hospitalizations, deaths, ICU admissions, and widespread vaccination against the virus, the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 virus no longer a worldwide emergency on May 5, 2023 (Carlson et al., 2023). The end of the pandemic doesn't imply that the fight is done, according to Michael Ryan, director of emergencies for the WHO: "We still have weaknesses, and those weaknesses that we still have will be exposed by this virus or another virus." Additionally, the need to consider the perceived impact of COVID on learners during the pandemic and also how the pandemic continues to affect learners must be taken into consideration (Carlson et al,. 2023).

Global society has undergone a significant and sudden transformation as a result of the COVID-19 epidemic. With the longest school closures in history and an impending recession, this has been the greatest blow to the educational system in decades. After the pandemic, the partners UNESCO and UNICEF joined forces to make sure that all learners are back in school and receive the customized services needed to meet their learning, health, and psychosocial wellbeing needs, as well as support to make up for lost learning (Alejo et al., 2023). Disruptions to education systems over the past years have already led to significant losses and inequalities in learning.

2.2.2 Deconstructing Learner's experiences of COVID-19 on mental health and well-being.

There have been questions expressed about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on learners' mental health and overall well-being, including the possibility of school closures, social isolation, financial strain on families, illness or death in the family, and limited access to healthcare. Everything from learners' ability to sleep effectively to their eating habits suffered because of the disturbance to routines and lack of movement. Regardless of how mentally sound they were before the pandemic, COVID-19 made them aware that the people they associate with and the things they are surrounded by matter (Slade, 2010).

High school learners faced significant challenges during COVID-19, and arguably continue to face challenges post-pandemic. They are at risk of experiencing physical, mental, and social health problems due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic caused a large increase in high school learners' mental health experiences because caregivers did not want to expose their children to the virus and preferred to keep them at home. Learners were regularly exposed to the COVID-19 pandemic and the risks to their mental health (Slade, 2010).

Young people have suffered major expenses in the form of numerous losses, both personally and as a result of school disruptions. Many youngsters have lost their parents, grandparents, and family members. The death of an old family as a result of COVID-19 is especially painful in South Africa, where many grandparents serve as primary caregivers. The loss or separation of the primary caregiver has major consequences for the child's mental health in terms of caregiver loss, a secure foundation for exploring the world, and heightened concern about the future (Slade, 2010).

2.2.3 Related Studies

A few international studies have been conducted on learners' mental health during the pandemic in different places. A study on the mental health of students during the COVID-19 pandemic was done in Bangladesh (Xiong et al., 2020) to provide fresh insights into depression and the rarely highlighted issues of student mental health. According to the study, depression is caused by a lack of knowledge about COVID-19, financial concerns, and employment anxieties, all of which have a negative cascade effect on students' mental health. The study then emphasizes the importance of adopting diverse coping techniques to protect students' mental health and keep them positive throughout the crisis. As a result, the study intends to investigate the impact of financial concerns, employment anxiety, and COVID-19 knowledge on depression and mental health among students in Bangladesh in light of the severity of the global coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, specifically on the physical and mental health of students. According to the study, depression is caused by employment worry, student status, and frequent COVID-19 news, all of which significantly damage students' mental health (Xiong et al., 2020).

Therefore, it is still important to conduct or take actionable activities to enable people to readily accept and adopt the "new normal" way of life. The study in Bangladesh focused more on the necessity to establish techniques for learners to manage throughout the pandemic rather than analysing their experiences with mental health during the pandemic.

While many studies focus on national policy, professional development, and curriculum, others focus on the learner's specific learning during a pandemic. According to Copeland et al. (2021), pandemics affect learners' behavioural and emotional functions, especially attention and externalization problems brought on by loneliness and fear. Students in a research conducted in Qatar by Fawaz et al,. (2021) indicated worry about the learning and evaluation processes, the weighty task loads, and the technical challenges and constraints. Students actively dealt with these issues by engaging in leisure activities, reaching out to family and friends for assistance, and talking to teachers. According to the research study, learners require emotional support while online learning, and the literature indicates that the pandemic was hugely disruptive to learners in practically every aspect of their lives, with substantial mental health repercussions.

2.2.4 The South African Context

A study was conducted at the University of Cape Town by Silbert et al. (2021). The preceding school year (2021) was especially tough for South African students due to the terrible effects of the COVID-19 epidemic. Anxiety levels have risen, particularly among young South Africans in school, as a result of persistent isolation, uncertainty, financial struggle, bereavement, and loss. Increased levels of worry are associated with much higher work demands, as well as disease, grief, anxiety, tiredness, and dread associated with a higher likelihood of contracting the virus. The education sector is experiencing heightened mental stress and anxiety as a result of the general population's significant fall in mental health. The impact of emotional and psychological stress on school-aged children is a growing concern. This is related to several issues. First, learners are concerned about their development and growth at a time when their daily routines have undergone significant upheaval. Learners lost around 70% of a complete years' worth of information between March 2020 and June 2021, and they were also absent frequently, which had a major detrimental influence on their ability to read and write (Silbert and Mzozoyana, 2021).

Multiple losses have cost learners dearly, both personally and in terms of disruptions to their education. They have lost parents, grandparents, or other significant family members. In South Africa, where many grandparents act as the primary carers, losing elderly family members to COVID-19 has been particularly devastating. When a child's primary caregiver dies or separates from them, the loss of an essential attachment figure, a safe foundation from which to explore the world, and heightened fear about the future have a substantial impact on their mental health (Silbert and Mzozoyana, 2021).

According to a study undertaken by Silbert et al,. (2021) at UCT, physical distance rules have stopped learners from playing as they normally do during break time since the beginning of the pandemic. For students, the loss and sometimes absence of play have resulted in poor concentration and involvement in school activities. As a result, learners' healthy development has already been negatively impacted in several ways, including their capacity for critical thought, social interaction, and appropriate physical touch. As a result, more research is needed to address grave concerns about the physical development of learners who lack play, which is crucial for their mental well-being.

Therefore, there are gaps in the study I am conducting, I should have considered how the pandemic has affected the mental health of students, who have reported managing their emotional tiredness while catering to educational needs. Furthermore, during the pandemic, it should have provided a direct relationship to learners' mental health, implying that any learner intervention should be cognizant of their well-being.

2.2.5 Findings and Importance of the Study

As I attempt to comprehend the potential effects of COVID-19 on learners' mental health and well-being, it is crucial to take into account how other local, national, and international events have been impacted by natural disasters and are still having an impact on learners, even though there is little research on the topic. The focus of earlier research in this field has typically been on well-understood aspects of developmental psychology, such as the age and gender differences that are frequently observed in the course of severe stress (Dunn et al., 2017).

Before the worldwide pandemic, research on stress reactions to health-related disasters was scarce, with the majority of studies concentrating on how students react to the trauma associated with natural disasters such as hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, and fires. Although these disasters differ from pandemics in many ways (e.g., amount of isolation and separation, necessary quarantine), they are relevant in the context of COVID-19 because they have a large negative impact on the community, mortality, and unpredictability (Sprang & Silman, 2013).

Previous research has been lacking in that little or no focus has been devoted to how the pandemic has affected the mental health of students, who have described managing their emotional tiredness while attending to educational obligations. To address the gaps, this study examined the effects of the COVID-19 epidemic on high school learners' mental health and well-being that live in Sebokeng, Vanderbijlpark. As a result, it is crucial to consider where learners are today after the pandemic and how their experiences at that time have affected their well-being now.

We can prevent learning losses, improve academic performance, and foster healthy development by focusing on the mental health of learners both inside and outside of the context of the pandemic. The effects of COVID-19 experiences in South Africa on mental health have not yet been thoroughly studied.

2.3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Urie Bronfenbrenner is broadly reviewed as the most influential psychologist in the development of a Bioecological theory of human development. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory approach, which is a component of the social context perspective, was used to offer the context for analysing and comprehending the findings of my research (Punt, 2018).

2.3.1 Ecological Systems Theory

Incorporating all the systems that children and their families are a part of, the Ecological Systems Theory offers a comprehensive strategy that faithfully captures the dynamic character of actual family connections (Hayes & O'Toole, 2017). Systems theory is the study of how smaller, less complex systems interact with larger, more complex ones. The focus of this theory is on how systems interact with one another as well as how they change and evolve. Social workers can use the framework provided by systems theory to examine how a learner's system works, how it interacts with other systems in the environment, and how it is impacted by those other systems (Greene, 2017).

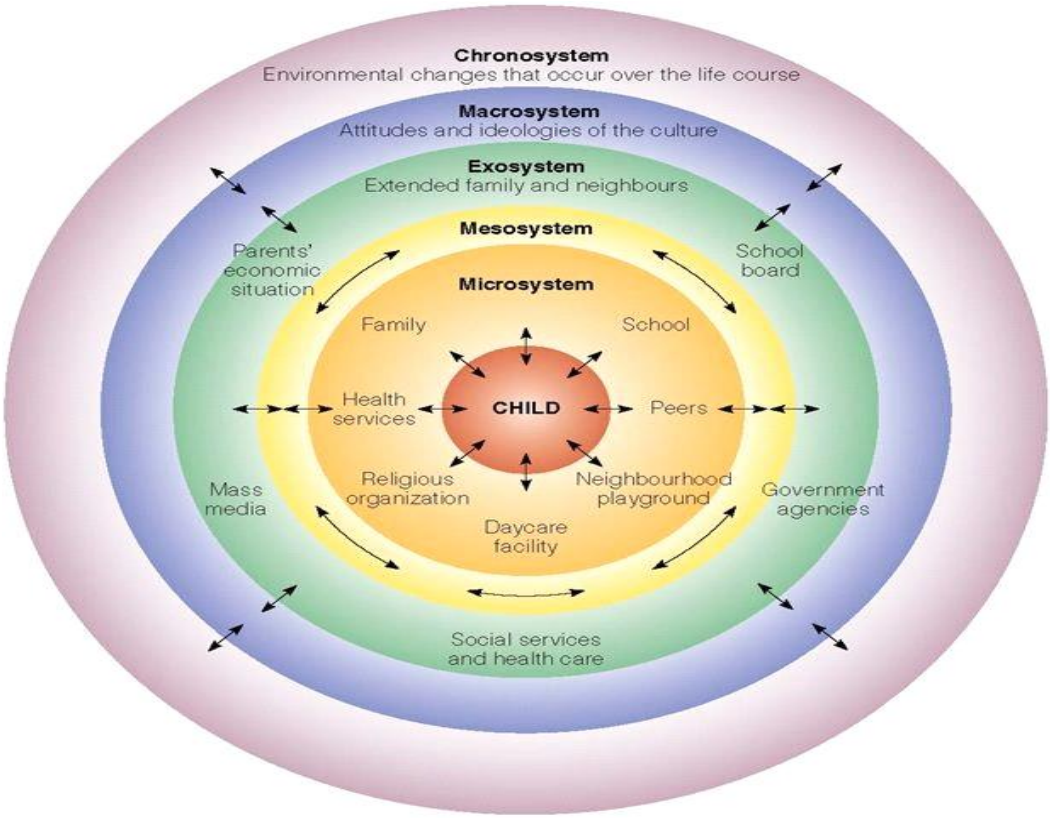
The theory was used to guide the exploration of learners' perceptions and experiences of mental health and well-being during COVID-19 in the current study. The theory enabled me to have a broader perspective on the learner's experiences and also on the other different systems that might have been contributing factors during the pandemic. In essence, this theory views various levels and groups of people as interactive systems in which interactions between parts are necessary for the functioning of the whole. For instance, a school is a system made up of various components, including its faculty, its pupils, its curriculum, and its management. It is essential to look at how the system's many components interact to comprehend the system as a whole.

According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, a child's development is viewed as a complex system of relationships that are influenced by a range of environmental factors, from the child's immediate home and school environments to more general cultural values, laws, and practices. The relationship between the child and her immediate environment as well as the larger environment must be examined to research a child's development.

According to Bronfenbrenner (1977), a child's environment is made up of a series of interconnected structures. He arranged them according to the impact they have on children. The Microsystem, Mesosystem, Exosystem, Macrosystem, and Chronosystem are the names he gave to these systems. The five systems are interconnected, so how each one affects the development of a kid relies on how it interacts with the others.

Figure 1.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).



The first level of Bronfenbrenner's theory is referred to as the Microsystem, and it includes all of the components of a child's immediate environment that have a direct connection with them, such as their parents, siblings, teachers, and classmates. Due to the reciprocal nature of relationships in microsystems, children can both be affected by the people around them and can change their attitudes and behaviours. The way a learner reacts to the individuals in their microsystem may have an impact on how they treat them in turn. This study was primarily focused on the school setting as a microsystem to identify any elements that might contribute to learners' experiences with mental health during COVID-19.

The Mesosystem is made up of the interactions between the child's Microsystems, such as those between parents and teachers or between classmates and siblings. The many Microsystems of a person communicate with one another and have an impact on one another in the Mesosystem as opposed to functioning separately. For instance, a child's growth may be impacted by interactions between parents and instructors. In essence, a Mesosystem is a collection of Microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

The Mesosystem is interested in the interactions between several microsystems and how these interactions affect one another (Donald et al., 2014). For instance, learners play a variety of roles in their home and school contexts, and both Microsystems interact with one another, which may have had an impact on how they experienced their mental health during COVID-19. As a result, the theory enabled the researcher to identify the effects on the learner's mental health.

According to Bronfenbrenner (1977), the Exosystem is the system that includes additional formal and informal social structures that, while not directly limiting the child, have an effect on one of the Microsystems and hence indirectly affect the child. Exosystems include areas like communities, parents' places of employment, parents' friends, and the media. These are circumstances that don't include the child and aren't part of their everyday lives, but they nonetheless affect them.

The Macrosystem is a part of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory that focuses on how cultural factors like socioeconomic status, wealth, poverty, and ethnicity influence a child's development. Therefore, the culture in which people are raised may have an impact on their views and understanding of how the world works (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The Macrosystem is different from the preceding ecosystems in that it refers to the already established society and culture that the child is evolving in rather than the particular circumstances of one developing child. Therefore, the researcher applied this theory to examine how the pandemic-related financial crisis, lost livelihoods, depleted emergency savings, and loans are taken out to cover necessities affected learners' mental health and well-being.

In Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the Chronosystem is the very last level. According to Bronfenbrenner (1977), this system consists of all environmental changes that occur over the course of a lifetime and have an effect on a person's development. Examples include major life transitions and historical events. These include both typical life transitions, like as starting school, and uncommon ones, such as parents getting divorced or having to relocate to a new house.

By using the Ecological systems theory, it was also crucial to recognize the protective factors within a given context that enhances the stressors that can contribute to the learner's experience of mental health during COVID-19. The Ecological systems theory, necessarily, provided the lens through which the dynamics of environmental effects in the South African learning context, as well as learners' experiences of mental, could be viewed. It was necessary to take into consideration all the contexts and systems that might influence learners' experience of mental health during COVID-19 in the South African context.

2.4 SUMMARY OF CHAPTER TWO

This chapter began by describing the history of COVID-19 and breaking down how learners experienced their mental health and general well-being during COVID-19. Because of the different stressors and difficulties, they could have faced while studying, learners are vulnerable to COVID-19. The learners' experiences of mental health throughout COVID-19 within a South African environment were understood and explored using Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as the theoretical framework.

The research process, including the research strategy and methods applied in this study, will be covered in detail in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 3: Methods

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The primary aim of this study as stated in Chapter 1 was to explore the experiences of learners' mental health during COVID-19 at a public secondary school in Sebokeng, Vanderbijlpark. The study aimed to explore high school learners' experiences of mental health and well-being during COVID-19 and gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of high school learners to understand the support needs of learners' post-COVID.

To achieve the aims of this research study, the following research question, also stated in section 1.4 of Chapter 1, was used to guide the investigation:

- What are the experiences of high school learners in Sebokeng, Vanderbijlpark on their mental health and well-being during COVID-19?

The research process involves the research paradigm, methodology of choice, research design, participants, and research site selection, as well as trustworthiness strategies, data collection techniques, and data analysis techniques. The ethical considerations applicable to this study will also be discussed as well as my reflections as the researcher.

3.2 RESEARCH QUESTION, AIM, AND OBJECTIVES

The study's aim and objective are as follows**:**

Aim:

The primary aim of the study was to explore high school learners' experiences of mental health and well-being during COVID-19 in Sebokeng, Vanderbijlpark.

Objectives:

- To gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of high school learners in Sebokeng Vanderbijlpark during Covid-19, specifically about mental health and well-being.
- To understand the support needs of high school learners post-COVID.

3.3 RESEARCH APPROACH

Contrary to quantitative research, which focuses on gathering and analysing numerical data for statistical analysis, qualitative research focuses on thematic and contextual information. The humanities and social sciences, including anthropology, sociology, education, the health sciences, history, etc., frequently employ it. Qualitative research has the following benefits: The participants' views, behaviours, and experiences can be thoroughly analyzed and understood thanks to this. Saving money and being cost-effective. Incorporating the human experience and perspective into the research process, qualitative research is adaptable to new questions and data.

A qualitative research approach was employed to better comprehend the phenomenon that was being studied. A comprehensive strategy that includes discovery is qualitative research. It is an evolving model that occurs in a natural setting and enables the researcher to get extensive information through close participation in real occurrences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The qualitative research approach is appropriate for this study since the data was derived from observations and experiences of people. It is also appropriate because it functions within flexible structures as opposed to other approaches that call for rigid frameworks with little room for error.

To do qualitative research, post-structuralism is the method used. The five subfields of qualitative research are case study, ethnographic study, phenomenology study, grounded theory study, and content analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The five subjects described above are characteristic of inductive reasoning-based research and the methodologies that support it. The premises of qualitative research are based on inductive rather than logical reasoning.

This study's methodology was based on phenomenological ideas. With this strategy, the researcher will be able to gather comprehensive data on the mental health experiences of learners during COVID-19.

3.4 RESEARCH DESIGN

The goal of the phenomenological research design is to study how people perceive and understand a particular event. When employing this strategy, the researcher makes an effort to set aside their existing knowledge and view the phenomenon they are researching from a fresh perspective (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

It accurately captures the essence of a few individuals' experiences who have all come into contact with the phenomenon's principles. The phenomenological principles will be taken into consideration in this study because this design is significantly influenced by philosophy and commonly involves interviews with participants (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994).

The research study design is a framework that acts as a bridge between research questions and research conduct (Durrheim, 2006). Research design is, therefore, a plan to dictate the conditions for collecting and analysing data in such a way that their relevance to research objectives is combined with how the research process is conducted (Durrheim, 2006).

Although many researchers have developed classifications of qualitative research designs, there is no common classification of designs used in qualitative research (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001). Research designs are examples of qualitative studies in the social sciences and humanities.

Understanding an experience from the perspective of a participant was the goal of the phenomenological investigation. The purpose of phenomenological research is to understand the essence or true meaning of an experience, and the research problem was to explain the essence of the phenomenon (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001).

The importance of the value that various lived experiences have for different people is highlighted. This entails comprehending the basics of several individuals' experiences with a phenomenon, such as sadness, exclusion, or motivation, and explaining the shared interpretation that multiple individuals have for their lived experiences with a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

According to Creswell and Poth (2018:186), the goal of this type of study is to “highlight the intentionality of consciousness when experiences involve both the outer appearance and internal awareness based on the memory, picture, and meaning”. Because the researcher usually has some involvement, knowledge, or stake in the situation, this study presents a difficulty that calls for bracketing (putting all prejudgments aside).

3.5 POPULATION, SAMPLE, AND SAMPLING PROCEDURES

Population

The term "population" describes all of the people who are present in a given area, such as a city or town, region, country, continent, or the entire world. A population from which a statistical sample is drawn in statistics is referred to as a population (Weeks, 2020). The learners in Grade 10 at Fundulwazi Secondary School in Sebokeng Vanderbijlpark, South Africa, make up the population of this study. There are 1168 learners enrolled in the school, which offers Grades 8 through 12. There are 84 learners in Grade 10 overall (possible participants) in the school.

Research site: Sebokeng

Is a township in the districts of Sedibeng and Emfuleni in southern Gauteng, South Africa, close to the industrial metropolis of Vanderbijlpark. The township spans several zones, from Zone 3 to Zone 24. The majority of black middle-class residents and residences with greater property values can be found in Zones 6, 10, and 14, which were erected during the township's creation and were known as "matchbox houses." There has been an increase in applications from other racial groups despite the township's predominately black population (Siyaya, 2015).

There are 60,793 houses and 218,515 people living there, or 4,704.72 people per square kilometre. Residents of Sebokeng have chosen to pursue business as a means of making a living. Locals operate a variety of enterprises, including formal ones like spaza shops, hair salons, and shebeens as well as informal ones that are generally located at homes, like bars, gas stations, and nightclubs (Siyaya, 2015).

Many of Sebokeng's roads were unnamed by the municipality during the Apartheid era, thus locals utilize 7-digit house numbers to travel through residential neighbourhoods. The longest major roads in Sebokeng are Moshoeshoe Rd, named after the Sotho king Moshoeshoe, and Adams Rd in Evaton. The Vaal Triangle D8 education district offices are located in Zone 18, next to Residential High School. Zone 18 also includes the Sebokeng Training College and the Sebokeng campus of the Vaal University of Technology (Siyaya, 2015).

Sample

A sample is a portion of the population, which means that the population has been divided into samples. A sample's size is the number of participants included in it. If the sample is more representative of the population, the researcher can be more confident in the quality of the results (Weeks, 2020). Choosing a suitable sample size in qualitative research is a topic of conceptual debate and practical uncertainty. Braun and Clarke (2013) provide guidelines for sample sizes depending on the size of the project, based on their opinion the target sample size for this study was 10 participants, between the ages of 15-18 years.

Sampling procedure

Many different sampling methods have been developed to ensure that a sample accurately represents the target population. Purposive sampling was utilized as a sampling technique for this investigation. Using their discretion and/or judgment, the researcher chooses the variables for the sample population in this non-probability sampling method (Weeks, 2020). Every member of the target population (The Grade 10s at Fundulwazi Secondary School) had an equal opportunity of being selected for the sample when using purposive sampling. The researcher collected a list of every learner in Grade 10 at Fundulwazi Secondary School. She then gave them a presentation on the research topic and asked those who were interested in participating to give her their names.

Sample characteristics

The target population comprised Setswana-speaking high school learners who were attending a public school in Sebokeng, Vanderbijlpark, Gauteng Province. The targeted population is the dominant group of people living in the township (Sebokeng). Purposive sampling was the method of sampling used in this study. Purposive sampling is based on a researcher's assessment of the characteristics of a sample, and it is based on the idea that the researcher is aware of the kind of participant who will best suit the research study (Bless et al., 2013). Purposive sampling, thus, looks for participants "who fit the criteria of a desirable participant" (Henning et al., 2004, p. 71). However, there are restrictions to employing these sampling techniques because of the possibility of bias (Bless et al., 2013). The research population was limited to learners in one high school. The table below lists the inclusion criteria for selecting specific research participants.

Table 3.4.1: The inclusion criteria for selecting specific research participants.

CRITERIA FOR SELECTING SPECIFIC RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS
• Each participant must understand and be fluent in English, at the time of the study.
• Each participant must be in Grade 10, and between the ages of 15-18 years.
• Each participant must be a full-time learner at Fundulwazi secondary school.

In using these predetermined criteria, greater insights were garnered from the study's research questions. Participation in this study was entirely voluntary; therefore, the number of participants who consented to participate in the study could not be predetermined. The target population consisted of 168 Grade 10 learners. However, 10 participants participated in the individual, semi-structured interviews in English.

The following information was provided voluntarily by the participants and arose from the demographic questions asked during the individual interviews. The ten participants were between the ages of 15 and 18. There were only one male and nine females. All participants were Setswana-speaking, but to avoid language barriers the interviews were held in English because the researcher is a Swati-speaking person. Grades 10 through 11 were the range for the participants' overall learning.

Table 3.4.2 Demographic information of participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Grade	Location
P1	Female	16	10	Sebokeng zone 12
P2	Female	15	10	Sebokeng zone 10
P3	Female	15	10	Sebokeng zone 10
P4	Male	16	11	Sebokeng zone 12
P5	Female	15	10	Sebokeng zone 12
P6	Female	16	10	Sebokeng zone 11
P7	Female	16	10	Sebokeng zone 11
P8	Female	16	10	Sebokeng zone 12
P9	Female	16	10	Sebokeng zone 12
P10	Female	17	10	Sebokeng zone 12

As indicated in Table 3.4.2, most of the participants in the study were females and most participants were in grade 10. The average age was 16 years, and most of the participants were from Zone 12.

3.6 RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

In this study, data were collected utilizing an individual semi-structured interview schedule with learners. According to Patton (2002), the researcher only used this instrument to try and understand the participants' experiences with mental health during COVID-19. The instrument was generated from the research topic, which is exploring learners' experiences of mental health and well-being during COVID-19 in Sebokeng, Vanderbijlpark. I generated as many possible interview questions aimed at answering the research objectives and through the guidance of my supervisor, only 12 were selected for the data collection process.

Through interviews, I wanted to create an environment of trust and openness in which participants could express themselves honestly (Kelly, 2006). The Research Instrument was pre-tested before the data collection process. The researcher interviewed an 18-year-old learner from Katleho-Impumelelo secondary school in Sebokeng. The learner is a black South African female currently doing Grade 11 at the school where I work at. The interview took place in the researcher's office during lunch break. I started by introducing myself to the learner by name and the institution I come from, as well as the organization I work for, and then I, highlighted the purpose of the study to the learner, and gave her the Participant Information Sheet (PIS) as well as the Assent form for learners, for her to sign if she is interested in taking part in the research study.

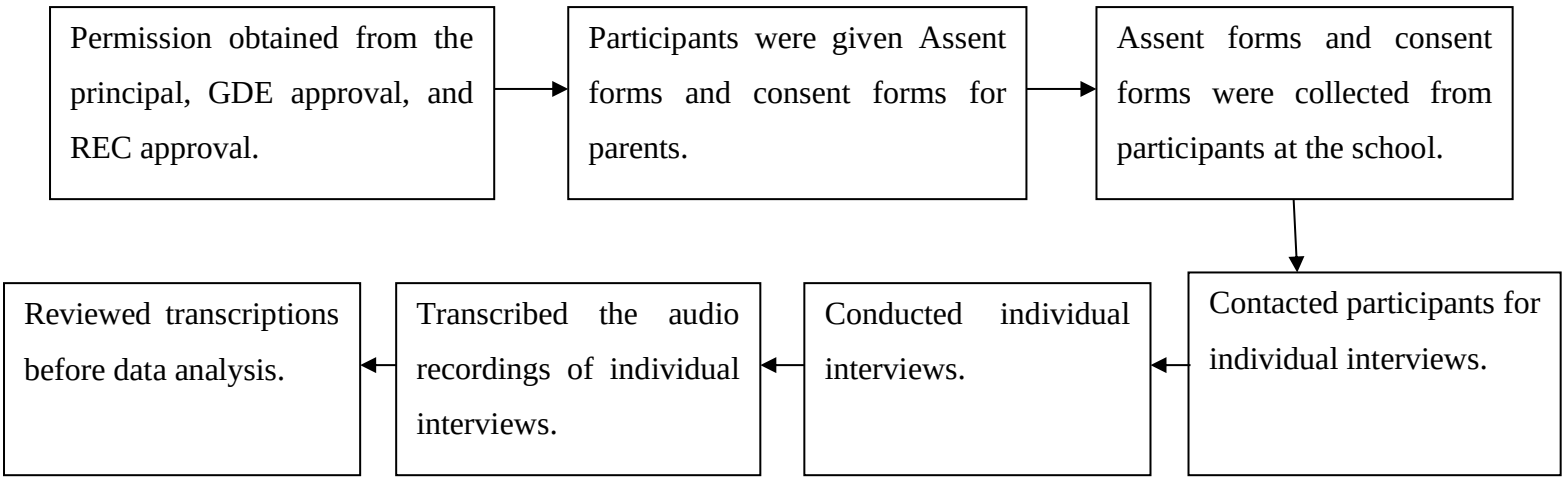
Some challenges/issues popped up when conducting the interview. For example, some of the questions asked covered answers for the question that were still going to follow, and the interview took longer than the stipulated time.

3.7 METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

In this study, the methods of data collection that were used are semi-structured interviews. During data collection, I involved myself in the context in which the data was collected, and, as a result, I became part of the context in which the phenomenon of learners' experiences of mental health occurs. Data were gathered over the first term's summer break (2023) and the first week of the second term (2023). The participants were at home enjoying the holidays during this period, which facilitated the researcher's easy access to them. The interviews were conducted at the community hall which is next to the school, and some were conducted at the school hence the school was open during holidays for the Grade 12s extra classes.

Eleven people initially gave their permission to take part in the study. One person who had given consent but hadn't yet started data collection withdrew from the study throughout the research procedure. As part of the initial round of data collection, the final 10 participants filled out the assent forms, and their parents filled out the consent forms to give consent for learners to take part in the research. Following that, all 10 participants agreed to take part in the one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. When the data were collected, every participant was a learner at the same school (Fundulwazi Secondary) in Sebokeng, Vanderbijlpark. Figure 2 outlines the data collection process that was followed in this study.

Figure 2. Data collection process



After receiving ethical approval, the principal of the school where the data were gathered supplied the names of possible participants who fit the inclusion criteria during the first round of data collection. These people have all voluntarily given their consent for me to use their names. Consent was gained when prospective research participants were told of the study's goals and objectives during the first stage of data collection. I obtained the signed consent and assent documents from parents and learners.

After participants were chosen to take part in the one-on-one interviews, semi-structured interviews which is the second phase of data gathering started. I had the chance to gather in-depth accounts of the participants' experiences with COVID-19 through one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. It was easy to gain a deeper knowledge of the participants' opinions throughout this round of data collection. The interviews were conducted in English. The stipulated time for the interviews was 30-45 minutes but, instead, they took on average 10-15 minutes. In general, participants did not give much information during the interview; some gave straightforward forward or one-word answers and a few who are talkative by nature gave more information during the interview.

3.8 METHODS OF DATA ANALYSIS

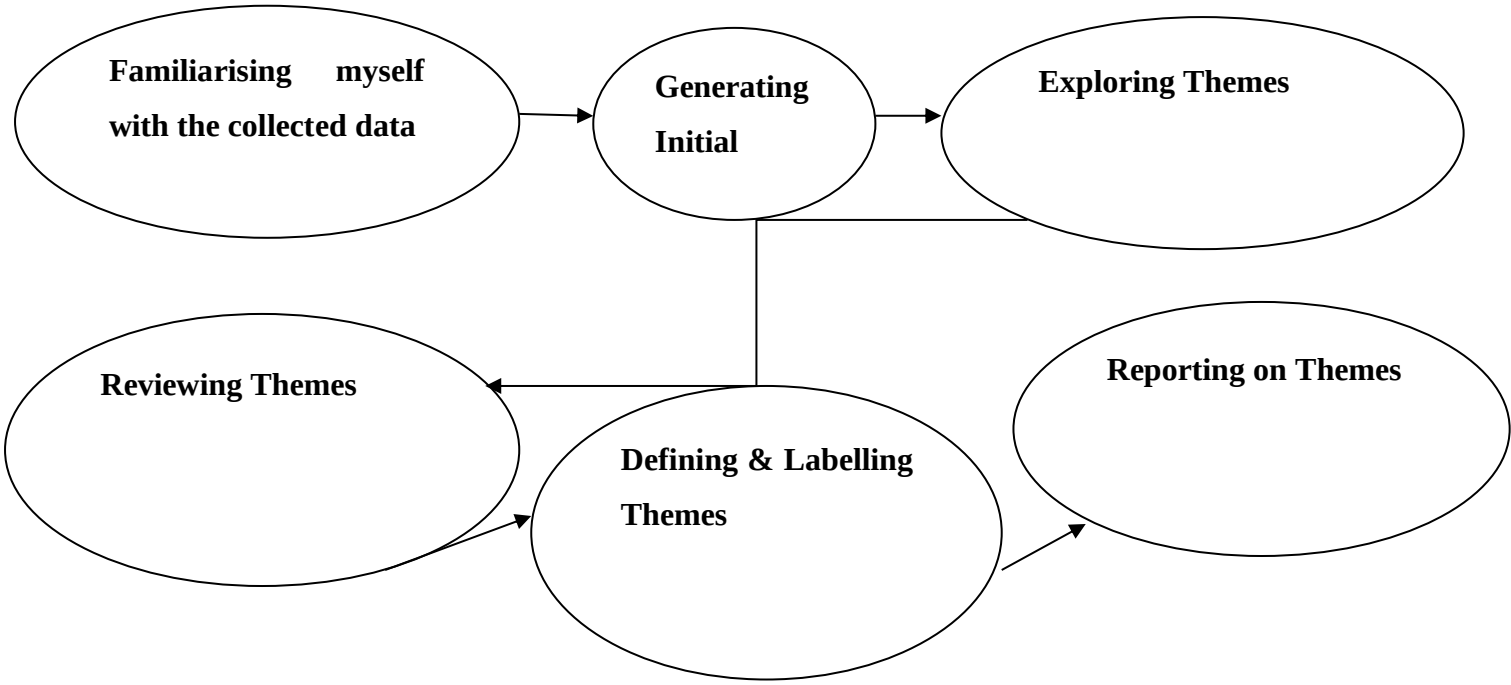
Following the interview phase, I transcribed the individual, semi-structured interview audio recordings. It is vital to remember that the participants were all fluent English speakers, hence this chapter's reports of the findings were written in English. But to preserve the authenticity and, consequently, reliability, data analysis was carried out using the Otter software.

Before beginning the data analysis, I checked the transcription of the interview to ensure that the data were accurate. I had to evaluate and make corrections to the interview transcripts while listening to the audio recordings since I was not satisfied with them and felt that they were not 100% accurate. All of the transcripts were checked, about 10% of the transcriptions were not accurate in each transcript, and they were then fixed.

I have opted to use an interpretive paradigm to address the research topic. Thematic analysis has been selected as the data analysis technique. Thematic analysis should be regarded as a foundational methodology for qualitative research, according to Braun and Clarke (2006). A way to recognize and arrange the researcher's data set, evaluate, and report on distinct themes in data is known as thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

I have chosen to analyse the data by utilizing Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis, which are shown as follows:

Figure 3. The thematic analysis process



The first step helped me to develop general themes and initial ideas. This phase included taking notes on the information as I was reading the scripts and listening to the recordings. Themes about the learner's mental health experiences during COVID-19 were investigated. Participants provided various ideas on their mental health experiences with COVID-19. At this stage, I as the researcher made notes and jotted down early impressions.

The second phase of analysis followed after the semi-structured interviews, and then the interview transcriptions were coded. After the themes are analysed to identify which set of codes may fall under which subthemes, the codes that appeared infrequently will not be included in the research findings. I started making notes on potential data items of interest, queries, linkages between data items, and other early concepts after step 1's familiarization process.

The rare/rather infrequent codes are considered significant still and will be taken into consideration through analysis. The coding procedure which is the process that involves reading across your data, assigning codes to experts, going through your data multiple times, and organizing codes into themes, helped to provide recommendations which will be covered in more detail in Chapter 5 of the research report. The opportunity to code gave me the chance to better understand the codes and how they link to other themes, however, I decided to use thematic analysis because it allowed me to fully immerse myself in the data and investigate codes as they appeared.

By merging themes from the data analysis process the study aimed at answering the research questions that guide this study by comparing findings from the literature review. However, it was crucial to explore any unforeseen information that might have had a significant impact on the study's results rather than just focusing on the findings from the literature review.

Lastly, given the nature of this study, it was essential to realize the active role that I, as the researcher, played when making meaning of the data that were collected. I used a mind map to regularly reflect on my contribution to the study. Reflection as a method of bracketing, analysing, and going over recognized themes from the data was crucial for me as a researcher to prevent any personal bias from doing research.

3.9 ANALYSIS

The interviews were transcribed using Otter software. Data collected from each semi-structured interview were coded and analysed, and then codes were categorized into overarching themes. By conducting individual semi-structured interviews, we were able to ascertain recurring themes from responses to various participants' questions. In addition, semi-structured interviews allowed us to explore participants and clarify uncertainties. This was beneficial because structured interviews were rigorous, detailed, and predesigned (Nieuwenhuis, 2007).

3.10 TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE STUDY

A study's credibility, or the qualitative researcher's level of confidence in the authenticity of the study's findings, must be established before a study can be considered trustworthy. When referring to methods for ensuring a study's quality, rigor, and credibility while re-establishing the congruence of the researcher's epistemological and ontological foundations with the design, the term "trustworthiness" refers to an overarching idea used in qualitative research (Shenton, 2004). It will be easier to evaluate the research study's quality because its credibility has been established and guaranteed. To ensure trustworthiness, Shenton (2004) recommends four factors: credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability.

3.10.1 Credibility

The degree to which study findings reflect or align with reality can be referred to as credibility (Merriam, 2009). A semi-structured interview was used as the data-gathering technique in this study to increase trustworthiness. Shenton (2004) underlined that understanding the organizational cultures of participating organizations can help to establish credibility.

This research study used two data collection methods, one-on-one interviews, and individual semi-structured interviews, to increase reliability. Shenton (2004) emphasizes that credibility can also be ensured by knowing the culture of participating organizations. As a researcher, I was familiar with the high school situation in Sebokeng, Gauteng, which added credibility to my research. Finally, the research study received regular reports from learners.

3.10.2 Transferability

Transferability is the ability to apply research findings to different contexts, communities, and settings (Van der Riet & Durrheim, 2006; Merriam, 2009). However, the objective of qualitative research is not to provide a rich and extensive explanation and interpretation of the findings to contextualize the study's findings (Van der Riet & Durrheim, 2006). The study's transferability is assured by detailed disclosure of the study's background. I selected the high school where my research will be done because it is accessible and welcomes a wide range of students. Therefore, a deeper understanding of the phenomena in a high school environment will be possible by offering thorough and "thick" explanations of learners' perceptions of mental health in COVID-19 (Shenton, 2004).

Transferability was ensured in this study with sufficient information about the context of the study. I chose the high school I studied not only because it is accessible to me, but also because it caters to a diverse group of learners. Students from poor and wealthy areas attend certain high schools. Selected learners, therefore, face many challenges that may contribute to their mental health and well-being during COVID-19.

3.10.3 Dependability

When a study is repeated in the same method, under the same circumstances, and with the same participants, dependability refers to the extent to which the same results are obtained (Shenton, 2004). One-on-one interviews are an example of "overlapping methods" that can be utilized to achieve this, given the nature of qualitative research. A future researcher should be able to replicate the study's methods, even if not necessarily to get the same results, to address the dependability issue more thoroughly (Merriam, 2009).

The dependability of this study was assured by providing the reader with sufficient information about the research design, conduct, data collection, and how I, as a researcher, continue to reflect on the research work it was done.

3.10.4 Confirmability

Confirmability entails the actions necessary to reassuringly ensure that the research findings reflect the views and experiences of the participants rather than the researcher's preference (Shenton, 2004). The provision of an audit trail, also known as a theoretical audit trail, encompassing raw data, process notes, and interview guides ensures the auditability of research investigations (Merriam, 2009; Shenton, 2004). Confirmability is a problem for qualitative researchers, similar to objectivity. In this case, protocols were put in place to help ensure that the research findings, to the greatest extent feasible, are the result of the participants' experiences and ideas rather than the researcher's preferences and traits. Confirmability played a crucial role in the study process since it required us as researchers to be aware of potential biases that can influence how we interpret research results.

3.11 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Participants believe that researchers will correctly and ethically represent them, according to Daniels (2008). As a result, it is essential to guarantee that the correct ethical standards are upheld. These ethical procedures include obtaining ethical clearance and consent from numerous institutions and the subjects before the research endeavour may start. Application for ethical clearance from the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) Non-Medical of the University of Witwatersrand was the initial step in ensuring ethical research practices, see attached clearance certificate in Appendix A (Protocol Number: H22/11/69).

The process for gaining ethical approval comprises a full explanation of the research's procedures and how ethical compliance would be kept under observation. The Gauteng Department of Education gave permission to conduct research, the researcher spoke to the school's principal to gain access to the research setting and the high school learners before making request for ethical clearance to the Human Research Ethics Committee.

Assent

Participants were given a participant information sheet and a consent form to fill in order to participate in the research after the REC had granted ethical clearance and the necessary approval was received from the school principal.

Confidentiality

The ethical considerations of informed permission, anonymity, and confidentiality are essential while conducting qualitative research. Protecting the well-being of research participants is the primary objective of research ethics (Wassenaar, 2006). Learner's names were kept anonymous to ensure confidentiality throughout, and also during the interviews learners were not called by their names.

Voluntary participation & informed consent.

I went to all the Grade 10 classes at Sebokeng secondary school to present the research topic to learners and then asked those who would like to take part in the study to enlist their names on her register. The research topic was thoroughly discussed, along with what it requires to participate and what to expect during the study. I provided potential research participants with a participant information sheet, which gave them enough written information to decide whether or not to participate in a research study based on an explanation of the proposed research and the type of participation that is required of them. This was done because the participant's consent must be considered informed if they have a basic understanding of the research and what they are consenting to.

For participants who were under the age of 18, the researcher requested permission from the principal before issuing PIS and consent forms for parents who were to participate in the study, requesting their agreement. Parents were given directions to sign the consent form on the line provided if they approve of their child's participation.

3.12 SUMMARY OF CHAPTER 3

In this chapter, an overview of the research methodology for this study was presented. It was explained how participants' experiences and worldviews are taken into consideration in the research process according to the interpretive research paradigm. After outlining the three key components of research ontology, epistemology, and methodology a more thorough explanation of the qualitative methodology employed in the study was given. This involved thinking about how study participants were chosen, data was gathered, and data were analysed. Additionally, the steps for guaranteeing the data's reliability were described. To ensure effective ethical research practice, the chapter was closed with a section on researcher reflexivity and the many ethical concerns that were taken into account during the study process.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The research findings are presented in Chapter 4. The many developing themes and categories will be pointed out and addressed in this chapter about the study's research questions. The information gathered from the chosen sample of high school learners is presented in this chapter as themes and subthemes. The outlined topics and subthemes aim to respond to the research questions covered in Chapter 1's Section 1.4. The four major themes and subthemes that arose throughout the study are visually summarized in Table 4.1 on the following page, and they will be covered in further detail in Chapter 5.

Table 4.1: Themes identified in the study

EXPLORING LEARNER'S EXPERIENCES OF MENTAL HEALTH DURING COVID-19.	
THEMES	**Sub-THEMES**
Learners are still living as if the pandemic is not over.	COVID-19 significantly disrupted learners' well-being. Coping techniques. Suffering
COVID-19 significantly disrupted school and learning.	Failure. Manifestations of support systems. The lockdown led to poor attendance.
Learners experienced significant losses due to COVID-19.	The lockdown led to a loss. Continued experience of losses.
COVID-19 produced a lot of fear.	Fear around hygiene. Fear of failure Fear of losing loved ones

4.3 THEMATIC CONTENT OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS.

Four broad themes were generated in the data coding and analysis process. Through repeated coding and sorting, different codes were assigned to each of the four themes. Each theme was color-coded to ease cross-referencing of data points and allow for a comparison of the participant's responses.

The themes significantly relate to each other, hence there are some overlaps. Firstly, the participants' experiences of COVID-19 were elaborated upon, which was followed by the participants' perceived challenges of living as if the pandemic is not over. Participants 'being disrupted by COVID-19 in school and learning, as well as participants experiencing loss, fear, and suffering due to COVID-19. The research findings were summarized using information from the one-on-one, semi-structured interviews; each overarching concept is described in the sections below:

4.3.1 Learners are still living as if the pandemic is not over.

Learners are seriously suffering from the consequences of the pandemic, hence the negative effects of the pandemic have not been distributed equally. Learners in disadvantaged areas like Sebokeng continue to be disproportionately affected in relation to their long-term health outcomes. Participants indicated how the pandemic has disrupted their well-being and caused their suffering. They shared differences in terms of things they had to do to survive the trauma both pre and post-COVID-19.

- COVID-19 significantly disrupted learners' well-being.

COVID-19 affected learner's well-being in a way that they are now still living in fear, scared such that they are reluctant to touch one another in the classroom, they still put on their masks, and immediately when someone is coughing they tell him/her to go to the clinic because they believe the person will infect them with COVID-19.

Learners tend to have episodes of the symptoms or imagine that they might have COVID-19 as soon as they catch some fever or flu. One of the participants even mentioned that she still sanitizes her space, herself as well as the people who usually come to her space to date.

"My being? Oh, it affected me a lot. In such a way that I didn't even talk to people, whenever I meet with you in the street I just feel that I don't want to touch you or any part of your body. Even though we are friends. I just prefer to talk then that's it". P3

"Hence I said I was scared most of the time, so I followed all the precautions, ensured that I keep my distance, and wear my mask even when am at home". P8

- Coping techniques.

Most learners indicated that they used to watch Mindset, a channel on Dstv to catch up/rather keep up with their schoolwork. Some indicated that they used to attend online classes using WhatsApp, and it was their most effective platform for their learning hence they could ask questions, and teachers would answer and send all the work they were supposed to do.

"I attended online classes via WhatsApp. I watched YouTube videos, teachers teaching there, and I made sure to practice every subject before bed". P5

"I was doing online classes via YouTube. And also watching Mindset on Dstv to stick with the topics that must be done during that time ". P4

"There was this channel I used to watch on Dstv called Mindset, which helped learners to catch up with their school work covering different subjects ". P1

"I taught myself a lot of things. Watch channels that were very helpful like Mindset. It's channel 319 if I'm not mistaken. Yeah ". P2

While sharing their experience about COVID-19 and school work, only two learners indicated that they felt they had everything under control during COVID-19, hence they are used to studying alone at home.

"Ok COVID-19 didn't influence me that much. I enjoy being at home. So I enjoy spending time at home, even though most of the time my parents were never in the house hence they are health workers but I enjoyed having the entire house to myself". P2

"Okay. I don't think COVID-19 affected my well-being because I still managed to do everything I did before COVID-19. So, I still talk with my friends like, I mean, nothing changed". P5

- Suffering

COVID-19 brought significant suffering to the learners' lives. Most of them lost important members of the family, which led to real problems or rather suffering, such as hunger and loneliness since those members who passed away were very close members of the family and some were breadwinners in the family. Learners mentioned that their caregivers lost their jobs and those with small businesses lost customers, leading to indirect losses to the learners, and that made some learners realise that life is indeed too short.

"I've just told myself that death is not something that we can run off. So we had counselling as a family since we were struggling to cope with my father's death, especially me, Yoh mam I felt so lonely, and the fact that the business was not doing well, and no money was coming in it was hard". P4

"Ok, my experience is that I have noticed that life is too short because I lost my mom. She tested positive for COVID-19 and the other thing is that we were struggling to get some food hence the family business lost customers and also it influenced me in a way that I was lonely because our friends were not able to come to visit". P7

"I can say it has been a difficult time for so many of us and so many different reasons. For example, I lost my mom during COVID-19, and it also affected my studies. Because we had to do home-schooling and distance learning was stressful and boring for me, but overall, I still managed to keep my grades". P5

"Yes I lost someone and I couldn't cope because I always knew that person as my mother since she is the one who raised me. But I wish that I had a chance to say goodbye ". P1

"I now live with my sister, my dad, and my younger brother. I lost my mom, grandfather, and my aunt in 2020 during COVID-19 and they meant a lot to me". P10

Only one learner experienced a loss of a friend due to COVID-19 out of all learners who formed part of the study participants.

"Yoh mam, I lost my best friend due to COVID-19 her parents work for the health department and I think she got it from them. It was so sad, I loved her and was scared of being alone".P8

4.3.2 COVID-19 significantly disrupted school and learning.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the effects of interrupted education have been devastating, with learners behind by a full school year. Rotational attendance, irregular school closures and days off for specific grades, have resulted in learners loosing learning time. According to the majority of participants, COVID-19 had an influence on their school work in different ways, such as failure or repeating a grade, manifestation of support systems, and how lockdown led to poor attendance.

- Failure.

The fact that learners were falling behind in the curriculum caused them to fear repeating the grade, as happened during COVID-19. They indicated that after COVID-19 they tried by all means to avoid repeating the same Grade, they made sure to focus on their studies to ensure that they cover the syllabus, but it was not easy hence they have spent so much time at home that they have forgotten the majority of what they learned in school. As a result, they must relearn everything, which is quite difficult for them. The majority of learners' related fears were about not having enough time to study or do school work on their own at home without the help of a teacher or rather classmates. COVID-19 instilled fear in learners, such that even today they do not feel confident to study because most of the work they did on their own at home during COVID-19 was not what the teachers wanted from them.

"It was a challenge hence what I've just said, having to adapt to the not-so-normal situation wasn't easy at all, and also I was scared that I might repeat the Grade because we were behind with so much work ". P9

"Yes COVID-19 did affect my school work so badly. You know during lockdown I didn't have enough time to study and when we went back to school it was a challenge because I had forgotten most of the lessons. That made me scared, I had the fear that I would fail." P10

- Manifestations of support systems.

During COVID-19, learners mostly got help from their families; hence home is where everyone was with their family. Unfortunately, most learners couldn't afford data or airtime to join online classes or chats that took place via WhatsApp; therefore the majority of the learners relied on their family members for assistance with their school work.

“Yeah I did get some help you know, from my sister. She was really helpful, I could ask her to practice maths with me, and listen to me reading the short stories and poems and she didn't complain “. P10

“I attended online classes via WhatsApp. I watched YouTube videos, teachers teaching there, and I made sure to practice every subject before bed”. P5

"My grandmother is okay because she was a teacher some time ago. She helped me I wonder how I was going to manage without her ". P1

"My mom and my sister because my sister was in the previous Grade before, they helped me out". P3

Some learners indicated that they relied on the internet whereby a lot of school information was posted on social media, and one learner mentioned that he used to watch videos on certain chapters of the subjects he was struggling with on you Tube, and that helped him a lot.

"I studied alone, and I relied on the internet and social media as well on watching YouTube videos, especially for subjects like maths, because it requires practice daily ". P9

While learners had support from friends, the internet, family members, and social, a certain learner didn't get the support he only relied on himself and his books.

"Home! At home? Okay. At home, I am the oldest of them all; there is no one to help me with schoolwork instead I was the one assisting my brother and sister with their schoolwork. I relied on myself I made peace with the fact that nobody can help me ". P6

- The lockdown led to poor attendance.

COVID-19 disrupted learning in so many ways, with the lockdown having to change the learners' attendance routine. The sudden shift from being taught by teachers daily to part-time or rather distant learning affected learners' attendance. Most of the learners indicated that after the pandemic was over, it wasn't easy for them to adjust to the normal routine because they became used to staying at home comfortably and without fear of going out to have contact with strangers. Things have gone out of hand in such a way that the number of absenteeism in school has increased, some learners indicated that since COVID-19 they are now not scared of being absent or bunking school.

“Because we didn't have a lot of time, we had to go to school this week and the next week you not going. We didn't attend as we used to before, and we were getting behind with school work and seeing this happen hence I failed after the pandemic was scared not to come to school because didn't want to fail “. P1

"Okay, I think they should have introduced us to online learning, and ensured that we are taught by our teachers, and also they should have supplied us with study materials to cover the entire curriculum unlike seating at home and coming back later knowing nothing". P9

4.3.3 Learners experienced significant losses due to COVID-19.

When President Cyril Ramaphosa announced the lockdown measure’s to limit the spread of COVID-19 on 15 March 2020, this included the closure of schools from 18 March to 14 April 2020. Once schools reopened on the 24th of August 2020, schools implemented rotational school attendance schedules, and this added to the school days lost. Learners lost learning days due to individual decisions made by different schools to reopen late or close earlier than scheduled for the year. Learners lost friends, caregivers, and parents. They were never prepared and they never got to accept or get used to the fact that COVID-19 keeps on taking from them. It was not easy but there was nothing they could do hence it was beyond their control.

- The lockdown led to a loss.

Learners indicated that the lockdown caused much loss in their lives. Parents/ caregivers lost their jobs, their businesses as well lives, and also they experienced a loss of contact learning which leads to lower educational success.

“Yes my schoolwork was affected, because I couldn't learn a lot because there was no teacher to make me understand, remember we were at home we couldn’t have contact with them as we used to”. P1

"No. Okay, the only thing that changed is the laws and the rules of lockdown that you have to stay in and the fact that we kept on losing things. If I may say at home there's a tuck shop, which eventually closed down due to COVID-19, both my parents couldn't generate income so we depended on it until there was nothing left. But other than that everything was more or less the same of experience ". P6

Learners indicated that during the lockdown, all that was taking place was loss, people lost loved ones, and their jobs, and they lost business and even friendships, so COVID-19 was a bad experience hence it kept on taking and taking from them.

"Ok, my experience is that I have noticed that life is too short because I lost my mom. She tested positive for COVID-19 and the other thing is that we were struggling to get some food hence the family business lost customers and also it influenced me in a way that I was lonely because our friends were not able to come to visit during lockdown". P7

- Continued experience of losses.

Even now learners are still dealing with loss and grief due to COVID-19. The majority of learners indicated that they are still traumatized from the experience, and also they are still experiencing some loss even with the pandemic over.

"It was not easy mam not at all, even now am still struggling to live with the fact that my mom, my aunt, and my grandfather are no longer with us. It pains me every day and it's getting even worse ". P10

"Going to church helped me a lot, hence most of the people were supportive and there for me. But also letting go was not easy, even today am still grieving the loss of my mom, she meant everything to me, sometimes when am upset I wish I could just talk to her but I can't so it was not easy at all ". P7

4.3.4 COVID-19 produced a lot of fear.

Covid-19 led to an unparalleled amount of harm and damage in all aspects of life on a global scale, in such a way that it has even given rise to a new phobia- Corona phobia, which is the fear of contracting COVID-19. Fear about COVID-19 took an emotional toll, especially to those already living with anxiety, to an extent that it motivated change in learner's lives on how to live their lives.

- Fear around hygiene.

Learners learned to be hygienic at all times. COVID-19 instilled fear in such a way that they were very scared; even now they still fear that they might die, so to date they adhere to some of the precautions, and whenever they are not feeling well they run to the clinic. Learners now enjoy living in a clean and neat place to avoid sickness unlike before COVID-19.

"My being? Oh, it affected me a lot. In such a way that I didn't even talk to people, whenever I meet with you in the street I just feel that I don't want to touch you or any part of your body. Even though we are friends. I just prefer to talk then that's it ". P3

"During COVID-19 I experience that people mostly die because they were not taking sanitation. So, I experienced that we must take some hygiene seriously ". P4

- Fear of failure

Learners indicated a significant amount of fear when it comes to repeating grades/classes. They were behind with schoolwork, and they tried, by all means, to catch up on their schoolwork, ask for help from family members, and remain for afternoon classes so that they don't have to repeat grades.

"Because we didn't have a lot of time, we had to go to school this week and the next week you not going. We didn't attend as we used to before, and we were getting behind with school work and seeing this happen hence I failed after the pandemic was scared not to come to school because didn't want to fail ". P1

"It affected me a lot. My schoolwork I was behind with mine. And when I didn't get help with my schoolwork. I'll just run out I'll just stay back in schoolwork to try and catch up. Yoh mam it was really bad, I was scared I didn't want to fail ".P3

- Fear of losing loved ones

COVID-19 brought dysfunction, loss, and difficulty, the majority of learners suffered family losses during COVID-19. It caused actual issues or rather agony, and it instilled fear of losing loved ones due to the way people were dying.

"COVID-19 was a very hard experience for me. I couldn't go to school, I almost lost my mom. Everything was hurtful. Everybody around me seemed to be distant apart, apart from me, like, it was hard for me, and I tend to just run away and reach another place where it is not open and just hide."P3

"It wasn't a great experience, I was scared most of the time hence people were dying right, left, and canter. I was scared that I might lose my grandmother and I will be left all alone". P8

Learners lost a lot of family members during COVID-19, and they experienced a major change in their lives, hence experiencing people die like that was something they'd never seen before and it instilled fear that they might even lose the remaining family members.

"I experienced a lot of changes in the world, as being indoors and wearing masks all the time. It was strange because we were not used to living like that, and also people were dying like flies Yoh mam it was scary". P1

4.4 Summary of chapter

The research findings were presented in this chapter along with the main themes and subthemes that came out of the data. First, the impact of COVID-19 on the learner's mental health and well-being was discussed. Next, the impact of COVID-19 on participants' academic performance, their financial losses as a result of COVID-19, and their overall COVID-19 experiences were covered.

The study findings will be discussed the research questions in the following and last chapter, and conclusions will be drawn about the state of the field of research at the time. With the literature review, connections and comparisons will be made. Chapter 5 will also discuss the study's advantages, disadvantages, and suggestions for further investigation. My final thoughts on the study will be presented before I end.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

5.1 INTRODUCTION

After doing a literature analysis on learners' experiences with mental health throughout COVID-19, data were collected using qualitative research techniques to address the study's research goals. Following thematic analysis and interpretation of the data, the following primary themes emerged:

- Learners are still living as if the pandemic is not over.
- COVID-19 significantly disrupted school and learning.
- Learners experienced significant losses due to COVID-19.
- COVID-19 provided a lot of fear.

A discussion of the research results based on the aforementioned themes will be included in this chapter's conclusion. Based on the results of this investigation, the study's advantages, drawbacks, and suggestions for future research will also be covered. As the research process comes to an end, I share my reflections on this study.

5.2 DISCUSSION OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

The research findings were discussed along with the main themes and subthemes that came out of the data. First, an in-depth discussion of the impact of COVID-19 on the learner's mental health and well-being, the impact of COVID-19 on participants' academic performance, their financial losses as a result of COVID-19, and their overall COVID-19 experiences. Information about learners' mental health and their experience of COVID-19 is essential to prioritize and support learning.

The theoretical framework offered a lens through which the study's research questions could be addressed, and it served as a benchmark against which my findings were evaluated. The ecological systems theory of Bronfenbrenner was utilized to comprehend and interpret the intricate interplay and dynamics of systems that affect learners' experiences of mental health during COVID-19, as mentioned in section 2.3 of Chapter 2.A child's environment is made up of several interconnected systems, according to Bronfenbrenner (1977).

Therefore, the interconnected structures of the Microsystem, Mesosystem, Exosystem, Macrosystem, and Chronosystem should be taken into consideration to understand learners' experiences with mental health during COVID-19 as the impact of one system on a child's development depends on its relationship with the others. I needed to understand how learners' experiences with mental health were positioned within larger contexts and systems that they may not directly be able to access, such as government policies that are put into effect but still have an impact on learners as individuals. This section's examination of the research findings is organized around the main research Question.

5.2.1 Discussion of the research results based on the aforementioned themes.

- **Learners are still living as if the pandemic is not over.**

From the analysed data, findings indicate that learners are still suffering from the consequences of the pandemic, hence the negative effects of the pandemic have not been distributed equally. Findings states that learners in disadvantaged areas like Sebokeng, continues to be disproportionately affected in relation to their long-term health outcomes. This is indistinguishable to what Slade, 2010 states, high school learners faced significant challenges during COVID-19, and arguably continue to face challenges post-pandemic and, that they are at risk of experiencing physical, mental, and social health problems due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Also findings indicates how the pandemic has disrupted learner's well-being and caused their suffering in terms of things they had to do to survive the trauma, both pre and post-COVID-19, some learners still attend online classes using WhatsApp, which is now the most effective platform for their learning. This is in line with findings of previous research which states that everything from learner's ability to learn and sleep effectively, to their eating habits suffered because of the pandemic (Slade, 2010).

Also findings revealed that, high school learners encountered several difficulties throughout COVID-19 and were in danger of developing physical, mental, and social health issues as a result. The current study agrees with the findings of previous research that indicates that physical distance rules have prevented learners from playing sports and interacting as they usually do during break time since the pandemic's beginning which has caused an impact on their well-being (Slade, 2010).

- **COVID-19 significantly disrupted school and learning.**

The overall findings indicates that COVID-19 disrupted learning in so many ways, with the lockdown having to change the learners' attendance routine. The sudden shift from being taught by teachers daily to part-time or rather distant learning affected learners' attendance and, also the tasks loads to take home. This is related with the results from previous research by Alejo et al., 2023, who states that disruptions to education systems during COVID-19 have already led to significant losses and inequalities in learning.

Also findings indicates that most learners struggled even after the pandemic was over, it wasn't easy for them to adjust to the normal routine because they became used to staying at home comfortably and without fear of going out to have contact with strangers. This is in line with findings from previous research conducted in Qatar by Fawaz et al,. (2021) which indicated worry about the learning and evaluation processes, the weighty task loads, and the technical challenges and constraints, with learners having to actively deal with these issues by engaging in leisure activities, reaching out to family and friends for assistance, and talking to teachers.

Findings indicates that during COVID-19 learners mostly got help from their families; hence home is where everyone was trapped with their families due to the lockdown. Also, most learners couldn’t afford data or airtime to join online classes or chats that took place via WhatsApp; therefore the majority of the learners relied on their family members for assistance with their school work. The findings are comparable to the findings of previous research conducted by Fawaz et al,. (2021) which states that, learners require emotional support when they are learning online, and it is abundantly obvious from the literature that the pandemic severely disrupted learners' lives in almost every area and had negative effects on their mental health.

Findings on previous research by Silbert and Mzozoyana, 2021, indicates that learners lost around 70% of a complete years’ worth of information between March 2020 and June 2021, and they were also absent frequently, which had a major detrimental influence on their ability to read and write. Also findings of the current study indicates that things have gone out of hand in such a way that the number of absenteeism in schools has increased, some learners indicated that since COVID-19 they are now not scared of being absent or bunking school. This is comparable to a study conducted by Copeland et al,. (2021), which states that the pandemic affects learner’s behavioural and emotional functions, especially attention and externalization

problems brought on by loneliness and fear, also suggests that a significant portion of learners did not return to school in 2020 after the initial school closure.

- **Learners experienced significant losses due to COVID-19.**

The overall findings are indistinguishable to what Slade, 2010 states, young people have suffered major expenses in the form of numerous losses, both personally and as a result of school disruptions and, that many youngsters have lost their parents, grandparents, and family members. The death of an old family as a result of COVID-19 is especially painful in South Africa, where many grandparents serve as primary caregivers. The loss or separation of the primary caregiver has major consequences for the child's mental health in terms of caregiver loss, a secure foundation for exploring the world, and heightened concern about the future. This is in line with findings of current study which indicates that, COVID-19 brought dysfunction, loss, and difficulty in the lives of learners, and the majority of learners suffered family losses during COVID-19.

The findings indicate that learners went through continued experiences of loss. Even post-pandemic, learners are still dealing with loss and grief due to COVID-19, and the majority of learners are still traumatized from the experience and they are still experiencing some loss even with the pandemic over. Also findings indicates that COVID-19 caused a major setback and change into their learning, with issues related to, online learning, rotational class attendance, loss of loved ones, loss of income, fear of failure and sickness or rather health. Similar findings have been noted from previous research, regardless of how mentally sound learner were before the pandemic, COVID-19 made them aware that the people they associate and the things they are surrounded by matter and, the loss or separation of the primary caregiver has major consequences for the child's mental health (Slade, 2010).

- **COVID-19 provided a lot of fear.**

Findings proposed that COVID-19 brought dysfunction, loss, and difficulty, learners suffered family losses during COVID-19 and, that caused actual issues and it instilled fear of losing loved ones due to the way people were dying. Also findings indicates that learners have the need for tender support both within and outside of their immediate school context and, COVID-19 instilled fear in a way that learner's became very cautious about hygiene. The current study findings agrees with the findings of previous research on the mental health of students during the COVID-19 pandemic which was done in Bangladesh (Xiong et al., 2020) to provide fresh insights into depression and the rarely highlighted issues of student mental health. According to the study, fear and depression are caused by a lack of knowledge about COVID-19, financial concerns, and employment anxieties, all of which have a negative cascade effect on students' mental health.

Also results shows that even now they still fear that they might die, so they still adhere to some of the precautions, and whenever they are not feeling well they run to the clinic. This is comparable of findings of previous research which states that, learners' ability to think critically, communicate socially, connect with others, and engage in appropriate physical touch has already been adversely affected due to fear caused by the pandemic (Silbert & Mzozoyana, 2021).

5.3 STRENGTHS OF THE RESEARCH

The study gave learners a platform to talk about their experiences with mental health during COVID-19. The experiences of South African learners, particularly regarding mental health during COVID-19, are understudied; therefore, I think that this research could significantly advance the way that learners' mental health is supported in the future.

Participant 5 expressed her gratitude for participation in the study as the exposure to the research topic made her more aware of how she could better manage her mental health**:**

"I am very privileged that I got the opportunity to speak to you about my experience with COVID-19. I wish the other learners got a chance to reflect on the traumatic experience we all had".

Employing a smaller sample size also has the benefit of allowing for a deeper knowledge of the participant's actual experiences rather than the study's primary goal of drawing general conclusions from the data. I was able to obtain access to the participants' subjective experiences and life worlds through the use of one data collection technique, namely the individual, semi-structured interviews, while also boosting the study's credibility. It was easier to evaluate and comprehend the research results because of the detailed explanations provided by the individual, semi-structured interview participants.

Additionally, it was advantageous to give them consent forms for parents and assent forms at meetings because I was able to determine which specific participants I should look for when it was time for the interviews. Additionally, I've found that the participant information sheets helped me get parents and students to discuss the delicate subject under study. I then had the chance to elicit the participants' opinions and experiences through the use of semi-structured interviews, which added an extra layer of nuance to the readings of the data.

The study sought to understand how learners' mental health developed during COVID-19 and the obstacles that might have hampered their welfare. This knowledge could be helpful to the DOE and schools in general. These research results could guide support and intervention measures at different levels to promote learners' mental health and minimize negative effects on it. Additionally, even though the interviews were quite brief, the researcher nevertheless learned crucial details concerning the pandemic's ongoing effects on learners' wellness.

5.4 IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY FOR PRACTICE.

Looking at the results of the study, it is evident that there is a need for ongoing psychosocial support for learners from different individuals post the pandemic. Firstly, the placement of social workers in schools should be reinforced so that they can provide support for learners who have been affected by COVID-19, and also help them find their way of living post-COVID-19. Based on the findings, COVID-19 led to financial instability due to temporary and permanent loss of jobs, and that affected learners in a very disruptive way, Therefore, in this situation, social workers are needed to link learners to information and resources for food, health care, and unemployment benefits for their parents or caregivers.

The detrimental effects of missing a lot of school because of COVID-19 are highlighted by Fricker and Alhattab (2021), and these include the loss of learning, emotional anguish, exposure to violence and abuse, failure to take advantage of school-based feeding programs, and insufficient socialization. The future occupational prospects of several of the learners were potentially substantially harmed, and many suffered from trauma. It is therefore critically necessary to contextualize and redesign career counselling at schools to improve individual career and personal counselling provided to all learners by psychologists (Pillay, 2020).

Holistic education and training are required to increase learners' chances of success in the future in ever-changing work situations. Instead of the size of the obstacles, learners are encountering and their perceived limitations and "weaknesses" (areas for improvement), the emphasis should be on learners' strengths and resiliency. At the end of the day, the goal is to support learners' optimal [personalized emotional, physical, and spiritual] health at the human-environmental interface (Seymour, 2016). Additionally, there is a need to strengthen the teacher's role, which means that learners could gain from health education regarding proper hygiene and infection control during a pandemic.

When looking at the findings of this study, it is clear that learners demonstrated a great capacity for change adaptation during the COVID-19 lockdown period, even though it was challenging. The implementation of creative and innovative teaching and learning strategies should be encouraged in all educational contexts, and ongoing monitoring of learners' progress and facilitating appropriate intervention should be undertaken as needed. As a result, learners must be prepared for a teaching and learning environment that is constantly changing. To succeed in the new environment following COVID-19, learners need once more to be taught how to use their emotional, social, and spiritual intelligence. This will help them accept responsibility for their growth and development.

5.4.1 Policy

Findings show that there is a gap in the intervention strategies implemented by the Department of Education. The Department of Education needs to set aside more money for post-pandemic psychosocial care for learners. To hire school social workers in every school, the DOE must boost its budget. School social workers help learners of all grades and stages find those in need, respond to learners in crises, and assist students in coping with and resolving common difficulties. Since social workers interact with people individually, in groups, and within families all of which are crucial components or systems in a learner's life the DOE should consider the deployment of social workers in schools.

Additionally, the DOE should allow for a national policy that promotes collaboration and idea sharing among stakeholders, including students, parents, teachers, researchers, and academics, as well as among professional associations, labor unions, and provincial education departments, regarding the future of teaching and learning in general and e-strategies and intervention techniques in particular.

The Mental Health Care Act No.17 of 2002 does not emphasize the mental health needs of children, particularly in light of the present legal and legislative landscape, but their inclusion is implied in the description of "mental health care user" in the Act. Therefore, this research will help policymakers to achieve their end goal and promote mental health in the population as a whole.

5.4.2Theory

According to the study's findings, COVID-19 posed a lot of stressors in learners' lives. These stressors mainly included situations like potential virus exposure and a loved one's passing, as well as secondary adversities brought on by financial hardships and underlying physical and psychological conditions. Importantly, fears and uncertainties (such as fears related to hygiene) may linger after a pandemic has ended, influencing behaviours significantly.

Bronfenbrenner (1977) suggests that a child's environment is composed of several interrelated systems. The Microsystem, Mesosystem, Exosystem, Macrosystem, and Chronosystem. Therefore these structures were taken into consideration in terms of understanding learners' experiences of mental health during COVID-19. The theory helped determine the impact of one system on a child's mental health and wellbeing development which depends on its relationship with others.

5.5 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

Further research is advised because there is little available data on learners' experiences with their mental health during COVID-19 in South Africa. Future studies might examine a more varied and sizable sample size that is representative of all sexes, cultures, and socioeconomic classes. Additionally, future research on the topic might be conducted at various research locations, like full-service, private, rural, and special schools, and also schools with more psychosocial support. To identify the context-specific difficulties or expectations placed on students that may have an impact on their mental health and well-being, it is important to thoroughly examine each of these individual settings.

Future research may also concentrate on other participants in the educational system, such as learners in other grades, principals, teachers, students with learning problems, and special education teachers. Also, future studies can concentrate on the difficulties and realities of implementing interventions at various levels in a resource- and economically-constrained educational setting. The impact of learner mental health and wellbeing, specifically on teaching and learning and learner achievement in South Africa post-pandemic, might also be advantageously studied in future research.

5.6 CONCLUSION

The results and findings of this research study support those found in both international as well as South African literature. As COVID-19 became more well-known around the world, this research reveals learner experiences related to their mental health and well-being during COVID-19. According to the research findings, learners encountered COVID-19 in a variety of ways, and a wide range of difficulties may have had an impact on their mental health and well-being. The South African educational system faces these difficulties on various levels. The results highlight the growing need for measures to assist both learners' mental health and wellbeing following COVID-19.

According to Coghan (2014), each stage of qualitative research incorporates personal experiences. As a result, I was able to better interpret and comprehend learner experiences of COVID-19 through data analysis and also made the data collection process more effective by using qualitative methods to ask questions during interviews.

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APPENDIX A

Participant information sheet for learners



Dear Learner

My name is Andile Nkomo I am a Masters student at the University of the Witwatersrand, and I need to do a research study for my schoolwork. A research study is a way to find out new information about something. My research is about, exploring the learner's experiences of mental health and well-being during Covid-19 in Sebokeng, Vanderbijlpark. I would like to invite you to talk with me about your experiences during COVID-19. When we talk, I will explain to you to help you understand as we talk.

You are asked to join me for an interview at the school hall after school. It will take between 30-45 minutes. It is your choice to be in the research or not. If you do not want to talk to me it is fine, and you will not be in trouble if you do not want to take part in the interview. If, you want to stop talking or go, that's okay. If you don't want to answer any of the questions, that's okay too. If you feel tired during the interview, we can take a short break. When we are talking, I will put the recording tape on so I can listen carefully when you are talking and the recording will help me to remember what you said for my research. You can tell me to turn it off, at any time and I will.

Only I and my teachers will listen to the recordings and the copy of what you shared from the tape will also only be seen by me, and my teachers. After we finish listening to your words and the tape, they will be locked away safely.Taking part in the research may not benefit you directly, but it will give you a chance to share your experience of COVID-19, and it will help me learn and understand better the well-being of learners during COVID-19. This might help the school to understand more and better help and support you and other children while you come to school.

Nothing bad will happen to you if you take part in the research. But you might become worried or upset when sharing some of the information about your experiences during and after COVID-19. If you have any worries, during or after the interview, you can come and talk to me. I will keep everything private, but if I think you might need someone to talk to more, I will refer you to a social worker at the Department of social Development by the name of: Sekgetho Clementine. It is a walking distance and the address is as follows: No.3 Moshoeshoe Street, 1983 Sebokeng, and the contact no. is: +27 81 004 9688.

If you decide to be in the research, I will not tell anyone else that you joined the research, what we talked about and what you said during the interview. When I write my research report, I might write about some of the things you have talked about, but I won't use your name, so people won't know they are your words.

If you have any questions during or afterwards about this research study, feel free to contact me or my supervisor on the details listed below. If you have any worries 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.

Thank you……

Researcher: Nkomo A, P

Andilenkomo96@gmail.com

Supervisors:

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Jennifer Watermeyer

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APPENDIX B

Participant information sheet for parents



Dear Sir / Madam

My name is Andile Nkomo. I am a Masters' student at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. My supervisors are Prof Edmarie Pretorius and Prof Jenifer Watermeyer. I am conducting a research study about learners' experiences of mental health and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study title is exploring the mental health and well-being experiences of high school learners during Covid-19 in Sebokeng, Vanderbijlpark.

I am inviting your child to take part in an interview, it will be a once of interview session. If you agree that your child take part, his/her participation in this research study will last for about 30-35 minutes. The interview will take place at the school library at 14h45 pm which is after school hours. With your permission, I would like to audio record the interview. This data will be stored in my device and will be deleted after the researcher has recorded or used all the necessary and crucial information from it. Only the researcher will have access to the data.

The interview will be confidential and anonymous. When I share the results of the research study, I will not include your child's name or anything else that could identify him/her. Confidentiality will be reached only in case whereby your child threatens to harm him/herself or another person. With your permission, other researchers may use the data collected from this research study, but their names and any personal information will not be used or passed on. If you allow him/her to take part in the research study, you should understand that it is voluntary there won't be any payments or incentives for participating. Your child will not get any direct benefits if you allow them to join the research study.

They will also not lose any services, benefits, or rights if they decide not to join. Taking part in the research study will not cost your child anything. The risks for this research study are not more than what happens in everyday life. If this happens, I will stop the interview and continue another time. If your child needs some support or counseling services following the interview these are available free of charge at Social Development. The name of the counselor is Sekgetho Clementine, address: Department of Social Development at No.3 Moshoeshoe Street, 1983 Sebokeng.

This research study will be written up as a research report. If your child has questions during or afterward about this research study, he/she should feel free to contact me or my supervisor using 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), by telephone at +27(0) 11 717 1408, email hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za.

Yours sincerely,
Nkomo A.P

Researcher:
Andile Nkomo
Wits email: 2331216@students.wits.ac.za

Supervisors:
Prof Edmarie Pretorius: email: Edmarie.Pretorius@wits.ac.za;

Prof Jenifer Watermeyer: email: Jennifer.watermeyer@wits.ac.za

APPENDIX C

Consent form for parents

Title of project: Exploring the mental health and well-being experiences of high school learners during Covid-19 in Sebokeng, Vanderbijlpark.

Name of researcher: Andile Nkomo

I, ……., agree for my child 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 my child can volunteer 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 child's interview may be used by the researcher in their research report/	YES	NO
I agree that my child's participation will remain anonymous (my name will not be used by the researcher in their research report)	YES	NO
I agree that other researchers may use the information my child provides in the interview (depending on their own ethics clearance being obtained) but my child's name and any personal information will not be used or passed on	YES	NO

Name of learner/child:
Date:
Signature:

Name of researcher:
Date:
Signature:

APPENDIX D

Assent form for learners

Title of Study: Exploring the mental health and well-being experiences of high school learners during Covid-19 in Sebokeng, Vanderbijlpark. **Researcher:** Andile Nkomo

I, **(Learner's name),** 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 can volunteer 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 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

Leaner's signature: …….

The researcher: Nkomo A.P Email**:** 2331216@students.wits.ac.za.

Supervisors:

Prof Pretorius **:** Edmarie.Pretorius@wits.ac.za;

Prof Watermeyer **:** Jennifer.watermeyer@wits.ac.za

APPENDIX E

Letter of consent from the Gauteng Department of Education

GAUTENG PROVINCE
Department: Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

R/A/A/1/2

GDE RESEARCH APPROVAL LETTER

Date:	27 January 2023
Validity of Research Approval:	08 February 2023– 30 September 2023 2023/19
Name of Researcher:	Nkomo AP
Address of Researcher:	Stand no.069 B Hoyi Kwalugedlane
Telephone Number:	0715202038/ 0638280830
Email address:	2331216@students.wits.ac.za
Research Topic:	Exploring the mental health and well-being experiences of high school learners during COVID-19 in Sebokeng, Vanderbijlpark.
Type of qualification	Masters
Number and type of schools:	1 Secondary School
District/s/HO	Sedibeng West

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.

27/01/2023

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

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.Tshabalala2@gauteng.gov.za
Website: www.education.gpg.gov.za

APPENDIX F

Ethical clearance certificate from the research ethics

Committee (REC)

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND JOHANNESBURG

Research Office

HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)
R14/49 Nkomo

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE	**PROTOCOL NUMBER: H22/11/59**
PROJECT TITLE	Exploring the mental health and well-being experiences of high school learners during COVID-19 in Sebokeng, Vanderbijlpark
INVESTIGATOR(S)	Ms A Nkomo
SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT	Human and Community Development
DATE CONSIDERED	25 November 2022
DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE	Approved Risk Level: Low
EXPIRY DATE	15 February 2026

DATE 16 February 2023 **CHAIRPERSON** (Professor J Watermeyer)

cc: Supervisor : Prof E Pretorius and Prof J Watermeyer

DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR(S)

To be completed in duplicate and **A SIGNED COPY** returned to the Secretary electronically. Unreported changes to the application may invalidate the clearance given by the HREC (Non-Medical)

I/We fully understand the conditions under which I am/we are authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I/we guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I/we undertake to submit an amendment of the protocol to the Committee. **I/we agree to completion of a regular progress report. For Minimal and Low Risk studies, this is due annually on 31 December. For Medium and High Risk studies, this is due twice annually on 30 June and 31 December.**

17 / 02 / 2023

PLEASE QUOTE THE PROTOCOL NUMBER ON ALL ENQUIRIES

APPENDIX G

Semi-structured interview schedule

Purpose of interview: The purpose of the interviews is Explore the mental health and well-being experiences of high school learners during Covid-19 in Sebokeng, Vanderbijlpark.

Type of interview **:** Semi-structured interview (face-to-face)

Duration of interview **:** 30-45 minutes

Interview details

Time & date of the interview:

Location of the Interview :

Audio recording YES/NO :

Confirmation of signed consent forms: YES/NO

Interview Questions

1. Tell me more about yourself
2. Tell me more about your experience during COVID-19.
3. How did COVID-19 influence your well-being?
4. In which ways do you think the COVID-19 pandemic influenced your personal life?
5. How did your way of living changes during the COVID-19 pandemic?
6. In your opinion, how has COVID-19 influenced your school work?
7. What did you do to keep up with your school work during COVID-19?

8. Who did you ask to help you OR who helped you with your school work during COVID-19?

9. How did COVID-19 affect your concentration and focus on your school work?

10. How did you experience the sudden shift from being taught by teachers full-time to part-time learning?

11. If you experienced any losses (e.g. teacher, family member, friend or classmate) during the COVID-19 pandemic, what did you do to cope with the loss of a teacher, a family member, a friend, or a schoolmate due to COVID-19?

12. Thinking back, what do you think could have been done by the Department of Education and the school to make learning easier during the COVID-19 Pandemic?