



The Impact of School Closures on Learners' Mental Health in the Context of COVID-19 in the City of Cape Town


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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the negative impact of the shutdown of contact-based learning on learners' mental health as a result of COVID-19 and provides recommendations to promote learners' mental health during and post COVID-19. A qualitative research method was used to guide the collection and analysis of the data. Data was collected from a sample of 20 learners from Cape Town and analysed through thematic analysis. The study findings revealed that with the shutdown of contact-based learning as one of the COVID-19 containment measures by the government learners experienced social anxiety disorder and sleeping disorder. Youth policymakers need to design interventions that promote mental health in after-school programmes implemented by qualified youth workers and social workers. Youth workers should take the courses of action in a non-formal education to promote youth mental health.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19; closures of schools; learners; mental health; schools.

INTRODUCTION

On 31st December 2019, the World Health Organisation reported COVID-19 in Wuhan City, China. Since then, COVID-19 emerged as a health crisis that mainly affects the respiratory system (Landi et al., 2020). The outbreak of COVID-19 spread all over the world. To contain the spread of COVID-19 countries embarked on a nationwide lockdown which included the closures of schools (Jung et al., 2020). To reduce physical contact among learners within the school environment and to protect learners' countries all over the world cancelled contact-based learning (Viner et al., 2020). COVID-19 has caused stress and anxiety to people all over the world (Tandon et al., 2020). Sherr et al., (2020) show that school closures had potential harm to learners. The sudden outbreak of the deadly diseases challenged the education system across the world which resulted with some schools introducing e-learning which helped students to be less stressed and avoid missing out on the school calendar (Dube et al., 2022; Wang et al, 2020).

Although various studies have been conducted with regard to the impact of COVID-19 on mental health majority of these studies focused on students in the higher education sector and youth in general. Therefore, the present study focuses on learners from the secondary school level. In addition to that, this study aims to address the shortcomings of prior studies by understanding the negative impact of the closure of schools as a result of COVID-19 on learners' mental health. More so, the study contributes to the promotion of learners' mental health in the context and beyond COVID-19 by recommending measures that stakeholders in the youth development sector and schools can use to promote youth mental health. This study will enable teachers to understand the ways in which COVID-19 has affected learners' mental health. This will also help them to rethink strategies for promoting mental health within the school environment.

There are several impediments to the academic success of learners and mental health issues are one of them (Unger, 2007). A study by Putra et al., (2020) shows that the closure of schools harmed learners' academic performance resulting in mental health issues since the majority of learners did not have access to resources needed for them to study from home. "The closure of schools as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic is contributing to the malnutrition of learners who depend on school feeding schemes. This consequently affects their overall well-being and functioning" (Chauke & Chinyakata, 2020:73). 1.6 billion students worldwide were mentally affected by the closures of schools (Naudé, 2020).

The closure of schools as a result of COVID-19 has worsened school-going age youth mental health crisis (Brown & Kafka, 2020). According to Lee (2020), due to the closure of school's learners experienced loss of appetite, sleeping problems and were always stressed at home because of their parents' loss of jobs as a result of COVID-19. The study conducted by Giannopoulou et al., (2021) revealed that within a one month of lockdown school-going aged youth started to be depressed. In addition, female learners also suffered from sexual assaults in the hands of trusted authorities such as family members. Attending school regularly helps to promote mental health among learners (Snedden et al., 2020). Moreover, due to lockdown, it

was reported that, globally one in five young people in secondary schools suffered from mental disorders (Zhai & Du, 2020).

After the closure of school's students lived in fear that they may infect their loved ones with COVID-19 since they were exposed to the public (Pan et al, 2020). Wang et al., (2020) states that due to the pandemic that forced the authorities to close schools' students began to develop suicidal thoughts. Closure of schools created uncertainty and learners fear for their academic progress while at home which affected their mental health (Liu et al.; 2020; Wang, et al., 2019). A study conducted by Tanhan (2019) avers that the measures taken by authorities all over the world to contain the spread of COVID-19 such as quarantine had short-long term effects on people such as fears of infection, frustration, and boredom that negatively affect people's mental health. Reducing consumption of COVID-19-related news on social media and other platforms plays a vital role in reducing mental health crises among young people in the context of COVID-19 (Rosen et al., 2021).

Aim of the study

The study aims to explore the negative impact of the shutdown of contact-based learning on learners' mental health as a result of COVID-19 and provides recommendations to promote learners' mental health during and post COVID-19.

Research question

Main question:

How did the shutdown of contact-based learning as a result of COVID-19 negatively affect learners' mental health and what needs to be done to promote learners' mental health during and post COVID-19?

Sub-question

What are the mental health issues that learners experienced after contact learning was shut down as one of the measures to contain the spread of COVID-19?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study made use of the social exclusion theory. Social exclusion theory can be understood as a process of excluding people to enjoy human rights or from participants in social, economic, and cultural activities which have a negative impact on human development (Walker & Walker, 1997). In simpler terms, social exclusion theory is when people are denied opportunities that can enhance their development. Being excluded from participating in social, economic, and cultural activities led people including learners to vulnerable situations. Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is evident that the young people were socially excluded, in terms of resources whereby learners from disadvantaged schools were not provided with the opportunity to learn online like other learners from well-resourced schools. This social exclusion had a negative influence on learners' mental health when schools were closed.

Thus, the social exclusion theory was deemed appropriate for the study as it enabled the researchers to explain how the shutdown of contact-based learning brought about inequality in

Cape Town. Learners from under-resourced schools were excluded from participating in online-based learning which had negative effects on learners' mental health. Secondly, this theory further explains that youth represent a stage where humans are full of energy and are expected to interact with others. Therefore, the shutdown of contact-based learning excluded learners to connect with their peers in face-to-face interaction which is associated with an increased risk of mental health illness. This evidence points to the significance of the social exclusion theory as a theoretical lens in understanding the effect of social exclusion on learners' mental health in the context of COVID-19.

METHODS

A qualitative research method was employed to explore the negative impacts that COVID-19 may have had on the learners' mental health as a result of the shutdown of contact-based learning. The qualitative research approach was suitable for the study as it enabled the researchers to understand the world through the participant's perception and interpretation of their own reality. The qualitative research method was appropriate in this study because it enabled the researchers to understand the social constructive through the interaction with the participants.

Study Setting

The study was conducted in Khayelitsha, Cape Town, Western Cape Province, South Africa. Khayelitsha Township lies some 19km east of Wynberg and 25 km to the southeast of Cape Town in the Western Cape. The name is of Xhosa origin and means 'new home (Cape Town Site, 2013). The township is considered one of the most dangerous townships in Cape Town. It has a high unemployment rate among young people, as a result of unemployment young people join a gang for survival.

Population and Sampling

The study population consisted of learners in Khayelitsha, Cape Town, Western Cape Province. The targeted population were 20 learners from Khayelitsha between the ages of 14-18 years old selected from child and youth development organisation in Khayelitsha. The inclusion criteria were that learners should be between the age of 14-18 years old and residing in Khayelitsha. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants. Purposive sampling was used to select participants because it enables the researchers to choose the participants on the basis of specific criteria that was deemed to be essential. Purposive sampling was chosen because the researchers wanted to select learners from Khayelitsha since they were more knowledgeable and able to share their experiences than anyone else on the possible negative impact the COVID-19 might have had on their mental health after the shutdown of schools.

Table 1.*Background information of the participants*

| Participants' background information Position | School level | Gender | Age |
|--|---------------------|---------------|--------------|
| Themba | Secondary School | Male | 14 years old |
| Tina | Secondary School | Male | 14 years old |
| Ehle | Secondary School | Female | 18 years old |
| Namahla | Secondary School | Female | 16 years old |
| Mpho | Secondary School | Female | 18 years old |
| Xolani | Secondary School | Male | 14 years old |
| Vuyo | Secondary School | Female | 18 years old |
| Rinaka | Secondary School | Female | 16 years old |
| Nonhlanhla | Secondary School | Female | 14 years old |
| Thandeka | Secondary School | Female | 16 years old |
| Nomphelo | Secondary School | Female | 15 years old |
| Thulasizwe | Secondary School | Male | 17 years old |
| Sipho | Secondary School | Male | 18 years old |
| Gumede | Secondary School | Male | 17 years old |
| Zandile | Secondary School | Female | 15 years old |
| Solly | Secondary School | Male | 16 years old |
| Karabo | Secondary School | Female | 15 years old |
| Namhla | Secondary School | Female | 17 years old |
| Portia | Secondary School | Female | 14 years old |
| Riana | Secondary School | Female | 14 years old |

Data collection

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Two focus group discussions comprising of 10 members were conducted, and the number of focus group discussions was determined by data saturation. Data saturation occurred after interviewing four participants. The languages preferred by the participants were IsiXhosa. The researcher hired a research assistant who was well versed in IsiXhosa to translate into English. Each focus group lasted for 20 minutes. The participants were asked a central question. "In *what way did the shutdown of contact-based learning in schools as a result of COVID-19 negatively affect your mental health and what do you think needs to be done to promote learners' mental health during and post COVID-19?*" The broad question was then followed by probing questions which were guided by the participant's responses.

A semi-structured interview was essential for study since it provided the participants with opportunities to express themselves without being interrupted by the researcher's assistant. Prior the interviews, a written consent was obtained from all participants above the

age of 16. For participants below 16 years of age, approval was given by the managers of youth organisation where youth are trained in arts in after schools programmes.

Data analysis

Data collected was analysed through the use of thematic analysis. As the interviews were also conducted using IsiXhosa, the transcripts were carefully translated into English from the original language before the analysis procedure was performed. The study carefully followed all the six steps of thematic analysis in analysing collected data. Thematic analysis is data analysis used in qualitative research method that involves reading through the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The following six steps of thematic analysis were followed.

Table 2.

Summary of the thematic analysis

| | |
|----------------------------|--|
| Familiarization | Overall of all the data collected |
| Coding | Phrases or highlighting the text or data |
| Generating themes | Identifying patterns |
| Reviewing themes | Accurate representations of the data |
| Defining and naming themes | Name and define each of them |
| Writing report | Producing final report |

The first step of thematic analysis followed was for the researcher to familiarise himself with the overall data collected. The researchers listened to the recorded audio and read the written text carefully with the intention of trying to understand if the collected data is in harmony with the aim of the study. The second step involved coding. The researchers highlighted important content that answered the questions asked during the semi-structured interviews. Then the researchers started to generate a theme based on the content extracted in the data collection. Thereafter the researchers reviewed the theme with the purpose of checking if there was anything that was missing. This step was followed by defining and naming themes, at this stage the researchers came up with succinct names that will made themes to be well understood. Lastly, the final report was written with the aim of presenting what the present study found in relation to COVID-19 and mental health amongst learners.

Trustworthiness and ethical considerations

Building a rapport with participants during data collection played a vital role in achieving the study's credibility. Data collection procedures were provided to ensure transferability in the present study. Verbatim transcripts of the participants' responses were provided to ensure confirmability of the present study. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from a youth-focused organisation that implements an art-based after-school programme. A written consent and ascent were obtained from all the interviewed participants. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study, ensured that their real names will not be disclosed to the public and confidentiality will be strictly maintained in the present study. Participants were assured

that no one is forced to participate in the study. The research assistant was compensated to assist in data collection.

RESULTS

The study revealed that the shutdown of contact-based learning had a negative impact on the learner's mental health as a result of COVID-19. Thus, four themes were identified by way of thematic analysis as follows; social anxiety disorder, sleeping disorder, change of eating habits, and depression. Pseudonym was used in the study finding.

Theme 1: Social anxiety disorder

One of the themes that emerged from the participants' responses during the interview on the negative impact of the school closure on learners' mental health was a social anxiety disorder. Interacting with others in person was perceived as valuable and helpful to participants to stay strong psychologically before the government decided to close schools to contain the spread of COVID-19. However, the participants indicated that the closure of schools made them develop a social anxiety disorder. The participants indicated that the disorder caused them to feel nervous to go outdoor and play with their peers believing that they will contract COVID-19 while interacting with their peers which affected their relationship with their friends. The extract below illustrates this:

Before the government decide to close schools, I used to go outside and play with my friends, this was very helpful because through interaction with friends we taught each other lot of things but after the government announced to close schools, I started to fear to visit my friends or play with them. (Themba)

I think is important in our age to interact with our peers it helps us to be strong psychological. But the shutdown where we have been prohibited to go to school this makes me develop anxiety and fear to go outside fearing that I will contract COVID-19 and dies. (Tina)

Interacting with others is very important for a young person's cognitive development. The above response from the participants indicates that resulting from the closure of schools, participants developed a fear of interacting with others. This was motivated by the belief that by going to a public place one will easily contact COVID-19. More so, in regard to fear, one participant indicated that she had developed COVID-19 symptoms while schools were closed. Her mother feared to take her to the hospital, fearing that things will get worse at the hospital because the place had a lot of people who were admitted because they tested positive for COVID-19. This is evident in the following statement by the participants:

I had a fever while school was closed, my mom did not take me to the hospital because she feared that if I can go fever will get while because a lot of people who were at the hospital had COVID-19 (Ehle).

I remember the time I had flu I wanted to go to hospital but, my mother did not allow me fearing for being in a public place. I had to use garlic at home to cure myself (Namahla).

From the statement above it can be noted that while schools were closed some participants developed a fever. However, the participants could not go to the hospital due to the fear of contracting the virus in public space. Furthermore, it emerged during the interview that some participants thought of a better way of curing themselves at home. The use of garlic was the method that one of the participants had used to cure the fever that she had.

Theme 2: Sleeping disorder

Another common mental health issue that the participants experienced while schools were closed was the sleeping disorder. During the interview, the participants indicated the closure of school as one of the measures to contain the spread of COVID-19 in South Africa contributed to the change in the participants' sleeping patterns. The participants would sleep for hours since they were advised to stay at home and not go out to play with their friends. Some of the participants relayed their opinions as follows:

While I was at home, I had nothing to do because my mother sometimes would advise me not to play outdoors. So, I was always bored then I was sleeping more than eight hours a day because I had nothing to do since our teachers were not even teaching us online like other schools (Mpho).

I will sleep during the day because I had nothing to do since I was not even playing with my friends. Sleeping during the day made it hard for me to sleep at night. I will stay awake at night and play with my phones (Xolani)

The above extracts from the participants show that they experienced sleeping problems. One of the participants indicated that since they had nothing to do during the day, they spend more time asleep. In addition, the participants also revealed that insomnia was one of the mental health issues that they had dealt with amid the closure of schools. More so, the participants would find it difficult to sleep at night since would have done so during the day. Some schools had opted for online learning to make sure that learners do not miss out on school however, the participants indicated that the schools did not use online learning to deliver teaching and learning and this on its own made the participants feel bored and spent most of their time sleeping. Other participants who had a problem with sleeping while schools were closed had to say this:

I always sleep peaceful but, the time schools were closed I had a problem with sleeping sometimes I had to take a sleeping pill so I can sleep (Vuyo).

The quotations described above indicate that participants had challenges with sleeping while schools were closed and the optimal treatment to deal with the sleeping problem the participants had to use a sleeping pill. (Rinaka)

Theme 3: Change eating habits

The closure of schools was associated with the increased risk of developing eating disorders among the participants. Often when people are stressed and have nothing to do in their leisure time they tend to sleep or eat a lot of food to keep themselves busy and forget about the

difficulties that one is facing in life. This is evidenced by the following statements by the participants:

I used to eat a lot of food while I was at home the time schools were closed. My mother used to complain about the way I used to eat (Nonhlanhla).

I have gained weight while school was closed because I used to eat a lot and sleep because my mom would not allow me to go and play outside (Thandeka).

Mmm I had to change my diet, I was eating more of the traditional food than food that we used to eat before COVID-19. We were told to traditional food and medicine will help in fighting the symptoms of COVID-19 such as flu (Nomphele).

Always being at home made me to eat lot of food (Portia)

The closure of schools has resulted in eating disorders among the participants. During this period the participants gained weight since food was among the things that kept them busy and forget about the challenges that are posed by the new reality. In addition, the response from the participants during interviews indicated that some of the participants had to change their diet, eat traditional food, and drink traditional medicine with the belief that traditional medicine will end COVID-19. The use of traditional medicine as one of the methods to prevent COVID-19 was prevalent in African communities. However, people were advised to avoid the use of traditional medicine to prevent COVID-19, rather visit doctors in hospitals to receive proper health care support.

Theme 4: Depression

Attending schools regularly for young people is important since they learn a number of skills that enable them to be better citizens. However, school closures had a negative impact on young people's mental health across the globe. It was noted in the present study that the school closures affected the well-being of the participants. Young people need to connect with friends and meet new friends in social interaction. Moreover, participants reported that the school closures made them feel isolated and leaving them with no friends to talk which makes some of them stressed. The school closures took an unexpected turn when participants worried about what would happen to them and their education. This is highlighted by the responses below.

I live with my grandmother depending on the social grant, while school was closed, I used to worry about where I would get healthy meals because the grant is not for us at home. I was always stressed and locked myself inside the room most of the time (Thulasizwe).

I used to watch news that some other learners from other schools were learning online while we were just sitting at home doing nothing. I used to stress to peers of my age from other schools will progress educational and us we will remain behind (Sipho).

I was always down and worrying about my schoolwork since schools were closed (Riana).

I have never repeated a grade, so I thought when school reopens, I will return to the same grade. This used to stress me. Now I happy because I didn't repeat the class (Gumede).

The above utterance from the participants shows that before the school closures some of the participants used to receive a healthy meal at school. However, the school closures make

it hard for some of the participants to receive a meal at school regardless of the Department of Basic Education's call that schools should provide food schemes to learners even if school is still closed. Thus, being unable to receive a meal made some of the participants worry about where they will receive the next meal since some came from poor backgrounds. In addition, some of the participants used to worry about repeating a grade in the following year since their school did not opt for online learning.

The closure of schools gave young people opportunities to bond with their parents. Despite this important aspect of family relationships, bonding with parents at the time of COVID-19 was not a pleasant one since young people witness the pain that their parents went through after losing their jobs. The participants had to say the following:

My father lost his job and my mother she is not working; the situation was not good at home. Me sitting at home and saw my parents being stressed me two. The situation was worse because I was not even playing my friend at the time. I had to sit at home and worry every day (Zandile).

People were dying because of COVID-19, I lived in fear and get worried every day about what would happen to me if my parents died because of COVID-19. I had no one to talk to about this if the school were not closed, I would talk to my teacher because she is a very understanding person (Solly).

Not going to school hurt me, I was always sad and ask myself when would school open. This was also affecting my health; I was always in the bad mood which affected my period cycle (Karabo).

While the school was closed, I had a difficult time like other youth in Cape Town who feared that they might lose their lives due to COVID-19. I think schools need to have some sort of physical activities where we can have time to relax such as doing school garden this will help us to forget about what we went through while schools were closed. (Namhla).

The quotations above indicate that participants were living life in fear that their parents might die because of COVID-19 which had a negative impact on their mental health. In addition, being sad and change of mood while schools were closed had an effect on female participants. As indicated by one of the participants who began to experience an abnormal mensuration cycle due to mood change and stress. Young people in schools need to be engaged in physical activities that can contribute to good mental health. One of the participants noted that amid school closures they feared for their lives. Therefore, since school reopened the participants believed being engaged in physical activities plays a vital role in promoting learners' good mental health within the school environment.

DISCUSSION

The study aims to explore the negative impact of the shutdown of contact-based learning on learners' mental health as a result of COVID-19 and provides recommendations to promote learners' mental health during and post COVID-19. Findings from the study were summarised

into four themes: social anxiety disorder, sleeping disorder, eating disorder, and depression. Based on the views shared by learners who participated in the study, there is greater evidence that the shutdown of contact-based learning had a negative impact on learners' mental health residing in Cape Town. This finding supports study conducted by Chen et al., (2020); Duan (202); Liang (2020); Tang (2021) and Xie (2020) contends that amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, school-going youth experienced a notable surge in mental health challenges, particularly grappling with issues such as depression. The shutdown of contact-based learning was at the time a viable option that the government had to protect learners against COVID-19. However, at that time this decision had a devastating impact on learners' mental health which was not taken into a consideration. In addition to that, measures to protect learners' mental health were not put in place. In support of this finding, another study revealed that closing of schools to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 was associated with disproportionate mental health consequences for learners particularly older learners (Hawrilenko et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2021).

COVID-19 as a new virus brought uncertainty and anxiety to different cohorts and learners were not inhumane to this anxiety. The study showed that while schools were closed learners began to experience social anxiety. In addition, learners developed anxiety each time they thought of going outdoors and playing with their peers. Learners who adhered to COVID-19 measures such as maintaining quarantine experienced mental stress (Statt, 2020). Moreover, this anxiety even prevented learners who developed the symptoms of COVID-19 to go and see doctors for health care support. This assertion concurs with the work of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021) and the World Health Organization (2020) which argued that amid the closings of schools' students suffered from anxiety.

Spending much of the lockdown time at home doing nothing had a negative impact on learners' sleeping patterns. The study revealed that while schools were closed, learners had nothing to do since their schools did not offer online classes. Therefore, learners suffered from sleeping disorders. This finding supports the findings of UNESCO (2020), indicating that the COVID-19 lockdown and subsequent closure of numerous schools had a detrimental effect on the sleep patterns of learners. Furthermore, sleeping disorders that learners experience includes sleeping during the day for others it includes suffering from insomnia. This finding is in line with the observation by Bhat and Chokroverty (2022) who state that closing of schools in the era of COVID-19 resulted in teachers and students suffering from clinical insomnia that emanated from feeling lonely. The study further revealed that some learners had to take sleeping pills to sleep. To avoid the use of sleeping pills parents are encouraged to need to read short stories to their children. This will help learners who struggle to sleep to sleep peacefully at night.

The results from the study also reflect the change in the participant's eating habits. Learners who were interviewed for this study indicated that being stressed and staying at home doing nothing changed their eating habits. In addition, learners eat a lot of food to deal with the stress of not knowing when the schools will reopen. COVID-19 lockdown was associated with

severe eating disorders, particularly among children (Zipfel et al., 2022). The study further revealed that some of the learners were starting to gain weight because of eating a lot of food without exercise. Eating disorder is one of the most common diseases among young people that need to be given full attention (Swanson et al., 2011).

The study found that the closure of contact-based learning had increased the prevalence of depression among learners in Cape Town. Lu (2019) indicates that adults' youth cohort in the context of the total shutdown instituted by the government in so many countries had suffered from mental health issues such as experiencing depression. This was the result of youth spending most of their time alone. The study also found that learners were depressed while Cape Town was classified as the epicenter of COVID-19. More so, learners feared that their parents might die of COVID-19. For some learners seeing their parents losing jobs as the total closure of the economy had a negative impact on their mental health. Depression is more common among young people (Merikangas et al., 2010).

Previous studies on the impact of COVID-19 on mental health sampled university students, and youth who were excluded from the economy. The present study contributes to a new body of knowledge by indicating how the shutdown of contact-based learning as a government intervention to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 negatively affects learners' mental health. This study will inform the stakeholders in education on how the shutdown of contact-based learning affects learners' mental health intending to encourage them to promote mental health in schools and also in the communities in after school's programmes.

Qualitative approach was well-suited for capturing a nuanced understanding of the ways COVID-19 had affected learners' mental learners in Cape Town. To our knowledge, this is the first study conducted in Cape Town targeting learners who attended arts-based programmes after school to look at how negatively the closure of schools affected their mental health and gives them the opportunity to suggest possible strategies that can be used to promote learners' mental health. The shutdown of contact-based learning made learners feel isolated and excluded which carried risks for learners' mental health. The findings of this study concur with the social exclusion theory that emphasised that when people are excluded in social, cultural, and economic activities they become vulnerable. Being excluded from interacting with others while schools were closed was associated with learners' mental issues such as being depressed and developing anxiety feelings. Home confinement made learners feel excluded which had negative consequences to their mental health, including poor sleep quality.

Implications of the study

These findings have several implications for schools, parents, youth workers, and youth policymakers. The study findings reflect on the negative impact that the shutdown of contact-based learning had on learners as one of the measures taken by the government to combat the spread of COVID-19. There is need for schools to teach the importance of mental health through life orientation lessons. This will provide learners with opportunities to talk to teachers in schools when they experience mental health issues such as depression. It should be noted that

even though this study is not generalisable to learners from other areas in South Africa, the implications espoused here are crucial for the department of basic education to promote mental health awareness in schools. Youth policymakers need to design interventions that promote mental health in after school programmes implemented by qualified youth workers, and social workers. Youth workers in the after-school programme play a vital role in addressing the needs of young people. Therefore, youth workers should take the courses of action in a non-formal education during and beyond COVID-19 to promote youth mental health.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The outbreak of COVID-19 resulted in the closures of schools which had a negative impact on learners' mental health. Thus, the negative impact of COVID-19 on learners' mental health found in the present study was associated with learners beginning to fear that when schools remain closed, they will be left behind in their studies. This made several learners suffer from psychological stress that affected even their eating and sleeping habits. Some schools opted for online learning. However, this had a negative impact on learners' mental health since the majority of them had no access to connectivity and resources needed to study online such as a laptop. Learners' mental health subject in developing countries like South Africa is a new topic that is not given full attention. Therefore, there is need for such topics to be given the attention it deserves to ensure that youth policymakers design effective measures that will promote learners' mental health. Post COVID-19 the Department of Basic Education in South Africa should establish mental health hotline with no cost where learners can call professional psychologists and receive teleconsultations. This will help learners to cope with the negative impact of COVID-19 on their mental health. Schools should organise a workshop for parents, a workshop that will teach parents about mental health issues and how to identify the signs of mental health issues. This will enable parents to help their children during and post COVID-19 to deal with mental health-related issues. Department of Basic Education should partner with youth-focused non-governmental organisations and give them a platform to come to school to raise mental health campaign. This will educate learners to look after their mental health during and post COVID-19. There is a need for introduction of mental health literacy change behaviour in school curriculum development. The present study had limitations of its own, the study limitation was that the sample size was too small therefore, the study findings cannot be generalised to the entire South African learners. There is a need for a future study on a similar topic that can use the survey to target learners from other provinces in South Africa with the aim of giving learners opportunities to contribute to the promotion of mental health during and post COVID-19 in South Africa.

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