



# The Impact of Clinical Experiences on the Student Nurse's Mental Health – A Case Study of a Rural University in Limpopo Province, South Africa

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## ABSTRACT

Nursing students often face increased risks to their mental health due to the combined pressures of academic workload and clinical training. Clinical placements, while essential for practical learning, can expose students to emotionally demanding situations that impact their psychological well-being. This study sought to explore how clinical experiences affect the mental health of student nurses in a rural university in South Africa. Using a qualitative exploratory and descriptive approach, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with fifteen nursing students at the University of Venda, comprising both level 2 and level 4 learners. Through a rigorous thematic framework analysis, four main themes emerged. Firstly, students expressed confusion about the complexity of teaching and learning activities, such as overlapped tests, presentations, and exams. Secondly, poor communication between charge nurses, staff, and students in clinical settings led to feelings of exclusion and frustration. Thirdly, the emotional strain of clinical placements manifested itself as trauma, pressure, and feelings of being overwhelmed. Finally, there was a clear lack of support systems and resources, with students highlighting the need for better mental health services and adequate recess periods to help them cope. The study concluded that the combination of inadequate resources and challenging clinical environments contributes significantly to student nurses' emotional distress. The study recommends enhanced clinical mentorship, improved communication within clinical teams, accessible mental health support on campus, scheduled breaks during training, and sufficient learning resources. This research adds valuable insight into the mental health challenges faced by nursing students in rural South African contexts, emphasizing the urgent need for systemic support to safeguard their well-being and academic success.

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## INTRODUCTION

The nursing profession is a complex and overwhelming field in the health care and science discipline, capable of leading to the development of depression and other psychological illnesses. According to Abbasi, Rabiei, and Masoudi, student nurses are not satisfied with nurse education and support.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Kalyani, Jamshidi, Molazem, Torabizadeh, and Sharif, assert that student nurses face many

<sup>1</sup> Samira Abbasi et al., "The Effect of Assertiveness Program on Clinical Competence of Intensive Care Units Nurses; A Randomized Clinical Trial," *Avicenna Journal of Nursing and Midwifery Care* 27, no. 5 (2019): 293–305.

other challenges that are overlooked during their academic periods, which eventually affect their passion, motivations, and desire to provide proper health services, outdone by clinical placement areas that lack adequate resources and infrastructures.<sup>2</sup>

Aboshaiqah et al., express concern that inadequate exposure to a variety of cases on the nursing ward, a theory and practice gap, and a lack of harmony, communication, and interpersonal relationships all harm nursing students' clinical learning experiences.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, while student nurses attempt to deal with academic pressure, stress, and traumatic experiences, Amoo, Menlah, Garti, and Appiah state that student nurses must nevertheless accept intimidation, bullying, and internal conflict among staff nurses, charge nurses, and student nurses.<sup>4</sup> While emphasizing the role of clinical supervisors and lecturers in making nursing students' experiences unbearable, Männistö et al., recognize the importance of interpersonal relationships that include friendships with peers and family support as crucial for learning and reducing the risk of stress and depression.<sup>5</sup>

Some students report that studying nursing is a lonely journey that isolates them from friends and families due to academic workload.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, being isolated from social activities and family support can cause anxiety and stress, leading to making constant mistakes, which can potentially harm patients.<sup>7</sup> These factors, along with emotional trauma, constant stress, economic hardships, and anxiety about the future, have an impact on the physical, emotional, and spiritual wholeness of student nurses in rural-based Universities.<sup>8</sup> The University and other rural-based TVET colleges that offer nursing certificates, diplomas, and degrees within the Limpopo province are faced with the same challenges in student nurses' clinical placement areas for practical.<sup>9</sup>

The health care system in South Africa provides everyone living in the country the constitutional right to access free primary health care regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, and nationality. SABC NEWS reported that South Africa's then Minister of Health, Dr. Aeron Motsoaledi, expressed concerns about the health system being burdened by patients from neighboring countries.<sup>10</sup> Motsoaledi also noted that Limpopo's health system faces significant constraints in resources and staff due to overuse of the health system by citizens in neighboring countries. Not only do such practices affect the health care system of the province, but they also create a workload for the nurses and, more especially, student nurses because they must provide non-discriminatory care and services to everyone, which could create conflicts between natives. This study aimed to explore the impact of clinical traumatic experiences on the mental health of students at a rural-based University in the Limpopo Province, South Africa.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Clinical experiences play a pivotal role in shaping the professional identity and competency of student nurses. However, these experiences often come with a significant emotional and psychological cost, especially in resource-limited and rural settings such as those in Limpopo Province, South Africa. Recent studies conducted in 2022 offer critical insights into the complex and often distressing impact of clinical placements on student nurses' mental health. A key study by Makhado et al. explored the broader effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on teaching and learning among student nurses at a rural university in

<sup>2</sup> Kalypso Lordanou et al., "Learning by Arguing," *Learning and Instruction* 63 (2019): 101207.

<sup>3</sup> Ahmad E. Aboshaiqah et al., "Challenges in the Clinical Environment: The Saudi Student Nurses' Experience," *Education Research International* 2018 (December 2, 2018): 1–9, <https://doi.org/10.1155/2018/3652643>.

<sup>4</sup> Sara Ama Amoo et al., "Bullying in the Clinical Setting: Lived Experiences of Nursing Students in the Central Region of Ghana," *PloS One* 16, no. 9 (2021): e0257620.

<sup>5</sup> Merja Männistö et al., "Digital Collaborative Learning in Nursing Education: A Systematic Review," *Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences* 34, no. 2 (2020): 280–92.

<sup>6</sup> Charanjit Singh et al., "Work Experiences of Nurse Academics: A Qualitative Study," *Nurse Education Today* 106 (November 2021): 105038, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2021.105038>.

<sup>7</sup> Ellen J M Bakker et al., "Late Dropout from Nursing Education: An Interview Study of Nursing Students' Experiences and Reasons," *Nurse Education in Practice* 39 (2019): 17–25.

<sup>8</sup> Shelley Spurr et al., "Examining Nursing Students' Wellness and Resilience: An Exploratory Study," *Nurse Education in Practice* 51 (February 2021): 102978, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nepr.2021.102978>.

<sup>9</sup> Setlabo Sarah Dikgare, "Health-Related Factors Affecting Lecturers Job-Performance at Vhembe Technical Vocational Education and Training College, Limpopo Province" (University of Venda, 2020).

<sup>10</sup> Sihle Hlophe, "The Representation of Minority Languages on SABC 1: The Case of Siswati." (2014).

Limpopo.<sup>11</sup> The study found that the students were not only academically disrupted but also emotionally strained. The sudden shift to online learning, combined with uncertainty about clinical placements, created a climate of anxiety and demotivation. For many students, the lack of physical interaction and direct clinical exposure during lockdowns led to feelings of isolation, stress, and perceived loss of competence. The rural context exacerbated these feelings due to limited technological infrastructure and support systems, highlighting the intersection between geographic disadvantage and vulnerability to mental health.

Beyond the pandemic, the physical and psychological safety of student nurses during clinical placements remains a persistent concern. Research by Makhado et al. on occupational health and safety during clinical learning in Limpopo revealed that students often felt unsafe and unsupported in clinical environments.<sup>12</sup> Exposure to infectious diseases, insufficient protective equipment, and a lack of clear guidance from clinical mentors created conditions of fear and distress. These occupational hazards had a direct bearing on students' mental health, leading to increased anxiety, emotional fatigue, and, in some cases, avoidance of clinical duties.

Adding another layer to this challenge is the disconnect between student nurses' expectations and the realities of clinical practice. A study by Mafumo and Netshikweta examined what student nurses expected from their clinical learning environments across hospitals in Limpopo.<sup>13</sup> Many students entered the field seeking supportive mentorship and hands-on experience. However, they were often met with overcrowded wards, unfriendly staff, and limited opportunities for meaningful engagement. This gap between expectation and experience contributed to frustration, decreased motivation, and emotional burnout.

Perhaps the most direct link between clinical experience and mental health was documented in a study focusing on student nurses' experiences in psychiatric hospitals.<sup>14</sup> The study identified four major themes that affected the mental health of learners: fear of mental health care users, anxiety regarding clinical assessments, a general disinterest in psychiatric nursing, and stress from personal and social issues. The psychiatric setting, often unfamiliar and emotionally intense, left many students feeling overwhelmed and ill-prepared. Some reported emotional withdrawal, while others developed negative attitudes toward psychiatric nursing altogether. The emotional burden becomes even more apparent in psychiatric nursing placements, which have been shown to elicit intense reactions among learners. At the University of Limpopo, Hlahla et al. found that many student nurses felt unprepared and deeply uncomfortable when working in psychiatric facilities.<sup>15</sup> Students described experiencing fear and emotional discomfort when interacting with mental healthcare users, particularly when not adequately trained or oriented.<sup>16</sup> This is consistent with national findings by Masutha et al. who reported widespread anxiety, fear of clinical assessments, disinterest in mental health nursing, and social stress among students in psychiatric settings across South Africa.<sup>17</sup> Such negative experiences can foster avoidance behaviors and even absenteeism, as highlighted in a 2025 study from Limpopo College of Nursing, where students cited stress and lack of rest as key reasons for missing psychiatric placements.

These findings collectively paint a picture of a high-stakes learning environment that, while essential for professional development, exposes student nurses to psychological stressors that can compromise their well-being. In the context of Limpopo, rurality amplifies these challenges due to limited institutional resources, inadequate clinical infrastructure, and insufficient mental health support. Despite these difficulties, many studies advocate for better preparation, debriefing sessions, and strengthened

<sup>11</sup> L. Makhado and L. Khoza, "Occupational Health and Safety Concerns of Student Nurses during Clinical Practice in Limpopo Province.," *International Journal of Caring Sciences.*, 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Makhado and Khoza, "Occupational Health and Safety Concerns of Student Nurses during Clinical Practice in Limpopo Province. ."

<sup>13</sup> Julia L Mafumo and Mutshinyalo L Netshikweta, "Expectations of Learner Nurses in Sampled Clinical Areas of the Limpopo Province, South Africa," *Health SA Gesondheid* 27 (2022): 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Saadhna Panday et al., "Teenage Pregnancy in South Africa: With a Specific Focus on School-Going Learners," 2009.

<sup>15</sup> L. S. Hlahla et al., "Challenges Faced by University of Limpopo Learner Nurses during Psychiatry Clinical Exposure: A Qualitative Study," *Nursing Reports* 14, no. 1 (2024): 164–73.

<sup>16</sup> Hlahla et al., "Challenges Faced by University of Limpopo Learner Nurses during Psychiatry Clinical Exposure: A Qualitative Study."

<sup>17</sup> Thingahangwi Cecilia Masutha et al., "Experiences of Student Nurses Regarding Experiential Learning in Specialized Psychiatric Hospitals in South Africa, a Qualitative Study," *Healthcare* 11, no. 8 (April 17, 2023): 1151, <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare11081151>.

support systems as effective ways to mitigate the emotional toll of clinical training.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study used a qualitative approach that is exploratory and descriptive in the contextual design to explore the impact of clinical traumatic experiences on the mental health of student nurses at a rural-based University in the Limpopo Province, South Africa. The study objectives were (a) to describe the clinical experiences of students nurses in their clinical placement areas. (b) to explore the challenges faced by student nurses during their clinical placement. (c) to explain how the challenges impact students' mental health and academic progress. (d) to establish measures that can be used to support students during their clinical placement.

### **Context of the Study**

This study was conducted at the University, which is a rural-based university situated in a town in Limpopo province, South Africa, under the administration of Vhembe District Municipality and Thulamela Local Municipality. According to the World Bank, Zimbabwe, the neighboring country to the province of Limpopo, is continuously suffering economically because of sanctions and difficulties; people are fleeing their country and seeking basic medical care in South Africa.<sup>18</sup> The healthcare system in Limpopo Province is facing challenges such as a lack of medicine, long waiting times, and poor infrastructure.<sup>19</sup> All study participants resided in the province at the time of this study.

### **The Target Population of the Study**

The population of this study was student nurses who were enrolled and registered at the University of Venda. The students were approached and informed about the study and given an informed consent form to sign.

### **Sampling Criteria**

Eight (8) student nurses between the ages of nineteen (19) and twenty-four (24) in the faculty of health sciences from level two (2) and level four (4) studying Bachelor of Nursing at the University of Venda participated in this study consisting of two (2) male students and six (6) female students and were selected through purposive sampling and snowballing method. Through purposive sampling, the researchers used characteristics such as Level of Study and degree to identify suitable participants, level 2 and 4 students doing the Nursing degree, Students were recruited from their respective groups, and the researcher approached the lecture hall and requested to deliver the recruitment message to the few group of students in class, students were informed about the purpose of the study and given contact details of the researchers to contact when they were interested to be part of the study, once participants were identified and verified, they were able to refer their friends and other classmates to the researcher for participation through snowballing sampling method.

### **Data Collection**

Qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive design was used in this study, revealing that nursing and healthcare research frequently uses qualitative descriptive designs.<sup>20</sup> The impact of clinical experiences on student nurses' mental health was examined in this study, using exploratory and descriptive methodologies that emphasize the significance of comprehending and explaining phenomena. To answer the research question on how the mental health of student nurses was impacted by the clinical traumatic experiences during their clinical placement areas, the researcher conducted face-to-face semi-structured

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<sup>18</sup> Daniel Rodriguez-Segura, "EdTech in Developing Countries: A Review of the Evidence," *The World Bank Research Observer* 37, no. 2 (2022): 171–203.

<sup>19</sup> Khathutshelo G Netshisaulu, Hulisani Malelelo-Ndou, and Dorah U Ramathuba, "Challenges Experienced by Health Care Professionals Working in Resource-Poor Intensive Care Settings in the Limpopo Province of South Africa," *Curationis* 42, no. 1 (2019): 1–8.

<sup>20</sup> Louise Doyle et al., "An Overview of the Qualitative Descriptive Design within Nursing Research," *Journal of Research in Nursing* 25, no. 5 (2020): 443–55; D. F. Polit and C. T. Beck, *Nursing Research*, 10th ed. (Wolters Kluwer, 2017); David Hunter, Jacqueline McCallum, and Dora Howes, "Defining Exploratory-Descriptive Qualitative (EDQ) Research and Considering Its Application to Healthcare," *Journal of Nursing and Health Care* 4, no. 1 (2019).

interview questions with eight (8) student nurses at the University of Venda, each interview was 20-30 minutes long, the interviews were conducted in English, consent to record audio and be transcribed into text was obtained verbally from each participant.<sup>21</sup> Field notes were taken during the interview to highlight gestures, facial expressions, and general body language.<sup>22</sup> Data saturation was achieved when the researcher interviewed all eight (8) participants, and students were assured of confidentiality throughout the data collection process. The researcher ensured that participants were well-informed about the aim of the study and the plan for data analysis and usage.

### **Data Analysis**

The data in this study were analyzed using framework analysis and thematic framework analysis. This process of analysis followed the six basic steps which are, 1), Familiarization, whereby the researchers thoroughly read the data to be well aware of what it entails and take note of important aspects (2), generation codes, the researcher arranged the data systematically and highlighted the codes, 3), searching for themes, after generating the codes, the researchers searched for patterns and themes within the data which corresponded with the objectives of the study and answered the research questions. 4), reviewing the themes, the researcher verified the themes and checked for coherence and distinctiveness of the themes. 5), the researchers therefore, moved to the final step of defining the themes, giving them names, checking their meaning to ascertain whether they represent what is collected in the field and their relation to the phenomenon. Eventually 6), the researcher concluded by writing up a report on themes, discussing the finding as well as their implications based on what was collected in the field from participants. The data collected was transcribed and compared with the audio recording to confirm its accuracy and correctness. The researcher was able to uncover new knowledge by discussing the themes that developed, stimulated by the research questions, and confirming and disputing theoretical assumptions, which made it easier to comprehend concepts and variables according to the definitions provided.

(a) How can you describe your clinical experience in your placement area? (b) What were the challenges faced during your clinical placement? (c) How did these challenges impact your mental health and academic progress? (d) What can be done to support the student nurses' during their clinical placement areas? Quotations from interviews with participants of this study are used in this article to prove and quantify the data presented in this article.

### **Ethical Consideration**

Ethical clearance for this study was requested and granted to allow well-conducted research to be conducted professionally and also ethically, and to avoid plagiarism. Consent was obtained from participants in writing, and detailed information on the research was provided, along with the promotion of voluntary participation.

### **Measures to Ensure Trustworthiness**

To ensure that the trustworthiness and quality of the data, as well as research principles, were followed, the researchers followed the most famous criteria of Gubato ensure transferability, credibility, dependability, and confirmability.<sup>23</sup> Credibility was ensured by submitting the collected and coded data to the research principal and expert to independently read and analyze the data to verify the themes as attributed by Adler.<sup>24</sup> Transferability was addressed by providing an accurate and in-depth analysis of the data and reviewing the available literature on the phenomenon. Furthermore, the results were shared with content readers. Objectivity was enforced by comparing the transcribed data with the audio recording to ensure that all the information was well captured and analysed as described by the participants.

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<sup>21</sup> Jun Cui and Robin Bell, "Behavioural Entrepreneurial Mindset: How Entrepreneurial Education Activity Impacts Entrepreneurial Intention and Behaviour," *The International Journal of Management Education* 20, no. 2 (July 2022): 100639, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijme.2022.100639>.

<sup>22</sup> Tim May and Beth Perry, *Social Research: Issues, Methods and Process* (McGraw-Hill Education (UK), 2022).

<sup>23</sup> Egon G Guba, "Criteria for Assessing the Trustworthiness of Naturalistic Inquiries," *Ectj* 29, no. 2 (1981): 75–91.

<sup>24</sup> Rachel H Adler, "Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research," *Journal of Human Lactation* 38, no. 4 (2022): 598–602.

Amindescribes this process as confirmability, which ensures neutrality within the study.<sup>25</sup> Finally, the study's dependability was achieved by following correct data collection and research procedures, ensuring consistency and reproducibility for future researchers by Boucerredj and Debbache.<sup>26</sup>

**PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS**

In-depth data were obtained from the participants who were interviewed about the impact of clinical experiences on the student nurses' mental health at a rural University. The participants in this study expressed their learning and clinical experience on the phenomenon, which helped the researchers to obtain a deep understanding and a clear picture of the research problem. In this study, a semi-structured interview was used to allow for the flexibility of the questions. To ensure the accuracy and dependability of the participants, the demographic data for each person were first sought. Analysis of the interview data revealed four major themes that seemed to be a huge concern to student nurses: (1) Teaching and learning methods, (2), Clinical supervision and support, (3) Mental Health and interpersonal relationships, (4) and finally, support system and resources. These themes and their associated subthemes were presented and discussed below.

**Table 2: Main themes and subthemes demonstration motivated by research objectives.**

Objectives	Main Themes	Sub-themes
To describe the experiences of student nurses in their clinical placement areas.	Teaching and Learning methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Confusion</li> <li>● Workload (Tests, presentations, exams, Blocks)</li> </ul>
To explore challenges faced by student nurses during their clinical placement.	Clinical supervision and support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Effective communication</li> <li>● Theory and practice and Midwifery.</li> </ul>
To explain how these challenges impact the mental health and academic progress of student nurses.	Mental health and interpersonal relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Emotional trauma</li> <li>● feeling overwhelmed</li> <li>● lack of social relationships</li> </ul>
To establish measures that can be used to support student nurses during their clinical placement.	Support system and resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● By finding Therapy/someone to talk to</li> <li>● The university must Introduce Recess</li> </ul>

**Theme 1: Teaching and Learning Methods**

“Teaching and learning methods” in this study refer to how lecturers and students work together towards achieving the same goal by giving information and getting information, as well as implementing what was learned. Participants in this study were asked to describe their clinical experiences. Most participants expressed their dissatisfaction with the teaching and learning experiences; they described these experiences as confusing, due to their work schedule, which involved constant tests, presentations, and online classes. The following quotes further elaborate further on the confusion.

*Okay. As a whole. But. Yeah. Yeah. Last year, it was a mixture. It was, it was confusing. It's like I would go for practicals for three days, and then the rest of the week I'm going to class. Sometimes I'll have practicals, and then in the evening I have an online class (Participant 1, female, 24 years, Level 2)*

<sup>25</sup> Mohamed Ezzat Khamis Amin et al., “Establishing Trustworthiness and Authenticity in Qualitative Pharmacy Research,” *Research in Social and Administrative Pharmacy* 16, no. 10 (2020): 1472–82.

<sup>26</sup> Leila Boucerredj, Souhaila Meneceur, and Abderrhmane Bouafia, “Optimize UAV Reliability with a New Hybrid Approach,” 2023.

Another participant said:

*Mmm, it's not really well because you cannot really plan your dates, they just call you any time and say come to class or we need you for this and that, and not really follow the timetable as they should, and we are not told in time that we have to go to practicals. They usually tell you that after your exam today, you are going to the practical day after tomorrow, so there's no plan where you should know that next month on this date, I'm going to start my practical. And they shift sometimes (Participant 6, female, 19 years, Level 2).*

This study further found student nurses struggled with venues to attend classes. Participant 7, described their experiences with the struggle of venues.

*So, mostly before class we have to go, uh, check in for equipment, sometimes there's no venue, or we have to resort to online, online classes. So, it's been quite teaching, and it's been a little smaller in a way. That's easy. It's how we do it normally. It's been, it's been good for me. That kind of simulation teaching is really fun. It's fun. In a way, if this is your teacher, let's have him come see you. Especially if there is a shortage of lecturers, we can't stop learning because of that, so we use the available lecturer to cover the space of the missing one. (Participant 7, male, 24 years, Level 7)*

### **Workload (tests, presentations, examinations, blocks, and assignments)**

Participants in this study indicated that being a nursing student comes with a lot of work; the workload the students complained about involved a lack of time to study, do presentations, attend online classes, attend blocks, prepare for tests, and submit assignments. Participants 1, 3, 6, and 8 had the following views about their experiences:

*Sometimes I'll have practical, then in the evening I have an online class. So it was really overwhelming with assignments and tests at the same time, going to work, academics, and this side, assignments. Like all these things, how are you toggling in each? Last year, it was difficult. And like I said, last year it was mixed. I would go to the practical and expect to be in the block at the same time. So it was challenging, but I had to just keep afloat (Participant 1, female, 24 years).*

*Yeah, this one is demanding. Fourth year. Like, there are a lot of things that are needed. Like the professional file, from there, the supplying of and also filling up the cases, the case register for the case people that we have to give birth. So firstly, it's demanding. (Participant 3, male, 22 years, Level 4).*

*I do face challenges, but usually I would say it only happen in one module where we are being told about the test in short notice but on other modules we are being told that the test is going to be this and this, sometimes they even ask us when do we want to write a test but obviously given conditions to choose the test date, sometimes you have to choose by force, you don't have a choice, because sometimes they will tell you that you have to choose the date before next week and by that time you may find we trying to grab some information but usually they tell us in time that you are going to write a test on this day ( Participant 6, male, 19 Years, Level 2).*

*Ow okay In the beginning my performance was very poor because I was still struggling to balance between theory and practical and were expected to presentation and write test in the same day at some point, so that wasn't easy for me to give my best but mhhm I had to do what I was supposed to do in to be on track and things got better as time goes by when getting used to such situations and being able to adapt that wherein I managed to improve on test, exams and practical yeah. (participant 8, male, 23 years, Level 4).*

The findings have revealed that students cannot keep up with the presentations, test submissions, and blocks that they are required to attend. Sometimes, lecturers fail to plan classes that are convenient for students, and students reported that they attend practical and are expected to have online classes later

in the evening, and still write an assignment, prepare for presentation, role-playing, and tests for other modules within the same week. As a result, they only prepare their parts in the presentation without understanding the main content. Furthermore, this study found that there are lecturers who make the learning experience of nursing students unpleasant by not clarifying the ambiguity and not having enough time to further elaborate on the content. Students get content from fellow students' presentations.

## **Theme 2: Clinical supervision and support (effective communication between nursing staff, charge nurses, and student nurses)**

Participants in this study further expressed their concerns with the communication and support of staff nurses, charge nurses, and student nurses, stating that it is not properly planned and creates a lot of tension. Student nurses in this study further commended their supervisors in clinical settings and for the support their clinical supervisor provided, some participants felt that the tension was building, which led to verbal bullying. Participant 1 and 2 expressed their experiences with communication and support.

*I can be in one ward for one week and then in another ward, yeah, so I have to like adapt to different, um, different teachers and different, I mean, different nurses and their teaching. Styles. Okay. So, um, it's like sometimes you get them that there are some, some are rude, very, very rude. So it's like dealing with the rudeness of patients and the rudeness of, like, sisters. Yeah, things like that. (participant 1, female, 24 years, Level 2)*

Another participant had the following to say:

*Yeah, at our practical and test we don't perform well, like at the hospital, the nurses there would say that we are lazy and spoiled, we don't want to work, forgetting that we experience trauma there of seeing patients that were under our care getting worse or even dying in front of us, like guys we are still young, we are not supposed to be seeing such things, and yes, just because we chose nursing and we were aware that these things of seeing someone dying would happen, it still does not take away the fact that we are young and vulnerable to experience such things, and when we try our best to deal with our emotions or do our school work, we get undermined, it not nice, but it's the career we chose. (Participant 2, female, 20 years, Level 2)*

*Like, we're not educated or, yeah, we're not enough, like, even the best that we're trying is not enough. That's how it makes you feel. So, after all that happens, I try to bottle it up, just bottle it up and move on with the day. Okay. (Participant 2, female, 20 years, Level 2).*

## **Theory and Practice and Midwifery**

Student nurses who had experienced Midwifery explained their challenges when applying theory and practice, and midwifery. Participant 5, explained that midwifery is the stage where they learn by doing through the integration of theory and practice, this includes observations and role-playing. This study also found that the university has tried to integrate student theory with practice by introducing role plays, blocks, and midwifery. Participants 5 and 6 had the following to say about theory and practice.

*Uhhh, sometimes it could be challenging when one doesn't really understand the content lesson during lectures, wherein one has to apply such theory in their practical. Okay, some of the days we are expected to do a long presentation, fully understanding the content and on the other side supposed to write a test on the same day. I don't solve them, I just take it as it is because I have no choice, I want the best, and I want to graduate on record time (Participant 5, female, 19 years).*

*Sometimes learning it's like a person has to do a procedure, and we all have to see. We can't all learn because there is no enough materials so that's a big challenge because you only get to be exposed to a certain procedure now or at the hospital on a living patient and it takes time for a sister to teach you well at the hospital because they are trying to be more careful of someone's life and also the dangers that can affect someone's life. So improper planning and not having enough resources for us to learn, no time management, has affected our life, our social life and also our learning experiences. (Participant 6, female, 19 years, level 2).*

### **Theme 3: Mental Health and Interpersonal Relationships**

The students in this study revealed that their clinical placement exposed them to traumatic experiences that caused emotional trauma.

*Um, practical parts, maybe because of last year's exposure, it's not so bad, but it gets devastating. You feel like most people, depending on the world that you're in, if you're like in medical wards. Basically, it's like death is a lot. We don't say people don't get cured, people don't get home. But death is just a lot. To the point that when a person leaves, maybe say, I have a patient, and sometimes we bond with our patients. Normally, not that we ask for it, it's just normal... (Participant 8, female, 23 years, level 4)*

*They're traumatized after that, Mara (but) now, according to me, I remember my first thing that I did, I bathed the dead, not knowing. Mara, that didn't affect me. So, as I can see, I can really say it depends on a person. So I am a person who's not that easily, how can I say, scared by things or what? Mm-hmm. I'm that person who, like, I've been exposed to a lot of things, so, oh yeah. That one. I was like, okay, part of life, we'll just take the patient, then go to another patient. (Participant 3, male, 22 years, level 4).*

Participants in this study further revealed that being exposed to a dead body for the first time was a traumatising experience for them. Participant 5 said:

*I once had a trauma after eish, after being exposed to a situation wherein I had to lay a corpse and that situation was unusual for me, and sometimes I had to take care of patients involved in a car accident, which was traumatizing because some of them would arrive when they were in a coma. (Participant 5, female, 19 years, level 2).*

#### **Feeling Overwhelmed**

Another sub-theme that emerged during the discussion with the participants was students feeling overwhelmed. Participants 2 and 4 stated that they were feeling overwhelmed and emotionally drained, and described their mental health as depressed. Students in this study did not report any idealization of dropping out despite admitting that they are feeling depressed.

*(Laughs.... Yooohhh) Okay. I personally, I feel like it's overwhelming. It's overwhelming, Ankere, you mean the overall? It's overwhelming because you barely have time for yourself, if we're not at practicals, we're on block, if we're not on block, we're at practical, so you barely have time for yourself (Participant 2, female, 20 years, level 2).*

*You are depressed sometimes because you are stressed, and you have no one to talk to. You have to deal with certain things by yourself (Participant 4, female, 19 years, level 2).*

#### **Interpersonal relationships**

Interpersonal relationships in this study explained how not having friends and socializing with peers outside the nursing degree impacted the mental health of student nurses. Students revealed that they do not meet a lot of people outside their profession, and they do not often make close relationships except with their classmates. Family time, intimate relationships, social relationships, and outings with friends are not possible, and the journey is lonely without these support systems. Of equal importance, the findings of this study also revealed that nursing students at the University do not get to visit their homes often, and have no time for their families, friends, and partners, as they are always occupied with school and practical work; these students described this situation as having 'No social life'.

*So, because we don't get recess, I don't go home that much. It means I don't see my family from time to time. I only get to see them maybe in December, because we do get, I think, maybe two weeks or three, yeah, two weeks or three. So, that's the only time that I go home. So it means all year long I'm at school, and then I only talk with my family telephonically, and then relationships, obviously, we won't (Laughs) see much of each other because there's no time. It takes a toll on relationships, yeah. (Participant 2, female, 20 years, level 2)*

*Okay fine, I really have no social life since I spend a lot of time busy with academic duties and practical, it's all about nursing and time for forming friendships and sometimes relationships is limited as I'm always busy. So it is also difficult for me to use my phone, and sometimes that could be once or twice in a day, because when I arrive in my room, I have to rest so that I could be able to wake up during the night and study. Umh, sometimes I feel like I lost the bond with people whom I used to spend time with, such as family members and friends. (Participant 5, female, 19 years, level 2)*

*You don't have, you don't have. The only people you know you interact with are your classmates and your co-workers. Because if I'm here at this university, I only know where I am. The people I attend with. Because if I come to class, we attend, we usually attend from 7 in the morning to 4. That means I will attend the whole day. I'll go back to rest, stay for the day. All week, like that. So, we don't interact, so you focus on being a nursing student. You don't socialize with others. (Participant 4, female, 19 years, level 2).*

#### **Theme 4: Support system and resources**

This theme sought to identify measures that can be used to support student clinical experiences in rural universities. Participants in this study expressed their desire to be supported through reliable transport, accommodations that catered only for nursing students, and access to counselling without prolonged waiting lists. Moreover, financial support through bursaries was mentioned by students.

*We also need bursaries, we don't get practical money but other degrees they get, so yeah and like how they used to do it before, we'd do practical at Siloam and we get our own place there to stay, that was prior to COVID, so they must bring that back. (Participant 7, male, 24 years, 4).*

*We need bursaries, like now there's COIDA bursary (Compensation for Occupational injuries and Diseases Act) and Exxaro bursary (Exxaro Resources Limited, which is a resources company with a coal business and acquisitive growth prospect in minerals and energy), so they should find more bursaries for us. (Participant 2, female, 20 years, level 2).*

#### **Recess**

Currently, the University policy and academic calendar indicate that the university offers 4 recesses for students in March, June, September, and November after the final exams; however, nursing students recess only in November after their final examinations and are also expected to report back to campus earlier in February than other students. Therefore, participants felt that recess was necessary and would help them rest.

*If they can just give us time for recessing, for example, and a break from practical and block, it can be better. (Participant 4, female, 19 years, level 2).*

*We don't get recess. If we get recess, it's either because they're striking or... yeah, they're striking. Then that's the only time you're free. Otherwise, you don't get time (Participant 8, female 20 years, level 8).*

#### **Therapy/someone to talk to**

Moreover, participants in this study indicated that they would appreciate having psychological support services. The university had a psychological service support accessible to all students; however, sometimes students are placed on a waiting list. Participant 6 said;

*Uh, number one, I think we should have, uh, therapies here on campus. Um, yeah, so that we can talk to them to like just voice out our experiences. It feels nice when you're talking to somebody about your trauma. Like, you get a sense of relief, right? The therapist is to focus on nursing students, not the general that any other student can come. (Participant 6, female, 19 years, level 2).*

## DISCUSSION

In this study, the impact of clinical experiences on the student nurses' mental health in a rural university was explored. According to the results, student nurses are faced with several challenges during their clinical learning that significantly affect their mental health. The results of this study showed that not only were student nurses' mental health affected, but also their academic progress, as they encountered difficulties in transitioning from theoretical content learning to practical learning.

In this study, the first findings showed that student nurses experienced a lot of dissatisfaction with the process of learning, which created a lot of confusion and a workload that they struggled to cope with. This means that students could not cope with the pressure to attend classes, and blocks, prepare for tests, write assignments, attend clinical training, look for venues to attend physical classes, and sometimes attend evening online classes. These findings confirm that of Kekkonen et al., who posit that students can be dissatisfied with the blocks and prepare for tests and clinical training.<sup>27</sup> Such practices harm the academic progress of students. These findings further confirmed those of Kyndt et al. that nursing students have adopted the surface learning approach due to their inability to cope with the workload.<sup>28</sup> Surface learning is cramming, passing, and forgetting the content for good grades and the reduction of workload. According to Manthias and Wentzel, academic pressure, long hours of practical training, and physical exhaustion provoke burnout in undergraduate nursing students.<sup>29</sup> Havenga and Sengane reported that student nurses are often expected to deal with an extensive amount of theoretical academic work and practical work with limited time allocation.<sup>30</sup>

The second finding in this study revealed that student nurses faced many challenges with communicating with staff nurses and charge nurses. The findings show that there was poor communication and tension that placed them in compromising situations at their clinical placement areas. The findings of this study further revealed that some challenges that manifested themselves in the clinical placement areas that student nurses had to deal with were rudeness and bullying from both clinical staff and patients. The findings of Kaylani et al. further confirm these findings indicate that nursing staff are unwelcoming and not supportive of nursing students, and some supervisors are discriminatory towards nursing and medical students.<sup>31</sup> It seems that clinical placement areas can be unhealthy for student nurses and affect their mental health; the tension and other communication issues can affect the way in which student nurses learn. The findings of the Irish Nursing Board supported the findings related to tension and communication in this study, that the nursing profession is influenced by many factors such as internal and external politics, communication and relationships between professional nursing staff and nursing students.<sup>32</sup>

This study also found that student nurses were exposed to theory and practice and midwifery. Theory and practice and midwifery were explained in this study as the process through which students learn to integrate theoretical content with practical learning through midwifery. However, the findings showed that students struggled to integrate theory and practice and midwifery due to a lack of adequate resources and equipment in some of the clinical placement areas. Theory and practice are very crucial in the health profession because they prepare students with the necessary skills to execute the work unsupervised and gain confidence in their abilities. Mbakaya et al. reported that midwifery was introduced to teach students to apply theory and practice by first gaining knowledge, learning about history, and subsequently acquiring skills through role-playing.<sup>33</sup> According to Bwanga and Chanda, lack of resources

<sup>27</sup> Hanne Kekkonen, Matti Lassas, and Samuli Siltanen, "Posterior Consistency and Convergence Rates for Bayesian Inversion with Hypoelliptic Operators," *Inverse Problems* 32, no. 8 (2016): 085005.

<sup>28</sup> Eva Kyndt et al., "'Time Is Not Enough.' Workload in Higher Education: A Student Perspective," *Higher Education Research & Development* 33, no. 4 (2014): 684–98.

<sup>29</sup> Kyalo Abigail Manthi, James M. Kilika, and Linda Kimencu, "How Do Human Resource Management Practices Predict Employee Turnover Intentions: An Empirical Survey of Teacher Training Colleges in Kenya," *International Journal of Business Administration* 9, no. 4 (June 13, 2018): 201, <https://doi.org/10.5430/ijba.v9n4p201>.

<sup>30</sup> Yolanda Havenga and Malmsey L. Sengane, "Challenges Experienced by Postgraduate Nursing Students at a South African University," *Health SA Gesondheid* 23 (March 29, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.4102/hsag.v23i0.1107>.

<sup>31</sup> Melissa Tooley and Kaylan Connally, "No Panacea: Diagnosing What Ails Teacher Professional Development before Reaching for Remedies," *New America*, 2016.

<sup>32</sup> Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, *A Snapshot of Public Health Nursing and Community Registered General Nursing in Ireland* (Professional Development Centre and Library, Irish Nurses and Midwives ..., 2013).

<sup>33</sup> Balwani Chingaticifwe Mbakaya et al., "Nursing and Midwifery Students' Experiences and Perception of Their Clinical Learning Environment in Malawi: A Mixed-Method Study," *BMC Nursing* 19, no. 1 (2020): 87.

and failure to follow procedures and guidelines by nursing staff were reported to interfere with students' ability to integrate theory and practice.<sup>34</sup>

The third finding of the study was that the mental health of student nurses was impacted by traumatic experiences such as caring for critically ill patients, witnessing death, and bathing corpses. The findings showed that emotional trauma, feeling overwhelmed, and depression were common symptoms among student nurses. Similar findings were reported by Karacaa et al. that nursing students are often exposed to long-term emotional trauma.<sup>35</sup> Garcia et al. concurred with Karacaa et al. that nursing students are vulnerable to mental health issues because of their exposure to physical illness, death, and academic stress.

Traumatic experiences can negatively affect mental health and emotional stability, it is associated with constant symptoms of fatigue, insomnia, flashbacks, anxiety, loss of appetite, loss of patience, and a sense of empathy and sympathy. These findings are in line with those of Aloufi et al. that nursing students experience sleepless nights and feel overwhelmed, accompanied by stress and confusion.<sup>36</sup> This study also found patterns within the students' reports about overwhelming feelings. Simpson and Sawatzky revealed that the feeling of being overwhelmed often leads to the ideation of dropping out.<sup>37</sup> However, this study did not establish that student nurses idealized dropping out. González-García et al. reported that working during a health crisis and extensive exposure to traumatic events lead to depression symptoms, anxiety, chronic illness, and psychosomatic symptoms, similar sentiments can be traced in this study that nursing students at the University are often exposed to traumatic events, bathing death bodies, academic workload and lack of family time which increases their vulnerability to Anxiety, depression, and psychosomatic symptoms.<sup>38</sup>

Although Bruffaerts et al. reported that nursing students are prone to substance use as a coping strategy to deal with stress and PTSD, findings in this study did not establish that indeed nursing students at the University are predisposed to drug and alcohol use.<sup>39</sup> Of equal importance, the findings of this study revealed that nursing students at the University do not get to visit their homes often, and have no time for their families, friends, and partners as they are always occupied with school and practical work; these students described this situation as having 'No social life'. Männistö et al. indicated in their study that interactions with friends, family, and peers are vital for mental health stability; however, deprivation of such important aspects of social life can impact physical and mental health.<sup>40</sup> Similar sentiments emerged in this study that nursing students feel that they have lost touch with their loved ones, and that has made them feel that they are on this journey alone without support, hence they feel that interpersonal relationships are a toll. Socialization is an important part of learning and support, communicating and spending appropriate time with family and friends can boost a person's mental health. Choi *et al.*, reported that the ability to form interpersonal relationships increases a person's ability to comprehend the feelings of others, support, uphold cultivate family connections can boost mental health and stress.<sup>41</sup>

Dinç Hür et al. asserted that being dissatisfied with academic progress, financial status, and lack of friends and family time can affect mental health.<sup>42</sup> Participants in this study reported that they barely have time for themselves and, as a result, cannot engage in intimate relationships with students outside their career because they would not be able to give them time. This study further found that students

<sup>34</sup> Oswald Bwanga and Ernest Chanda, "Experiences of Nurses in the Clinical Supervision of Nursing Students: Findings from a Systematic Review and Their Application to Radiography," 2019.

<sup>35</sup> A. Karacaa et al., "Relationship between Mental Health of Nursing Students and Coping, Self-Esteem and Social Support," *Nurse Education Today* 76 (May 2019): 44–50, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2019.01.029>.

<sup>36</sup> Mohammad A. Aloufi et al., "Reducing Stress, Anxiety and Depression in Undergraduate Nursing Students: Systematic Review," *Nurse Education Today* 102 (July 2021): 104877, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2021.104877>.

<sup>37</sup> Marie-Claude G Simpson and Jo-Ann V Sawatzky, "Clinical Placement Anxiety in Undergraduate Nursing Students: A Concept Analysis," *Nurse Education Today* 87 (2020): 104329.

<sup>38</sup> María González-García et al., "Nursing Students' Experiences of Clinical Practices in Emergency and Intensive Care Units," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17, no. 16 (2020): 5686.

<sup>39</sup> Ronny Bruffaerts et al., "Mental Health Problems in College Freshmen: Prevalence and Academic Functioning," *Journal of Affective Disorders* 225 (2018): 97–103.

<sup>40</sup> Männistö et al., "Digital Collaborative Learning in Nursing Education: A Systematic Review."

<sup>41</sup> Sun-Joo Chung and Lee-Jin Choi, "The Development of Sustainable Assessment during the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Case of the English Language Program in South Korea," *Sustainability* 13, no. 8 (2021): 4499.

<sup>42</sup> Sevgi Dinç Hür et al., "Depressive Symptoms in Karabuk University Health School Students," *Journal of Psychiatric Nursing* 5, no. 2 (2014): 72–76.

signified the importance of being able to go back home to their families because being away from them makes them feel lonely. Rood, Tanzillo, and Madsen confirmed in their study that nursing students expressed their failure to deal with stress because there is no motivation from home, and they have no social life.<sup>43</sup> The findings in this study revealed that student nurses only get recess when there is a strike on campus.

The Fourth and final findings in this study showed that the support structure and resources at the university are not adequate to cater for the needs of student nurses. Lack of reliable transportation from and to clinical placement areas, lack of funding, and special accommodations were identified as significant desires for the participants in this study. The findings also showed that student nurses would prefer to have their counseling professional on standby because the current service provided is overused and has waiting lists. Huang, Lei, Xu, Liu, and Yu, found that universities and health organizations use various strategies, such as debriefing, pre-briefing, guided reflection exercises, and mentorship to support nursing students.<sup>44</sup> This study also reports that students reiterated the importance of recess and provision of resources by the university as measures they would prefer to be in place to better their experiences at the University. The findings revealed that students wanted more financial support because currently they have COIDA and Exxaro. Furthermore, the study did not ask students about NSFAS funding, but it can be assumed that student nurses do not feel that NSFAS funding and other bursaries are enough to cater to their financial needs. Moreover, the findings in this study showed that student nurses were concerned about their recess, as they indicated that they do not get much time for recess unless there is a strike on campus. The university's annual academic calendar always stipulates that students get recess four times (4x) a year; however, nursing students do not get to rest well.

### **Discussion Summary**

This study found that nursing students are mentally affected by the clinical experiences at the rural-based university. The lack of resources and bad treatment from senior staff members made their clinical experiences unpleasant. Moreover, the study found that academic settings such as test schedules, exams, and clinical learning are overwhelming and have the potential to impact their academic progress. Psychological effects such as trauma, stress, and social exclusion were found to be some aspects that impact the student's mental health. It was further found in this study that the operation and delivery of content and the integration of theory and practice are complicated. The study also settled that student nurses felt that the institution could provide them with more resources and support to help them cope better with academic pressure and clinical experiences. Issues such as bursaries, lack of recess and transportation as well as designated accommodations for nursing students emerged and were addressed by student nurses.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study made recommendations based on the findings and analysis of the collected data as an effort to contribute to the development and progress of the university and its implicated faculties. The following recommendations were made. The Faculty Board and Department of Nursing must develop an effective and convenient work plan for nursing students to be able to integrate online learning, physical classes, practical periods, and assessments. The university must conduct workshops involving students, lecturers, nursing professionals, and sisters to educate them about workplace relationships and information-sharing sessions between professional nurses and students about their challenges and experiences with supervision and clinical placements.

Furthermore, the study recommends that the university must consider organizing group therapy between professional university psychologists and nursing students to share their experiences and receive assistance at least 2 times a month for all levels. The University and the Department of Nursing should introduce or organize a get-together orientation between nursing students and their parents to support and

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<sup>43</sup> Linda Rood, Tanya Tanzillo, and Nancy Madsen, "Student Nurses' Educational Experiences during COVID-19: A Qualitative Study," *Nurse Education Today* 119 (December 2022): 105562, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2022.105562>.

<sup>44</sup> Long Huang et al., "Emotional Responses and Coping Strategies in Nurses and Nursing Students during Covid-19 Outbreak: A Comparative Study," *PLOS ONE* 15, no. 8 (August 7, 2020): e0237303, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0237303>.

motivate their children at least four times a year.

Lastly, the study recommends that the university should reserve accommodation only for nursing students of all levels, mobilize additional resources such as funding and clinical equipment, and that the university review its policies and decisions about the provision of recess for nursing students.

## CONCLUSION

Clinical experiences are an essential component of nursing education, yet they often present significant psychological and emotional challenges for student nurses, particularly in rural, under-resourced settings. In the context of a rural university in Limpopo Province, South Africa, the impact of clinical placements on student nurses' mental health is shaped by multiple intersecting factors. These include exposure to stressful and unpredictable clinical environments, lack of adequate support and supervision, fear during psychiatric rotations, and a misalignment between expectations and actual experiences in the field.

The literature reviewed indicates that these challenges are not isolated incidents but part of a broader systemic issue that affects nursing students across the province. The emotional strain, ranging from anxiety and fear to burnout and disengagement, experienced by students, can negatively influence their academic performance, clinical competence, and future commitment to the profession. Moreover, rural universities often face additional barriers, such as limited mental health resources, overcrowded clinical sites, and a shortage of trained clinical educators. This case study underscores the urgent need for supportive interventions within nursing education that address student mental health as a priority. Enhancing clinical preparation, providing regular psychological support, and fostering a more inclusive and responsive clinical learning environment are critical steps toward ensuring the well-being of future nurses. By investing in the mental health of student nurses, particularly those studying in rural contexts like Limpopo, nursing education institutions can contribute to a more resilient, competent, and compassionate healthcare workforce.

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