

# Exploring the Psychological Factors Influencing Learners' Academic Performance in a Rural High School during the COVID-19 Pandemic



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## ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted teaching and learning, and learners in rural schools faced various psychosocial issues. These could be explained by affecting learners' academic performance. However, this study explores the psychological factors influencing learners' academic performance in a rural high school during COVID-19. It used a qualitative research approach and a phenomenological research design. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. Ten participants, including four learners and six teachers, were purposively and conveniently selected from a rural high school in the Thabo Mofutsanyane district, Free State, South Africa. Data were analysed through narrative analysis. The findings revealed that various psychological factors influenced learners' academic performance during COVID-19, such as depression, stress, anxiety, loss of concentration, and hopelessness. This study concluded that psychosocial factors can negatively affect learners' academic performance by reducing their focus and motivation, thereby hindering learning. Those from rural high schools were the learners who found it most difficult to focus on their academics and whose concentration was disrupted throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

*Keywords: Academic Performance, COVID-19, Learners, Psychological Factors, Rural High School*

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## INTRODUCTION

According to Benner and Mistry, the COVID-19 global pandemic and the resulting economic, health, and educational disruptions have upset all aspects of young people's lives.<sup>1</sup> As stated by Nadiahan and Cabauatan, due to the rapid increase of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has been estimated that ninety-four percent of the world's learners' population, especially those from the "low and middle-income" countries, were significantly affected by the closure of most learning institutions and schools.<sup>2</sup> According to Mbunge, South Africa's government had to temporarily close schools and other learning institutions, such as libraries and universities, to slow the spread of COVID-19.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, many schools in the United States were closed, and scheduled tests and examinations were also cancelled. As stated by Aristovnik et al., it was a productive

<sup>1</sup> Aprile D Benner and Rashmita S Mistry, "Child Development During the COVID-19 Pandemic Through a Life Course Theory Lens," *Child Development Perspectives* 14, no. 4 (December 1, 2020): 236–43, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12387>.

<sup>2</sup> Maureen B Nadiahan and Leonardo I Cabauatan Jr, "Status of Learners' Support in the College of Education of a State University in the Cordillera-Philippines during the COVID-19 Pandemic.," *International Journal of Curriculum and Instruction* 13, no. 3 (2021): 2677.

<sup>3</sup> Elliot Mbunge, "Effects of COVID-19 in South African Health System and Society: An Explanatory Study," *Diabetes & Metabolic Syndrome: Clinical Research & Reviews* 14, no. 6 (2020): 1811.

way to close the learning institutions to lower the spread of the virus.<sup>4</sup> However, that has resulted in difficulties for learners, teachers, parents, and other educational professionals. The report demonstrated that in the United States, there was a concern that some closed schools might not return to normality for the entire academic year.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, access to all Indian educational institutions was denied, and the government enforced the “Janata” curfew, which forced all citizens to stay at home to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Even the Indian police had to patrol to ensure that citizens were abiding by the law and aware of the pandemic.<sup>6</sup> Research carried out in China at the beginning of the pandemic found that the outbreak of the virus mainly caused psychological effects and moderately severe anxiety and stress.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Lederer et al. highlighted that the main concern was that learners were suffering from excessive and escalating levels of mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, and stress.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the current COVID-19 pandemic has added to their mental health issues by forcing learners to adapt to the new “norm”, which is the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic could affect many learners because schools had to be closed to prevent the virus from spreading. Tang et al. state that school closures due to the COVID-19 outbreak have affected mostly the world's learners physically, socially, and psychologically, yet a rigorous investigation into their mental health during this period is still lacking.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Boals and Banks state that learners and colleagues have had trouble staying focused and productive since the pandemic.<sup>10</sup> Due to COVID-19, the school calendar changed, negatively affecting learners. Learners had to attend classes no more than two days a week instead of the usual 5. As a result, this reduced their support from their teachers, principals, and even social workers. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic left the learners in my area with uncertainty about their future, anxiety, depression, lack of motivation, a sense of belonging, and a lack of social connectedness. This is because they do not have the necessary tools, such as enough textbooks and gadgets, to support their school-related activities during the pandemic.

As Lederer et al. noted before COVID-19, learners with limited access could go to computer labs or businesses, but with schools shut down and many on-campus spaces restricted due to concerns about transmission risk, this is often no longer possible.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, some learners' home situations prevent them from completing their school-related tasks. There are various causes for this: firstly, most learners from rural areas do not have textbooks and gadgets to help them continue their studies. Secondly, some learners share their bedrooms with siblings or parents, which prevents them from completing their work. Thirdly, other learners are guardians of their siblings. Thus, they spend a lot of time cooking, cleaning, and looking after their younger siblings. Lastly, some learners live with abusive parents, which affects them emotionally and mentally, making it hard for them to focus on their schoolwork. Therefore, the sudden closure of schools negatively impacted learners' psychosocial well-being, thus affecting their academic performance.

During COVID-19, many studies documented that learners in rural and under-resourced settings experienced declines in well-being, anxiety, loss of learning time, lack of access to technology, and mental health challenges.<sup>12</sup> However, people lack a detailed understanding of which psychosocial factors, for

<sup>4</sup> Aleksander Aristovnik et al., “Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Life of Higher Education Students: A Global Perspective,” *Sustainability* 12, no. 20 (2020): 8438.

<sup>5</sup> E. M. Onyema, “Integration of Emerging Technologies in Teaching and Learning Process in Nigeria: The Way Forward,” *International Journal of Education and Development Using ICT* 16, no. 3 (2020): 34–50.

<sup>6</sup> Onyema, “Integration of Emerging Technologies in Teaching and Learning Process in Nigeria: The Way Forward.”  
<sup>7</sup> Nigusie Shifera Aylie, Mengistu Ayenew Mekonen, and Rahel Matiyas Mekuria, “The Psychological Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic among University Students in Bench-Sheko Zone, South-West Ethiopia: A Community-Based Cross-Sectional Study,” *Psychology Research and Behavior Management*, 2020, 814.

<sup>8</sup> Alyssa M Lederer et al., “More than Inconvenienced: The Unique Needs of US College Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Health Education & Behavior* 48, no. 1 (2021): 15.

<sup>9</sup> Suqin Tang et al., “Mental Health and Its Correlates among Children and Adolescents during COVID-19 School Closure: The Importance of Parent-Child Discussion,” *Journal of Affective Disorders* 279 (2021): 353.

<sup>10</sup> Adriel Boals and Jonathan B Banks, “Stress and Cognitive Functioning during a Pandemic: Thoughts from Stress Researchers.,” *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* 12, no. S1 (2020): S255.

<sup>11</sup> Lederer et al., “More than Inconvenienced: The Unique Needs of US College Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic.”16.

<sup>12</sup> Katlego Mmamochabo A Mphahlele and Johannes Madingwaneng Mosehlane, “The Impact of COVID-19 on Education in South African Rural Public Schools: A Psychosocial Approach,” *African Journal of Development Studies* 2023, no. si1 (2023): 293; Patricia Sentle Mofokeng, “Effects of COVID-19 on Learners' Wellbeing in a Rural High School District,” *International Journal of Studies in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2023): 11–17; Nomthandazo Prudence Zwane and Kananga Robert Mukuna, “Psychosocial Factors Influencing the

example, family support, self-efficacy, hope, coping strategies, and social isolation, most strongly mediated academic performance in rural high school learners during and immediately after the pandemic. Also, how these factors interact with contextual constraints, such as a lack of internet access, reduced teacher contact, and the loss of loved ones, is often not known. In contrast, some work has been done in university-student-oriented studies, such as self-perceived academic competence in online learning.<sup>13</sup> Limited empirical research focuses on younger learners in rural secondary schools, particularly among Basotho learners or those in similar socio-economic contexts. There is also a scarcity of longitudinal data showing how psychosocial impacts over time translate into changes in objective academic outcomes such as grades and progression, rather than just subjective reports of well-being or mental health. This study therefore seeks to examine the psychosocial challenges posed by COVID-19 to learners' academic performance at a rural high school in the Free State, South Africa. The findings are presented subsequently.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Psychosocial challenges on learners' academic performance during the COVID-19 pandemic

#### *Fear and Anxiety*

According to Wang et al., fear is a displeasing emotional state evoked by self-doubt and unstable emotions.<sup>14</sup> This research describes fear as learners feeling unsure about their futures amid the closure of learning institutions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Learners, especially those from rural areas and low- and middle-income families, could not access study materials, thus making it difficult for them to keep up with the school curriculum. Copeland et al. stated that the research in China has proven that 24.9% of learners were discovered to be experiencing anxiety because of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, past investigations disclosed that the COVID-19 pandemic and unexpected changes in the lives of people produced significant danger to their physical and mental health, such as anxiety and fear.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, learners were fearful of certain conditions, such as being unable to continue their online learning or online classes, wasting money on online education, feeling lonely and lacking motivation to continue their studies, distractions during online classes, and inadequate learning materials.<sup>17</sup> When it comes to the educational environment, fear can result in psychological suffering. For example, fear of vagueness and uncertainty could negatively affect the overall teaching and learning process. Furthermore, academic achievement and learners' overall well-being would be jeopardised.<sup>18</sup> According to Ying et al., "high levels of anxiety generated by the fear of being evaluated, the teachers' teaching technique, and the learners' culture" are some of the factors that contributed to learners' fear and anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic."<sup>19</sup>

#### *Stress and Depression*

Mosanya states, "stress can be defined as physiological arousal in response to environmental threats and challenges that are subjectively perceived as overwhelming an individual's resources".<sup>20</sup> According to Wang et al., mental health issues in learners have always been a huge public health concern; in addition to that, the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened their mental health issues, namely: panic disorder, posttraumatic

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Academic Performance of Students at a Rural College in the Covid-19 Era," *International Journal of Studies in Psychology* 3, no. 1 (2023): 6–12.

<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth O. Akin-Odanye et al., "Psychosocial Impact of Covid-19 on Students at Institutions of Higher Learning," *European Journal of Education Studies* 8, no. 6 (June 4, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.46827/ejes.v8i6.3770>.

<sup>14</sup> Fang Wang et al., "Fear of COVID-19 among College Students: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis," *Frontiers in Public Health* 10 (2022): 846894.

<sup>15</sup> William E Copeland et al., "Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on College Student Mental Health and Wellness," *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 60, no. 1 (2021): 134.

<sup>16</sup> Wang et al., "Fear of COVID-19 among College Students: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Dao Thi Hong Van, Nguyen Duy Khang, and Ha Hoang Quoc Thi, "The Impacts of Fears of COVID-19 on University Students' Adaptability in Online Learning," in *Frontiers in Education*, vol. 7 (Frontiers Media SA, 2022), 851422.

<sup>18</sup> Van, Khang, and Thi, "The Impacts of Fears of COVID-19 on University Students' Adaptability in Online Learning."

<sup>19</sup> Yong Hua Ying, Winson Eng Wei Siang, and Maslawati Mohamad, "The Challenges of Learning English Skills and the Integration of Social Media and Video Conferencing Tools to Help ESL Learners Coping with the Challenges during COVID-19 Pandemic: A Literature Review," *Creative Education* 12, no. 7 (2021): 1504.

<sup>20</sup> Magdalena Mosanya, "Buffering Academic Stress during the COVID-19 Pandemic Related Social Isolation: Grit and Growth Mindset as Protective Factors against the Impact of Loneliness," *International Journal of Applied Positive Psychology* 6, no. 2 (2021): 159–74.

stress symptoms, psychological distress, and insomnia.<sup>21</sup> Mbunge states that, to reduce the spread of COVID-19, the South African government had to temporarily close schools and other institutions where teaching and learning normally occur.<sup>22</sup> In China and Italy, COVID-19 spread right when most learners were about to graduate, and others were to move to the next grade; thus, the stress levels and depressive symptoms were relatively high.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, the pandemic has been a major stressor, as learners are deprived of the activities they have been doing to keep themselves occupied. They have been deprived of attending traditional classes with their educators and other learners, and they have also been denied opportunities for extramural and extracurricular activities that would relieve the stress they experienced during normal school days.<sup>24</sup>

Boals and Banks state that physical distancing from others may be more stressful, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, when most people need to be with others to avoid pandemic-related stress.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, most learners face the disruption caused by the pandemic and no longer have the familiar routine and support that their peers and teachers provide. The sense of stability is also lost as their normal routine changes in response to COVID-19 case numbers.<sup>26</sup> Social psychological research has established that when individuals expect an “upcoming stressor, they prefer to wait with others rather than wait alone”. Moreover, Sundarasan et al. found that severe depression symptoms were moderately shown, and severe anxiety symptoms and utmost stress symptoms were exhibited among respondents.<sup>27</sup> Subsequently, the occurrence of anxiety was extremely high among the learners as compared to the overall population. Numerous stressors were classified as major factors that affected the anxiety levels of learners as well as their psychosocial well-being. Those major factors included a parent or a guardian being infected by COVID-19, a parent or a guardian losing their job because of COVID-19, the interruption of the education process, the consequences of the pandemic on education and prospective jobs, and the frequent reminders on the news that COVID-19 pandemic numbers are increasing and the inaccurate news about the pandemic that learners were reading about on social media. In addition, some learners were also stressed about their place of residence, the unstable family income due to their parents or guardians losing their jobs, their parents’ or guardians’ psychological conditions, the reduction in social contact, and the inability to freely move from one place to another because of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions.

According to Realyvásquez-Vargas et al., since the beginning of March 2020, the education section worldwide has been compelled to have online classes.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, learners were forced to attend those online classes from home rather than in their school classrooms. However, this has burdened most learners from disadvantaged family backgrounds. This is because those learners rely solely on their schools for most things, such as a stable internet connection and learning materials. According to Yadav, only a handful of private schools could adopt online teaching methods.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, many low-income public schools had to be closed with no strategies for accessing online learning solutions. In addition, most learners missed opportunities to learn during the disease outbreak.

Furthermore, learners had no access to the healthy meals they received from their public schools on normal school days. Thus, they were subjected not only to social stress but also to economic stress. Furthermore, “a recent national analysis showed that 12.3% of children ages 6–17 years do not have access to a computer or tablet at home”.<sup>30</sup> This shows that it has been difficult for most learners to stay in touch with the curriculum during the pandemic because they lacked gadgets to continue their schoolwork, leaving them stressed, depressed, and frustrated by their inability to study. Similarly, Naidoo and Cartwright reported that

<sup>21</sup> Wang et al., “Fear of COVID-19 among College Students: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis.”

<sup>22</sup> Mbunge, “Effects of COVID-19 in South African Health System and Society: An Explanatory Study.”1811.

<sup>23</sup> Benner and Mistry, “Child Development During the COVID-19 Pandemic Through a Life Course Theory Lens.”

<sup>24</sup> Giacomo Bono et al., “A New Approach to Gratitude Interventions in High Schools That Supports Student Wellbeing,” *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 15, no. 5 (September 2, 2020): 657–65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2020.1789712>.

<sup>25</sup> Boals and Banks, “Stress and Cognitive Functioning during a Pandemic: Thoughts from Stress Researchers.”256.

<sup>26</sup> Copeland et al., “Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on College Student Mental Health and Wellness.” 134.

<sup>27</sup> Sheela Sundarasan et al., “Psychological Impact of COVID-19 and Lockdown among University Students in Malaysia: Implications and Policy Recommendations,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17, no. 17 (2020): 6206.

<sup>28</sup> Arturo Realyvásquez-Vargas et al., “The Impact of Environmental Factors on Academic Performance of University Students Taking Online Classes during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Mexico,” *Sustainability* 12, no. 21 (2020): 9194.

<sup>29</sup> Bhawna Yadav, “Psychological and Social Effect of Pandemic COVID-19 on Education System,” *Globus-An International Journal of Management and IT* 11, no. 2 (2020): 28–39.

<sup>30</sup> Lilybeth Fontanesi et al., “The Effect of the COVID-19 Lockdown on Parents: A Call to Adopt Urgent Measures.,” *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* 12, no. S1 (2020): S79.

being forced to stay at home during the pandemic left most learners feeling resentful, frustrated, and overwhelmed, as they struggled to manage online classes and domestic chores.<sup>31</sup> Some learners had to be “parents” or “guardians to their younger siblings and older family members. As a result, most of those learners were left feeling stressed and depressed because they were not able to focus on their academic activities.

### Lack of Motivation

According to Tohidi and Jabbari, motivation is a force that drives people to behave in particular ways; learners must be motivated to achieve academically.<sup>32</sup> Benner and Mistry claimed that the findings of an investigation on the COVID-19 pandemic during earlier stages of the outbreak were that there were intensified levels of psychological issues and posttraumatic stress disorder for some school-aged learners, adolescents, and young adults.<sup>33</sup> According to Lederer et al., in addition to school responsibilities, most learners have extended caregiving responsibilities, such as caring for children or siblings, and for elderly or sick family members, due to schools closing.<sup>34</sup> Other learners may have to deal with the loss of their family members or become severely ill themselves. As a result, this may result in depression as learners are overwhelmed with their house chores and schoolwork at the same time.

Based on the study conducted by Aristovnik et al. the results also show that learners were affected by specific socio-demographic attributes “(male, part-time, first degree, professional science, lower standard of living, from Africa or Asia)” were notably not so much content with their education or overall life throughout the pandemic, while female, full-time, first-degree learners and learners with financial problems were generally more affected” by the COVID-19 outbreak about their emotional life and personal situations.<sup>35</sup>

As stated by Lederer et al., before the COVID-19 pandemic, learners with limited access could visit computer labs and businesses, but this is often no longer possible, as schools are closed and many areas on campus are restricted due to concerns about infection risk.<sup>36</sup> This leads to a lack of motivation, as learners without textbooks or gadgets to support their studies are left behind in their schoolwork. According to Zhu et al., in the long term, the COVID-19 pandemic could permanently reduce young people's sense of security, especially those with a low sense of control.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, a lack of motivation can force learners to engage in passive learning. Yadav, the sudden shift to online learning without any planning, especially in countries like India, where the infrastructure for online learning was not ready, and the curriculum was not designed for this format, has created the risk that most of our learners will become passive learners.<sup>38</sup> They seem to be losing interest due to low attention spans. In addition, Yin et al. have stated that “learners need two-way communication, which can be difficult to achieve” due to online learning platforms.<sup>39</sup> Learners in this situation lose motivation to learn because they are constantly facing the computer. Similarly, in South Africa, most learners from rural areas are used to face-to-face classes. Thus, the abrupt shift to online learning left them demotivated and less interested in further study because they lacked the knowledge to use online learning platforms.

<sup>31</sup> Paulette Naidoo and Duncan Cartwright, “Where to from Here? Contemplating the Impact of COVID-19 on South African Students and Student Counseling Services in Higher Education,” *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy* 36, no. 4 (2022): 355–69.

<sup>32</sup> Hamid Tohidi and Mohammad Mehdi Jabbari, “The Effects of Motivation in Education,” *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 31 (2012): 823, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2011.12.148>.

<sup>33</sup> Benner and Mistry, “Child Development During the COVID-19 Pandemic Through a Life Course Theory Lens.”238.

<sup>34</sup> Lederer et al., “More than Inconvenienced: The Unique Needs of US College Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic.”

<sup>35</sup> Aristovnik et al., “Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Life of Higher Education Students: A Global Perspective.”

<sup>36</sup> Lederer et al., “More than Inconvenienced: The Unique Needs of US College Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic.” 16.

<sup>37</sup> Nan Zhu et al., “Debate: Facing Uncertainty with(out) a Sense of Control – Cultural Influence on Adolescents’ Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Child and Adolescent Mental Health* 25, no. 3 (September 17, 2020): 173–74, <https://doi.org/10.1111/camh.12408>.

<sup>38</sup> Yadav, “Psychological and Social Effect of Pandemic COVID-19 on Education System.”31.

<sup>39</sup> Bangmin Yin et al., “Efficacy and Acceptability of Parent-Only Group Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Treatment of Anxiety Disorder in Children and Adolescents: A Meta-Analysis of Randomized Controlled Trials,” *BMC Psychiatry* 21, no. 1 (December 11, 2021): 29, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-020-03021-0>.

### **Lack of Peer Learning and Learning Materials**

According to Van et al., the so-called costs of online platforms, internet issues, and technical problems have hindered learners' ability to learn online.<sup>40</sup> These difficulties were followed by learners' skepticism about the quality of their learning, as I thought most of them were paying more than they expected and not understanding as well as they did on campus. Furthermore, most learners shared books with their classmates during normal school hours. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, learners had no learning materials. Some learners had to travel long distances to borrow textbooks from their peers. Even then, it was challenging to meet with their peers as one of the lockdown rules was that people should not be roaming the streets unless there was a valid reason. According to Lederer et al., before the COVID-19 pandemic, learners without access could visit computer labs and businesses, but this is often no longer possible as schools are closed and many areas on campus are restricted due to concerns about infection risk.<sup>41</sup> In some schools, learners had to leave their textbooks behind because teachers feared they might be lost. As a result, most rural learners found it challenging to keep up with the curriculum during the pandemic.

Some schools have implemented online learning as one of the strategies to assist learners, especially grade 12 learners, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Yin et al. state that because of the pandemic, "video conferencing platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Skype, and WebEx, and Learning Management Systems such as Schoology, Canvas, Google Classroom, CIDOS, Moodle, and social media (Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube) are heavily used as e-learning applications."<sup>42</sup> However, most learners from rural areas in South Africa cannot afford to buy devices that enable and make online learning effective. Even though others could afford those devices, data, and networks, data and network access remained barriers to accessing online learning platforms. Also, there were cases where learners were not fully equipped to use the devices; thus, accessing those online learning platforms was disastrous. The same applies to some teachers who lack the necessary expertise or experience to work with online learning platforms. According to Sepulveda-Escobar and Morrison, research shows that teachers are concerned about how well learners can acquire the skills they need when learning online.<sup>43</sup>

Some learners learn best when their peers, rather than their teachers, explain information. Sometimes, teachers just want to cover the curriculum without checking whether all learners understand. This leaves those learners behind, and their only hope of catching up is their peers. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions on movement, learners from rural areas were unable to exchange information or acquire knowledge. On the other hand, learners from high-income households are better off and able to continue their education than marginalised and vulnerable populations of learners who cannot continue their education and learning.<sup>44</sup> In addition, the new timetable was created to ensure that only a limited number of learners were present at the school's premises. This made learners unable to see their best friends or the intelligent learners who could assist them with their schoolwork. Thus, the lack of contact with their peers led some learners to fall behind in the curriculum. According to Onyema et al., educational institutions are hubs of social activity and human interaction; school closures may deprive adolescents and children of the social communication and interactions essential for learning, development, and creativity.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, most learners from rural areas require face-to-face instruction and physical contact to learn from and play with their peers, thereby developing creative and critical skills.

### **Lack of Counselling and Guidance Services**

In most South African schools, some social workers and committees address learners' psychological issues. Therefore, learners were able to discuss their feelings about their lives. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, that had to stop because physical contact among people was restricted. Thus, some learners

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<sup>40</sup> Van, Khang, and Thi, "The Impacts of Fears of COVID-19 on University Students' Adaptability in Online Learning."2.

<sup>41</sup> Lederer et al., "More than Inconvenienced: The Unique Needs of US College Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic."16.

<sup>42</sup> Yin et al., "Efficacy and Acceptability of Parent-Only Group Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Treatment of Anxiety Disorder in Children and Adolescents: A Meta-Analysis of Randomized Controlled Trials."

<sup>43</sup> Paulina Sepulveda-Escobar and Astrid Morrison, "Online Teaching Placement during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Chile: Challenges and Opportunities," *European Journal of Teacher Education* 43, no. 4 (2020): 591.

<sup>44</sup> Nadiahan and Cabauatan Jr, "Status of Learners' Support in the College of Education of a State University in the Cordillera-Philippines during the COVID-19 Pandemic."2677.

<sup>45</sup> Onyema, "Integration of Emerging Technologies in Teaching and Learning Process in Nigeria: The Way Forward."112.

returned to the old ways they used to do things, such as being involved with the wrong crowd of teenagers or other learners. In some schools in South Africa, teachers and social workers went so far as to interact with learners via social media platforms such as WhatsApp. However, there is no doubt that online learning platforms and social media cannot replace the physical and human connection of face-to-face teaching and sessions.<sup>46</sup>

As stated by Onyema et al., prolonged school closures may leave differently abled learners requiring more physical attention and support from their teachers, which can affect the effectiveness of education and academic performance.<sup>47</sup> Consequently, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic calls for a paradigm shift in educational culture and structure that successfully adapts to the demand for learning experiences in the global new normal, amid new trends and challenges.<sup>48</sup> Hence, it became challenging for learners to receive teachers' guidance. Learners were unable to complete certain tasks independently. For example, a learner must be taught subjects (English, mathematics, and physical sciences) before they can be assessed to ensure that they comprehend the learning outcomes. Even after implementing online learning to cover the curriculum, most learners from rural areas still could not attend due to a lack of devices and unstable internet connections. As a result, there was still a wide range of learners from rural areas who could not receive comprehensive and proper guidance from their teachers, department heads, and principals.

Furthermore, online learning and instruction occur at home and require parental involvement throughout the teaching and learning process. For young learners, online learning cannot be productively executed without parental guidance, supervision, and support.<sup>49</sup> Also, some teachers were unable to use online learning effectively because they were unfamiliar with online platforms. This meant that teachers had to change their teaching styles and adapt lessons for online use. Moreover, online or blended courses make teachers feel less connected to learners.<sup>50</sup> This shows that some teachers could not fully guide learners because they did not feel a connection with them.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Protection Motivation Theory

The Protection Motivation Theory (TMT) was developed by Ronald Rogers in 1975. According to Prasetyo et al., PMT simply means that when people experience unexpected threatening events, they are prompted to participate in protective behaviours.<sup>51</sup> Clubb and Hinkle state that PMT suggests that internal and external features can persuade or hinder the undertaking of protective behaviours and that internal cognitive processes mediate the consequences of such features.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, the theory suggests that people defend and guard themselves based on their perceptions of four factors: the severity of threatening" events, the likelihood of threat occurrence, the effectiveness of recommended preventive actions, and self-efficacy to adopt recommended actions.<sup>53</sup> According to the theory adopted in this study, the coping-evaluation response, which provides defensive motivation, occurs after the threat-evaluation process, as

<sup>46</sup> Sepulveda-Escobar and Morrison, "Online Teaching Placement during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Chile: Challenges and Opportunities."591.

<sup>47</sup> Edeh Michael Onyema et al., "Impact of Coronavirus Pandemic on Education," *Journal of Education and Practice* 11, no. 13 (2020): 111.

<sup>48</sup> Nadiyah and Cabauatan Jr, "Status of Learners' Support in the College of Education of a State University in the Cordillera-Philippines during the COVID-19 Pandemic."2677.

<sup>49</sup> Anbareen Jan, "A Phenomenological Study of Synchronous Teaching during COVID-19: A Case of an International School in Malaysia," *Social Sciences & Humanities Open* 2, no. 1 (2020): 100084.

<sup>50</sup> Sepulveda-Escobar and Morrison, "Online Teaching Placement during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Chile: Challenges and Opportunities."591.

<sup>51</sup> Yogi Tri Prasetyo et al., "Factors Affecting Perceived Effectiveness of COVID-19 Prevention Measures among Filipinos during Enhanced Community Quarantine in Luzon, Philippines: Integrating Protection Motivation Theory and Extended Theory of Planned Behavior," *International Journal of Infectious Diseases* 99 (2020): 312–23.

<sup>52</sup> Audrey C Clubb and Joshua C Hinkle, "Protection Motivation Theory as a Theoretical Framework for Understanding the Use of Protective Measures," *Criminal Justice Studies* 28, no. 3 (2015): 336–55.

<sup>53</sup> Malak Al-Rasheed, "Protective Behavior against COVID-19 among the Public in Kuwait: An Examination of the Protection Motivation Theory, Trust in Government, and Sociodemographic Factors," *Social Work in Public Health* 35, no. 7 (2020): 548.

threats must be identified before coping strategies are evaluated.<sup>54</sup> This means people implement coping strategies after the threat has been discovered.

According to Westcott et al., “the objective of PMT is to recognise and assess the danger and then counter this assessment with effective and efficacious mitigation options”.<sup>55</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic poses a threat to learners by disrupting the teaching and learning process, negatively affecting their psychosocial well-being and, in turn, their academic performance. This meant that teachers, learners, parents, school governing bodies, and education professionals had to devise strategies to help learners continue their schoolwork during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As stated above, the study aims to explore the psychosocial factors influencing learners’ academic performance at a rural high school during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Wong et al., protective motivation theory has provided valuable insights into the conscious and rational processes underlying various safety-related behaviours.<sup>56</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic, learners, teachers, and parents had to stay motivated to cover the curriculum despite dire circumstances. As a result, all parties involved had to develop strategies to continue their work rather than fall behind. Therefore, the study follows the Protection Motivation Theory to understand the psychosocial factors influencing learners’ academic performance at a rural high school during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the theory will assist the researcher in comprehending the strategies participants developed to protect themselves from the COVID-19 pandemic and the psychosocial challenges of the outbreak on learners’ academic performance in a rural high school.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Approach

This study employed a qualitative approach to collect information on participants’ experiences with the psychosocial challenges of COVID-19 and their impact on learners’ academic performance.

### Research Paradigm

According to Kivunja and Kuyini, this approach tries to ‘get into the head of the subjects being studied’ so to speak, and to understand and interpret what the subject is thinking or the meaning they are making of the context”.<sup>57</sup> Thus, the interpretivism paradigm benefited this study by offering insight and an in-depth understanding of the participants’ experiences.

### Research Design

This study utilised a phenomenological research design to collect data from participants’ lived experiences. This approach was beneficial because it enabled the researcher to gather information from participants’ lived experiences, which this study sought to achieve.

### Data Collection Methods

#### *Face-to-face semi-structured interviews*

The study used face-to-face semi-structured interviews to gather information regarding participants’ experiences. As a result, this allows the researcher to explore and understand in depth the participants’ experiences, thoughts, and beliefs regarding the psychosocial challenges posed by COVID-19 to learners’ academic performance.

### Participants

The target participants were teachers and learners selected from a rural high school in the Thabo Mofutsanyana District, Free State Province, South Africa. Thus, teachers with at least two years of field

<sup>54</sup> Roghaye Ezati Rad et al., “Application of the Protection Motivation Theory for Predicting COVID-19 Preventive Behaviors in Hormozgan, Iran: A Cross-Sectional Study,” *BMC Public Health* 21, no. 1 (2021): 466.

<sup>55</sup> Rachel Westcott et al., “Expanding Protection Motivation Theory: Investigating an Application to Animal Owners and Emergency Responders in Bushfire Emergencies,” *BMC Psychology* 5, no. 1 (2017): 13.

<sup>56</sup> Tiffany S Wong et al., “The Utility of a Protection Motivation Theory Framework for Understanding Sedentary Behavior,” *Health Psychology and Behavioral Medicine* 4, no. 1 (2016): 29–48.

<sup>57</sup> Charles Kivunja and Ahmed Bawa Kuyini, “Understanding and Applying Research Paradigms in Educational Contexts.,” *International Journal of Higher Education* 6, no. 5 (2017): 33.



experience were selected to participate in the study. The study consisted of ten participants. Three female and three male teachers were selected at a rural high school in the Thabo Mofutsanyane district. Their teaching experience ranged from 2 to 23 years. Furthermore, two girl learners and two boy learners, aged 16 to 18 years, were selected from the same school in the Thabo Mofutsanyane district, Free State Province, South Africa.

### **Research Site**

The research was conducted at a rural high school in Bethlehem. The school is under the Thabo Mofutsanyane district in the Free State Province, South Africa. The school's infrastructure was somewhat poor. There was a shortage of chairs and tables, and a few were in good condition. The school falls in quintile 1, meaning it is non-paying and relies on government funding. The interviews took place in the learners' classrooms after school hours, in the presence of adults.

### **Data Analysis**

The following are the steps for the narrative analysis of the participants' data: firstly, sufficient data were collected on their experiences with the psychosocial factors that influence learners' academic performance at a rural high school during the COVID-19 pandemic. Secondly, the data were filtered and divided into themes identified in the literature review. Lastly, the data were analysed based on the study's relevance. Therefore, the narrative analysis is beneficial for the study. The researcher had to hear the participants' experiences regarding the psychosocial factors influencing learners' academic performance at a rural high school during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study's findings were credible because the data were collected from actual participants, including teachers and learners. Participants were engaged for a long time to ensure they understood the questions. Thus, they could provide relevant information in response to the study questions.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The researcher requested permission from the University of the Free State, the Department of Education, and the chosen school. Firstly, informed consent, the participants were not inclined to participate in the study. They were told they could decide to discontinue the study if they wished. Secondly, participants were not deceived. This means the researcher did not pretend to be studying one thing but rather studied the other. Instructions and the study's purpose were explained in full detail to the participants, so they knew what they were getting into. Thirdly, privacy and anonymity were assured. This means that participants' personal information will not be shared with third parties without their consent. Lastly, psychological abuse means that in no way, shape, or form were the participants forced to answer questions they did not feel comfortable with. Also, no harmful pictures were shown to the participants during the study.

## **PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Psychological issues that arose from the COVID-19 pandemic and impacted learners' academic performance**

#### ***Depression***

Participants reported that they experienced depression during the pandemic. They stated that their lives had changed drastically and that they had no power to change the situation they had found themselves in. Learners reported they could not attend school as they used to, and teachers reported they could not do their work efficiently or effectively. This hindered them from completing their work to the best of their abilities. This resulted in participants feeling depressed, sad, and hopeless because they were unable to complete most of their school tasks on their own. Furthermore, being unable to spend time with their peers, who sometimes assisted them with their schoolwork, was unbearable. The following are some responses.

*"I felt depressed, overwhelmed, and bored because when I was at school, I would forget all my problems at home. My friends would make me laugh, or we would play, and my teachers would give me plenty of schoolwork. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, I could not cope with sitting at home doing nothing and talking to myself. Being far away from my teachers made me*

*feel depressed because they were my biggest motivators and role models, and I could not cope without seeing them or hearing their voices” (Participant A).*

*“After hearing that I would not attend school every day, I could not believe it. I felt depressed because I could not see my friends every day, and I had no one to help me with my schoolwork at home. My parents are not educated, so that made it more difficult for me to do most of the work I had at home” (Participant B).*

*“I was depressed during the COVID-19 pandemic. I had to stay indoors, and I did not go to school. I had to give up my favourite sports because I did not have the time; even if I did, I could not see my friends. At school, we had a few daily lessons; we would go to school this week and not the following week, or skip days. If we went on Monday, then we would not go on Tuesday. Sometimes I hated going to school because I knew I would be separated from my friends and teachers again. So, when I spent most of the time at home, I would have emotional and mental breakdowns. I even thought of consuming poison because the pressure to study hard and pass was too much from my parents” (Participant C).*

*“My schoolmates knew me as a top achiever at school, but when the pandemic hit, everything changed. I had to adapt to the fact that I would no longer receive the same level of assistance from my teachers as before. That forced me to study on my own and bury myself in my books, but that had a negative effect because there were some topics I could not do on my own, like Mathematics and Physical Sciences. I felt I would disappoint my family if I failed the grade, and the thought of failing made me sad. I no longer had an interest in studying because I thought I would fail anyway, so I did not see the point of carrying on with reading and practicing because a lot of the things I did not understand” (Participant D).*

*“The COVID-19 pandemic brought depression into my life. I was unable to reach the learners who needed my support the most. I offer mathematics in grades 10 and 11, which are the most critical because they prepare learners for matric. I was unable to assist them and was used to the traditional way of teaching. However, to be more specific, I had to find learners through other means, such as social media and WhatsApp. But that did not help either because most learners had no privilege of owning cell phones. I struggled a lot because I thought I was failing at my job; I did not have hope that most of the learners would succeed to the next grade” (Participant H).*

*“I am an English and Life Orientation teacher, and most of the time, I help with offering counselling to learners because I am in the school-based support team programme (SBST). As much as learners in our school struggle with owning gadgets such as cell phones, others could contact me during that period to inform me how they felt during the pandemic. They have reported feeling sad and losing interest in schoolwork and sports activities they used to enjoy. Learners said they could not focus on their schoolwork, so some gave up because they could not understand or do anything without first being taught. Others stated that things were not the same when they returned to school using the new timetable. They were no longer partaking in sports activities, which made them lose interest and feel more depressed (Participant I).*

The findings from the participants revealed that depression was one of the factors that influenced the academic performance of learners during the COVID-19 pandemic. They have demonstrated that being isolated from others, such as their peers and teachers, caused sadness and a loss of interest in partaking in their academic work. Lederer et al. highlighted that the primary concern was that learners were suffering from excessive and escalating levels of mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, and stress.<sup>58</sup> In addition, not being able to attend school on a day-to-day basis has proven to cause depression in participants, which in turn negatively influences their academic performance. Other participants

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<sup>58</sup> Lederer et al., “More than Inconvenienced: The Unique Needs of US College Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic.”15.

(teachers) reported finding it hard to assist their learners during the pandemic and thus felt they were failing at their jobs. That depressed them because they were concerned about their learners' academic performance. The data proves that depression had a negative influence on the academic performance of learners during the COVID-19 pandemic because they did not study as they used to.

### **Stress**

Due to the drastic changes brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, participants reported spending most of their time stressed and worried. They were stressed because they did not know what would change next or when things would return to normal. The learners were worried because they thought they would repeat the grades due to their inability to complete the 2020 curriculum. Similarly, the teachers were stressed, thinking their learners lacked sufficient study materials to support their schoolwork. Furthermore, they were also worried that learners would be unable to move to the next grade the following year. Other participants reported that they were stressed about losing their loved ones who were still working during the pandemic. Thus, it was difficult for them to continue studying at home.

*“During the pandemic, I was stressed because the normal things I was used to changed a lot. I like hanging out with my friends and having them to talk to if I am going through problems. I started talking to myself because I could not communicate with my friends, teachers, and loved ones. I could not cope without listening to the teachers teach me. That is when I started to develop depression and anxiety because I just did not know what to do” (Participant A).*

*“COVID-19 stressed my life and schoolwork because I could not join the soccer team. As you know, academics can be very stressful, and I relieve stress by playing soccer. My head was always bowed, reading books or listening to the radio, where they only talked about the COVID-19 pandemic. I learn best when a teacher is in front of me, reading the instructions and telling me what to do, but COVID-19 took that away from me and made me stress over whether I would pass or fail the grade” (Participant D).*

*“I am only in my second year of teaching. So, I could say I am a new teacher because I was still learning some things when the COVID-19 pandemic began. When that happened, I was stressed because I could not cover the entire curriculum, as we were not allowed to attend school. There was a time when I requested that the lessons be printed and taken to every learner's home because I was worried about their performance in the 2020 academic year. But that did not happen because the school's principal reminded me of the restrictions that we were not allowed to go to other people's houses. That made me more stressed because I thought their low performance would reflect badly on me, so I was willing to do anything to provide them with the information. (Participant F).*

*“The COVID-19 pandemic brought plenty of stress in my life, mainly because I was worried about whether I could assist learners all at once when they returned to school. I knew there were concepts I would have to skip because I could not cover them within the short time we were given. I had to pay closer attention to the challenging concepts, but the learners still performed below average. I figured that that was because I did not emphasise everything clearly. We were working under pressure, making me uncomfortable and stressed because I knew I was failing most learners who depended on me” (Participant J).*

The results showed that participants faced major stress due to the COVID-19 pandemic. They have reported that being separated from their peers and teachers was stressful. It was because they would ask for assistance from their peers and teachers. Thus, not having to communicate with them daily was extremely stressful. Other participants mentioned that the stress stemmed from not knowing whether their learners could study independently and progress to the next grade because they could not assist them. As a result, the constant stress of isolation and the updates about the COVID-19 pandemic negatively influenced learners' academic performance. As stated by Wang et al., mental health issues in learners have always been a huge public health concern; in addition to that, the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened their

mental health issues, namely: panic disorder, posttraumatic stress symptoms, psychological distress, and insomnia.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, Boals and Banks stated that physical distancing from others may be more stressful, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, when most people need to be with others to avoid pandemic-related stress.<sup>60</sup> This indicated that participants were deprived of attending traditional classes with their educators and other learners, and they were also denied opportunities for extramural and extracurricular activities, which would have relieved the stress they experienced during normal school days.

### **Anxiety**

Participants reported feeling anxious all the time because they did not know what the future held. They reported they were worried and uncertain about the future because they did not know what it held. In addition, they did not know how long the restriction on social interaction would last or when things would return to normal. As a result, they felt worried because they had no control over the COVID-19 pandemic.

*“Because economics, accounting, and mathematics subjects require me to practice frequently, I could not do that independently since the teachers were not available to help me all the time, so I had to do it independently. That made me anxious because sometimes teachers would brush over some concepts in class, leaving me to practice on my own, which was very hard. I was always worried and nervous because I wanted to be an accountant, and failing those subjects would mean I could not be who I had always dreamt of being”* (Participant B).

*“I was extremely worried on behalf of my learners because I could imagine the hardships that they were going through at that time. I was more worried when they returned to school because I realised, they were not studying at home. I even had to reteach some topics I had already covered in term one before the pandemic. That was how bad things were”* (Participant G).

*“When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, we were told that we should isolate, and restrictions were put in place. One of those restrictions included staying at home and not going to work. I am one of the teachers who teach mathematics at school, and knowing that the subject is challenging for about 90% of learners worries me. I was worried, nervous, and anxious because I had no idea how I would help the learners at risk of failing. I could not create a social media platform to guide them because most of our learners come from disadvantaged backgrounds, so reaching them via social media was difficult”* (Participant H).

The results showed that the COVID-19 pandemic brought anxiety into the lives of the participants. They reported that constant worry about their normal schedule not returning was problematic. They were also concerned about their academic performance because they could not use the traditional method of teaching and learning, which involves being in a classroom with other learners and teachers. They had to rely on themselves and study on their own. Thus, teachers could not guide their learners, which made them extremely anxious. As a result, anxiety played a role in the academic performance of learners during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is supported by the work of Wang et al, which stated that past investigations disclosed that the COVID-19 pandemic and unexpected changes in the lives of people produced significant danger to their physical and mental health, such as anxiety and fear.<sup>61</sup>

### **Loss of concentration**

Participants stated they could not concentrate on the most important things. Such as completing the academic curriculum, focusing on complicated concepts, and applying them to higher education institutions. Furthermore, they have also reported that the pandemic shifted their focus from their academic activities to the number of people who were dying each day. They lost concentration because the only thing they heard and watched on television and radio was related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

<sup>59</sup> Wang et al., “Fear of COVID-19 among College Students: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis.”1.

<sup>60</sup> Boals and Banks, “Stress and Cognitive Functioning during a Pandemic: Thoughts from Stress Researchers.”256.

<sup>61</sup> Wang et al., “Fear of COVID-19 among College Students: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis.”2.

*“I could not focus because I could not attend school. I spent more than six months sitting at home doing nothing. I also could not write my June exams. I was stressed out because while sitting at home, I was not studying, and I gained weight, which affected my self-esteem and self-confidence. During the pandemic, I could not attend sports. I also could not think carefully because my parents could not support us financially, as no one was allowed to go to work” (Participant A).*

*“Concentrating on my schoolwork was impossible because I had to concentrate on my siblings, who are like my children. My mother was very sick, and we did not live with my father. I had a problem doing my schoolwork because I would clean, cook, and try to help my little sisters and brothers with theirs. I had to ensure my mother was being well looked after. My schoolwork suffered, and the most difficult subjects I just gave up on, subjects like Accounting and Economics, were because I needed someone to help me with” (Participant B).*

*“Most learners had difficulty concentrating and often manifested symptoms of depression because of the challenges Covid-19 brought. They even lost concentration when we did simple tasks, which they had done in previous years. For example, one learner in class would cough, and the others would assume it was due to COVID-19. They would go so far as to refuse to sit next to the said learner. So, they could not concentrate 100% on our tasks then. When it came to other learners who had lost some of their parents or guardians, they were also unable to pay attention because they had difficulty accepting that their parents were no more. This led learners to fail and lose hope. And that affected their academics very badly” (Participant F).*

The results indicated that participants lost concentration due to the COVID-19 pandemic. They could not pay attention to their academic work because they were concentrating on the pandemic. Participants reported that they faced depression, stress, and anxiety. Thus, it was extremely challenging for them to focus on their academic work. Moreover, other participants had to assume the role of household head because their guardians were ill. Also, learners were so focused on the COVID-19 pandemic that they could not concentrate on the simple tasks when they returned to school. As Yadav stated, learners could not focus on their schoolwork when the pandemic began, as news about it filled them with uncertainty.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, they could not concentrate quickly before being bombarded with too much information.

### **Hopelessness**

Participants reported losing hope due to the COVID-19 pandemic. They have stated that they were constantly reminded that they would not return to normality sooner than they thought. They were reading and hearing about the increase in people who were infected by the disease and the fact that they were still going to be under lockdown. As a result, they did not see the importance of continuing the study, especially the content they could not understand.

*“The COVID-19 pandemic impacted me negatively because I could not participate in school competitions, and I like going to competitions to win awards because that makes me feel good. But I lost hope because the pandemic was not ending; instead, the number of people dying from the virus was increasing every day. I knew I would not enter competitions, so I had no hope of winning any awards or passing my schoolwork” (Participant A).*

*“In our school, there was a prize-giving ceremony for top achievers, but the COVID-19 pandemic did not allow us to go to the school awards, which made me feel hopeless about being a top achiever. This was because the awards that they used to give us would motivate me to study hard, but without those kinds of ceremonies, I felt like I was going to fail the grade that I was in” (Participant C).*

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<sup>62</sup> Yadav, “Psychological and Social Effect of Pandemic COVID-19 on Education System.”31.

*“I could tell that most of my learners had lost hope when they had to use a new timetable to attend their classes. I knew about six learners who were the best in Mathematics, but during the COVID-19 pandemic, their marks dropped significantly. They could not understand even simple topics such as dealing with ‘exponents’, which is how badly the pandemic affected them. One of them even asked me if it was possible to discontinue mathematics mid-year, to which I responded that it was impossible. I had to tell her that she would have to try a little harder and that, if she felt the subject was still challenging, she would drop it the following year. It was hard to keep them motivated” (Participant H).*

Findings revealed that participants lost hope because of the COVID-19 pandemic. They did not believe they would succeed independently or advance to the next grade because they lacked anyone to assist them with their academic work, which made it difficult to stay motivated. Others were motivated by external factors, such as school award ceremonies; however, when those factors were absent, they did not see the need to focus on their academic work. According to Onyema et al., learners had lost hope because they were uncertain of the future.<sup>63</sup> They did not know whether they would pass to the next grade, be reconciled with their peers and teachers, or if things would worsen.<sup>64</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The study aimed to explore the psychosocial challenges of COVID-19 on learners' academic performance in a rural high school. Based on the data collected and analysed, the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected learners' academic performance for the following reasons: initially, learners had to study because they were not allowed to attend classes. They had to study independently, which affected their academic performance because they did not have their peers or teachers explain some of the concepts. Furthermore, learners and teachers had to switch to online learning to cover the curriculum. However, most learners could not effectively use online learning platforms because they lacked smart devices, data, or stable network connectivity. In addition, learners had to adjust to the new timetable that enabled social distancing, and fewer learners attended the school. Hence, they could not engage with their peers, teachers, principals, and support systems such as social workers. Most of these challenges resulted in learners having psychological issues such as anxiety, depression, and fear for their future. Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic affected learners' academic performance.

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<sup>63</sup> Onyema, “Integration of Emerging Technologies in Teaching and Learning Process in Nigeria: The Way Forward.”112.

<sup>64</sup> Onyema, “Integration of Emerging Technologies in Teaching and Learning Process in Nigeria: The Way Forward.”112.

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