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The Understanding of Psychological Challenges Facing South African School Learners In the 21st Century: A Visual Explanatory Approach

Theresia Joakim Kanyopa & Matseliso Mokhele-Makgalwa

Curriculum and High Education, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein,
9300 Republic of South Africa

*Corresponding Author: kanyopa.tj@ufs.ac.za

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Abstract: The 21st century has brought rapid social, technological, and economic changes that have reshaped the educational landscape worldwide. Within this context, South African school learners face a multifaceted psychological challenge that significantly impacts their well-being and educational outcomes. These challenges are shaped by the unique sociocultural context of South African societies marked by historical inequalities, cultural diversity, and socioeconomic disparities. Thus, this study aimed to explore the understanding of the psychological challenges facing South African learners in the 21st century through the visual explanatory research design. To develop effective interventions and support systems, the study employed a qualitative research approach from the interpretive paradigm perspective to explain the researched issue textually and visually through its participants' perspectives. The research context and the participants were purposefully and conveniently selected from two secondary schools in the Kwa-Zulu Natal province of South Africa. Besides, the study utilised the focus group discussion and drawing as a visual explanatory approach to generate data. Further, thematic data analysis was used to assign codes and themes. The findings indicate that South African learners are negatively impacted by the psychological challenges that come with the advancement of technology in the 21st century. This study suggests that both parents and the teachers must understand that technology brought both pros and cons to young generations; thus, guidance and restrictions should be employed in the use of technological devices for the benefit and well-being of these learners.

Keywords: 21st Century; psychological challenges; South African school; learner, visual explanatory approach

Introduction

Various research studies in post-1994 have shown strides and motives taken by the government to address inequalities and injustices that are inherited from the previous education system in South Africa (Adonis & Silinda, 2021; Walton & Engelbrecht, 2022). However, the legacy of apartheid continues to manifest in various aspects of society, including the education system (Kanyopa & Hlalele, 2021; Pillay & Prinsloo, 2021). This shows that some disparities excessively affect learners, especially those who are from historically underprivileged communities, perpetuating the cycle of poverty and inequality. Despite the advancements made to increase access to education, Feng, Hu, Afshan, Irfan, Hu and Abbas (2023) and Kanyopa (2023) mentioned that disparities in resources, quality, and opportunities still exist. On the other hand, the literature also pointed out some of the key

challenges that face South African school learners in the 21st century, such as the high levels of academic pressure and stress (Wills & Hormeyr, 2019; Mofokeng, 2023). It has been mentioned that academic pressure seems to be a push gear towards psychological challenges such as depression, stress, anxiety, and substance abuse, which are ultimately hindering South African learners' achievements and personal growth (Kanyopa, 2022; 2023).

In addition, socioeconomic factors such as poverty and unemployment were mentioned to play a significant role in influencing the psychological challenges faced by South African learners (Pillay & Prinsloo, 2021). Adonis and Silinda (2021) and Ajani (2023) argue that the unfair distribution of resources according to race leads to a widening achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged learners in South African schools. Despite of having social-economic factors, scholars like Walton and Engelbrecht (2022) and Feng et al. (2023) state that exposure to violence creates feelings of fear and anxiety, which also play significant roles in affecting learners psychologically. These scholars further pointed out that crime and violence in South African schools contribute to a hostile and unsafe learning environment for teaching and learning which negatively impact learner's psychological well-being and academic success. Ajimudin and Mukuna (2023) and Mofokeng (2023) supported that high levels of violence and crime happening in South African school communities lead to extensive psychological challenges for the learners, which result in the detrimental impacts on their mental health, well-being, and academic achievement. Concisely, the body of knowledge shows that there is limited research exist on how psychological challenges impact South African learners, specifically in 21st century. Hence, this paper aimed to address this gap by exploring the understanding of these challenges through a visual explanatory research design.

Literature Review

1. Defining Psychological Challenges

The term "*Psychological challenges*" refers to mental health problems that may negatively affect a persons' emotional, mental, and physical functioning (Zwane & Mukuna, 2023). Psychological challenges normally trigger mental issues such as anxiety and depression, which were mentioned as prevalent among South African school learners. Bechtel and Wright (2019) explained the psychological challenges as the specific difficulties, issues, and problems encountered by South African school learners within their sociocultural and educational environment. These challenges are influenced by factors such as the country's historical background, cultural diversity, socioeconomic disparities, educational policies, and community dynamics (Ajimudin & Mukuna, 2023; Wills & Hormeyr, 2019). Thus, to understand these challenges requires an in-depth exploration of how various contextual factors intersect and shape the psychological well-being and educational experiences of South African school learners, in order to develop effective interventions and support strategies tailored to their specific needs.

2. Relationship Between 21st Century Technological Advancement and Psychological Challenges in Teaching and Learning

The impacts of psychological challenges in teaching and learning are seen as obstacles to the mental well-being of both teachers and learners at schools (Khahro & Javed, 2022). In the South African education context, it was mentioned that the advancement of technology in the 21st century brought both pros and cons in the teaching and learning process. Studies revealed that the advancement of technology in the 21st century was not immune to the far-reaching consequences of psychological challenges in the teaching and learning process (Van Niekerk & van Gent, 2021). This also was supported by Sarbrini (2023) and Zammit (2023) who that the advancement of technology in the 21st century goes hand in hand with critical psychological challenges such as a lack of concentration in the classroom, peer pressure and feelings of inadequacy. Sarbrini (2023) added that when the learners are engaged too much with technology such as online games, and gambling, and their ability to engage with learning material and their academic performance may be compromised. This implies that the overall academic achievements of the learners can be adversely affected if they are too occupied by technology.

It was also affirmed that technological advancements have prompted the dropout rate and disengagement of learners in the classrooms (Marino, Israel, Vasquez III, Fisher & Gallegos, 2018). Dropout rates were mentioned to go higher as a large number of learners decided to engage themselves with online marketing and businesses that were mentioned to provide them with progressive income. Van Niekerk and van Gent (2021) and Zammit (2023) supported this by saying that factors such as poverty, societal pressures and family issues can contribute to a sense of hopelessness that, making learners more susceptible to disengagement in the classrooms and, ultimately, abandoning their educational journey. In addition, technological advancements have created a negative atmosphere within the classroom. Marino et al. (2018) and Pillay and Prinsloo (2021) revealed that technology brought several conflicts among the learners with online bullying and mocking, influencing a lack of empathy among learners and turning them to be unpleasant when they are dealing with their emotional struggles. Thus, the negative learning atmosphere was declared to have a negative impact towards the overall classroom dynamics and make the process of teaching and learning more challenging.

Indeed, the relationship between the 21st century technological advancements and psychological challenges in teaching and learning is multifaceted. Therefore, recognising the trigger factors within a specific context and addressing the psychological challenges that learners are facing is crucial for creating an educational environment that supports their mental well-being (Ajimudin & Mukuna, 2023; Van Niekerk & van Gent, 2021), and fostering a positive and effective learning experiences to the learners. Hence, the current study employed a visual participatory approach to explore the understanding of psychological challenges facing South African school learners in the 21st century.

Methodology

Leavy (2022) defines research methodology as a systematic way of enquiry that examines and comprehends the complexity of a research problem. It comprises components such as research design, paradigm, research approach and methods for data generation. The research methodology is an aspect of the research that seeks to dive thoroughly into its subjective elements to explain the research phenomenon to acquire a thorough knowledge of its social, cultural, and environmental impacts on the researched contexts and participants (Prosek & Gibson, 2021).

1. Research Design

Flick (2019) mentioned three types of research approaches, which are qualitative, quantitative and mixed research approaches. Tracy (2019) defines a research approach as a logical plan and procedure that consists of certain steps toward data collection and analysis. The current study was grounded in a qualitative research approach to explore the understanding of psychological challenges that face South African learners in the 21st century. Leavy (2022) defines the qualitative approach as an approach that is used to gather non-numerical data. Qualitative research approach is characterised by its three main characteristics, which are description, explanation and interpretation (Tracy, 2019). Thus, the approach provided the current study with an in-depth understanding of the psychological challenges facing South African school learners in the 21st century. The qualitative approach also enabled the researchers to comprehensively explore the psychological challenges in the 21st century to the learners by mainly focusing on their sociocultural contexts and learning experiences. Also, this approach offered insightful information that informed the causes of psychological challenges for South African school learners, as well as interventions and support mechanisms for the successful teaching and learning process.

Furthermore, the study embraced a visual explanatory research design. Leavy (2022) defines research design as the '*style*' that embellishes the study. The visual explanatory design in this study was influenced by the active participation of research participants throughout the research process. In this design, the researchers incorporated visual elements such as photographs, drawings and other visual data contributed by the participants to explain the research problem. Vaughn and Jacquez (2020) affirmed that visual explanatory design involves the active involvement of participants in various stages of the research process. It also allows them to co-create knowledge, express their perspectives, and have a voice in shaping the research outcomes (Johannesson, Ohlson

& Zhai, 2023). It was mentioned that visual explanatory research design is particularly valuable in studies where traditional verbal or written communication may not fully capture the complexity and richness of participants' experiences (Flick, 2019; Prosek & Gibson, 2021).

2. Research Context and Participants

Research took place in two selected secondary schools in KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa over two months. The schools selected were township schools with limited teaching and learning resources. The schools also have high rates of violence that sometimes are caused by the communities around the schools. Staff in both schools are experiencing feelings of insecurity and fear from time to time due to the lack of security companies to secure the schools. The majority of learners in both schools are Black learner population who come from disadvantaged communities. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used to name the schools as School X and School Z. Each school was presented by two teachers and three learners.

A total of 10 (5 females, 5 males) participants were selected by using purposive and convenience sampling methods. The sample comprised four teachers and six learners from Grades ten and eleven. The written informed consents were given to the teacher participants while the learners, since they are minors, their informed consent letters were sent to their parents to give them permission to participate in the research process. All participants were Blacks. The ethical clearance was also given by the ethics committee of the University where both authors are working. The table below presents the profiles of the study participants.

Table 1. Participants' profiles

Participant pseudonym	School	Grade	Gender	Age between
Teacher 1	X	11	M	30-35 years
Teacher 2	X	11	F	20-25 years
Teacher 3	Z	12	M	40-45 years
Teacher 4	Z	12	F	45-50 years
Learner 1	X	11	M	15-17 years
Learner 2	X	11	F	15-17 years
Learner 3	X	11	M	15-17 years
Learner 4	Z	12	M	15-17 years
Learner 5	Z	12	F	15-17 years
Learner 6	Z	12	F	15-17 years

3. Data Collection Process

Data generation is the activity of obtaining and compiling information from different sources (Leavy, 2022; Walton & Engelbrecht, 2022). Data generation methods are crucial in the research process because "how the information was collected and explained determines the methodology applied in the research process" (Leavy, 2022, p.44). This study employed the focus group discussion and drawing to generate data to answer the following research questions.

- i. What is the understanding of psychological challenges facing South African school learners in the 21st century?
- ii. What are the impacts of psychological challenges on South African school learners in the 21st century?
- iii. Why is it important to have a visual understanding of the psychological challenges facing South African school learners in the 21st century?

Focus Group Discussion

A focus group discussion is a data generation method that includes a small group of participants sitting together and discussing in detail the research problem topic in a structured and interactive manner (Flick, 2019; Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). A focus group discussion was selected because it is the most suitable method for the researchers and participants as it saved time and enabled us to get in-depth insights into participants' opinions and experiences

related to psychological challenges facing South African school learners in the 21st century. The four teacher participants were involved in focus group discussions to seek the clarity of the research questions mentioned above. Thus, in this study, the focus group discussion took place in two days (23rd and 24th) of November, 2023. Each session lasted for one hour, whereby teacher participants were actively engaged in the discussion regarding their understanding of psychological challenges facing South African school learners in the 21st century.

Drawing

Kanyopa and Hlalele (2021) mentioned the significance of conducting research using drawings to generate data. Hripcsak, Schuemie, Madigan, Ryan and Suchard (2021, p.280) alluded that “drawing is a method that creates opportunities for its participants to generate data that is not reliant on language skills and can also provide access to unconscious views and beliefs”. Research also affirmed that the use of drawing in a research involves participants to picture their thoughts and explain in detail the meaning embedded in their drawing (Kanyopa & Hlalele, 2021; Kanyopa, 2022). Six learners were the only participants that were involved in this generation method. This was because the drawing method seemed to be more relevant to their age group, and it also allowed them to express their nonverbal experiences in picture form.

Therefore, the drawing data generation process in this study took place in three main sessions that lasted for two hours. In the first session, researchers began by explaining to the participants how to do the drawing method by using metaphors to explain their understanding and their experiences of psychological challenges facing South African school learners in the 21st century. The second session was the making of drawing, whereby the participants were asked to use pencils and paper to draw their drawings. The participants were encouraged to think deeper to provide a relevant drawing that corresponded to their understanding and experiences of psychological challenges facing South African school learners in the 21st century. The third session was the interpretation of the drawing, whereby each participant was given an opportunity to speak freely about their drawings so as to gain a deeper understanding of the researched phenomenon.

4. Data Analysis

According to Braun, Clarke and Hayfield (2023) and Morgan (2022), thematic is a data analysis method in qualitative research that includes detecting and analysing patterns within generated data to acquire a greater knowledge of the study issue. Researchers employed this strategy to carefully study and code the data from the focus group discussions and drawings’ transcripts, field notes, or other textual data in order to find repeating patterns of meaning, ideas, or experiences. Thematic analysis allowed us to identify the recurring patterns from the data generated by starting with transcribing the verbal, textual and visual information from the participants.

6. Trustworthiness of The Study

The current study undertook several measures to ensure its trustworthiness. To ensure *credibility*, researchers employed member checking on the instruments that provided feedback and suggestions from colleagues on the formation of questions and objectives of the study. In addition, triangulation of data sources and diverse methods were employed to strengthen the robustness of the findings. *Dependability* was ensured by providing a clear description of data generation procedures, coding, and analytical decisions that could be followed and verified by future research. The *transferability* was ensured by rich information regarding the research participants and contextual descriptions of the research context to allow readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other similar contexts., *Confirmability* was ensured by embracing reflexivity throughout the research process, acknowledging and documenting the researchers' biases and preconceptions to maintain transparency and minimise the undue influence on the interpretation of data. Also, transcripts were sent back to the participants to review and validate the interpretations of the findings to ensure no omission or addition of what they contributed.

Findings

This section discusses the findings of the study under the emerging themes. Data analysis process revealed three main themes, which are: Diverse understanding of psychological challenges facing South African school learners in the 21st century; Impacts of psychological challenges facing South African school learners in the 21st century and The importance of understanding psychological challenges facing South African school learners in the 21st century. Participants elaborated on the study's findings through these themes as follows;

1. Diverse Understanding of Psychological Challenges Facing South African School Learners in The 21st Century
When engaging in the focus group discussion to answer the first research question, the participants' response revealed that a psychological challenge is anything that affects the wellness of individual mental health.

Teacher 1 explained;

"A psychological challenge refers to a difficult or stressful situation that an individual may experience, which can negatively impact their mental and emotional well-being."

Teacher 2 also added;

"Psychological challenges involve cognitive and behavioural factors that contribute to suffering and maladaptive functioning."

Teacher 3 mentioned that;

"Psychological challenge is anything that may cause an emotional draining to a person, which may be caused by the disappointment in life and sadness linger for a long time."

When engaging in drawing sessions, learners also explained this theme by providing their drawings that elaborate their understanding of psychological challenges as follows:

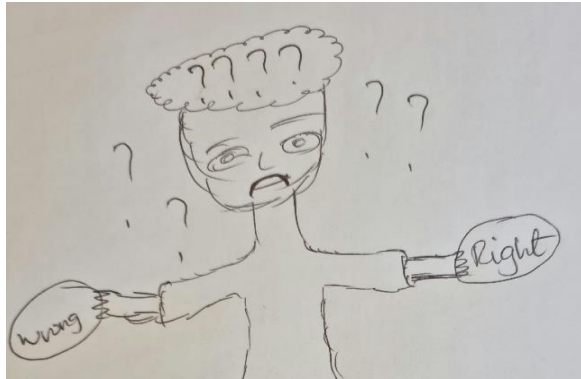
Learner 6 explained her understanding of psychological challenges by relating it to the state of a person being overwhelmed with work or study-related issues and life circumstances in general. The drawing below elucidates her understanding of the research phenomenon.



During the drawing interpretation session, learners 6 states *"learners in 21st century we are overwhelmed, this is because, there is a point where we feel like we are being buried by studies' stress, life challenges and the weight of responsibilities"*

Figure 1. Overwhelmed mind as an understanding of psychological challenges

Furthermore, Learner 3 also explained his understanding of psychological challenges by relating it to the situation whereby the person does not have a clear mental state. The drawing below elucidates his understanding of psychological challenges.



During the drawing interpretation, learner 3 elaborated that *“psychological challenges is the situation where us as learners we are finding ourselves in the situation that we need to make choices that rise the conflicts between our morals and our temptations”*

Figure 2. Unclear state of mind as an understanding of psychological challenges

However, some of the learner participants tried to answer and explain the first theme from the positive psychology point of view and relate the issue of psychological challenges with the encouragements that an individual gets after experiencing an unrest mental state towards the certain task and forcing himself or herself towards the achievements, personal growth and self-improvement. Learner 4 provided a drawing that expresses the positivity of understanding psychological challenges.



During drawing interpretation session, learner 4 mentioned that

“I view psychological challenges as a reminder to myself about my goals and try to keep focusing on them everyday”

Figure 3. Unfocused mind as understanding of psychological challenges

This also was supported by Learner 2, who alluded that;

“... a psychological challenge can be seen as an opportunity for ... growth and development.”

Learner 3 also commented;

“... South African learners are encouraged to embrace challenges as opportunities for personal growth and self-improvement.”

Bechtel and Wright (2019) and Mofokeng (2023) stipulated the perspective on understanding psychological challenges as a golden opportunity for an individual to learn and grow from that experience. They

both argued that people should consider difficult situations as temporary and focus more on improving themselves and not situations; this will help them to avoid stress.

2. Impacts of Psychological Challenges Facing South African School Learners in the 21st Century

It was mentioned in Ajimudin and Mukuna (2023) that high rates of poverty, unemployment, and unfair access to basic services are the core reasons for psychological challenges to South African school learners. Participants' responses on the second theme revealed that learners from low economic classes are experiencing financial stress, a lack of resources, and limited opportunities, which result to feelings of low self-esteem. During the focus group discussion, teacher participants revealed that learners are negatively affected by psychological challenges and contribute to poor discipline in their schools.

Teacher 1 contributed;

"...currently we are experiencing a high range of poor discipline in our school which always come with harmful behaviours and thoughts... such as suicide thoughts."

Teacher 2 also added;

"... Mmmh, true...I still remember the tragic death of one our grade 10 learner in 2021... he ended his life and left us with lots of unanswered questions till now."

The responses of teacher participants from school Z revealed that psychological challenges contribute to learners' maladaptive functioning and poor performance in their schoolwork.

Teacher 3 commented;

"I saw some of our best learners turned to be lazy, lost focus and becoming less optimistic on everyday basis... which hindering their academic performance."

Teacher 4 also agreed;

"...True...psychological challenges affect our learners' energy level, mental ability and their concentration in the classrooms."

Moreover, during the drawing sessions, learners also explained this theme by providing their drawings that elaborate on the impacts of the psychological challenges as follows:

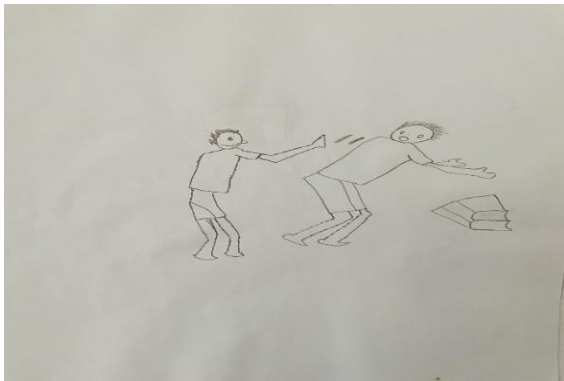
Learner 1 explained the impacts of the psychological challenges facing South African school learners in the 21st century by associating it with high suicidal rates in schools. He drew the following drawing to explain such impact.



During the drawing interpretation session, Learner 1 mentioned that *“psychological challenges are linked to many chronic emotional, mental and behavior problems that contribute to the feeling of loss control, confusion and exhaustion to many learners”*

Figure 4. Suicidal thoughts as an impact of the psychological challenges

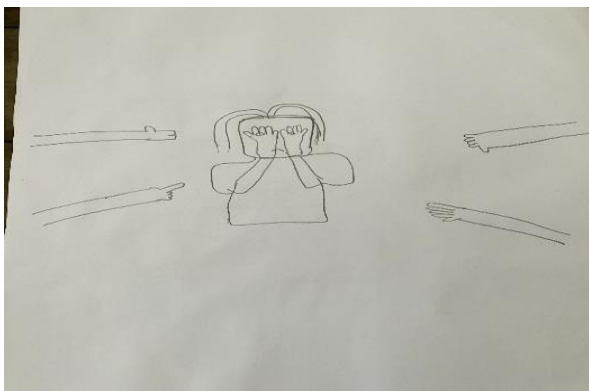
In addition, Learner 4 explained the impacts of psychological challenges by associating them with his personal experiences and mentioned that learners' actions and behaviours always reflect what is in their minds. He explained this by pulling out the issue of bullying in schools and saying that most of the time, bullies' actions are expressions of their resentment that cover their mentality. He drew the following drawing to elucidate this.



During the drawing interpretation session, Learner 4 said *“bullies are trapped in a world where no one seems to understand the pain they are going through...they often feel like they have nobody to turn to, which only deepens the sense of loneliness. As a result, they are deciding to express it in a bitter way”*.

Figure 5. Bully as an impact of the psychological challenges

Moreover, Learner 5 shared the profound impact of psychological challenges and described it as a constant source of fear, anxiety, and isolation. She drew the following drawing to comprehend this.



During the drawing interpretation session, Learner 5 mentioned *“this picture shows that learners are facing a lot, and at the same point...their emotions are covered, silenced and their thoughts are remaining unspoken...which turn them to choose isolation”*.

Figure 6. Depression as an impact of the psychological challenges

The above responses from the participants show that the psychological challenges have negative impacts on South African school learners as most tend to contribute to the loss of focus and becoming unhappy with themselves and every one of everything around them. As evidenced by Magabane (2021) and Van Niekerk and van Gent (2021), psychological challenges lean towards mental complications that decrease the enjoyment of life and increase time-to-time conflicts for an individual.

3. The Importance of Having an Understanding of Psychological Challenges Facing South African School Learners in the 21st century

The study participants further shared their perspectives of the importance of a concrete understanding of psychological challenges facing South African school learners in the 21st century. Harrison, Loxton and Somhlabe (2021) mentioned that it is crucial for parents, teachers and caregivers to have a full understanding of the psychological challenges facing South African school learners in the 21st century; this will decrease hopelessness and suicides in many learners. Zwane and Mukuna (2023) affirm that understanding of psychological challenges will save lives by saving millions of learners from developing serious mental illnesses. Participants of the study commented as follows:

Teacher 3 commented that:

“Understanding of psychological challenges enables learners to become more self-aware, and it pushes schools’ authorities to provide access to trained counsellors and therapists who will help learners to address and cope with their psychological challenges.”

Teacher 1 also mentioned;

“Having a critical understanding of psychological challenges that face our learners in the 21st century allows us as teachers to work cooperatively with parents to provide individual support tailored to the learner's needs.”

Teacher 2 added;

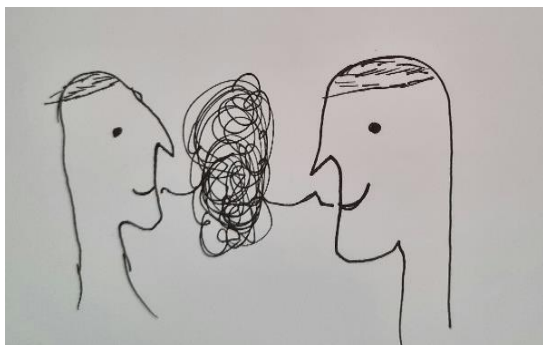
“The understanding of psychological challenges helps us to develop effective coping strategies for our learners... as school, it is our responsibility to create a safe and supportive environment that deals with the diverse challenges of our learners.”

Teacher 4 also commented;

Having an understanding of psychological challenges would significantly impact our learners’ academic achievements as they will improve with coping mechanisms and skills provided by their schools.”

When engaging in drawing sessions, learner participants shared their drawings representing their perspectives on this theme. To start, was Learner 1 who mentioned that:

“Comprehending these challenges allows schools to provide us with appropriate interventions and support systems.”



During the drawing interpretation session, Learner 1 interpreted his picture by saying that “the understanding helps the counselor and learner with psychological challenges to speak one language and understand each other”

Figure 7. Understanding of psychological challenges foster two ways communication

Learner 5 also commented:

“Understanding these challenges contribute to breaking of the violence, isolation and stigmas.”

Learner 2 further supported that:

“Breaking of those cycles offering the learners some opportunities for personal growth, healing, and empowerment.”

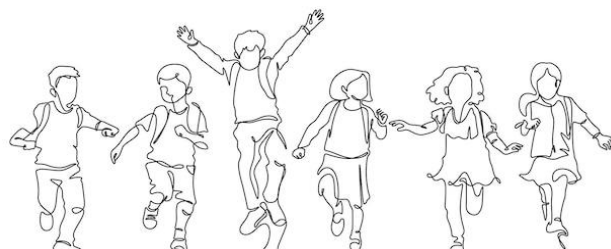


During drawing interpretation session, Learner 2 mentioned that “the understanding of psychological challenges helps to break the cycle of discrimination, exclusion and stigmatization which are dangerous in our communities”

Figure 8. Understanding of psychological challenges foster diversity and acceptance

Learner 4 also explained:

“Understanding creates awareness...which help learners to deal with their challenging situations without losing themselves.”



During drawing interpretation session, Learner 4 mentioned “the understanding of these challenges help learners to cope effectively with stresses, which I view it as a self-care and stress reduction”

Figure 9. Understanding of psychological challenges nurture love and happy life

The participants' comments above show that it is crucial to have a critical understanding of psychological challenges facing South African school learners in the 21st century because having a full understanding of these challenges helps learners to seek appropriate support and interventions that will enable them to thrive academically (Feng et al., 2023; Khahro & Javed, 2022). In addition, by recognising these challenges, both teachers and policymakers can develop targeted interventions that promote psychological well-being and assist them in creating supportive learning environments (Adonis & Silinda, 2021; Zammit, 2023).

Discussion

This demonstrated that psychological challenges affected the well-being of learners and their academic performance. The effects include poor concentration in the classroom, anxiety, low self-esteem, stress and frustrations that lead to low mental functioning. These findings concurred with research which revealed some of the factors that impact learners' overall well-being and academic success (Ajimudin & Mukuna, 2023). Therefore, it is important for South African teachers to be well equipped with knowledge and skill to understand the psychological challenges facing their learners, specifically in the 21st century, whereby the technology brought both pros and cons to young generations. This is also supported by the studies that indicated that technology advancement in the 21st century plays a crucial role in education, but its impact is not uniform across all socioeconomic groups (Marino et al., 2018; Sarbrini, 2023). This implies that learners from affluent backgrounds may have access to the latest technological resources, while those from disadvantaged communities may lack basic access to the internet and electronic devices. Thus, the digital divide creates a psychological challenge, as learners without adequate access to technology may feel left behind, fostering a sense of inadequacy and limiting their educational opportunities (Wills & Hormeyr, 2019; Zammit, 2023).

The results of the study indicated that psychological challenges are influenced by socioeconomic disparities such as poverty, inequalities and poor parenting, which are predominant in the country. It is consistent with the literature, which alluded that the historical legacy of apartheid has left a lasting impact on access to resources, with a significant portion of learners facing economic hardship (Ajani, 2023; Zochi, 2017). In addition, Hripcsak et al. (2021) and Kanyopa and Hlalele (2021) affirmed that learners from disadvantaged backgrounds often experience heightened stress, anxiety, and a sense of inadequacy as they contend with the pressure to succeed in an environment where resources are rare. Body of South African literature affirms that a lack of adequate nutrition, housing, and other basic needs contributes to a challenging psychological landscape for South African school learners (Wills & Hormeyr, 2019; Zwane & Mukuna, 2023). This study has found that peer pressure is another source of psychological challenges as most of the time, teachers are confronted with unpleasant behaviour and poor discipline from the learners. Ajimudin and Mukuna (2023) pointed out that some unpleasant behaviour at schools are influenced by the learners who are not well-mannered and show disrespect to the teachers.

In addition, the study has found that psychological challenges cause a negative learner-teacher relationship as both parties may have bad experiences with each other. This is also supported by the studies that indicate negative relationships always influence negative experiences (Ajimudin and Mukuna (2023). This was also supported by scholars like Kanyopa (2022) and Zwane and Mukuna (2023), who had negative relationships with their teachers earlier in their schooling years. Thus, it is advised that learners and teachers work collaboratively in a supportive environment to enhance learners' academic performance (Harrison et al., 2021; Magabane, 2021). The findings have indicated a shortage of learning resources contributing to psychological challenges to South African school learners. However, teacher participants of the study revealed that the problem is not that schools do not have the resources at all, but the problem is the learners who do not look after the resources.

The study has found that external distractions also contribute to psychological challenges for school learners in the 21st century. Poor living conditions, situations at home as well as too many responsibilities that learners face at their homes are mentioned to have specific effects on learners' well-being and academic performance at school (Adonis & Silinda, 2021; Wills & Hormeyr, 2019). Psychological challenges seem to affect many areas of learners' lives, reducing their productivity and academic achievement. These challenges also are

mentioned to negatively impact relationships with their friends, teachers and family members. This study notes that these challenges can have long-term consequences for learners' future careers and their overall well-being; thus, the next section stipulates the recommendations of this research.

Drawing from the psychological challenges and its effects to the learners, this study recommended that teachers should adopt various classroom management strategies to monitor and assess their learners' behaviour at school. Harrison et al. (2021) and Pillay and Prinsloo (2021) recommended that classroom control strategies like peer evaluation, class charter and encouragement initiatives are important for eliminating factors that contribute to the psychological challenges to the learners. Also, this study views teachers as facilitators at school as they determine the teaching and learning atmosphere, create and maintain their classes; and therefore, the study recommends that teachers' training is vital in supporting South African learners emotionally, socially, mentally and physically. Kanyopa (2022) and Walton and Engelbrecht (2022) advised teachers to self-evaluate where they need to improve and where they can collaborate with parents and communities for better practices in navigating psychological challenges facing learners in schools.

For future research, this study recommends community engagement as a professional way of learning about South African learners' communities. This will help eliminate psychological challenges which are grounded within these communities. In addition, when involving teachers and learners in the studies, this study recommends that future researchers facilitate a cooperative research process because it gives the participants an opportunity to share their lived experiences and enrich the study with diverse perspectives on its findings.

Conclusion

The psychological challenges facing South African school learners in the 21st century are complex and interconnected, rooted in historical, social, economic, and educational factors. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach that considers the multifaceted nature of South African learners lived experiences. Efforts to bridge the social-economic gap, promotion of cultural understanding, reduction of inequalities, and ensuring of equitable access to education are indispensable steps towards creating an educational environment that brings up positive psychological well-being for all South African learners. It is believed that addressing psychological challenges facing South African school learners foster motives towards building a more inclusive, integrative and supportive educational system that nurtures the potential of every South African learner regardless of their background.

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Conflict of Interest: Both authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Informed consent Statement: The participants were given informed consent forms explaining that their participation was voluntary without any material or monetary benefits in returns. Also, they were informed that they are free to withdraw at any time if they wish to, and that no physical or psychological harm would be imposed on them by participating in the study. Moreover, pseudonyms were employed instead of real names for both the school and participants to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

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