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Emotional And Psychological Learning Barriers Among Learners in Eastern Cape Province, South Africa

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Abstract

Emotional and psychological learning barriers remain a significant yet often underrecognised challenge affecting learner performance in South African schools, particularly in historically under-resourced provinces such as the Eastern Cape. Learners experiencing anxiety, stress, low self-esteem, and trauma frequently struggle to engage meaningfully with teaching and learning processes, resulting in poor academic achievement, behavioural difficulties, and increased risk of dropout. The problem is exacerbated by socioeconomic hardship, limited access to psychosocial support services, and large class sizes, which constrain teachers' capacity to provide individualised support. This study adopted a mixed-methods research design to examine the prevalence and impact of emotional and psychological learning barriers among learners in selected public schools in the Eastern Cape Province. The quantitative component involved a survey administered to 120 learners across grades 7–9, whereas the qualitative component comprised semistructured interviews with 15 teachers and 5 school-based support team members. The quantitative data were analysed via descriptive statistics, and the qualitative data were thematically analysed to identify recurring patterns and experiences. The findings revealed that anxiety related to academic pressure, family instability, and exposure to community violence significantly hinder learners' concentration, motivation, and classroom participation. Teachers reported limited training and insufficient institutional support to address these barriers effectively within mainstream classrooms. The study recommends strengthening school-based psychosocial support through the deployment of counsellors, continuous professional development for teachers on learner well-being, and closer collaboration between schools, families, and community support structures. The implementation of holistic support frameworks is essential for improving learner engagement and academic outcomes in Eastern Cape Province.

Keywords: Academic Engagement; Educational Resilience; Learner Wellbeing; Psychosocial Support; School Climate