

An investigation into the challenges faced by school administrators in managing learners' mental health issues in selected Secondary Schools of Mwinilunga District of North-western Province, Zambia

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Abstract

The study investigated the challenges faced by school administrators in managing learners' mental health issues in selected secondary schools of Miniplug District in North-Western Province of Zambia. The study was guided by 2 specific objectives which sought (i) to identify the common mental health problems experienced by learners and (ii) to examine the challenges school administrators encountered in addressing these mental health concerns in secondary schools. A descriptive research design was employed using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Data were collected from head teachers, guidance and counselling teachers, and learners through questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically. The findings revealed that learners commonly experienced anxiety, depression, stress, substance abuse, behavioral disorders, and emotional trauma resulting from family problems, academic pressure, poverty, and peer influence. The study further established that school administrators faced numerous challenges such as inadequate training in mental health management, shortage of professional counsellors, lack of counselling facilities and resources, stigma associated with mental health issues, limited parental involvement, and insufficient support from stakeholders and government institutions. The study concluded that although school administrators played an important role in promoting learner wellbeing, their efforts were constrained by limited capacity and resources. The study recommended increased training for school administrators and teachers in mental health management, employment of qualified school counsellors, strengthening of guidance and counselling programmes, enhanced collaboration between schools, parents, and health institutions, and increased government support toward mental health services in schools.

Keywords: Adolescent Wellbeing; Educational Management; Guidance and Counselling; Mental Health and School Administrators

1. Introduction

Mental health management in secondary schools has become an important area of concern in the education sector due to the increasing number of learners experiencing emotional, psychological, behavioural, and social challenges (WHO, 2022a). Schools are no longer expected to focus only on academic achievement but are also required to support the overall wellbeing and personal development of learners. In Zambia, secondary school administrators have continued to face growing pressure in addressing issues such as stress, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, indiscipline, and emotional trauma among learners (Chanda, 2023). The effectiveness of schools in responding to these challenges largely depends on the availability of strong educational leadership, counselling services, supportive learning environments,

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and stakeholder collaboration (UNESCO, 2021). Therefore, understanding key concepts related to mental health, school administration, adolescent wellbeing, educational management, and guidance and counselling is essential in providing a clear background for this study (MoE, 2020; UNICEF, 2021).

Mental health refers to the emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing of individuals, which affects how people think, feel, behave, and interact with others. In the school environment, learners' mental health plays a significant role in influencing academic performance, behaviour, relationships, and overall development (WHO, 2022a). Secondary school learners often experience mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, stress, low self-esteem, trauma, and emotional instability due to academic pressure, family conflicts, peer influence, poverty, and social expectations. Poor mental health among learners may lead to absenteeism, indiscipline, substance abuse, poor concentration, and school dropout. As a result, schools are increasingly expected to create supportive environments that promote positive mental wellbeing and early identification of mental health concerns among learners (APA, 2021).

School administrators are individuals responsible for managing and supervising the operations of educational institutions. These include head teachers, deputy head teachers, senior teachers, and other school managers who provide leadership in ensuring effective teaching, discipline, learner welfare, and policy implementation within schools (Bush, 2020). In relation to learner mental health, school administrators play an important role in coordinating guidance and counselling programmes, responding to behavioural and emotional challenges, engaging parents and stakeholders, and creating safe learning environments. However, many administrators face difficulties in managing mental health issues due to limited training, inadequate counselling personnel, lack of financial resources, and increasing cases of psychological distress among learners. Their leadership and decision-making are therefore critical in addressing mental health challenges within secondary schools (Fullan, 2019).

Adolescent wellbeing refers to the overall physical, emotional, social, and psychological health of young people during the adolescent stage of development. Adolescence is a critical period characterized by rapid physical growth, emotional changes, identity formation, and increased social interaction (UNICEF, 2021). During this stage, learners are vulnerable to mental health problems that may arise from family instability, peer pressure, bullying, substance abuse, academic stress, and socio-economic hardships. Promoting adolescent wellbeing in schools is essential because healthy learners are more likely to perform well academically, maintain positive relationships, and develop confidence and resilience. Schools therefore play an important role in supporting learners' wellbeing through counselling services, supportive relationships, extracurricular activities, and mental health awareness programmes (WHO, 2021).

Educational management refers to the process of planning, organizing, coordinating, and supervising educational activities and resources to achieve institutional goals effectively (Chanda et al., 2025). In secondary schools, educational management involves ensuring effective administration, learner discipline, academic performance, staff coordination, and the provision of learner support services (Hoy and Miskel, 2018). Managing learner mental health issues has become an important aspect of educational management because schools are expected to address not only academic needs but also learners' emotional and psychological wellbeing. Effective educational management requires school leaders to establish policies and programmes that support mental health, strengthen guidance and counselling services, and collaborate with parents, communities, and health professionals. However, limited resources and inadequate policy implementation often make it difficult for schools to manage mental health issues effectively (Bush, 2020).

Guidance and counselling refers to professional support services aimed at helping learners understand themselves, solve personal and academic problems, make informed decisions, and develop positive behavior (Kashumba et al., 2025). In secondary schools, guidance and counselling programmes are important in addressing emotional difficulties, behavioural problems, career development, peer pressure, and mental health concerns among learners (Gysbers and Henderson, 2018). Effective counselling services provide learners with emotional support, coping strategies, and opportunities to discuss their problems confidentially. Guidance and counselling also assist school administrators and teachers in identifying learners who may require specialized psychological or medical support. Despite its importance, many schools face challenges in implementing effective counselling programmes due to shortages of trained counsellors, lack of facilities, negative attitudes toward counselling, and inadequate support from educational authorities (Sink, 2019).

1.1. Statement of the problem

Mental health challenges among secondary school learners have been increasingly documented in Zambia and other Sub-Saharan African countries, with studies indicating that approximately 29.7% of adolescents experience depressive symptoms, while over 30% report suicidal ideation and a significant proportion experience behavioural and emotional difficulties (Bansal et al., 2025). Similarly, evidence from global school-based health surveys shows that adolescent

mental health problems, including anxiety and depression, are a growing concern in low- and middle-income countries, including Zambia (WHO, 2021). These findings suggest that a substantial proportion of learners are likely to require psychological and psychosocial support within school settings. In Mwinilunga District of North-Western Province, school administrators are increasingly confronted with managing such cases among learners; however, their capacity to respond effectively is constrained by limited counselling services, inadequate professional training, and weak referral systems. UNICEF (2023) and Chanda (2025) reports that adolescents in Zambia face multiple psychosocial stressors, including poverty, violence, and family instability, which significantly increase their vulnerability to mental health challenges. In addition, UNICEF Eastern and Southern Africa (2022) notes that more than half of adolescents in the region experience violence or significant psychosocial stress, which contributes to anxiety, depression, and behavioural disorders. Despite the existence of education policies that promote guidance and counselling services in schools, implementation remains weak, particularly in rural districts such as Mwinilunga. Stigma associated with mental health problems further discourages learners from seeking help, while school administrators often lack structured protocols for early identification, intervention, and referral of affected learners. As a result, there is a growing gap between the rising prevalence of learner mental health challenges and the limited institutional capacity to manage them effectively, thereby necessitating an investigation into the challenges faced by school administrators in addressing learners' mental health issues.

Objectives of the Study

- To identify the common mental health problems experienced by learners in selected secondary schools of Mwinilunga District, Zambia.
- To examine the challenges school administrators, encounter in addressing learners' mental health concerns in selected secondary schools of Mwinilunga District, Zambia.

1.2. Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to improving the understanding and management of learners' mental health issues in secondary schools. The findings are expected to provide valuable insights to school administrators on the common mental health challenges affecting learners and the difficulties they face in addressing them effectively. This information may assist school leaders and teachers in strengthening guidance and counselling programmes, improving early identification of mental health problems, and enhancing learner support systems. The study may also be useful to the Ministry of Education and other education stakeholders in formulating policies and allocating resources aimed at promoting mental health services in schools. Furthermore, it may benefit learners by promoting a safer and more supportive learning environment that enhances their wellbeing and academic performance. In addition, the study may contribute to existing academic literature on school-based mental health management, particularly within the Zambian context, and serve as a reference for future researchers interested in related studies.

1.3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in the Ecological Systems Theory developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979), which explains how an individual's development is influenced by multiple interacting environmental systems. In the context of this study, learners' mental health is understood as being shaped by various layers of influence, including the school environment, family background, peer relationships, community factors, and broader societal conditions. The microsystem includes immediate environments such as classrooms, teachers, peers, and school administrators, where direct interactions significantly affect learners' emotional and psychological wellbeing. The mesosystem involves the relationship between different microsystems, such as the interaction between parents and schools in supporting learners' mental health. The exosystem includes external influences such as parental employment conditions, school policies, and availability of counselling services, which indirectly affect learners' wellbeing. The macrosystem represents broader cultural, social, and policy frameworks that shape attitudes towards mental health and counselling services in schools. This theory is relevant to the study because it helps explain how school administrators operate within a complex system of influences when managing learners' mental health challenges. It further highlights the importance of collaboration between schools, families, and communities in addressing mental health issues effectively (UNICEF, 2021).

2. Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive research design using a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by school administrators in managing learners' mental health issues. The study was conducted in 4 secondary schools of Mwinilunga District in North-Western Province of Zambia. The target population of 1600 was drawn with a sample size 10% which was 160.

The sample included 4 head teachers, 1 from each selected school. 12 guidance and counselling teachers, 3 from each selected school and 144 learners, 36 from each selected school. A sample of respondents was selected using purposive and simple random sampling techniques to ensure representation of key stakeholders with relevant knowledge of the problem under investigation. Data were collected using questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions to capture both statistical and in-depth perspectives on mental health management in schools. Quantitative data from questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages, while qualitative data from interviews and focus group discussions were analyzed thematically to identify emerging patterns and themes. Ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were strictly observed throughout the study. The methodology enabled the researchers to triangulate data sources, thereby improving the validity and reliability of the findings.

3. Results and Discussions

The following findings and discussions were presented according to set research objectives

3.1. Common Mental Health Problems Experienced by Learners in Secondary Schools

Anxiety emerged as one of the most frequently reported mental health problems among learners in selected secondary schools, significantly affecting their academic engagement and overall wellbeing. Chanda and Chitondo (2023) in their study observed that learners commonly experience persistent worry, fear, and nervousness, particularly in relation to academic demands such as examinations, continuous assessments, and classroom presentations. This emotional strain is often intensified by fear of failure or the possibility of disappointing parents and teachers, which increases psychological pressure and reduces learners' ability to concentrate effectively in class. One of the head teachers alluded that:

“In highly competitive school environments, these challenges are further exacerbated, especially where access to counselling and psychosocial support services is limited or underdeveloped. As anxiety persists, learners may begin to withdraw from classroom participation, avoid academic tasks, experience sleep disturbances, and ultimately demonstrate declining academic performance”.

If left unaddressed, anxiety can have long-term consequences on both emotional stability and educational achievement (Mponela and Chanda, 2025). According to WHO (2022), anxiety disorders are among the leading mental health conditions affecting adolescents globally, often emerging during school-going years. Similarly, UNICEF (2023) emphasizes that the absence of adequate school-based mental health support systems worsens these outcomes, highlighting the need for early identification, intervention, and sustained psychosocial support to improve learner wellbeing and academic success.

Depression was also identified as a significant mental health challenge that affected learners in secondary schools, with serious implications for their academic performance and social functioning. Affected learners often exhibited persistent sadness, withdrawal from peers, loss of interest in previously enjoyable school activities, and reduced motivation to complete academic tasks. These symptoms were frequently associated with a range of underlying factors, including academic difficulties, family instability, peer rejection, and emotional neglect within both home and school environments. In some cases, learners experiencing depression continued attending school physically but remained emotionally disengaged, which significantly reduced their ability to participate meaningfully in classroom learning and interact effectively with peers and teachers. The often hidden and internalized nature of depression made it difficult for educators to identify early warning signs, particularly in overcrowded classrooms where individualized attention was limited and learner behaviour could easily go unnoticed. UNICEF (2023) noted that such conditions contributed to delayed intervention, thereby worsening outcomes for affected learners. Furthermore, the American Psychological Association (APA, 2022) emphasized that depression among adolescents was an increasing global concern, as it negatively affected cognitive functioning, learning outcomes, behaviour, and overall psychosocial development, underscoring the urgent need for strengthened school-based mental health support systems.

Academic stress was widely reported among learners and was largely attributed to heavy academic workloads, frequent testing, and high expectations from both teachers and parents. Learners often felt overwhelmed by the pressure to perform well in national examinations, which were perceived as determining future educational and career opportunities. One of the guidance and counselling teachers noted that:

“This constant pressure creates significant emotional strain, leading to fatigue, reduced motivation, and difficulty in balancing academic responsibilities with personal life”.

In some schools, limited academic support systems, such as remedial teaching and counselling services, further contributed to increased stress levels among learners, as they lacked adequate avenues for academic guidance and emotional support. Over time, prolonged exposure to academic stress was found to result in burnout, heightened anxiety, and declining academic performance. The WHO (2022) noted that excessive academic pressure was a major contributor to adolescent stress-related mental health challenges globally. Similarly, UNESCO (2021) emphasized that education systems which prioritized performance outcomes without sufficient psychosocial support tended to increase stress-related disorders among learners, highlighting the need for more balanced and supportive learning environments.

Low self-esteem was another common mental health issue identified among learners, where many individuals expressed a lack of confidence in their academic abilities and personal worth. Zulu and Chanda (2025) noted that learners with low self-esteem often compare themselves negatively with their peers, especially those who perform better academically or are more socially active. This condition was commonly linked to repeated academic failure, experiences of bullying, negative feedback from teachers, or a lack of encouragement from family members. As a result, affected learners tended to withdraw from classroom discussions, avoided leadership roles, and became socially isolated within the school environment. Such behaviours further limited their opportunities for academic engagement, skill development, and personal growth. UNICEF (2023) noted that low self-esteem among adolescents often undermined their participation in learning activities and negatively affected their overall school experience. In addition, WHO (2022) emphasized that low self-esteem had been widely associated with poor emotional wellbeing and reduced resilience in adolescents facing academic and social challenges, highlighting the importance of supportive school environments in building learner confidence and self-worth.

The study also revealed that some learners exhibited behavioural and emotional difficulties, including aggression, truancy, withdrawal from school activities, and general indiscipline. These behaviours were often outward expressions of underlying emotional struggles such as frustration, anxiety, or unresolved personal and family issues. In many school settings, such behaviours were frequently interpreted as misconduct rather than indicators of underlying mental health challenges, leading to punitive rather than supportive responses from school authorities. This approach often worsened the learners' emotional state and discouraged them from seeking help or accessing available support services in the future. The MoE (2021) emphasized that such misinterpretation of learner behaviour contributed to ineffective management of psychosocial challenges in schools. Furthermore, UNESCO (2021) noted that schools lacking trained counsellors or structured guidance and counselling programmes often struggled to identify the root causes of behavioural problems, resulting in inappropriate and ineffective intervention strategies that failed to address learners' emotional and psychological needs.

Substance use was identified in some cases as a coping mechanism among learners experiencing emotional distress, peer pressure, or academic stress. This is in line with Chanda (2023) who noted that learners engage in alcohol or drug use as a way of escaping emotional pain, relieving stress, or gaining acceptance from peers. However, such behaviour often worsened existing mental health conditions and led to additional challenges, including addiction, poor academic performance, and increased disciplinary cases within schools. Peer influence, curiosity, and a lack of parental supervision were identified as major contributing factors to substance use among adolescents. One of the head teachers revealed that:

“In school environments where awareness programmes were limited or inadequate, learners often did not fully understand the risks and long-term consequences associated with substance use”.

The WHO (2022) noted that substance use among adolescents frequently developed as a maladaptive coping strategy for dealing with stress and emotional difficulties. Similarly, the UNODC (2021) emphasized that substance abuse among young people was strongly linked to increased vulnerability to mental disorders, impaired cognitive development, and long-term behavioural problems, highlighting the need for strengthened prevention and awareness programmes in schools.

Social and environmental factors such as peer pressure, bullying, and a negative school climate were also found to significantly contribute to mental health problems among learners. Learners who experienced bullying often reported feelings of fear, isolation, humiliation, and low self-worth, which negatively affected their emotional wellbeing and academic engagement (Chanda, 2023b). In the Zambian context, studies have shown that bullying in schools is strongly associated with psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, and reduced academic participation (Siziya et al., 2012). Peer pressure also influenced learners to engage in risky behaviours such as substance use and truancy in an attempt to fit in with their peers and gain social acceptance. In schools where anti-bullying policies are weak or inconsistently enforced, such behaviours tend to persist and escalate over time, contributing to a hostile and unsafe

learning environment (Chanda and Phiri, 2025). UNICEF (2023) emphasized that exposure to bullying and negative peer relationships significantly increased adolescents' vulnerability to mental health challenges and affected their overall school engagement. Additionally, the MoE (2021) noted that inadequate enforcement of child protection and school safety policies often left learners exposed to emotional harm, underscoring the need for stronger psychosocial support systems within schools.

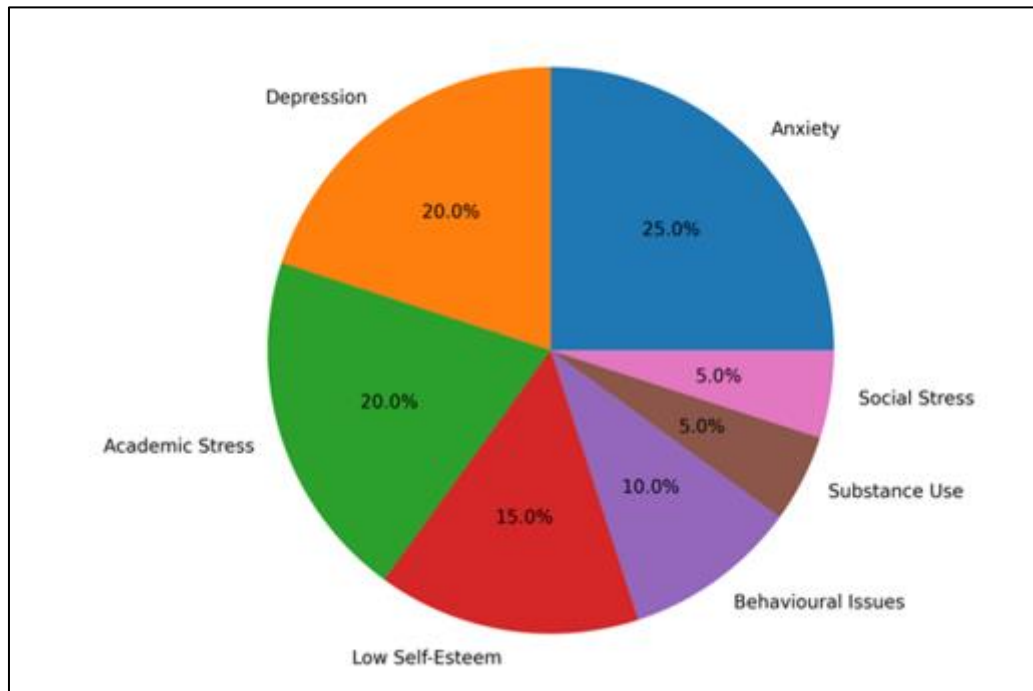


Figure 1 Common Mental Health Problems Experienced by Learners in Secondary Schools

3.2. Challenges School Administrators Encounter in Addressing Learners' Mental Health Concerns in Secondary Schools

The findings of the study indicated that school administrators often lack specialized training in identifying and managing learners' mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, and trauma. It was further revealed that this limitation affects their capacity to provide effective psychological support or make appropriate referrals to professional mental health services. In addition, the study established that many schools rely heavily on classroom teachers to handle counselling-related issues, despite the fact that most of these teachers do not possess formal training in guidance and counselling. This lack of professional background was found to contribute to ineffective and inconsistent intervention strategies when dealing with learners' mental health concerns. The study also noted that limited access to in-service training and professional development opportunities in mental health further constrains the ability of school personnel to respond adequately to learners' psychosocial needs. These findings are consistent with earlier studies conducted in Zambia, which reported that the shortage of trained guidance and counselling personnel in schools significantly undermines the effectiveness of counselling services and learner support systems (UNICEF Zambia, 2021). Similarly, other research has highlighted that inadequate staffing and insufficient professional preparation continue to be major challenges affecting the delivery of effective school-based counselling services in the country (MoE, 2019).

The findings of the study further indicated that school administrators are burdened with multiple responsibilities such as supervision of teaching and learning, academic monitoring, disciplinary management, and routine reporting. Consequently, it was observed that mental health-related issues among learners are often not prioritised and are sometimes addressed only superficially due to time constraints and competing administrative demands (ZNEC, 2020). This situation was found to result in delayed responses to learners' psychological needs, thereby reducing the effectiveness of early intervention strategies within schools. It was further established that the heavy workload placed on school leaders continues to limit their capacity to effectively plan, coordinate, and implement guidance and counselling programmes (University of Zambia, 2022). This means that even where such programmes exist, their implementation is often inconsistent and less effective due to limited administrative attention and time allocation. Similar findings from previous studies have also shown that excessive workload among school administrators

significantly undermines the effective delivery of counselling services and weakens institutional capacity to adequately support learners' mental health needs.

The findings of the study also revealed that many schools do not have dedicated professional counsellors, resulting in school administrators delegating counselling responsibilities to classroom teachers who are often not adequately trained in guidance and counselling. This arrangement was found to limit the effectiveness of counselling services, as most teachers lack specialized skills required for early identification, assessment, and management of learners' mental health challenges (UNESCO, 2021). Consequently, cases of anxiety, depression, and other psychosocial difficulties among learners are often detected late, reducing the chances of timely intervention and appropriate referral to professional support services. The study also established that the absence of trained counselling personnel affects the quality and consistency of support provided to learners, thereby weakening the overall school-based mental health response system (WHO, 2022). Similar studies conducted globally have confirmed that shortages of qualified school counsellors remain a major barrier to effective mental health support in educational settings, particularly in low-resource contexts where teacher-counsellor models are commonly used. In the Zambian context, research by Kapembwa (2020) also highlights that the shortage of trained guidance and counselling personnel in secondary schools significantly undermines the early detection and effective management of learners' psychosocial challenges.

The findings of the study further indicated that many schools lack appropriate infrastructure to support effective counselling services, including private counselling rooms, psychological assessment tools, and adequate learning materials for mental health awareness. This situation was found to compromise confidentiality during counselling sessions, thereby discouraging learners from openly seeking psychological support due to fear of exposure or stigma (World Bank, 2022). As a result, learners experiencing anxiety, depression, or other emotional difficulties often remain silent, which delays intervention and may worsen their conditions. The absence of dedicated counselling spaces was also observed to reduce the professionalism and effectiveness of counselling interactions, as sessions are sometimes conducted in shared offices or classrooms where privacy is not guaranteed (APA, 2021). Furthermore, the lack of assessment tools and informational resources limits the ability of school personnel to properly identify and understand the severity of learners' mental health needs (WHO, 2022). Similar studies conducted globally have consistently shown that poor school infrastructure remains a major barrier to effective counselling service delivery, particularly in low-resource educational settings where psychosocial support systems are underdeveloped.

Moving on, the study revealed that stigma surrounding mental health issues remains a significant barrier within the school environment, where both learners and, in some cases, staff tend to perceive mental health challenges as a sign of weakness, indiscipline, or misconduct rather than legitimate health conditions (Banda and Mwansa, 2019). As observed by one of the learners:

"This negative perception was found to discourage them from openly reporting their psychological difficulties, thereby limiting opportunities for early identification and timely intervention by school administrators".

As a result, many learners experiencing anxiety, depression, or trauma-related symptoms tend to suffer in silence, which worsens their conditions over time (Phiri, 2021). The study also established that fear of discrimination, labeling, or punitive responses further reduces help-seeking behaviour among learners, as they worry about being misunderstood or treated differently by peers and teachers. Consequently, the effectiveness of school-based counselling services is undermined, as cases are often reported only when they become severe or difficult to manage (Zulu, 2022). Similar studies conducted in Zambia have confirmed that stigma remains one of the major obstacles to effective mental health support in schools, as it reduces disclosure, delays intervention, and limits access to counselling services.

The findings of the study further revealed that parental involvement in addressing learners' mental health challenges is often limited due to lack of awareness and, in some cases, dismissive attitudes towards mental health issues affecting their children (Tembo and Sakala, 2019). It was observed that some parents tend to attribute behavioural and emotional difficulties to poor discipline or normal developmental changes rather than recognizing them as mental health concerns requiring professional attention. This situation was found to weaken collaboration between schools and homes, thereby reducing the effectiveness of intervention strategies implemented by school administrators. As a result, efforts to provide counselling support or make referrals to health services are often delayed or unsuccessful due to limited parental cooperation and follow-up (Chileshe, 2021). The study also established that school administrators frequently face challenges in engaging parents in counselling processes, as some parents are reluctant to attend meetings, accept referrals, or acknowledge the severity of their children's psychological needs. Consequently, the continuity of care for affected learners is compromised, leading to persistent or worsening mental health conditions (Hamusokwe, 2022). Similar studies conducted in Zambia have highlighted that inadequate parental involvement remains a key challenge in

the effective implementation of school-based guidance and counselling programmes, as it limits coordinated support between the school and the home environment.

The findings of the study further revealed that although existing education policies provide for the establishment and support of school counselling services, their implementation at school level remains weak due to a lack of clear operational procedures and effective monitoring mechanisms (ZIPAR, 2020). It was observed that school administrators often operate without well-defined frameworks to guide the identification, management, and referral of severe mental health cases among learners. This absence of structured guidelines was found to contribute to inconsistencies in how cases are handled across different schools, with some administrators responding promptly while others delay or provide inadequate support. As a result, learners with similar psychological needs may receive different levels of care depending on the school context and available leadership capacity (MoE, 2021). The study also established that limited supervision and follow-up from relevant education authorities further weaken the enforcement of counselling policy provisions, thereby affecting service delivery at school level. Consequently, the lack of standardized procedures undermines the effectiveness of guidance and counselling programmes and reduces confidence in the school-based mental health support system (Phiri & Zulu, 2022).

The findings of the study further revealed that referral systems to hospitals or professional psychologists are often weak, poorly coordinated, or in some cases inaccessible, particularly in rural districts such as Mwinilunga (Kasonde and Phiri, 2020). One of the guidance and counselling teachers observed that:

“This limitation significantly affects the ability of school administrators to ensure that learners with severe mental health conditions receive timely and appropriate specialized care. As a result, many cases that require urgent psychological or psychiatric attention are either delayed or remain unaddressed due to long distances to health facilities, inadequate transport systems, and lack of clear referral protocols”.

The study also established that even when referrals are made, follow-up mechanisms between schools and health institutions are often weak, leading to discontinuity in care and poor recovery outcomes for affected learners (Tembo, 2021). Consequently, learners with serious conditions such as severe depression, trauma, or suicidal ideation may not receive the specialized treatment they need in time, thereby increasing the risk of worsening symptoms. Similar studies conducted in Zambia have shown that inadequate referral pathways and limited access to mental health professionals remain major challenges in rural education settings, significantly affecting the effectiveness of school-based mental health support systems (Zulu, 2022a).

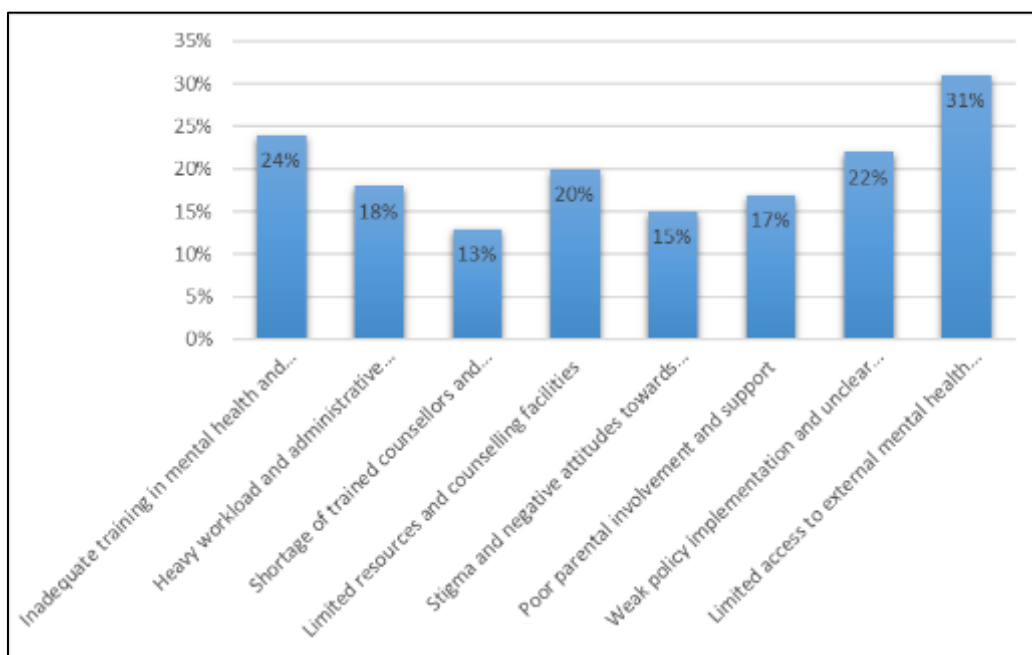


Figure 2 Challenges School Administrators Encounter in Addressing Learners' Mental Health Concerns

Study Recommendations

- The Ministry of Education and school authorities should strengthen the provision of trained guidance and counselling personnel in secondary schools by either recruiting qualified counsellors or providing specialised in-service mental health training for existing teachers.
- Schools should establish and formalise clear mental health referral systems in collaboration with nearby health facilities and professional psychologists. This would ensure that learners with severe psychological conditions receive timely and appropriate specialist support beyond the school environment.
- The Ministry of Education and school authorities should improve school-based mental health support structures by increasing funding for counselling services, providing dedicated counselling spaces, and running regular awareness programmes for learners, teachers, and parents. Such initiatives would help reduce stigma, encourage help-seeking behaviour, and strengthen collective responsibility in supporting learner mental well-being

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study established that school administrators in selected secondary schools of Mwinilunga District face multiple and interconnected challenges in managing learners' mental health issues. These challenges include inadequate counselling personnel, limited training in mental health management, insufficient counselling facilities, weak referral systems, and inadequate policy implementation at school level. In addition, stigma surrounding mental health problems among learners and limited parental involvement further complicate timely identification and intervention. The study also revealed that heavy administrative workloads and resource constraints reduce the capacity of school leaders to provide effective psychosocial support services. Overall, these findings highlight that while mental health needs among learners are increasingly evident, the school system remains insufficiently equipped to respond effectively. Strengthening guidance and counselling services, improving capacity building for administrators and teachers, and enhancing collaboration between schools, families, and health professionals are essential for improving mental health management in secondary schools in Mwinilunga District.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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