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Societal and Environmental Factors Impacting on Mental Health and Suicide among Learners in Nigeria

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of indigenous practices on forest conservation in Calabar Education Zone of Cross River State, Nigeria. The specific purpose was to: determine the influence of cultural practices and traditional agriculture on forest conservation. Two research questions directed this study. Two null hypotheses were tested in this study. The study adopted a survey research design. Multi-stage sampling technique was adopted for this study. The population of this study comprised 605,281 inhabitants in the study area. The sample for the study comprised 394 adult inhabitants in the study area. Data were collected using a questionnaire titled "Indigenous Practices and Forest Conservation Questionnaire" (IPFCQ). The instrument validated by three research experts, was constructed into three major sections: section A focused on Demographic data, section B focused on sub- variables under Indigenous Practices and section C focused on Forest Conservation based on a four-point likert-type scale. The reliability of the instrument was determined with Cronbach Alpha reliability method which gave reliability coefficient which ranged from .82 to .88. The data collected were analysed using Simple Linear Regression and tested from .05 level of significance and the result reveals that there is a significance influence of cultural practices and traditional agriculture on Forest Conservation in Calabar Education Zone of Cross River State, Nigeria. Based on the result of the study the researcher concluded that cultural practices and traditional agriculture promote forest conservation. On

	the strength of the conclusion. It was recommended that government of Cross River State should design strategic measures to incorporate indigenous practices for the conservation of forest resources in the study area and beyond. This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the societal and environmental factors that influence mental health and suicide among learners in Nigeria. It examines the complex interplay between social and environmental elements by presenting a clear perspective on the challenges faced by learners and thereafter offers recommendations for addressing these issues effectively. Drawing from existing literature and qualitative research, the paper identifies several societal factors that contribute to the mental health crises among learners in Nigeria. These factors include stigma surrounding mental health, cultural beliefs and social norms, socioeconomic disparities and access to mental health resources, influence of family dynamics and support systems. The paper emphasizes that addressing these societal factors is crucial in creating a supportive and understanding environment that encourages learners to seek help without fear rather than commit suicide. Furthermore, the paper highlights the significant impact of environmental factors on mental health outcomes. It explores how school-related factors such as academic pressure and bullying, violence and limited access to mental healthcare services exacerbate the vulnerability of learners to committing suicide. The paper also x-rays the implications for policy and interventions in addressing mental health challenges. Some recommendations were made such as: there should be increase investments in mental health infrastructure and resources to ensure equitable access to quality mental healthcare for all learners. Also, there should be collaboration between government entities, educational institutions, mental health professionals and community organizations to create a holistic support system for learners. In conclusion, this paper emphasizes the urgent need to address social and environmental factors in understanding mental health and suicide among learners in Nigeria.

Introduction

Mental health issues and suicide among learners in Nigeria have emerged as critical concerns in recent years. The significance of addressing this whole issue lies in the severe impact it has on learners' well-being and the overall societal fabric of the country.

World Health Organization (2018) views mental health as a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities and learn well. It maintained that mental health includes our emotional, psychological and social well-being. That our mental health affects how we think, feel and act. They went further to say that our mental health also determine how we handle issues such as stress, inter-personal relationships, academic problems and decision making.

Suicide on the other hand, is the act or an instance of taking one's own life voluntarily and intentionally. It is derived from Latin – Suicidium which means the act of taking one's own life (Nigerian Tribune, 2021).

Nigeria, like many other nations has witnessed a steady increase in mental health problems. These encompass a wide spectrum conditions that affect individuals' emotional, psychological, and social well-being. Of course the consequences of untreated mental health issues can be severe, leading to decline in academic performance, strained personal relationships, and reduced overall quality of life for learners (Atilola & Stevanovic, 2015).

The truth is that mental health has for several decades in Nigeria suffered from neglect by governments, organizations, families and individuals despite its tremendous impact on human functioning. Expressing his dissatisfaction with the state of mental health care in society, Ayonrinde (2019) remarked that in our society not much has been done by governments to improve the mental health of the people. According to him while hospitals have been built to take care of the physical health of the populace, school and other educational institutions provided for developing the intellectual ability, the emotional, psychological or mental health of individuals which is the most essential development for happiness, contentment and peace of mind has been left to the individual's resources.

In line with the foregoing, Ukpong (2020) asserted that this lack of concern for the mental health of the generality of Nigerians by government, organizations and schools has had a disastrous effect on the social, political, economic and academic lives of the people. Of course, given this neglect, we cannot but have a Nigerian society whose members in general and learners in particular are largely mentally, emotionally and academically disturbed in one form or another. There is therefore the need to interrogate some societal and environmental factors impacting on the mental health and suicide among learners in Nigeria with a view to making some laudable recommendations for possible solutions,

Prevalence of mental health and suicide among learners in Nigeria

Under this heading we shall discuss the following:

i. **The statistics and data of mental health disorder and suicide rates:**

World Health Organization (2019) gave a global perspective on the incidences of suicide arising from mental health disorder as follows:

An estimated 703000 people die by suicide worldwide each year. That over one in every 100 deaths (1.39%) in 2019 was the result of suicide. It further stated that the global suicide rate is over twice as high among men than women. It noted that over half (58%) of all deaths by suicide occur before the age of 50 years old. In a similar development WHO (2021) remarked that globally, suicide is the fourth leading cause of death in 15 – 29 year old, which is of course within school age. It noted that suicide occurs across all regions in the world that over three quarters (77%) of global suicide in 2019 occurred in low and middle income countries.

Mishara and Weisstub (2016) on their part maintained that suicide remains illegal in over 20 countries, while people who engage in suicidal behaviour may be punished in some countries that follow sharia laws, involving legal penalties that range from a small fine or short prison sentence, to life imprisonment. They noted that an individual suffering depression is twenty times more likely to die by suicide than someone without the disorder.

It is worthy to note that while the global rate of suicide is showing some signs of a decline, this is not the case in all countries and may be indicative of greater surveillance or access to data. For now, accurate statistics and data on mental health disorders and suicide rates among learners in Nigeria are crucial in understanding the magnitude of the problem. Even though a comprehensive data can be challenging to obtain, available studies provide valuable insights into the prevalence of mental health challenges and suicide rates (Nigeria Tribune, 2021).

According to one study conducted by United Nations Development Programme 2018), the prevalence of mental health disorders among Nigerian university students ranges from 16% to 53% with depression and anxiety being the most common conditions. In another study they found that approximately 32.3% of Nigerian adolescents experienced significant psychological distress. In fact, when it comes to suicide rates, obtaining accurate data is very challenging due to under-reporting and limited surveillance systems. However, anecdotal evidence and localized studies suggest that suicide rates among learners in Nigeria have been on the rise. Also, in a study conducted in Lagos, Nigeria, it was reported that the suicide rate among university students had increased from 0.6% in 2012 to 6.7% in 2016 (Atilola and Stevanovic, 2015).

ii. **Impact of mental health challenges on learners' academic performance and overall well-being:**

The mental health of the learner is very important for efficient learning and proper development of personality. The challenges of mental health significantly impact on learners' academic performance and their overall well-being. Little wonder Clayton, Manning,

Krygsman and Speiser (2017) posited that students experiencing mental health disorders often face difficulties concentrating, retaining information and completing assignments. They maintained that the symptoms of anxiety and depression can lead to decreased motivation, impaired decision-making abilities and reduced cognitive functioning, all of which hinder academic success.

Again, mental health challenges can affect learner's overall well-being and quality of life. In this regards, Atilola and Stevanovic (2015) pointed out that students struggling with mental health issues often experience emotional distress, social withdrawal and a diminished sense of self-worth. These factors, can no doubt lead to feelings of isolation, loneliness and a decreased ability to engage in healthy relationships, both within and outside the educational environment.

In fact, the impact of mental health challenges extends beyond the individual learners to their families and communities. Families may experience emotional and financial burdens as they strive to support their children's mental well-being. Indeed communities suffer from the loss of potential contributions from affected learners who may be unable to reach their full academic and professional potentials (Marmot, Allen, Bell, Bloomer and Goldbalatt, 2021).

Finally, in recognizing the profound impact of mental health challenges on learners, it is imperative to prioritize comprehensive support systems within educational institutions and society at large. Also, addressing mental health needs and promoting well-being, we can enhance learners' academic performance, overall quality of life and contribute to healthier and productive society.

The societal factors influencing mental health and suicide among learners in Nigeria

The societal factors influencing mental health and suicide among learners in Nigeria would be discussed under the following sub-heads:

i. **Stigma and cultural attitudes towards mental health:**

Stigma and cultural attitudes surrounding mental health play a significant role in shaping learners experiences and access to support. WHO (2018) noted that in Nigeria, there exists a prevailing stigma associated with mental health issues, which often leads to discrimination, misunderstanding and social exclusion. It emphasized that this stigma can prevent learners from seeking help and openly discussing their mental health challenges, further exacerbating their distress and sometime lead to suicide.

Similarly, in another study, WHO (2021) confirmed that cultural beliefs and attitudes also influence the perception of mental health. It noted that in some communities, mental health problems are attributed to spiritual causes or seen as a sign of weakness or personal failure. These beliefs can no doubt deter learners from seeking professional help and instead encourage them to seek remedies outside mental health field.

ii. **Socioeconomic disparities and access to mental health resources:**

Socioeconomic disparities pose significant barriers to accessing adequate mental health resources and support. On account of this, United Nations Development Programme (2018) posited that learners from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often face limited financial resources, which can impede their access to mental health services. It reiterated that the cost of treatment, transportation and medication can be prohibitive, thus making it difficult for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds to seek professional help. This lack of professional help makes them vulnerable to suicide.

Furthermore, the distribution of mental health resources is often skewed towards urban areas, leaving learners in rural and remote regions with limited access to quality mental health services. This geographic disparity exacerbates the challenges faced by learners in accessing appropriate care and support which create a fertile ground for suicide (Maliki & Ngban, 2006).

iii. **Influence of family dynamics and support systems:**

Family dynamics and support systems significantly impact on learners' mental health. Patel, Flisher, Hetrick and McGorry (2018) pointed out that the family unit plays a crucial role in shaping learners' emotional well-being and resilience. They maintained that a supportive and nurturing family environments foster positive mental health outcomes, while dysfunctional or abusive family dynamics can contribute to mental health challenges, which resultant effect is committing suicide as an option.

It is worthy to note that family support, understanding and open communication are vital in creating an environment where learners feel comfortable discussing their mental health concerns and seeking help. However, cultural norms and lack of awareness within families can hinder such support systems, leading to unaddressed mental health issues of learners. This when stretch further could lead to a suicide situation among the learners.

iv. **Media portrayal and societal pressure:**

Media portrayal and societal pressure also contribute to the mental health challenges faced by learners in Nigeria. Gordon, Shapiro and Brunye (2018) observed that media platforms, including social media, often perpetuate unrealistic standards of beauty, success and happiness. They reported that learners that are constantly exposed to idealized images and narratives, which can negatively impact on their self-esteem, body image and overall mental well-being.

In addition, societal pressure to conform to societal expectations, such as academic excellence or career success, can create immense stress and anxiety among learners. Furthermore, the fear of failure and the need to meet these expectations can contribute to the development or exacerbation of mental health disorders, which if not handled professionally could lead to committing suicide.

In fact, addressing these societal factors requires comprehensive efforts, which include awareness campaigns to challenge stigmas, investment in mental health infrastructure in rural areas, education on mental health within families and promoting responsible media practices.

Environmental factors affecting mental health and suicide among learners in Nigeria

The environmental factors affecting mental health and suicide among learners in Nigeria will also be discussed under the following sub-headings:

i. **School-related factors:**

School-related factors can significantly have impact on learners' mental health. Such factors as academic pressure, including high expectations, demanding coursework and intense competition, can lead to stress, anxiety and feelings of inadequacy among learners. As sometimes is the case, the pressure to perform well academically can be overwhelming and contribute a great deal to the development of mental health disorders which if not properly handled can lead to the extreme case of learners committing suicide.

Another significant school-related factor that negatively affects learners mental well-being is bullying. According to Kutcher, Wei and Coniglio (2016), learners who experience bullying may face social exclusion, harassment and physical or verbal abuse. All these lead to increase levels of anxiety, depressing and low self-esteem. Also, social isolation within the school environment can contribute to feelings of loneliness and further exacerbate mental health challenges which call for urgent and professional attention to avoid suicide.

ii. **Impact of economic condition and unemployment rates:**

It is true that hard economic conditions and unemployment rates in Nigeria have a significant influence on the mental health of learners. On that basis United Nations Development Programme (2018) remarked that high levels of poverty and economic instability can contribute to increased stress, anxiety and feelings of hopelessness among learners and their families. It noted that, unhealthy economic challenges can disrupt access to basic needs, educational opportunities and healthcare services, which further impacts on learners' mental well-being that could result to suicide.

iii. **Limited access to mental health resources:**

Access to mental health resources, such as counselling services and psychiatric care, remains limited in Nigeria, particularly within educational institutions. In the light of this limitation, WHO (2018) posted that the shortage of mental health professionals coupled with inadequate funding and infrastructure, hinders learners access to timely and appropriate support. This they noted, affect the mental well-being of learners with its attendant consequent of committing suicide.

iv. **Community environment and neighborhood characteristics:**

The community environment and neighbourhood characteristics can also impact on learners' mental health. Learners residing in neighbourhoods with high rates of crime, violence and limited access to recreational facilities may experience heightened levels of stress and fear. Also, the lack of safe spaces for physical activity and community engagement can in no small

measure contribute to poor mental health outcomes. This may further be aggravated to the extent of committing suicide if early and professional attention is not given.

v. **Exposure to violence and traumatic experiences:**

Exposure to violence and traumatic experiences can have lasting effects on learners' mental health. Again, Atilola and Stevanovic (2015) noted that learners who have witnessed or experienced violence, such, as domestic abuse, community violence or conflicts are at a higher risk developing mental health disorders including post-traumatic stress disorder. These traumatic experiences can disrupt learners' sense of safety, trust and overall psychological well-being.

Implications for policy and interventions in addressing mental health challenges and suicide among learners in Nigeria

Mental health issues and suicide have become a significant concern affecting individuals of all ages and backgrounds worldwide. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that recognizes the influence of societal and environmental factors. This paper therefore, discusses the implications for policy and interventions in four key areas, these are: a comprehensive approach, reducing stigma and improving access to mental health services, school-based programmes and interventions, and collaboration between stakeholders.

i. **Importance of a comprehensive approach:**

A comprehensive approach is crucial in addressing mental health challenges as it recognizes the multifaceted nature of mental health and acknowledges the role played by various factors. No doubt, WHO (2019) posited that socio-economic conditions, family dynamics, cultural beliefs and environmental stressors all contributed to an individual's mental well-being. Therefore, policies and interventions should not solely focus on individual-level factors but also consider broader social determinants of mental health and suicide among learners in Nigeria.

Furthermore, by adopting a comprehensive approach, policymakers can implement interventions that target both the individual and the larger systems surrounding them. These may include strategies such as promoting mental health literacy, improving access to affordable housing and employment opportunities, and implementing community-based support services. All these approaches according to Patel, Flisher, Hetrick and McGorry (2018) can help reduce risk factors and enhance protective factors for mental health and suicide, hence creating a supportive environment for individuals.

ii. **Reduce stigma and improve access to mental health services:**

Reducing stigma associated with mental health is crucial for ensuring individuals feel comfortable seeking help and accessing necessary services. Policy makers can play a pivotal role in addressing stigma by implementing the following recommendations:

a) **Public awareness campaigns:** Launching campaigns that aim to educate the public about mental health, challenge stereotypes and promote acceptance can significantly contribute to reducing stigma. Accordingly, Corrigan and Watson (2007) stated that

these campaigns should emphasize the fact that mental health conditions are treatable and complete recovery is possible.

b) **Mental health education:** Integrating mental health education into school curricula and workplace training programmes can foster greater understanding and empathy. In the light of this, Kutcher, Wei and Coniglio (2016) noted that by educating young people and professionals, society can break down barriers and create a more supportive and inclusive environment.

c) **Enacting mental health parity laws:** Enacting legislation that ensures equal insurance coverage for mental health services as compared to physical health services can help reduce disparities in access to care and by extension reduce the rate of suicide among learners. Supporting this view, Dzhambov, Markevych, Hartig, TiLov and Dimitrova (2020) assert that these laws are crucial in ensuring that individuals have affordable and equitable access to mental health services.

iii. **Implementation of school based programmes and interventions:**

Schools play a vital role in promoting mental health and well-being among young people. Implementing school-based programme and interventions can have a positive impact on mental health outcomes and suicide among learners in Nigeria. Some key strategies include:

a) **Incorporate mental health education:** Incorporating mental health education into school curricula can help raise awareness, reduce stigma and equip students with knowledge and skills to maintain their mental well-being.

b) **Early intervention and support:** Establishing early intervention programmes within schools can help identify and address mental health issues at an early stage thus preventing them from escalating into more significant problems. Also, providing accessible support services within schools can to a great extent ensure timely assistance for students in need.

iv. **Collaboration between stakeholders for effective solutions:**

Addressing mental health challenges requires collaboration between various stakeholders such as government agencies, educational institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This collaboration can lead to more effective and sustainable solutions. The key aspects of collaboration include:

a) **Intersectoral collaboration:** Facilitating collaboration between health, education, social welfare and other relevant sectors can ensure a holistic and coordinated approach to mental health promotion and intervention. This collaboration according to WHO (2019) can help address the diverse needs of individuals and communities thus reducing the incidences of suicide among learners.

b) **Partnership with NGOs:** Engaging NGOs with expertise in mental health can enhance the implementation of interventions and services. NGOs often have grassroots – level knowledge and can provide community-based support, ensuring that interventions are culturally sensitive and tailored to local context.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Prioritizing mental health in educational settings requires a comprehensive approach that considers societal and environmental factors. Therefore, by implementing evidence-based interventions and promoting collaboration, Nigeria can foster a supportive environment that promotes mental well-being and by extension, reduce the rate of suicide among learners. Indeed, it is through this commitment and collective effort that we can truly make a positive impact on the mental health landscape in Nigeria and as expected minimized the incidences of suicide among learners.

To address the mental health needs and suicide among learners in Nigeria, it is very crucial to take some proactive steps and implement evidence-based interventions. To this end, the following actions are recommended:

i. **Policy implementation:** Government should translate existing policies and guidelines on mental health promotion into actionable plans. It should ensure that these policies emphasize the importance of addressing societal and environmental factors impacting on mental health and suicide among learners both in schools and communities.
ii. **Resource allocation:** Government should allocate sufficient resources to support mental health initiatives. These include, funding for mental health services, training of professionals and implementation of school-based programmes. It should advocate for increased investment in mental health infrastructure to improve access to services, particularly in undeserved areas.
iii. **Education and awareness:** Government should conduct a targeted educational campaign to raise awareness about mental health, suicide, reduce stigma and promote mental health literacy among learners, teachers, parents and community members. It should encourage open discussions and provide accurate information to challenge misconceptions and promote help-seeking behaviour.
iv. **Collaboration and partnership:** Government should foster collaboration between her agencies, educational institutions, NGOs and community organizations. It should create platforms for sharing best practices, exchanging knowledge and develop joint initiatives to address mental health challenges collectively. It should further engage with relevant stakeholders to ensure a coordinated and integrated approach.

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