



Consultation-Driven Mental Health Supports: A Social-Ecological Analysis of Teacher Strategies in Rural Schools

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Abstract

Learner mental health significantly affects academic performance, behaviour, and socio-emotional development, particularly in rural contexts where trained counsellors are scarce. This research-based paper employed a qualitative phenomenological methodology, using semi-structured interviews conducted with six teachers in rural secondary schools in the Vhembe District of South Africa. The purpose was to explore how teachers provide consultation-driven mental health support in environments where professional services are limited. The study found that teachers rely on seven interconnected strategies to support learners' mental wellbeing. A major finding is that teachers provide informal counselling, conflict mediation, and emotional support because learners often lack parental or professional guidance. Another key finding is that rural adversity, poverty, parental migration, community violence, and unmet basic needs, intensifies learners' emotional distress, requiring teachers to act as both caregivers and ecological consultants within the school community. Considering the findings, the study suggests that rural schools require strengthened consultation models, improved teacher training, and clearer policy support to enhance comprehensive school mental health systems and ensure that vulnerable learners receive coordinated, sustainable mental health care.

Keywords

comprehensive school mental health, social-ecological model, school consultation, rural education, learner wellbeing, teacher support

INTRODUCTION

Learner mental health is increasingly recognised as a critical factor shaping academic performance, behaviour regulation, and socio-emotional development. When learners experience anxiety, depression, trauma, or emotional dysregulation, their ability to focus, retain information, and stay motivated is significantly compromised (Crothers, Hughes, Kolbert & Schmitt (2020) ; O'Connor, Dyson, Cowdell & Watson (2018)). These challenges are more severe in rural communities where adversity is persistent and access to mental health services remains limited.

Various studies have been conducted on mental health support in schools. Marais, Skinner, Serekoane, Sharp & Lenka (2019) examined how teachers respond to emotional difficulties among South African learners. The problem addressed in her study was the lack of formal mental health structures in schools. She found that teachers are often the first and only adults learners confide in, especially when facing family conflict or trauma. She concluded that schools need formalised mental health programmes to guide teachers, reduce burnout, and improve learner outcomes.

Similarly, Theron (2016) investigated resilience among rural youth. Her study focused on how learners cope with poverty, parental absence, and community violence. She found that caring teacher-learner relationships significantly strengthen resilience. Theron argued that teachers act as "protective relational anchors" and recommended systematic training for teachers on responding to trauma and emotional distress.

In another South African study, Mampane and Boucher (2011) explored how poverty affects learner resilience. They addressed the problem of structural disadvantages, such as hunger, unsafe home environments, and inconsistent parental support. Their findings showed that psychological vulnerability increases when basic needs are unmet. They argued that schools must implement integrated support systems that address both emotional and material needs.

Internationally, Hoover et al. (2019) conducted a study in the United States focusing on the functioning of school mental health systems. Their problem statement emphasised the lack of coordinated mental health services, particularly in rural and underserved districts. They found that teachers frequently deliver informal counselling due to shortages of psychologists and social workers. Hoover and colleagues concluded that comprehensive school mental health models are essential to strengthen prevention, early intervention, and referral systems.

A similar perspective is presented by Eklund, Meyer, Splett & Weist (2019) who evaluated the implementation of the Comprehensive School Mental Health (CSMH) Framework across different countries. Their study sought to identify effective structures for school-based mental health support. They found that multi-tiered systems—combining universal mental health education, targeted support, and specialised services—significantly improve both school climate and learner wellbeing. They argued that collaboration between teachers, families, and mental health professionals is crucial for sustainable implementation.

Another international study worth noting is Ungar (2011), who examined the social ecology of resilience among youth exposed to chronic adversity. He addressed the problem of fragmented support systems and found that resilience arises when multiple layers of a child’s environment, family, school, community, work together to provide safety, belonging, and emotional support. Ungar argued that schools are central to resilience-building, particularly when families are unstable or absent.

Across these studies, a consistent pattern emerges learners in disadvantaged environments rely heavily on teachers for emotional, behavioural, and academic support. This pattern is especially visible in rural South Africa, where participants in the present study described learners who “have no parent to cry to,” reflecting severe gaps in parental involvement and limited access to professional mental health services.

However, despite these valuable contributions, there remains a gap in the literature regarding the specific strategies rural secondary school teachers use daily to promote mental health under resource-constrained conditions. While previous research has identified challenges and highlighted the importance of teachers’ roles, few studies have systematically documented the actual practices teachers employ, especially within the structure of the Comprehensive School Mental Health (CSMH) Framework.

This study therefore seeks to fill this gap by exploring teacher-driven mental health support strategies in rural secondary schools in the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province. By situating these strategies within the Social-Ecological Model and the CSMH Framework, the study provides a comprehensive analysis of how teachers promote wellbeing across individual, family, school, and community systems.

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in Bronfenbrenner’s Social-Ecological Model (SEM) and the Comprehensive School Mental Health (CSMH) Framework, complemented by School-Based Consultation Theory. Together, these theories provide a holistic lens for understanding and analysing mental health support within school systems, especially in rural contexts. The Social-Ecological Model (SEM) was developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979; 1994), whose work emphasised that human development is shaped by multiple interacting environments. The CSMH Framework was developed and advanced by scholars such as Eklund, Meyer, Splett & Weist (2019), who integrated ecological principles into school mental health systems. School-Based Consultation Theory was conceptualised by key scholars such as Erchul & Sheridan, Kratochwill & Bergan, and Denton & Hasbrouck.

What does the theory say? (Major assumptions)

1. *Social-Ecological Model (SEM)*

SEM assumes that human development occurs within nested ecological systems that influence each other (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). These include:

- Individual: trauma, emotional regulation, learning needs
- Microsystem: teacher–learner relationships, classroom climate
- Mesosystem: school–family interactions
- Exosystem: social workers, community agencies
- Macrosystem: poverty, rurality, educational policy
- Chronosystem: life transitions and socio-historical changes

SEM argues that mental health challenges emerge from interactions across these layers.

2. *CSMH Framework*

The CSMH Framework assumes that school mental health must operate through multi-tiered supports:

- Tier 1: Universal prevention and mental health promotion
- Tier 2: Targeted early intervention
- Tier 3: Intensive services by specialists

It views schools as central hubs for mental health support where teachers play essential roles (Eklund, Meyer, Splett & Weist, 2019); Hoover et al., 2019).

3. School-Based Consultation Theory

Consultation theory assumes that learner support improves when teachers, families, and specialists engage in collaborative problem-solving (Erchul & Sheridan, 2014).

It highlights:

- Behavioural consultation (Sadzaglishvili, Shorena, Teona Gotsiridze, and Ketevan Lekeshvili, 2021)
- Collaborative consultation (Sheridan & Kratochwill)
- Instructional/systems consultation (Hauerwas & Goessling, 2008) The theory argues that consultation improves teacher capacity and implementation fidelity (Allen & Graden, 2002; Kelly, Garbacz & Albers, 2021).

Why do you think the theory is relevant to couch the study?

This theory is relevant because rural learners' mental health challenges arise from interconnected ecological factors such as poverty, parental migration, trauma, and limited professional support. SEM explains these systemic challenges, the CSMH Framework structures the types of support schools must provide, and consultation theory clarifies how teachers function as problem-solvers in resource-limited settings.

How does the theory address the main problem of your paper?

The main problem in this study is the absence of formal mental health personnel in rural schools, resulting in teachers becoming de facto counsellors, mediators, and consultants.

- SEM explains *why* mental health distress is heightened in rural contexts.
- CSMH explains *what* strategies teachers use (universal, targeted, and intensive supports).
- Consultation theory explains *how* teachers collaborate with families, social workers, and agencies, even informally to resolve learner challenges.

Together, these theories show that teachers act as ecological consultants, bridging gaps across systems. This theoretical combination is relevant for this study because it directly addresses how teachers support learner mental health across multiple ecological levels in rural settings. SEM explains the contextual causes of learners' challenges; the CSMH Framework structures the school-based interventions teachers deliver; and consultation theory clarifies how teachers function as collaborative problem-solvers in the absence of formal mental health personnel. I have chosen this integrated theoretical framing because it speaks directly to the core problem of the study and offers a comprehensive foundation for analysing teacher-driven mental health support strategies.

METHOD AND FINDINGS

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to explore teachers lived experiences in providing consultation-driven mental health support in rural secondary schools. Phenomenology is well suited for capturing how educators interpret and act upon learner needs in naturalistic contexts, aligning with consultation literature emphasising real-world, context-based problem solving (Woods, Wilcox, Friedman & Murch, 2011).

The research was conducted in the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province, a rural area characterised by poverty, limited mental health personnel, and high learner vulnerability. Purposive sampling was used to identify teachers actively engaged in academic, behavioural, and psychosocial support roles. Six teachers participated, which is consistent with phenomenological designs privileging depth of experience over sample size (Gutkin & Curtis, 2009).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting 45–90 minutes. Interview prompts explored teachers' emotional support practices, behavioural guidance, informal consultation roles, and collaboration with families and community agencies. Semi-structured interviewing aligns with consultation scholarship that values flexible, reciprocal communication during problem-solving processes (Erchul & Sheridan, 2014). Interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and supplemented with reflexive field notes.

Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis. Analysis progressed through coding, theme development, and interpretation. Interpretation was guided by the Social-Ecological Model (SEM), the Comprehensive School Mental Health (CSMH) Framework, and school-based consultation theory. Consultation literature emphasises ecological analysis and multilevel data interpretation (Graden, 1989; Gutkin & Curtis, 1986), strengthening the analytic alignment with these frameworks.

Research rigour was ensured through: Credibility: member checking and prolonged engagement, Dependability: audit trails and systematic documentation, Confirmability: reflexive journaling and triangulation of narratives, Transferability: thick descriptions enabling contextual understanding, these strategies reflect quality standards recommended in school consultation research for improving trustworthiness and reducing interpretive bias (Sheridan, Smith, Moorman Kim, Beretvas & Park (2019).

Ethical approval was obtained from the university ethics committee and relevant educational authorities. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, pseudonyms were used to maintain confidentiality, and data were stored securely in password-protected files. These procedures align with ethical guidelines for consultation research involving vulnerable student populations (Sadzaglishvili, Shorena, Teona Gotsiridze, and Ketevan Lekeshvili, 2021)

Seven major themes emerged from the analysis. These themes reflect the multi-tiered logic of the Comprehensive School Mental Health (CSMH) Framework and the ecological layers of the Social-Ecological Model (SEM). These aligns

with collaborative problem solving, relational support, and systemic engagement (Allen & Graden, 2002; Erchul & Sheridan, 2014; Kelly, Garbacz & Albers, 2021).

Theme 1: Strengthening Mental Health Education Within the Curriculum

(CSMH Tier 1; SEM Microsystem; aligns with consultation for universal prevention)

Teachers explained that they embed mental health content, including stress management, self-regulation, and resilience, into classroom instruction. This reflects the universal prevention tier in CSMH mirrors contributions of other scholars in the field who argues that consultation supports educators in delivering preventative classroom practices (Hauerwas & Goessling, 2008).

Narrative 1

“In our lessons, we teach them everything about life... how to handle stress, how to study, how to deal with challenges. Many don’t have anyone at home to guide them.”

Narrative 2

“I include things that are not in the textbook. I teach coping skills and practical life issues. The lesson becomes a mental health session.”

Narrative 3

“Our curriculum is full, but this is the only time learners can talk openly about problems. It’s the only mental health space they have.”

Interpretation

Within SEM, the classroom as a microsystem becomes the first line of mental health support. Consistent with other scholar’s research, teachers’ proactive instruction demonstrates consultative adaptation-educators use ecological insights to redesign instruction for wellbeing (Hauerwas & Goessling, 2008); Allen & Graden, 2002).

Theme 2: Individualised Emotional and Psychological Support

(CSMH Tier 2; SEM Microsystem–Mesosystem; other scholars focus on relational consultation)

Teachers frequently acted as emotional anchors for learners experiencing trauma, neglect, parental absence, and interpersonal conflict. Other researchers in the field in literature stresses that consultation strengthens educators’ relational capacity to address emotional needs (Erchul & Sheridan, 2014; Miller, Johnson, Welsh, Chafouleas, Riley-Tillman & Fabiano (2013).

Narrative 1

“Misbehaviour is a sign something is wrong. I call them privately and ask what is happening.”

Narrative 2

“They come to my office to cry because they have no parent to cry to. I listen.”

Narrative 3

“One girl broke down after class. There was violence at home every night. No child can learn like that.”

Interpretation

Teachers are functioning as frontline consultants-at-the-microsystem level, providing targeted support in the absence of mental health professionals. This is aligned with (Allen & Graden, 2002) who argues that teacher–student relationships are central mechanisms of school-based consultation effectiveness.

Theme 3: Addressing Basic Needs as a Foundation for Mental Health

(CSMH Tier 1 & 2; SEM Macrosystem emphasis on ecological barriers)

Teachers regularly provided food, uniforms, and personal care items to ensure learners’ basic needs were met. Kelly, Garbacz & Albers (2021) highlights that consultation must consider ecological constraints such as poverty and basic unmet needs.

Narrative 1

“Kids come with no jersey in winter. We buy for them. It gives them dignity.”

Narrative 2

“You can’t teach a hungry child. Sometimes we buy bread.”

Narrative 3

“Behind every child without uniform is a painful story. The school must step in.”

Interpretation

Teachers are addressing macrosystem-level deprivation through microsystem responses, confirming SEM predictions and supporting other scholars on the field that ecological consultation requires attention to structural inequities.

Theme 4: Strengthening Parental Involvement and Accountability

(CSMH Tier 1 & 2; SEM Mesosystem and other scholars focus on home-school collaboration)

Teachers described parental disengagement as a major barrier, with many reporting that parents are absent due to work migration or personal hardship. Sheridan & Kim (2015) research underscores the role of consultation in improving home-school collaboration, particularly in marginalised settings.

Narrative 1

“Most parents are in Gauteng. Children are staying alone. So, when there is a problem, there’s no one to monitor them.”

Narrative 2

“When we call a parent, the learner brings someone from outside to pretend. It shows you the parents are not involved.”

Narrative 3

“If the real parent comes early, the learner’s behaviour changes. But parents wait until things get worse.”

Interpretation

This theme underscores a breakdown in mesosystem linkages—the school–family relationship—which Erchul & Sheridan (2014); Allen & Graden (2002) identifies as a critical target for consultation. Teachers assume parental roles, compensating for structural family deficits.

Theme 5: Collaboration With Social Workers, Psychologists, and Community Stakeholders

(CSMH Tier 3; SEM Exosystem; other scholars’ emphasis on interdisciplinary consultation)

Teachers frequently collaborated with social workers, psychologists, local NGOs, and police-based victim support units. This reflects the CSMH Tier 3 requirement for specialised services and aligns with Kelly, Garbacz & Albers, (2021). on interdisciplinary consultation networks.

Narrative 1

“If a case is too deep, I refer to the social worker. They are trained. The social worker will visit the home and find the root problem.”

Narrative 2

“We call the psychologist from BOSASA (centre juvenile delinquency) when the problem is serious. They talk to learners about trauma.”

Narrative 3

“The SAPS (South African Police service) also help us with counselling on discipline, drugs, and abuse.”

Interpretation

This theme reflects the exosystem, illustrating how external agencies shape school-based interventions. In consultation terms, teachers are acting as liaison consultants, coordinating systems surrounding the learner—consistent with, Kelly, Garbacz & Albers (2021). models of ecological and collaborative consultation.

Theme 6: Shifting From Punitive Discipline to Counselling-Based Behaviour Support

(CSMH Tier 2; SEM Microsystem–Mesosystem)

Teachers viewed punitive discipline as counterproductive and emphasized supportive, counselling-centred approaches. (Erchul & Sheridan, 2014; Miller, Johnson, Welsh, Chafouleas, Riley-Tillman & Fabiano (2013). Erchul & Sheridan, 2014; Miller et al. (2013); Kelly, Garbacz & Albers (2021) literature consistently shows that behavioural consultation leads to more effective, equity-driven discipline practices.

Narrative 1

“When you suspend a learner, you are damaging them more. They fall behind. Some never come back.”

Narrative 2

“When I sit down with a disruptive learner one-on-one, the behavior changes.”

Narrative 3

“If counsellors were involved, we could stop suspension before it becomes a problem.”

These narratives agree with CSMH Tier 2; SEM Microsystem–Mesosystem in terms of the approach about Shifting from Punitive Discipline to Counselling-Based Behaviour Support.

Theme 7: Structured Career Guidance to Reduce Anxiety and Improve Focus

(CSMH Tier 1; SEM Exosystem–Future Orientation)

Career anxiety was a major stressor. Teachers reported that structured guidance reduces worry and helps learners focus academically. Erchul and Sheridan (2014) scholarship supports consultation approaches that help students develop future orientation, reducing stress and improving engagement.

Narrative 1

“Learners panic because they don’t know which subjects lead to which career... When we guide them, they calm down.”

Narrative 2

“Grade 9s are confused. They want to choose subjects following friends. We tell them: choose according to your marks.”

Narrative 3

“At the career exhibition, you see their eyes open... Their anxiety goes down.”

Interpretation

In SEM, career exposure represents an exosystem influence that expands learners perceived opportunities. Erchul and Sheridan (2014) describes this as consultation that enhances academic decision-making and self-regulation, strengthening overall wellbeing.

DISCUSSION

This study examined teacher-implemented strategies for supporting learner mental health in rural schools through the combined lenses of the Social-Ecological Model (SEM), the Comprehensive School Mental Health (CSMH) framework, and school-based consultation theory. Teachers in this context perform ecological consultation roles-identifying problems, implementing multi-tiered supports, coordinating with families and agencies, and adapting instruction—often without formal mental health training. These findings parallel to the argument made by Allen & Graden (2002); Erchul & Sheridan, (2014); Kelly, Garbacz & Albers (2021) who emphasize that teachers can act as “natural consultants” within multi-level systems, especially in settings with limited specialists.

Curriculum-Based Mental Health Education (Tier 1 / SEM Microsystem / Universal Consultation)

Teachers embedded mental health education into classroom instruction, reinforcing literature showing that universal mental health promotion improves emotional regulation and academic engagement (Durlak et al., 2011; Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016). Scholars Hauerwas & Goessling, (2008); Miller et al., (2013) reflects that instructional consultation, where educators modify instruction to meet social-emotional needs.

SEM highlights the classroom as a key microsystem shaping behaviour. Given limited parental support, curriculum-embedded instruction becomes the sole universal support available to learners. This finding underscores the significance of enabling teachers to implement Tier 1 mental health promotion with consultation support.

Individualised Emotional Support (Tier 2 / SEM Microsystem–Mesosystem / Relational Consultation)

Teachers provided one-on-one counselling for learners exposed to trauma, neglect, and conflict. This aligns with evidence showing that consultation strengthens teacher capacity for relational engagement and targeted intervention (Erchul & Sheridan, 2014; Miller et al., 2013). In SEM, these interactions operate at the microsystem level and compensate for mesosystem breakdowns when families are absent or inaccessible.

The emotional role teachers played mirrors global literature on trauma-informed schooling (Brunzell et al., 2016; Chafouleas, Koriakin, Roundfield & Overstreet, 2019) and further supports the need for consultation approaches that train teachers in basic counselling micro-skills.

Addressing Basic Needs (Tier 1 & 2 / SEM Macrosystem / Ecological Consultation)

Teachers met learners’ basic needs- food, uniforms, hygiene items-reflecting SEM’s assertion that macrosystem conditions (poverty, unemployment) shape emotional wellbeing (Blair & Raver, 2016). Kelly, Garbacz and Albers (2021) research emphasises that effective consultation must attend to contextual and ecological barriers. Without food security and physical comfort, no educational or psychological intervention can be effective. This finding highlights the need for schoolwide partnerships and consultation frameworks that address structural barriers undermining mental health.

Parental Engagement (Tier 1 & 2 / SEM Mesosystem / Home–School Consultation)

Teachers described weak home–school collaboration, confirming studies showing parental involvement is critical for mental health, behaviour, and achievement (Sheridan & Kim, 2015; Wilder, 2023). Erchul & Sheridan (2014) identifies family–school consultation as essential for improving student outcomes.

The absence of parents due to labour migration or family instability creates emotional insecurity and behavioural inconsistency. Teachers, therefore, act as surrogate caregivers—a phenomenon documented in rural and high-risk contexts. Consultation models can help schools systematize and strengthen parent engagement practices.

Collaboration with Social Workers and Community Agencies (Tier 3 / SEM Exosystem / Interdisciplinary Consultation)

The study found that teachers relied heavily on external professionals for serious cases, aligning with Kelly, Garbacz & Albers (2021) they also make emphasis on interdisciplinary consultation and cross-system collaboration. SEM positions professional support services within the exosystem, influencing learners indirectly but significantly.

This collaboration is necessary but inconsistent, highlighting systemic inequities. Effective consultation should embed structured referral pathways, joint problem-solving, and ongoing inter-agency communication.

Counselling-Oriented Discipline (Tier 2 / SEM Microsystem / Behavioural Consultation)

Teachers rejected punitive discipline and favoured restorative, counselling-based approaches. This aligns strongly with behavioural consultation models (Miller et al., 2013 and Kelly, Garbacz and Albers (2021), findings showing that supportive discipline improves long-term behaviour and reduces exclusionary practices. SEM shows that punitive measures disrupt microsystem stability, while counselling-oriented methods foster emotional regulation and prosocial behaviour.

Career Guidance as Mental Health Support (Tier 1 / SEM Exosystem)

Career uncertainty produced anxiety and overwhelmed for many learners. Structured career guidance reduces stress and promotes goal-directed behaviour (Santilli, Grossen & Nota, 2020); Maree, 2015). Erchul and Sheridan (2014) identifies academic pathway consultation as critical for improving learner self-efficacy. SEM illustrates how career opportunities within the exosystem shape identity development, hope, and motivation.

IMPLICATIONS

Implications for Consultation Practice

1. *Strengthening teacher consultation capacity*
Teachers need training in basic assessment, counselling micro-skills, SEL integration, and trauma-informed practice (Allen & Graden, 2002; Miller et al., 2013).
2. *Embedding ecological consultation frameworks*
Schools should use SEM and CSMH to plan multi-tiered supports, ensuring systemic alignment.
3. *Developing structured consultation pathways*
Formal protocols for referrals, teacher–social worker communication, and family consultation are essential.

Implications for Schools

- Establish school mental health teams (CSMH-consistent).
- Adopt restorative behaviour support models.
- Create safe rooms and mental health corners for learners.
- Integrate mental health instruction across subjects.

Implications for Policy Makers

- Employ full-time school psychologists and social workers in rural clusters.
- Provide funding for basic needs (food, uniforms, sanitary items).
- Mandate mental health literacy and SEL training for teachers.
- Align policies with the CSMH and SEM frameworks.

Implications for Community Structures

- Strengthen partnerships with NGOs, faith groups, traditional leaders, and local clinics.
- Train community volunteers as paraprofessional mentors.
- Develop crisis-response partnerships with SAPS and social services.

LIMITATIONS

- Small sample size (six teachers) limits generalisability.
- Self-reported data may reflect social desirability.
- Study focuses on teachers; learner perspectives were not captured.
- Findings reflect rural South Africa; contextual variations may differ.
- Consultation processes were informal, not formally supervised.

These limitations are consistent with qualitative consultation research in Erchul & Sheridan, (2014), which often examines context-specific, practitioner-driven phenomena.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that teachers in rural South African schools perform critical, multi-layered roles in promoting learner mental health. Through the combined frameworks of SEM, CSMH, and school consultation theory, teachers act as ecological consultants who mitigate the effects of poverty, trauma, and systemic inequities.

The findings reveals that consultation is most effective when it is collaborative, ecological, and responsive to local conditions. Strengthening multi-tiered support systems, teacher capacity, and interdisciplinary collaboration is essential for improving learner wellbeing and academic success in rural contexts.

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