

Mind the Gap: Examining National Education Policies' Alignment with Mental Health Needs in High Schools in Marginalised Communities

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Abstract

In South Africa, a disconnect persists between progressive national education policies and the lived reality of mental health support for high school students in marginalized communities. Despite a post-apartheid policy framework committed to inclusion and well-being, learners in under-resourced schools face persistent barriers, underscoring a critical implementation gap. This systematic review addressed this issue by analyzing the alignment of South African policies with students' mental health needs. Adhering to the SPIDER framework and PRISMA 2020 guidelines, the study synthesized evidence from 48 sources, including national policy documents and peer-reviewed literature. A qualitative document and policy analysis was conducted, interpreted through the theoretical lenses of Street-Level Bureaucracy and Institutional Theory to understand the mechanics of policy failure. The findings reveal that policies, while conceptually robust, form a rights-compliant façade that crumbles under implementation pressures. The analysis identifies three core fractures: (1) the rationing of care, where teachers triage support due to overwhelming caseloads; (2) the simplification of complex needs, where culturally misaligned tools lead to the misclassification of mental health issues; and (3) systemic accountability collapses, which prioritize paperwork over student well-being. Consequently, policies like the Integrated School Health Policy (ISHP) function as "paper tigers," strong in design but weak in practical effect, as street-level bureaucrats inevitably create a divergent de facto policy of survival. The study concludes that the implementation gap is a predictable outcome of a system designed for symbolic legitimacy rather than street-level efficacy. Recommendations are proposed to bridge this chasm by designing "street-ready" policies that structure frontline discretion, integrate community-specific resources, and shift accountability from process to measurable well-being outcomes.

Keywords: Marginalised Communities, Mental Health Needs, National Education Policies, National Education Policy Gaps