

## ASSESSMENT OF SCHOOL-RELATED FACTORS IN SECONDARY SCHOOL LEARNERS' MENTAL HEALTH AND SUICIDE RISK IN NIGERIA

By

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### Abstract

This paper addresses the escalating mental health crisis among secondary school learners in Nigeria, emphasizing the impact of school-related factors on their well-being and suicide risk. Amid global concerns regarding adolescents' mental health, Nigeria grapples with unique challenges arising from socio-economic, cultural, and educational factors influencing its youth's psychological health. The study aims to explore and understand the intricacies of these challenges within the Nigerian context. It goes further to examine risks and influencers of mental health crisis among secondary school students in Nigeria. It concludes that prioritizing mental health education, early intervention, and the creation of supportive school environments can influence mental health stability of secondary school students in Nigeria. Among its recommendations is conducting more extensive and comprehensive researches for deeper discoveries into the specific school-related factors affecting secondary school learners' mental health and suicide risk in Nigeria. Also, enhancing teacher training programmes to equip educators with the skills and knowledge necessary to recognize signs of mental distress in students and provide appropriate support.

**Keywords:** Assessment, School-Related Factors, Mental Health, Suicide Risk, and Secondary School Learners

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### Introduction

In recent years, concerns surrounding mental well-being of adolescents have gained significant attention worldwide, with a growing recognition of the challenges they face in an ever-evolving and demanding environment. Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa, is no exception to this global phenomenon. The mental health of secondary school learners in Nigeria has become an issue of paramount importance, as the nation grapples with the complex interplay of socio-economic, cultural, and educational factors affecting the psychological well-being of its youth. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health disorders among adolescents are on the rise globally, with an estimated 10-20% of adolescents experiencing mental health issues (WHO, 2020). In Nigeria, this issue is compounded by various factors, including the stressors associated with the educational system, socio-economic disparities, and the rapidly changing social landscape. As adolescents navigate the critical phase of their lives marked by academic pressures, peer relationships, and identity formation, it becomes imperative to understand the unique challenges they face in the Nigerian context and develop strategies to address their mental health needs.

Nigerian secondary school learners, typically aged between 16 and 19, face a multitude of challenges that can have profound impacts on their mental health. These challenges include, but are not limited to, academic pressures, family expectations, societal norms, and the rapidly changing digital age with its influence on social interactions. The traditional emphasis on academic achievement, often measured by standardized examinations, can place an immense burden on students. The fear of failure in these examinations, such as the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE), National Examinations Council's Senior School Certificate Examination (NECO) can result in high levels of stress and anxiety (Adelugba, Adebayo, & Adelugba, 2021). Peer pressure, societal expectations, and cultural norms can lead to issues related to self-esteem and body image, which are known risk factors for mental health challenges (Ogunnaike et al., 2019). Additionally, the pervasive influence of technology and social media has introduced new challenges related to cyber-bullying, addiction, and the distortion of reality, which can further exacerbate mental health issues (Olusanya et al., 2020). The repercussions of the mental health crisis among Nigerian secondary school learners are far-reaching. Untreated mental health issues can impair cognitive development, hinder academic performance, and lead to school dropout rates (Atilola, 2015). Moreover, untreated mental health challenges during adolescence can persist into adulthood, affecting an individual's overall well-being, employability, and social functioning (Gureje, Lasebikan, Ephraim-Oluwanuga, Olley, & Kola, 2005). The implications are not limited to the individuals themselves but extend to families, communities, and the nation at large. A lack of adequate mental health support can contribute to increased healthcare costs, decreased productivity, and potentially higher rates of crime and substance abuse (Oshodi et al., 2016).

### **Impact of School -related Factors on Mental Health**

Thus, addressing the mental health crisis among Nigerian secondary school students is not just a matter of individual well-being but a crucial societal concern. Addressing school-related factors is of paramount significance when it comes to mental health crisis and suicide risk among Nigerian secondary school students has significant impact in the following ways:

**(i) Impact on Academic Performance:** School-related stressors can significantly affect students' academic performance. When students experience high levels of stress due to factors like excessive workload or competitive environments, their ability to concentrate and learn effectively is compromised ((Adelugba et al., 2021)). This, in turn, can lead to lower academic achievement and decreased motivation to excel in their studies. According to Adelugba, Adebayo, and Adelugba (2021) academic stress is a prevalent issue among Nigerian secondary school students, adversely affecting their academic performance.

**(ii) Emotional Well-being and Self-esteem:** School-related factors can influence students' emotional well-being and self-esteem. For instance, bullying or negative peer interactions can erode a student's self-esteem and contribute to feelings of isolation and depression (Olusanya et al., 2020). Addressing such factors is crucial for maintaining students' mental health, Olusanya et al. (2020) highlighted the detrimental effects of cyber-bullying on the emotional well-being of adolescents in Nigeria.

**(iii) Attendance and Dropout Rates:** A school environment that does not address mental health concerns can lead to increased absenteeism and dropout rates. Students struggling with mental health issues may be more likely to skip school or eventually drop out to escape the stress and pressures they face (Atilola, 2015). Atilola (2015) emphasized the relationship between mental health issues and school dropout rates in Nigeria.

**(iv) Long-term Impact:** Untreated mental health challenges during secondary school can have long-lasting consequences. These challenges can persist into adulthood, affecting individuals' overall well-being, employability, and social functioning ((Gureje et al., 2005)). Consequently, addressing school-related factors is critical for preventing the long-term implications of untreated mental health issues. In their study, Gureje et al. (2005) conducted a community study in Nigeria, finding out the long-term impact of untreated mental health issues.

**(v) Economic and Societal Implications:** Failing to address school-related factors that contribute to the mental health crisis among secondary school learners can have broader economic and societal implications. Increased healthcare costs, decreased productivity, and potentially higher rates of crime and substance abuse are some of the societal consequences ((Oshodi et al., 2016). In a study conducted, Oshodi et al. (2016) investigated substance use among secondary school students in Nigeria and established its implications on the society.

### **Impact of Mental Health on Nigerian Secondary School Students**

The following are the impact of mental health on secondary school students:

**(i) Academic Pressure:** Nigerian students face intense academic pressure due to a competitive education system. The need to excel in examinations, especially, the Senior School Certificate Examinations, can lead to stress, anxiety, and depression among students (Olarewaju & Ojo, 2017).

**(ii) Socio-economic Factors:** Many students come from low-income families, and financial constraints can exacerbate stress and mental health issues. Lack of access to educational resources and a stable home environment can negatively impact students' well-being (Onukwugha & Onukwugha, 2019).

**(iii) Cultural Expectations:** Nigerian culture places a strong emphasis on academic achievement and obedience to authority figures. This can create a sense of pressure and fear of failure among students, contributing to mental health problems (Adeyemo, Ogunwobi, & Sotunde, 2020). Societal norms and expectations regarding gender roles can also contribute to mental health issues, as adolescents may struggle with conforming to these expectations (Good et al., 2012).

**(iv) Bullying and Peer Pressure:** Bullying and peer pressure are prevalent in Nigerian secondary schools. These issues can lead to feelings of isolation and depression among students (Adelabu, 2019). Adolescence is a time when peer relationships become central, and peer

pressure can have a profound impact on mental health. Students may feel pressured to conform to social norms and engage in risky behaviors (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011).

**(v) Lack of Mental Health Services:** Nigeria has a shortage of mental health professionals, and mental health services are often inaccessible or stigmatized. This lack of support makes it challenging for students to seek help for their mental health issues (Gureje et al., 2020). The shortage of school counselors and mental health professionals in educational institutions can also hinder early intervention and support (Schulte-Körne et al., 2016)).

**(vi) Family Environment:** The family environment plays a crucial role in the mental health of secondary school learners. Family conflicts, parental expectations, and unstable family dynamics can contribute to stress and anxiety (Barker et al., 2018). Adolescents from dysfunctional or abusive families may be at a higher risk of developing mental health issues (Barker et al., 2018).

**(vii) Technology and Social Media:** Excessive use of technology and social media platforms can have adverse effects on mental health. Cyberbullying, social comparison, and the pressure to maintain an idealized online image can contribute to anxiety and depression (Twenge & Campbell, 2018). The constant exposure to unrealistic beauty standards and curated lifestyles on social media can negatively impact adolescents' self-esteem (Perloff, 2014).

### **Suicide Risk among Secondary School Students**

Suicide risk among secondary school learners is a complex and concerning issue that has garnered attention from researchers, educators, and mental health professionals. Suicide among learners, particularly adolescents in secondary school settings, is a critical concern with multifaceted factors influencing its occurrence. It is of no doubt a global issue. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), suicide is the second leading cause of death among individuals aged 15 to 29 years worldwide (WHO, 2019). This age group includes many secondary school learners therefore becoming a critical concern with multifaceted factors influencing its occurrence.

Several factors contribute to the heightened risk of suicide among secondary school Students such as:

- (i) Mental Health Issues:** Adolescents may grapple with mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety, or mood disorders, which can significantly increase the risk of suicidal ideation and attempts.
- (ii) Bullying:** Experiences of bullying, whether in person or online, can lead to feelings of isolation and hopelessness, contributing to suicide risk.
- (iii) Academic Pressure:** Intense academic pressure, including high expectations from parents and educators, can create overwhelming stress for students, potentially leading to feelings of inadequacy and despair.
- (iv) Peer Relationships:** Peer relationships play a crucial role during adolescence. Struggles with social isolation, rejection, or conflicts with peers can contribute to suicidal thoughts.

- (v) **Family Dynamics:** Family conflicts, dysfunction, or inadequate support systems can exacerbate an adolescent's vulnerability to suicide.
- (vi) **Substance Abuse:** Substance abuse issues, such as drug or alcohol misuse, are often intertwined with mental health challenges and can increase the risk of self-harm.
- (vii) **Access to Means:** Easy access to lethal means, such as firearms or medications, can escalate the risk of successful suicide attempts.
- (viii) **Lack of Awareness and Support:** Stigmatization of mental health issues and a lack of awareness about available support resources can prevent learners from seeking help when needed.

### **Strategies for Preventing Mental Health and Suicide Risks among Secondary School Students**

Preventing mental health issues and suicide risks among secondary school students require a multifaceted approach that involves various stakeholders, including educators, parents, mental health professionals, and policymakers. Here are some evidence-based strategies:

- (i) **Mental Health Education and Awareness Programmes** Implement comprehensive mental health education programmes within secondary schools. If awareness programmes are organized, learners stand the chance to benefit and come to the knowledge of managing their mental issues.
- (ii) **Early Detection and Screening:** When regular conduct of mental health screenings are done, it enables identification of learners at risk of mental health issues. When mental issues are discovered early, solution would be sort to combat further development.
- (iii) **Accessible Counseling Services:** Schools should have reliable and functional counseling services which should also be accessible to learners to discuss their issues with the Counselors.
- (iv) **Anti-Bullying Programmes:** Schools should provide a framework for and implement anti-bullying programmes that create a safe and inclusive school environment.
- (v) **Peer Support and Mentoring:** Schools should establish peer support programmes and mentoring initiatives that connect students with trusted peers or adults.
- (vi) **Parent and Community Involvement:** Parents should be engaged in the quest to solve mental health issues as it affects their wards. The community should also be enlisted in activities tailored towards improving mental health of learners.
- (vii) **Training for Educators:** There should be training for educators on recognizing signs of mental health issues, suicide risk, and how to respond effectively.
- (viii) **Reducing Academic Pressure:** Academic pressure of learners should be reduced. The whole academic process should be reviewed such that the pressured areas should be re-worked to lessen academic burden on the part of the learners.

- (ix) **Encouraging Physical Activity and Healthy Lifestyles:** Promote physical activity and healthy lifestyle among learners. Regular exercise would promote mental health and keep them fit.

Incorporating these strategies into the educational system can help create a supportive and nurturing environment that reduces the risk of mental health issues and suicide among secondary school learners. However, if the above are not properly and adequately managed, the following can constitute hindrances to solutions to solving learners' mental challenges:

(i) **Under-reporting of Mental Health Issues:** Under-reporting and stigmatization of mental health issues among secondary school learners is a significant concern that has been documented in numerous studies. This phenomenon can have detrimental effects on the well-being of students and hinder their access to appropriate support and treatment. Secondary school students often under-report their mental health problems due to various factors, including fear of stigma and discrimination (Eisenberg et al., 2007). According to a study by Gulliver et al. (2010), approximately 70% of adolescents with mental health issues do not seek help or report their problems to anyone. This under-reporting can be attributed to a lack of awareness about mental health issues and available resources (Gulliver et al., 2010).

(ii) **Stigmatization of Mental Health Issues:** Stigmatization of mental health issues is prevalent among secondary school students, and it often leads to social exclusion and discrimination (Corrigan et al., 2010). Studies have shown that stigma related to mental health can prevent students from seeking help or disclosing their struggles (Corrigan et al., 2010). Negative stereotypes about mental illness persist in schools, which contribute to the stigmatization of affected students (Pescosolido et al., 2010).

(iii) **Barriers to Seeking Help:** The fear of being labeled as "mentally ill" can deter students from seeking help for their mental health issues (Eisenberg et al., 2007). Stigma also affects how teachers and peers perceive students with mental health problems, making it difficult for affected individuals to discuss their issues openly (Pescosolido et al., 2010).

## Conclusions

In examining school-related factors in secondary school learners' mental health and suicide risks in Nigeria, this paper underscores the critical importance of addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by students within the educational system. Our analysis has demonstrated that schools can serve as both a source of stress and a potential solution. By implementing evidence-based strategies, such as mental health education, accessible counselling services, and anti-bullying programs, schools can create an environment that fosters well-being and resilience. Also, the collaboration of various stakeholders, including educators, parents, mental health professionals, and policymakers, is essential for effective prevention and support initiatives. In conclusion, calls for a holistic approach that recognizes the interconnectedness of school-related factors and their impact on students' well-being.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations have been offered:

1. **Conduct Further Research:** Conduct more extensive and comprehensive research to delve deeper into the specific school-related factors affecting secondary school learners' mental health and suicide risk in Nigeria. This may include longitudinal studies to track the long-term effects of these factors.
2. **Evaluate Existing Mental Health Programmes:** Evaluate the effectiveness of existing mental health programmes and initiatives in Nigerian secondary schools. Assess their impact on students' mental well-being and identify areas for improvement.
3. **Develop Culturally Tailored Interventions:** Create culturally sensitive mental health interventions that consider the unique socio cultural context of Nigeria. These programmes should be designed to resonate with local beliefs, practices, and values.
4. **Strengthen Teacher Training:** Enhance teacher training programmes to equip educators with the skills and knowledge necessary to recognize signs of mental distress in students and provide appropriate support. This includes training on effective communication and referral to mental health professionals.
5. **Enhance Accessibility of Counseling Services:** Improve the accessibility of school-based counselling services by increasing the number of trained counsellors and ensuring students are aware of and comfortable using these services.
6. **Raise Awareness and Reduce Stigma:** Education authorities should launch nationwide awareness campaigns to reduce the stigma associated with mental health issues and suicide. These campaigns should target students, parents, teachers, and the wider community.
7. **Encourage Parental Involvement:** Promote parental involvement in their children's education and mental well-being. Organize workshops and seminars for parents to learn about identifying and addressing mental health concerns in their children.
8. **Policy Advocacy:** Government advocate for policy changes at the national and state levels to allocate resources and funding for mental health services in schools. Policies should prioritize mental health education and support.
9. **Establish Supportive School Environments:** Encourage schools to create supportive and inclusive environments where students feel safe and valued. This includes implementing anti-bullying policies and programs.
10. **Collaborative Efforts:** Government should Foster collaboration among schools, mental health professionals, local communities, and government agencies to address mental health and suicide risks comprehensively. Building partnerships can lead to more effective interventions.

11. Long-Term Monitoring and Evaluation: Implement a system for long-term monitoring and evaluation of mental health initiatives to assess their impact over time and make necessary adjustments.

12. Research Disparities: - Investigate any disparities in mental health and suicide risk among different demographic groups within Nigerian secondary schools, such as gender, socioeconomic status, and urban/rural locations.

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