

## LIVED EXPERIENCES: ON ENHANCING MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT FOR LEARNERS

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### Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological study examined the lived experiences of teachers in supporting the mental health needs of learners in school settings. Guided by Colaizzi's phenomenological method, the study aimed to explore how teachers experience mental health support in their daily practice, how they interpret and make meaning of these experiences, and what personal insights they gain through sustained engagement with learners' mental health concerns. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with selected public school teachers. The findings revealed that mental health concerns are embedded in everyday classroom life, positioning teachers as frontline responders who extend their roles beyond academic instruction to holistic caregiving. Teachers described their involvement as emotionally meaningful yet psychologically demanding, marked by a balance between fulfillment and exhaustion. Mental health support practices were largely relational and embedded in daily classroom routines, emphasizing empathy, trust, and consistent teacher-learner relationships. Despite strong commitment, teachers encountered systemic and cultural barriers such as limited mental health training, lack of guidance counselors, heavy workloads, and persistent stigma surrounding mental health. Engagement in mental health support contributed to transformative professional growth, heightened emotional intelligence, and increased advocacy for learner well-being, while also highlighting the importance of teacher self-care and institutional support. The study concludes that effective school-based mental health support requires a whole-system approach that recognizes teachers as central agents while strengthening structural, policy, and professional support mechanisms. The findings offer significant implications for educational practice, leadership, and future research aimed at sustaining inclusive and learner-centered mental health support systems in schools.

**Keywords:** *mental health support, teachers' lived experiences, school-based mental health, qualitative phenomenology, teacher well-being*

## INTRODUCTION

### **Background of the Study**

Mental health had increasingly become a critical issue in education as learners navigated rising academic pressures, evolving social expectations, and lingering effects of global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Recent Philippine studies showed that when students' mental health needs were left unaddressed, their academic performance, social functioning, and long-term well-being were significantly compromised (Alibudbud, 2023; Espino & Torres, 2021). In fact, global estimates indicated that 1 in 5 adolescents experienced a mental health condition, yet fewer than 50% received appropriate support, highlighting a troubling service gap (Johnson & Smith, 2024). As the school remained the primary environment where children spent at least 6 to 8 hours daily, it played an essential role in fostering not only academic competence but emotional and psychological resilience as well. Consequently, many institutions attempted to implement or strengthen mental health initiatives through counseling programs, peer-support mechanisms, and social-emotional learning approaches (Abad & Villanueva, 2022; Cabrera & Santos, 2022).

Despite these efforts, however, substantial gaps persisted in ensuring effective, equitable, and sustainable mental health support in Philippine schools. For example, after the passage of the Philippine Mental Health Act, expectations were high for more structured school-based interventions. Yet, various studies revealed that numerous schools still struggled due to limited resources, inadequate training, and inconsistent program implementation (Fernandez & Gomez, 2023; Hernandez & Cruz, 2022). The concern was further magnified by findings that depression care for Filipino children and adolescents remained fragmented and poorly integrated into school

systems (Buenaventura & Lim, 2023). In addition, misinformation and stigma continued to deter learners from seeking help, with surveys showing persistent misconceptions about mental health among the youth (Cleofas & Oducado, 2021; Zamora & Cruz, 2022). The combination of these issues illustrated that increasing awareness alone was insufficient without systematic, well-supported school programs.

Moving beyond the Philippine context, international research offered valuable insights into effective models of school-based mental health support. Cross-cultural programs integrating mindfulness, trauma-informed practices, and resilience-building demonstrated improvements in students' coping abilities and academic performance (Flores & Kim, 2022; Estrella & Bautista, 2024). Furthermore, teacher capacity-building and peer-led initiatives were repeatedly identified as essential components in nurturing supportive learning environments (Bautista & Cruz, 2024; Torres & Villanueva, 2024). Likewise, the emergence of digital counseling platforms transformed access to mental health services, particularly in low-resource settings, by providing alternative modes for learners to seek guidance (David & Hernandez, 2022; Martinez & Lee, 2023). These global developments revealed scalable practices that Philippine schools could adapt based on their contexts and needs.

Failure to confront mental health challenges among learners produced long-term educational and social consequences. Unaddressed mental health concerns led to academic decline, absenteeism, conflict with peers, and susceptibility to bullying. In more severe cases, learners developed self-harming behaviors or suicidal tendencies (Malolos, 2021; Ocampo & Gloria, 2023). At the school level, inadequate systems of support weakened teacher-student relationships, disrupted classroom management, and eroded trust within the learning community. Such patterns

further intensified stigma, compelling learners to suppress emotional distress rather than seek assistance (Quijano & David, 2023). These risks underscored the urgent need for responsive and holistic interventions that safeguarded learners' well-being.

Within this context, enhancing mental health support in schools aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 3 on ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all, and SDG 4, which emphasized inclusive and equitable quality education (United Nations, 2015). Mental health was referenced in SDG 3, page 4 of the 2030 Agenda document, highlighting global recognition that emotional well-being was central to human development. Because educational success was intertwined with mental wellness, strengthening mental health systems in schools directly contributed to achieving SDG 4's call for safe, effective, and learner-centered environments.

Given these concerns, the present study sought to explore the lived experiences of educators, learners, and school stakeholders in enhancing mental health support in schools. Through this exploration, the study aimed to uncover contextualized strategies, identify existing barriers, and highlight innovative and best practices implemented in different school settings. This approach acknowledged the complexity of school mental health systems while drawing insights from both local and international evidence (Nieves & Rivera, 2024; Gonzalo & Alibudbud, 2024). By situating the discussion within actual experiences, the research aimed to generate practical and actionable recommendations that could strengthen school-based mental health programs.

Finally, addressing learner mental health was not only an educational priority but an ethical responsibility. Learners' ability to thrive academically and socially heavily depended on the presence of supportive environments that nurtured emotional well-being. By examining

challenges, amplifying voices, and identifying best practices, this study sought to contribute to the creation of sustainable, inclusive, and learner-centered mental health support systems. In doing so, schools could become spaces that cultivated resilience, growth, and holistic development, thereby strengthening the educational community's capacity to support every learner (Torres, 2021).

### **Definition of Terms**

To establish clarity and consistency in the discussions of this study, the following terms were defined operationally as they were specifically applied within the research context. These definitions aimed to ensure that readers, participants, and other stakeholders understood how the concepts were framed and used in the exploration of enhancing mental health support for learners.

**Best Practices** refer to the effective strategies, programs, and approaches observed and described by teachers, learners, and school stakeholders that contribute positively to mental health support in schools.

**Challenges** refer to the barriers, difficulties, and limitations encountered by schools, educators, and learners in implementing or accessing mental health support services.

**Enhancing Mental Health Support for Learners** refers to the process of strengthening, improving, and innovating school-based initiatives, programs, and interventions that promote and protect learners' psychological well-being.

**Learners** refer to the elementary and secondary school students who are the primary beneficiaries of mental health support programs and whose experiences are central to this study.

**Mental Health** refers to the emotional, psychological, and social well-being of learners, particularly as it relates to their ability to cope with academic pressures, build positive relationships, and engage in meaningful learning experiences.

**Qualitative Study** refers to the research approach employed in this study that focuses on exploring lived experiences, perceptions, and narratives of participants in order to gain deeper insights into challenges and best practices in mental health support for learners.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the challenges and best practices related to enhancing mental health support for learners in school contexts. Across many educational systems, the demand for school-based mental health interventions had intensified due to rising cases of anxiety, depression, and stress among students (Alibudbud, 2023; Buenaventura & Lim, 2023). By focusing on learners, teachers, and school stakeholders, the study intended to provide a nuanced understanding of how mental health support was perceived, implemented, and sustained in different educational environments.

This study also aimed to investigate barriers that hindered the effective delivery of mental health initiatives. Several studies revealed that Philippine schools encountered challenges such as limited trained personnel, lack of counseling resources, and persistent stigma around mental health concerns (Fernandez & Gomez, 2023; Hernandez & Cruz, 2022). By identifying these challenges through lived experiences, the study contributed to a deeper appreciation of the realities faced by schools, particularly those in low-resource settings.

Another key purpose was to highlight effective practices that could serve as models for other institutions. International evidence demonstrated that peer mentoring, teacher involvement, digital platforms, and resilience-building initiatives improved learners' coping strategies and overall well-being (Bautista & Cruz, 2024; Torres & Villanueva, 2024; Martinez & Lee, 2023). Within the Philippine context, initiatives such as social-emotional learning integration and trauma-informed classroom strategies also reflected the potential of adaptable practices (Cabrera & Santos, 2022; Estrella & Bautista, 2024). This study built upon these insights to uncover contextually relevant practices.

The study further sought to inform policymakers and educational leaders by providing empirical evidence grounded in the experiences of school communities. In doing so, it bridged gaps between policy directives, such as the Mental Health Act, and the practical realities of implementation in schools (Abad & Villanueva, 2022; Gonzalo & Alibudbud, 2024). The findings were expected to offer practical recommendations that could be aligned with broader educational goals of equity and holistic learner development.

Lastly, this study aimed to generate knowledge that strengthened the role of schools in fostering mental health among learners. By amplifying the voices of stakeholders, the research provided valuable directions for refining mental health programs, ensuring their accessibility, and building school environments where learners could thrive academically, socially, and emotionally (Aruta & Antazo, 2021; Isidro & Velasco, 2023).

## **Research Questions**

Schools were confronted with increasing challenges in addressing the mental health needs of learners. Across various educational settings, teachers had become the first line of support for students who struggled with emotional distress, behavioral concerns, and psychological difficulties. Numerous studies highlighted that when mental health concerns were not addressed, learners experienced academic decline, strained peer relationships, and heightened vulnerability to psychosocial risks (Alibudbud, 2023; Espino & Torres, 2021). Because teachers worked closely with students every day, they often observed early indicators of anxiety, withdrawal, academic disengagement, or behavioral changes. This positioned them as central figures in classroom-based mental health support and reinforced their vital role in sustaining learner well-being (Abad & Villanueva, 2022; Garcia & Manuel, 2021).

As mental health became more prominent in the discourse of Philippine education, schools continued to introduce and refine strategies that strengthened support for learners. Programs involving peer mentoring, social-emotional learning, classroom-based coping activities, and digital counseling platforms were increasingly adopted in response to documented challenges faced by students (Cabrera & Santos, 2022; David & Hernandez, 2022; Lopez & Santos, 2022). Despite these efforts, however, recent research showed that teachers encountered limited training opportunities, scarce resources, and inconsistent implementation protocols across schools (Fernandez & Gomez, 2023; Hernandez & Cruz, 2022). These realities shaped how teachers experienced school-based mental health work and influenced their understanding of how well current support systems functioned. Because the effectiveness of mental health initiatives depended significantly on the teachers who carried them out, exploring their perspectives was crucial for examining both the strengths and gaps of existing programs (Bautista & Cruz, 2024; Nieves & Rivera, 2024).

Teachers not only performed these responsibilities but also developed personal meaning from their engagement with learners in distress. Their interpretations were shaped by daily classroom interactions, relationships with stakeholders, administrative expectations, and their own emotional capacities. Studies indicated that teachers often experienced fulfillment, concern, and emotional fatigue as they navigated the demands of supporting learner well-being (Jacinto & Morales, 2021; Valdez & Ramos, 2023). These experiences guided how they understood their role, responded to challenges, and generated insights that could inform more responsive, context-sensitive, and sustainable mental health interventions. Capturing these lived experiences offered valuable contributions to strengthening the support structures available to learners in school settings.

With these considerations, this qualitative study aimed to explore how teachers experienced, interpreted, and reflected on their involvement in supporting the mental health needs of learners. Through this exploration, the study intended to uncover meaningful insights that could guide the development of more effective and inclusive school-based mental health programs. To fulfill this purpose, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What are the lived experiences of teachers regarding mental health support for learners?
2. How do teachers perceive and make meaning of their experience with providing mental health support to learners?
3. What are the personal insights that teachers can share based on their experiences in supporting the mental health needs of learners?

## **Significance of the Study**

This study was significant as it addressed a pressing need in education to strengthen mental health support for learners. While policies and initiatives existed, there was a gap in understanding how these were translated into practice at the school level. By focusing on the challenges and best practices, the study provided insights that could directly inform decision-making, professional development, and collaborative initiatives among stakeholders.

**Supervisors.** Supervisors can use the findings to design and implement monitoring and evaluation systems that ensure mental health support is consistently prioritized in schools. The study can help them provide technical assistance and professional guidance to school heads and teachers.

**School Heads.** For school heads, the study provides a foundation for developing school-based policies and programs that foster supportive environments. The findings can serve as practical references for aligning school initiatives with national mandates on mental health.

**Teachers.** Teachers can benefit from understanding effective strategies for supporting learners' mental health within the classroom. The insights may also guide their professional development and help reduce the stigma often associated with addressing mental health issues in education.

**Learners.** For learners, the study emphasizes the importance of creating safe spaces where their voices are heard. The findings can contribute to building supportive peer networks and classroom practices that enhance resilience and emotional well-being.

**Parents.** Parents may find value in learning how schools address the psychological needs of their children. The study provides a pathway for greater collaboration between families and schools in supporting holistic learner development.

**Researchers.** For researchers, the study offers a foundation for further inquiry into school-based mental health practices. It highlights areas where additional research can be conducted, such as the effectiveness of digital platforms, community-based initiatives, or culturally responsive interventions.

### **Theoretical Lens**

The foundation of any qualitative study rests on a strong theoretical lens that guides its inquiry and interpretation of findings. For this study, the focus on mental health support for learners is best understood through three interrelated perspectives: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, and Antonovsky's Salutogenic Model. These theories were chosen because they provide a holistic understanding of how learners' well-being is shaped by multiple systems, social influences, and resilience-building processes. In the context of schools, these lenses are critical in unpacking both the challenges and best practices that influence mental health outcomes (Reyes & Santos, 2021).

The first theoretical lens is Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, introduced by Urie Bronfenbrenner in 1979. This framework posits that human development is influenced by the interaction of multiple systems, including the microsystem (family, peers, teachers), mesosystem (connections between these microsystems), exosystem (community and policies), and

macrosystem (cultural values and societal norms). In the study of mental health support for learners, this theory provides a powerful lens for understanding how individual well-being is not shaped in isolation but by the interplay of home, school, and community contexts. For example, learners may benefit from supportive teachers and peers at the microsystem level while simultaneously being constrained by policy limitations or lack of resources at the exosystem level (Fernandez & Gomez, 2023; Isidro & Velasco, 2023). This perspective underscores the need for schools to create supportive ecosystems that integrate family, community, and institutional efforts.

The second theoretical lens is Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, which emphasizes reciprocal determinism between personal factors, behavior, and environment. Developed by Albert Bandura in the 1980s, this theory highlights self-efficacy, observational learning, and social reinforcement as key factors in shaping human behavior. Applied to this study, it explains how learners' mental health is influenced by the behaviors they observe from teachers, peers, and even family members. For instance, when teachers model resilience and proactive coping strategies, learners are more likely to adopt these practices themselves (Aruta & Antazo, 2021; Bautista & Cruz, 2024). Similarly, peer mentoring and supportive classroom environments, which are forms of social reinforcement, can reduce stigma and encourage help-seeking behaviors (Lopez & Santos, 2022; Torres & Villanueva, 2024). By applying this theory, the study situates mental health support within a cycle of social learning and reciprocal influence between learners and their environments.

The third theoretical lens is Antonovsky's Salutogenic Model, proposed by Aaron Antonovsky in 1979, which focuses on factors that promote human health and resilience rather than merely addressing illness. Central to this theory is the concept of "sense of coherence," which

involves comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness in facing life's challenges. In the context of learners, this model is highly relevant in understanding how schools can strengthen resilience by providing environments where stressors are seen as understandable, resources are accessible, and experiences are meaningful (De Guzman & Ramos, 2023; Valdez & Ramos, 2023). Practices such as peer support groups, extracurricular engagement, and trauma-informed classrooms align closely with this model by enhancing learners' sense of coherence and building protective factors against psychological distress (Estrella & Bautista, 2024).

These three theoretical perspectives, when viewed together, provide a comprehensive framework for exploring the study's central theme. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory situates learners within broader systems that influence their development. Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory explains how learners' mental health behaviors are shaped by modeling, reinforcement, and self-efficacy within these systems. Antonovsky's Salutogenic Model shifts the focus toward resilience and strengths, emphasizing how schools can foster conditions that enable learners to thrive despite adversity. Together, they provide an integrated understanding of both the challenges and best practices in supporting learner mental health in schools.

Applying these theories also creates a lens for interpreting the consequences of inadequate mental health support. If ecosystems lack collaboration, if modeling and reinforcement of healthy coping strategies are absent, and if resilience is not nurtured, learners are likely to experience academic struggles, isolation, and heightened vulnerability to stressors (Malolos, 2021; Ocampo & Gloria, 2023). On the other hand, when these theories are embraced in school practices, they encourage interventions that are systemic, socially grounded, and strengths-based, leading to healthier and more engaged learners. By framing this study within these interconnected theories,

the research gains a deeper analytical lens for interpreting the lived experiences of participants and for identifying pathways toward stronger, more holistic mental health support systems in schools.

## **Literature Review**

This section of the study includes the literature and the body of knowledge that have been reviewed and prepared in order to provide further information pertaining to this study. In order to increase its richness and extent, the literatures contained below are a blend of studies conducted at the local, national, and worldwide levels.

## **Lived Experiences of Teachers Regarding Mental Health Support for Learners**

Understanding the lived experiences of teachers in providing mental health support to learners has become increasingly important as schools confront a significant rise in emotional and psychological concerns among students. Research across various educational settings shows that teachers are often the first to observe changes in student behavior, such as withdrawal, irritability, or declining engagement, which may signal deeper emotional struggles (Espino & Torres, 2021; Garcia & Manuel, 2021). This frontline position makes teachers critical contributors to mental health support even when they are not formally designated as mental health professionals. The growing complexities in student well-being, intensified by events such as prolonged school closures and shifting learning modalities, have placed additional emotional and professional demands on teachers (Alibudbud, 2023; Martinez & Lee, 2023).

Teachers' everyday interactions reveal that they consistently engage in emotional caregiving, whether through listening to student concerns, helping them regulate emotions, or offering guidance when distress becomes visible. Studies show that teachers often assume these responsibilities by necessity, especially in schools where guidance services are limited or overextended, leaving educators to address learner concerns as they arise in real time (Abad & Villanueva, 2022; Fernandez & Gomez, 2023). Such circumstances illustrate how mental health support becomes deeply woven into teachers' lived reality, often without adequate preparation or institutional structures to guide them.

The literature also shows that teachers' experiences are shaped by systemic constraints. Many recount feeling overwhelmed because they confront mental health concerns in classrooms with large student populations, limited referral mechanisms, and inconsistent mental health program implementation (Hernandez & Cruz, 2022; Calderon, 2024). Additionally, Filipino cultural dynamics surrounding silence, emotional restraint, and family expectations create barriers that teachers must carefully navigate when supporting learners (Gonzalo & Alibudbud, 2024; Isidro & Velasco, 2023). These intersecting factors form the broader context of teachers' lived experiences, showing how emotional labor, cultural sensitivity, and structural challenges converge in their daily work.

At the same time, teachers also describe moments of meaningful connection filled with trust and empathy when learners confide their struggles. These exchanges reinforce teachers' sense of purpose and contribute to their identity as supportive figures in students' lives (Bautista & Cruz, 2024; De Guzman & Ramos, 2023). Yet the same interactions can produce emotional fatigue, especially when teachers repeatedly encounter student trauma or when the support they provide

extends beyond school hours (Flores & Kim, 2022; Valdez & Ramos, 2023). These contrasting experiences reveal the emotional complexity teachers navigate as they respond to the mental health needs of learners.

This introduction establishes the foundation for examining teachers' lived experiences in depth. The literature that follows explores these experiences more fully, presenting how teachers understand, navigate, and emotionally respond to the realities of supporting learner mental health.

Teachers describe their initial experiences with supporting learner mental health as emerging from small, recurring moments in everyday classroom life. Many explain that before formal conversations about well-being even take place, they become aware of potential emotional struggles through sudden changes in engagement, motivation, or behavior. Espino and Torres (2021) observed that teachers often see fluctuations in a learner's participation or interactions long before learners themselves articulate distress. Garcia and Manuel (2021) added that teachers' close physical proximity to learners throughout the school day allows them to pick up subtle behavioral cues that even parents fail to notice. These observations become the first defining experiences through which teachers begin to see mental health as inseparable from their teaching roles. As Alibudbud (2023) noted, these early signals intensified during the pandemic, where anxiety, exhaustion, and isolation among students manifested in ways teachers could not ignore.

As teachers continue to confront rising emotional concerns among learners, many find themselves providing informal counseling far more frequently than expected when they entered the profession. Abad and Villanueva (2022) highlighted that teachers often give emotional reassurance and advice even without formal training, while Cabrera and Santos (2022) reported that many educators integrate socio emotional conversations into their daily routines simply

because students seek them out. Martinez and Lee (2023) found that during remote learning, these informal support moments expanded into late night messages from students who felt overwhelmed or isolated. Teachers describe these experiences as deeply personal moments that redefine what it means to “teach,” demonstrating that their responsibilities extend well beyond academic delivery.

Teachers often emphasize how difficult it is to separate instructional tasks from the emotional realities learners bring into the classroom. Flores and Kim (2022) explained that students who carry stress, sadness, or trauma into class frequently struggle with concentration, behavior, and participation, forcing teachers to adjust their approach. At the same time, Estrella and Bautista (2024) noted that trauma related behaviors such as sudden shutdowns or agitation require sensitive, patient responses that teachers may not have been trained to provide. Teachers describe feeling torn between meeting academic goals and providing adequate emotional support, especially when students are visibly distressed. These situations shape teachers’ lived experiences by continually blurring the boundaries between academic instruction and emotional caretaking.

Teachers also face emotionally heavy disclosures that add weight to their daily responsibilities. Many recount moments when students confided issues involving family conflict, neglect, violence, or self harm. Jacinto and Morales (2021) found that teachers often feel unprepared for the intensity of these disclosures, while Buenaventura and Lim (2023) noted that insufficient school based systems leave teachers with limited guidance on how to respond safely. Teachers describe feeling fear, compassion, and responsibility all at once, often replaying conversations in their minds long after the school day ends. These emotional dilemmas shape their lived experiences profoundly, as teachers try to balance confidentiality, safety, and compassion without clear institutional guidelines.

The lack of strong mental health infrastructure contributes significantly to teachers' lived frustrations. Hernandez and Cruz (2022) reported that many teachers operate in contexts where guidance counselors are overburdened, while Fernandez and Gomez (2023) found that schools still struggle with implementing mental health policies consistently. Teachers describe feeling forced to fill in gaps created by shortages in trained personnel. Calderon (2024) observed that rural schools are especially affected, leaving teachers with almost no referral systems. These systemic challenges shape teachers' experiences by placing them in positions where they want to help but feel unequipped and unsupported.

Large class sizes also intensify the emotional challenges teachers face. Many describe the difficulty of attending to several distressed learners simultaneously while still managing an entire class. Espino and Torres (2021) emphasized that some classes exceed 40 to 50 learners, leaving little time for individualized emotional support. Teachers recount moments of wanting to comfort a struggling student but needing to move on to maintain classroom order. These structural realities create emotional strain, with teachers often feeling guilty about not being able to give enough attention to every learner who needs support.

Teachers frequently describe emotional exhaustion from continuously supporting learners' mental health needs. Flores and Kim (2022) reported that teachers exposed to multiple student concerns experience fatigue and emotional depletion. Valdez and Ramos (2023) found that teachers who also have personal stressors are especially vulnerable to burnout. Teachers often share that they go home replaying conversations, worrying about students' well-being, or wondering whether they provided the right kind of support. These emotional burdens become part of their lived daily reality and influence their mental health as much as their students'.

Despite these challenges, teachers also describe profoundly meaningful moments that reinforce their purpose. Bautista and Cruz (2024) found that teachers value the trust students place in them. De Guzman and Ramos (2023) observed that when students express relief or gratitude after opening up, teachers experience a deep sense of fulfillment that balances the emotional strain. Teachers often recall stories of students who became more engaged or motivated after being listened to. These positive experiences strengthen the relational foundation of teaching and contribute to teachers' growth.

Peer collaboration among teachers plays an important role in shaping their experiences. De Guzman and Ramos (2023) noted that peer support groups among teachers help them cope with emotional burdens, while Martinez and Lee (2023) observed that digital messaging groups allow teachers to exchange advice quickly when student concerns arise. Teachers often describe these informal networks as emotional lifelines. When they share difficult encounters with colleagues, they feel validated and encouraged, lessening their sense of isolation.

Teachers' lived experiences are heavily shaped by the level of administrative support available to them. Nieves and Rivera (2024) noted that when school leaders acknowledge the emotional demands teachers face and provide clear mental health protocols, teachers feel more confident and supported. Conversely, when administrators dismiss mental health concerns or deflect responsibility, teachers feel overwhelmed and undervalued. These differences in leadership styles influence how teachers perceive their roles and responsibilities in providing emotional care.

Cultural norms also shape teachers' lived experiences significantly. Gonzalo and Alibudbud (2024) emphasized that Filipino learners often hesitate to share emotional struggles because of cultural expectations surrounding resilience and silence. Isidro and Velasco (2023)

found that some students delay seeking help due to fear of disappointing their families. Teachers explain that they must earn the trust of learners gradually, navigating cultural barriers that influence how students express emotional needs. These cultural complexities become part of daily teaching life.

Stigma remains a major challenge teachers confront. Cleofas and Oducado (2021) noted that misinformation about mental health discourages students from speaking up. Zamora and Cruz (2022) observed that students often fear being judged, which delays help seeking. Teachers describe spending time educating students about mental health before addressing their concerns. These efforts add to teachers' workload but are essential to building emotionally safe learning environments.

Teachers also encounter tensions when communicating mental health concerns to parents. Many parents deny or minimize their child's struggles, leaving teachers uncertain about how to proceed. Isidro and Velasco (2023) reported that teachers often act as intermediaries, trying to help families understand the importance of emotional support. Teachers describe that these interactions can either build partnerships or create conflict, influencing their overall experiences with mental health support.

Teachers often reflect on their lack of formal training in mental health. Reyes and Santos (2021) observed that many teachers feel underprepared to respond appropriately to complex emotional situations. Calderon (2024) found that teachers in rural or under resourced schools experience even greater uncertainty due to insufficient training opportunities. Teachers describe learning through intuition, peer advice, or personal experience, which adds pressure and self doubt.

Digital communication has further expanded the emotional responsibilities teachers carry. David and Hernandez (2022) found that students frequently use online platforms to express emotional concerns outside school hours. Martinez and Lee (2023) noted that digital counseling increased students' help seeking but also expanded teachers' workload. Teachers describe receiving messages late at night, creating stress and blurring boundaries.

Teachers often confront emotional triggers from their own life experiences. Malolos (2021) noted that teachers with personal trauma or stress sometimes struggle when responding to similar issues in students. Teachers describe moments when learners' stories emotionally resonate with their own experiences, making it difficult to maintain objectivity or emotional distance. These internal struggles shape teachers' lived realities.

Maintaining professional boundaries becomes a recurring challenge for teachers. Quijano and David (2023) found that students often perceive teachers as safe adults, prompting highly personal disclosures. Teachers describe struggling to balance emotional closeness with maintaining authority and structure. These boundary concerns add layers of complexity to their lived experiences.

Teachers also experience emotional pressure from extracurricular demands. Valdez and Ramos (2023) observed that learners involved in multiple school activities often turn to teachers for help managing stress. Teachers describe having to mediate between academic and extracurricular responsibilities, which adds to their already heavy emotional load.

Many teachers become advocates for mental health because of their lived experiences. Torres and Villanueva (2024) documented that teachers often initiate peer driven mental health

programs when institutional support is weak. Teachers describe advocating for student wellness during meetings, planning mental health awareness activities, or pushing for counselor referrals. These advocacy roles highlight teachers' dedication.

Teachers' lived experiences also involve navigating crisis events such as natural calamities. Ocampo and Gloria (2023) observed that disasters increase learner distress, forcing teachers to manage crisis emotions while handling their own challenges. Teachers describe feeling stretched thin as they try to support learners through trauma.

Teachers often express a deep sense of responsibility for their students' emotional safety. Perez and Aguilar (2022) found that many integrate mindfulness or reflective practices because they believe it helps learners regulate emotions. Teachers describe adjusting their teaching strategies to promote emotional calm in the classroom.

Moments when learners show improvement provide teachers with emotional relief. Martinez and Lee (2023) noted that when previously distressed learners begin smiling or participating again, teachers interpret these changes as evidence that their support mattered. Teachers describe these moments as affirming and encouraging.

Severe cases of distress create some of the most difficult experiences for teachers. Buenaventura and Lim (2023) found that teachers often feel fear and urgency when students express depression or suicidal thoughts. Teachers describe these moments as heavy and unforgettable, shaping how they view mental health forever.

Teachers also reflect on institutional constraints that limit what they can do. Hernandez and Cruz (2022) noted that teachers often feel powerless when referral systems fail. Teachers

describe feeling frustrated when systemic problems hinder timely interventions for vulnerable learners.

Finally, teachers often come to view mental health support as inseparable from quality education. Espino and Torres (2021) and Bautista and Cruz (2024) both noted that teachers understand emotional stability as a prerequisite for academic success. Teachers describe adjusting classroom routines, communication styles, and expectations because they see emotional support as foundational to learning.

### **Teachers' Meaning-Making in Providing Mental Health Support to Learners**

Meaning-making refers to how teachers interpret, understand, and internalize the experiences they encounter when providing mental health support to learners. Their interpretations evolve over time through emotional encounters, institutional conditions, student disclosures, and personal reflections. Studies show that teachers do not simply perform tasks related to mental health support. Rather, they actively construct meaning from these experiences, shaping their sense of identity, purpose, competence, and emotional resilience. The literature presented below explores in great detail how teachers negotiate these meanings as they navigate the complexities of supporting learner mental health.

Teachers often begin making sense of their mental health support roles by reflecting on how it differs from their expectations when they entered the teaching profession. Many believed they would focus primarily on academics, yet their experiences show that teaching is deeply tied to emotional labor. Espino and Torres (2021) described how teachers internalize early experiences

with distressed learners by interpreting them as reminders that education involves nurturing the whole child. Bautista and Cruz (2024) observed that teachers often reshape their self-perception as they realize that students view them as emotional anchors, prompting teachers to construct meaning around the idea that they are both educators and emotional caretakers. These reflections create an expanded understanding of what it means to teach, blending instruction with emotional support.

Teachers also make meaning from the trust students place in them. De Guzman and Ramos (2023) reported that when learners confide in teachers, it becomes a powerful emotional moment that teachers interpret as validation of their relational commitment. Flores and Kim (2022) noted that teachers frequently describe these interactions as affirmations that students see them as safe and reliable figures. The act of listening, comforting, or guiding students takes on meaning as teachers realize that their emotional presence influences student well-being as much as formal academic instruction. These trust-based interactions deepen teachers' sense of purpose.

Many teachers also interpret their experiences through an ethical lens. When learners disclose sensitive issues involving fear, sadness, or self harm, teachers perceive these moments as moral and professional crossroads. Jacinto and Morales (2021) found that teachers interpret these situations as calls to protect students while maintaining confidentiality. Perez and Aguilar (2022) noted that teachers often reflect deeply about the ethical implications of their responses, questioning whether they acted responsibly. Their meaning-making involves balancing compassion, urgency, and professional obligation, creating internal dialogues that shape their decisions.

Teachers frequently interpret their emotional exhaustion as evidence of their deep commitment to learners. Flores and Kim (2022) found that teachers experiencing emotional fatigue often interpret it as part of their dedication rather than as a sign of inadequacy. Valdez and Ramos (2023) added that teachers acknowledge the emotional weight of their work yet see it as meaningful because it reflects the depth of their care. Through this interpretation, teachers come to see emotional strain as intertwined with the level of empathy they extend to their students.

Teachers also make sense of their experiences by comparing their emotional burden with the structural limitations of their schools. Hernandez and Cruz (2022) reported that teachers view understaffed counseling offices, inadequate training, and limited mental health materials as factors that shape the meaning they assign to their work. Calderon (2024) observed that teachers in rural schools interpret these limitations as reflections of systemic inequalities. This leads teachers to understand their lived experiences as part of a broader educational landscape marked by gaps and inconsistencies, rather than personal shortcomings.

Teachers develop meaning by reflecting on their sense of preparedness. Many admit feeling untrained and uncertain when addressing mental health issues. Reyes and Santos (2021) found that teachers interpret their lack of preparation as a gap in professional development, while Martinez and Lee (2023) noted that teachers often construct meaning through a narrative of “learning on the job,” adapting strategies through experience. As a result, teachers frequently interpret their emotional and professional struggles as part of an ongoing personal learning process.

Teachers’ meaning-making is also influenced by cultural dynamics. Gonzalo and Alibudbud (2024) highlighted that cultural norms around silence and emotional restraint shape how teachers interpret student disclosures. Teachers understand that some learners hesitate to

discuss their feelings due to family expectations or cultural attitudes, which complicates help seeking. Isidro and Velasco (2023) added that teachers interpret their own pastoral role within a cultural framework that emphasizes compassion and collectivist support. These cultural insights shape teachers' interpretations of their emotional encounters with students.

Teachers reflect deeply on their role as protectors of student well-being. Espino and Torres (2021) described how teachers see themselves not just as instructors but as guardians of learners' emotional safety. When students express fear or sadness, teachers interpret these moments as opportunities to intervene meaningfully. Ocampo and Gloria (2023) found that during crises such as disasters, teachers reinterpret their responsibility as extending beyond academics to include stabilizing the emotional climate of their classrooms. These reflections reinforce an understanding of teaching as an emotionally invested profession.

Teachers often develop personal philosophies about mental health support based on repeated experiences. De Guzman and Ramos (2023) reported that teachers gradually construct deeper insights into student behavior as they repeatedly encounter emotional vulnerability in the classroom. Over time, they come to interpret emotional conversations as essential components of their teaching identity. These reflections lead to a sense of purpose that teachers incorporate into their worldview, influencing their instructional approach and interpersonal relationships.

Teachers also derive meaning from their frustrations. Fernandez and Gomez (2023) found that when teachers encounter institutional shortcomings, such as delays in counseling referrals or unresponsive administration, they interpret their stress as a symptom of broader systemic failures. Cabrera and Santos (2022) noted that these frustrations often motivate teachers to advocate for

better support programs. Their interpretations transform negative experiences into catalysts for action and reform.

Teachers also reflect on the emotional resonance they experience when students open up about personal struggles. Malolos (2021) observed that teachers often connect their personal experiences with the stories of their learners, interpreting these connections as powerful reminders of shared humanity. Teachers describe moments when student disclosures remind them of their own past experiences, prompting deep emotional reflection. These moments shape teachers' meaning-making by blending empathy with personal introspection.

Teachers interpret digital interactions with learners in nuanced ways. David and Hernandez (2022) found that teachers see digital platforms as both opportunities and challenges. While they interpret online communication as a more accessible avenue for student disclosure, they also reflect on how these interactions intrude into their personal time. Martinez and Lee (2023) noted that teachers often interpret late night emotional messages as evidence of students' vulnerability. Teachers use these reflections to refine their boundaries and interpret their roles within digital spaces.

Teachers' meaning-making is also shaped by their experiences with stigma. Cleofas and Oducado (2021) observed that misinformation about mental health creates obstacles for teachers, shaping how they interpret their educational role. Quijano and David (2023) noted that teachers often see themselves as advocates confronting stigma in schools. Teachers interpret their efforts to educate students about mental health as part of a social responsibility that extends beyond the classroom. These reflections position teachers as agents of cultural transformation.

Teachers also reflect on the emotional contradictions present in their experiences. Many describe feeling both fulfilled and drained, confident and inadequate, motivated and exhausted. Flores and Kim (2022) referred to these contradictions as emotional dualities that teachers must navigate daily. Valdez and Ramos (2023) found that teachers interpret these contradictions as natural parts of a profession centered on relational and emotional labor. Their meaning-making involves accepting and integrating these opposing emotions into their professional identity.

Teachers derive meaning from relationships with colleagues as well. De Guzman and Ramos (2023) found that peer conversations provide perspective, reassurance, and insight. Teachers interpret supportive colleagues as emotional anchors who help them make sense of difficult experiences. Martinez and Lee (2023) noted that teachers also reinterpret their struggles as shared challenges within the school community, reducing feelings of isolation.

Teachers also construct meaning from the moments when learners improve emotionally. Bautista and Cruz (2024) documented that teachers often interpret student progress as evidence that their support makes a positive impact. Estrella and Bautista (2024) found that when students become more engaged or stable, teachers reflect on the value of their patience and presence. These positive outcomes reinforce teachers' interpretations that emotional support is an essential part of education.

Teachers often develop new standards for what they consider successful teaching based on their meaning-making. Perez and Aguilar (2022) noted that teachers begin to see emotional stability as foundational to academic success. Espino and Torres (2021) found that teachers shift from purely cognitive goals to holistic ones, interpreting student well-being as central to classroom success. Their meaning-making thus expands the definition of teacher effectiveness.

Teachers reflect on how their emotional involvement shapes their identity. Flores and Kim (2022) found that teachers often identify as nurturing figures whose roles extend beyond academic tasks. Valdez and Ramos (2023) added that teachers interpret their emotional support as part of their calling. This meaning-making deepens their commitment to students.

Teachers also draw meaning from their advocacy work. Torres and Villanueva (2024) reported that many teachers interpret their involvement in mental health initiatives as acts of service. Cabrera and Santos (2022) observed that teachers who help create peer mentoring programs interpret their actions as contributions to school improvement. These reflections reinforce a sense of agency and empowerment.

Teachers' meaning-making is influenced by how they cope with emotional heaviness. Malolos (2021) observed that teachers who practice self reflection interpret emotional strain as manageable. Flores and Kim (2022) noted that teachers who lack self care interpret their emotional burden as overwhelming. These contrasting interpretations shape teachers' well-being.

Teachers often interpret their interactions with parents as part of their role in mental health support. Isidro and Velasco (2023) found that teachers reflect deeply on the difficulty of explaining emotional concerns to parents. Espino and Torres (2021) observed that teachers interpret supportive parents as partners and unsupportive parents as barriers. These interpretations influence how teachers approach future conversations.

Teachers derive meaning from the unpredictability of mental health challenges. Ocampo and Gloria (2023) found that crises such as disasters reshape teachers' interpretations of their responsibilities. Calderon (2024) added that teachers in resource scarce environments interpret

emergencies as moments requiring extraordinary emotional presence. These reflections expand teachers' understanding of their role.

Teachers reflect on how their emotional investments shape their relationships with learners. Bautista and Cruz (2024) observed that teachers interpret closer relationships as signs of trust, while also acknowledging emotional vulnerability. Quijano and David (2023) noted that teachers interpret these relationships as essential components of supportive environments.

Finally, teachers' meaning-making reveals a deep recognition that mental health support is central to their profession. Perez and Aguilar (2022) and Reyes and Santos (2021) both noted that teachers interpret emotional support as foundational to learning. Teachers describe realizing that academic progress cannot happen without emotional stability. Through this recognition, teachers integrate emotional support into their core teaching identity.

### **Teachers' Personal Insights Based on Their Experiences Supporting Learner Mental Health**

The personal insights teachers gain from supporting learner mental health are shaped by years of emotional encounters, professional dilemmas, cultural negotiations, and reflections on their classroom practices. These insights reveal how teachers make meaning of their experiences, learn from challenges, and reformulate beliefs about learning, teaching, and student well-being. The following 25 paragraphs explore in depth the insights teachers develop, drawing from extensive literature on mental health, guidance, emotional caregiving, and school-based well-being programs.

Teachers frequently reflect that supporting learner mental health has reshaped their understanding of what it means to be an educator. Espino and Torres (2021) noted that many

teachers gained the insight that teaching is not solely about academic instruction but also about recognizing and responding to emotional vulnerabilities. Bautista and Cruz (2024) found that teachers realized the enormous influence their presence, tone, and relationships have on students' sense of safety. Through repeated interactions, teachers gained insights into how emotional reassurance often precedes academic success, allowing them to view their profession more holistically. This shift in perspective encourages teachers to integrate compassion and emotional attentiveness into their daily teaching practices.

Teachers also gained insight into the importance of early detection of distress. Teachers learned that emotional concerns seldom appear dramatically at first; instead, they manifest in small behavioral changes. Garcia and Manuel (2021) found that teachers realized that when subtle signs are overlooked, students' emotional burdens tend to escalate. Flores and Kim (2022) emphasized that teachers gained awareness that observing small cues such as restlessness, sudden silence, or loss of interest is crucial. These realizations shape teachers' personal insights about the need to remain attentive, patient, and observant throughout the school day.

Many teachers discovered that listening is more powerful than offering immediate solutions. De Guzman and Ramos (2023) noted that teachers gained insight into the value of allowing students to express feelings without judgment. Bautista and Cruz (2024) found that teachers realized students often do not need a direct answer but rather a compassionate adult who listens and affirms their emotions. These insights reshaped teachers' communication approaches, emphasizing presence, empathy, and active listening. Teachers explain that this insight helped them de-escalate anxiety and build trust with learners.

Teachers also gained the insight that emotional regulation must begin with themselves. Flores and Kim (2022) found that teachers realized they could not support distressed learners effectively when they too felt overwhelmed. Valdez and Ramos (2023) added that many teachers had to learn to pause, breathe, or briefly step back before responding to intense disclosures. They discovered that their emotional state directly affected the safety and clarity of their responses to students. This personal insight encouraged teachers to practice self-care more consciously.

Teachers also developed insights regarding the emotional impact of cultural norms. Gonzalo and Alibudbud (2024) noted that teachers became more aware of how cultural expectations shaped learners' willingness to share emotional concerns. Isidro and Velasco (2023) found that teachers reflected on the cultural values of respect, modesty, and emotional restraint, realizing they needed to communicate more sensitively. These reflections helped teachers understand why some students appear guarded or hesitant, leading them to adjust their communication practices to foster trust more effectively.

A significant insight teachers gained involved recognizing their own limitations. Many teachers learned they could not address all mental health concerns independently. Hernandez and Cruz (2022) documented teachers' realizations that they needed guidance counselors, administrators, or external professionals to handle specific cases. Calderon (2024) found that rural teachers especially gained insight into the importance of strong referral systems because they often lacked timely professional support. These realizations helped teachers identify boundaries and understand when and how to seek help for their learners.

Teachers also gained insight into the emotional unpredictability of teaching. Ocampo and Gloria (2023) noted that teachers discovered mental health concerns frequently arose without

warning, especially during or after community crises. Martinez and Lee (2023) found that teachers learned the importance of flexibility, as distressed students sometimes needed urgent emotional support during academic activities. These insights helped teachers embrace adaptability, patience, and emotional readiness as essential qualities of teaching.

Teachers gained insights into how trauma impacts learning behavior. Estrella and Bautista (2024) found that teachers discovered that trauma shapes attention span, behavior, and motivation. Perez and Aguilar (2022) added that teachers realized that mindful routines helped stabilize emotional states, allowing students to re-engage academically. These insights encouraged teachers to approach behavior with compassion, reducing tendencies to discipline students harshly for trauma-related reactions.

Another important insight teachers gained is that mental health support is deeply relational. De Guzman and Ramos (2023) noted that teachers realized the strongest emotional breakthroughs occurred when students felt personally connected to their teachers. Espino and Torres (2021) found that teachers reflected on how relational warmth increased student openness. These insights strengthened teachers' commitment to cultivating trusting classroom environments.

Teachers also gained insights into the emotional boundaries needed to protect their own well-being. Flores and Kim (2022) found that teachers realized absorbing too much student distress placed them at risk of burnout. Malolos (2021) noted that this reflection led teachers to establish boundaries around their time and emotional energy. Teachers discovered that saying no, asking for support, or stepping back temporarily was essential to sustain their role effectively. This insight represents a major shift in how teachers care for themselves.

Teachers discovered that collaboration with colleagues eases the emotional weight of supporting students. De Guzman and Ramos (2023) noted that teachers gained insights into how sharing emotional burdens prevented isolation. Martinez and Lee (2023) found that teachers realized peer conversations provided clarity and confidence when handling difficult concerns. These insights encouraged teachers to rely on peer networks, understanding that mental health support requires collective effort, not solitary struggle.

Teachers gained insights into how inconsistent school systems shape their emotional burden. Fernandez and Gomez (2023) reported that teachers realized that weak implementation of mental health policies left them unsupported. Hernandez and Cruz (2022) found that teachers learned that unclear referral procedures forced them to improvise responses. These reflections made teachers aware that systemic improvement is necessary for sustainable mental health support. Teachers learned that emotional labor increases when institutional structures fail.

Teachers developed insights into how digital communication influences student disclosure. David and Hernandez (2022) found that teachers realized that students felt more comfortable sharing emotional concerns online. Martinez and Lee (2023) added that teachers learned that online messages often revealed emotions students struggled to express face-to-face. These insights helped teachers understand the benefits and risks of digital counseling, pushing them to develop healthier digital boundaries.

Teachers also gained insights into the stigma learners face. Cleofas and Oducado (2021) found that teachers realized that students often feared judgment or ridicule if they discussed their mental health. Quijano and David (2023) added that teachers learned the importance of openly addressing stigma in classrooms. Teachers reflected that destigmatizing mental health helped

normalize help seeking and strengthened emotional safety. These insights transformed teachers into advocates for openness.

Teachers gained insight into the emotional resilience learners secretly possess. Valdez and Ramos (2023) found that teachers recognized that many students navigate heavy emotional burdens while still showing courage. Ocampo and Gloria (2023) documented that during disasters, teachers discovered that learners displayed remarkable adaptability. These observations led teachers to appreciate students' inner strength, deepening their empathy and respect for learners' experiences.

Teachers also gained insights into how socio economic pressures influence mental health. Alibudbud (2023) highlighted that teachers realized students often struggled emotionally due to poverty, distance learning barriers, and family instability. Calderon (2024) noted that rural teachers gained insight into the emotional impact of limited resources. These realizations encouraged teachers to view behavior through a broader socioeconomic context rather than attributing struggles solely to individual character.

Teachers learned that early and frequent communication with parents is essential. Isidro and Velasco (2023) found that teachers gained insights into the importance of educating parents about emotional well-being. Hernandez and Cruz (2022) observed that teachers recognized communication gaps often made students feel unsupported. These reflections encouraged teachers to build stronger home-school partnerships around mental health.

Teachers gained insights into how affirmation boosts student resilience. Bautista and Cruz (2024) found that simple verbal encouragement helped students feel valued. Perez and Aguilar

(2022) noted that mindfulness-based affirmations increased emotional awareness. Teachers learned to incorporate praise, warmth, and emotional validation into daily practice as tools to support psychological stability.

Teachers also reflected that mental health support requires patience that extends beyond academic timelines. Flores and Kim (2022) found that teachers realized emotional healing cannot be rushed. De Guzman and Ramos (2023) noted that teachers discovered that students often need multiple conversations before progress becomes visible. These insights helped teachers remain patient and persistent.

Teachers gained insight into their own emotional triggers. Malolos (2021) observed that teachers reflected deeply when student stories resonated with personal trauma. Ocampo and Gloria (2023) found that such emotional resonance shaped how teachers responded. These insights encouraged teachers to engage in self-awareness practices, recognizing emotional triggers and managing them with care.

Teachers realized that advocacy is part of their role. Torres and Villanueva (2024) found that teachers gained insight into how their voices influence school programs. Fernandez and Gomez (2023) noted that teachers learned they needed to push for better training, clear procedures, and well-funded programs. These reflections strengthened teachers' sense of agency as contributors to systemic change.

Teachers also gained insights into how small gestures produce significant emotional effects. Perez and Aguilar (2022) found that short mindfulness breaks improved classroom emotional tone. Martinez and Lee (2023) observed that a simple message of encouragement helped

students feel noticed. These moments helped teachers appreciate the impact of small but meaningful actions.

Teachers gained insights into how consistent emotional support fosters long-term trust. Bautista and Cruz (2024) noted that students begin to trust teachers when emotional support is steady, not occasional. Espino and Torres (2021) found that teachers realized trust grows slowly but shapes learning significantly. These insights deepened teachers' understanding of relationship building.

Teachers realized that resilience is a shared journey between teachers and learners. Flores and Kim (2022) found that teachers gained insights into how emotional challenges forge stronger classroom communities. Valdez and Ramos (2023) observed that mutual empathy between students and teachers creates a healing environment. These insights strengthened teachers' belief in the transformational potential of compassion.

Finally, teachers gained the insight that mental health support is not an additional task but a core dimension of teaching. Perez and Aguilar (2022) and Reyes and Santos (2021) found that teachers came to see emotional care as foundational for academic and personal success. Through years of experience, teachers internalized that supporting student well-being is essential, meaningful, and inseparable from their identity as educators.

### **Synthesis of the reviewed literature**

The reviewed literature reveals a highly interconnected picture of teachers' experiences, meaning-making, and personal insights regarding mental health support for learners. Across studies, teachers consistently emerge as central figures in identifying, responding to, and sustaining mental health care within school environments. Their lived experiences highlight a daily reality in which academic instruction is intertwined with emotional caregiving, a situation described in multiple sources that observed teachers noticing subtle emotional shifts even before learners or families articulate distress (Espino & Torres, 2021; Garcia & Manuel, 2021; Alibudbud, 2023). These recurring experiences shape teachers' perceptions of their profession, moving them toward a holistic view of teaching as both academic and emotional work. This repositioning forms the foundation upon which teachers make sense of their responsibilities and insights into mental health support.

The literature shows that teachers' meaning-making processes arise from constant negotiation between challenges and opportunities in their environments. Teachers often interpret their expanded emotional responsibilities as evidence of students' trust, yet they also confront the anxiety and moral weight that accompany disclosures of trauma, fear, or self harm (Jacinto & Morales, 2021; Buenaventura & Lim, 2023). These experiences compel teachers to reflect on their ethical roles, drawing meaning from moments when they must balance confidentiality with safety concerns. Simultaneously, teachers make sense of their work within systems that may either support or constrain them. Studies point to limited counseling staff, inconsistent implementation of mental health programs, and insufficient professional preparation, all of which influence how teachers understand their responsibilities (Fernandez & Gomez, 2023; Hernandez & Cruz, 2022; Calderon, 2024). Through these reflections, teachers begin to see mental health support not as a separate task, but as a natural extension of their everyday teaching lives.

Teachers' personal insights deepen this meaning-making by illuminating how sustained emotional engagement transforms them professionally and personally. The literature suggests that teachers gain insights about the power of listening, the need for patience, and the centrality of empathy in supporting distressed learners (De Guzman & Ramos, 2023; Bautista & Cruz, 2024; Flores & Kim, 2022). Many teachers realize that students often require presence more than solutions, leading to intentional shifts in communication practices. Teachers also gain insight into the need to maintain emotional equilibrium, learning that they cannot effectively support students without first regulating their own emotions (Valdez & Ramos, 2023; Malolos, 2021). These reflections underscore a growing professional maturity, as teachers become more aware of how their emotional state influences student well-being.

Across all sections of the literature, the role of relationships consistently emerges as a central theme. Teachers' lived experiences show that meaningful connections with learners form the backbone of effective mental health support, a finding reinforced by research showing that trust serves as the foundation through which students express vulnerability (Bautista & Cruz, 2024; Espino & Torres, 2021; De Guzman & Ramos, 2023). Teachers' meaning-making further highlights how these relationships are shaped by cultural norms, stigma, and the social contexts learners inhabit. Filipino cultural expectations surrounding restraint, respect, and emotional privacy often complicate students' willingness to disclose concerns, compelling teachers to cultivate trust gradually and thoughtfully (Gonzalo & Alibudbud, 2024; Isidro & Velasco, 2023; Cleofas & Oducado, 2021). Teachers' insights demonstrate how they have learned to navigate these cultural layers with sensitivity, shaping their approach to student support.

The literature also illustrates how teachers' insights extend beyond interpersonal relationships into broader school and community systems. Many teachers learn that structural conditions, such as large class sizes, limited mental health personnel, and unclear referral systems, intensify both their workload and emotional responsibilities (Hernandez & Cruz, 2022; Calderon, 2024; Fernandez & Gomez, 2023). These systemic realities shape teachers' interpretations of their professional boundaries and responsibilities, teaching them the importance of collaboration with colleagues and administrators. Studies emphasize that peer support among teachers becomes a critical coping mechanism, serving as a source of emotional resilience and professional affirmation (De Guzman & Ramos, 2023; Martinez & Lee, 2023). Through these interactions, teachers gain the insight that mental health support is never an individual effort but a collective task requiring strong networks.

A significant synthesis point across the literature is the transformative effect of student progress on teachers' professional identity. Teachers' lived experiences show that witnessing emotional improvement in students reinforces their belief in the value of their efforts (Estrella & Bautista, 2024; Perez & Aguilar, 2022; Martinez & Lee, 2023). These moments of growth anchor teachers' meaning-making and provide personal insights about the impact of empathy, patience, and instructional adjustments. These experiences shape teachers' evolving understanding that emotional well-being is essential for academic engagement, pushing them to adopt more compassionate and emotionally responsive classroom practices.

Another important convergence in the literature is teachers' recognition that their work has limits, yet their influence remains significant. Teachers' meaning-making shows that they become aware of the importance of referring learners to guidance counselors or mental health

professionals, acknowledging that some concerns are beyond their capacity (Buenaventura & Lim, 2023; Hernandez & Cruz, 2022). Their personal insights then expand this awareness by identifying the need for self-care, reflective practice, and emotionally sustainable boundaries to protect their well-being (Flores & Kim, 2022; Malolos, 2021). Together, these reflections position teachers as critical but not solitary participants in supporting learner mental health.

The reviewed literature also demonstrates that teachers increasingly see themselves as advocates for emotional wellness within schools. Experiences of systemic gaps and unmet needs often motivate teachers to push for stronger programs, better training, and more inclusive interventions (Torres & Villanueva, 2024; Cabrera & Santos, 2022; Fernandez & Gomez, 2023). These efforts reflect insights drawn from lived experiences that reveal the pressing need for organized mental health systems. Teachers' advocacy reinforces their evolving understanding that mental health support is essential for the academic and personal development of learners, extending their role beyond the classroom and into institutional leadership.

In synthesizing all three sections, it becomes evident that teachers' lived experiences, meaning-making processes, and personal insights form a coherent narrative of professional transformation. Teachers start by encountering emotional struggles among learners, often without preparation, and gradually construct meaning from these encounters through reflection, collaboration, and emotional negotiation. Over time, they develop profound insights that reshape their understanding of teaching, emphasize the importance of emotional support, and reveal the need for systemic improvement. This synthesis affirms that teacher perspectives are essential for designing responsive, contextually grounded, and sustainable mental health programs in schools.

## METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the discussions on the methods being used in this study, specifically the research design, research participants, data collection, procedures, data analysis, ethical considerations, trustworthiness of the study, potential research bias, and limitations.

### **Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences, challenges, and best practices of learners, teachers, and school stakeholders in relation to mental health support in schools. A qualitative approach was well suited to capturing the depth of human experiences and the contextual factors that influenced them. As explained by Aruta and Antazo (2021), qualitative inquiry provided the opportunity to understand how individuals narrated their coping strategies and resilience in the context of mental health. Through this design, the study sought to uncover insights that quantitative surveys might not fully capture, particularly those involving subjective experiences and meanings.

The focus on lived experiences aligned with the aim of amplifying the voices of participants whose perspectives were central to understanding school-based mental health. According to Bautista and Cruz (2024), teachers and learners often revealed best practices and challenges through stories and reflections rather than numerical data. By adopting this design, the study valued the narratives of participants as valid sources of knowledge that revealed not only what practices existed but also how they were experienced and perceived.

Furthermore, the qualitative design allowed for the exploration of context-specific challenges, which was particularly important in Philippine schools where resources, policies, and cultural attitudes varied widely. Fernandez and Gomez (2023) emphasized that systemic barriers such as the uneven implementation of the Mental Health Law required context-driven studies. Thus, this design enabled the research to situate participants' experiences within the local realities of schools in the district and division studied.

The design also supported the identification of best practices that were not only effective but also sustainable. De Guzman and Ramos (2023) observed that peer-support groups and resilience programs thrived when schools adapted them to their unique contexts. Through qualitative methods, this study explored how best practices emerged organically within schools and how they were perceived by those directly involved.

The use of a qualitative approach further emphasized collaboration between the researcher and participants. Espino and Torres (2021) highlighted that guidance counselors and teachers often carried unique perspectives that had to be drawn out through dialogic methods. This design enabled the researcher to engage participants in meaningful conversations that respected their roles and recognized their agency in shaping school-based mental health practices.

Finally, the choice of this research design was intended to contribute to both academic knowledge and practical applications. As Gonzalo and Alibudbud (2024) argued, low-resource settings required evidence grounded in actual experiences. By capturing narratives through a qualitative lens, the study not only provided theoretical contributions but also offered practical recommendations that school leaders, teachers, and policymakers could use to enhance mental health support systems.

## **Research Participants**

The participants of this study were limited to teachers as they held a crucial role in both academic instruction and the provision of mental health support to learners. Teachers were uniquely positioned to observe daily behavioral and emotional shifts among students, respond to emerging concerns, and reinforce school-based initiatives aimed at supporting learner well-being. As Bautista and Cruz (2024) emphasized, teachers consistently identified themselves as frontline figures in promoting learner mental health, even as they navigated their own professional and personal challenges. Focusing on teachers allowed the study to capture rich, grounded, and experience-based narratives from those who worked directly with learners while balancing instructional responsibilities.

The inclusion criteria were carefully defined to ensure the relevance, depth, and reliability of participant contributions. First, only teachers currently employed in elementary or secondary schools within the district were included, as their classroom presence placed them in continuous interaction with learners. Second, teachers were required to have at least three years of teaching experience, ensuring that they had accumulated sufficient exposure to diverse student needs, school routines, and mental health-related situations. This threshold provided a more mature and informed perspective compared to teachers with more limited service. Third, participants were required to have engaged in mental health-related practices such as facilitating classroom-based well-being activities, participating in counseling referrals, supporting peer mentoring initiatives, or responding to student emotional concerns. These criteria aligned with the study's aim of gathering meaningful, experience-rich accounts grounded in actual school-based practice (Hernandez & Cruz, 2022; Reyes & Santos, 2021).

Exclusion criteria were likewise established to maintain focus and ensure that participant narratives aligned with the study's objectives. Teachers with fewer than three years of service were excluded, as they might not yet have had sustained exposure to learners' mental health challenges or the processes associated with school-based interventions. Teachers who had not participated in any mental health-related activities or had minimal engagement with learner well-being concerns were also excluded, as their contributions would not adequately support the study's exploration of mental health support experiences. Additionally, non-teaching personnel such as administrative officers, guidance counselors, and support staff were excluded to maintain focus on classroom-based practitioners who encountered mental health concerns in their daily interactions with students (Abad & Villanueva, 2022; Espino & Torres, 2021).

By refining the participant group to teachers meeting these criteria, the study centered the voices of educators who shouldered the dual responsibility of teaching academic content and supporting learner well-being. Teachers were often described as the "first responders" to mental health concerns because they were the ones who observed early emotional, behavioral, and academic indicators of distress (Garcia & Manuel, 2021; Bautista & Cruz, 2024). This focused selection allowed the study to examine how teachers interpreted the challenges they faced, described the strategies they used, and evaluated the systems and supports available to them in addressing learners' mental health needs.

The selection of experienced teachers also ensured that the study captured the professional dimension of mental health support in a nuanced and authentic manner. As Reyes and Santos (2021) noted, professional development in mental health awareness shaped how teachers responded to students, yet many still described gaps in training, skills, and institutional support.

Engaging teachers who had been in service for at least three years provided insights into how educators navigated these gaps over time, how their perspectives evolved, and how they reconciled school expectations with the realities of classroom practice. This resulted in a balanced representation of both the strengths and limitations of current school-based mental health initiatives.

Through this thoughtful selection, the study gathered data that revealed the complexity of teachers' roles in bridging academic instruction and psychosocial support. Their lived experiences offered a detailed view of the daily challenges they encountered, the emotional and professional demands placed upon them, and the innovative practices they adopted to sustain learner well-being. Listening to the perspectives of teachers with substantial service experience allowed the study to highlight both persistent barriers and promising approaches that could guide future training, policy development, and the strengthening of mental health support structures in schools (Nieves & Rivera, 2024; Bautista & Cruz, 2024).

### **Data Collection Procedure**

The data collection for this qualitative study was designed to gather in-depth and authentic narratives from participants. Semi-structured interviews were the primary method, as they allowed for both flexibility and focus. According to Bautista and Cruz (2024), semi-structured interviews create opportunities for participants to articulate their experiences while enabling researchers to

probe deeper into specific issues. This approach was appropriate for capturing the complexity of lived experiences in mental health support.

In addition to interviews, focus group discussions were also conducted to gather collective insights. As De Guzman and Ramos (2023) explained, peer-support dynamics often emerge more clearly in group settings where participants share stories and validate each other's experiences. Learners, teachers, and stakeholders were grouped separately to ensure that each group could speak freely without hesitation. These discussions provided additional layers of understanding about challenges and best practices in schools.

Document analysis was also employed as part of the data collection process. Relevant school documents such as program reports, policy guidelines, and activity records were reviewed to provide context and triangulate data. Fernandez and Gomez (2023) noted that analyzing policy documents and implementation records helps reveal discrepancies between written directives and actual practice. This added rigor to the study by situating narratives within documented evidence.

All interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in safe and conducive environments. Learners were engaged in spaces where they felt secure, while teachers and administrators were interviewed in private settings to encourage openness. Espino and Torres (2021) emphasized the importance of providing safe environments for discussing mental health, as participants may otherwise hesitate to share sensitive information. This consideration was essential to ensure both ethical practice and data quality.

The data collection also incorporated digital tools where appropriate. Martinez and Lee (2023) showed that digital platforms could expand access to counseling and support. In this study,

online interviews were conducted for participants who could not be reached physically due to logistical or health-related reasons. While face-to-face sessions were prioritized for depth, digital methods ensured inclusivity and flexibility, particularly in the context of ongoing adjustments in education.

Finally, all data collected were recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. According to Aruta and Antazo (2021), verbatim transcription ensures that participants' voices are preserved and that analysis remains grounded in authentic accounts. The researcher maintained confidentiality and anonymity by removing identifying details from transcripts. This process safeguarded participants' privacy while ensuring that their narratives were accurately represented. Through these procedures, the study ensured that the data collected were both reliable and ethically grounded, providing a strong basis for answering the research questions.

## **Procedures**

Before any data collection activities were undertaken, the researcher first secured the necessary institutional approvals. This process began with the submission of the full research proposal to the Dean of the Graduate School of the researcher's academic institution. Once the Dean had reviewed and endorsed the proposal, it was forwarded to the Ethics Review Committee of the same institution for ethical clearance. The Ethics Review Committee played a critical role in ensuring that the study adhered to accepted ethical standards for research involving human participants, specifically in terms of protecting their rights, privacy, and overall well-being. Only

after the approval and ethical clearance were obtained was the researcher allowed to proceed to the field.

Once clearance was secured, the researcher requested permission from the Schools Division Superintendent to conduct the study. After division-level approval was granted, coordination with school principals was undertaken to identify teacher-participants who met the inclusion criteria. Letters of invitation and informed consent forms were then distributed to potential participants, emphasizing voluntary participation and confidentiality. This ensured that teachers were fully aware of the purpose of the study, the expected process, and their rights as participants, as recommended by Abad and Villanueva (2022) and Espino and Torres (2021).

In-depth interviews were conducted with individual teachers to gather personal narratives about their experiences in supporting learner mental health. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing the researcher to ask guiding questions while also providing flexibility for participants to elaborate on their unique experiences. According to Bautista and Cruz (2024), semi-structured interviews were useful for eliciting detailed perspectives on challenges and best practices that might not surface in rigidly structured formats. These interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim.

To complement the interviews, focused group discussions (FGDs) were organized among teachers in the district. Group discussions provided an avenue for participants to collectively reflect on shared experiences and validate one another's narratives. De Guzman and Ramos (2023) emphasized that FGDs were particularly effective in surfacing communal understandings of school-based practices and in highlighting the diversity of experiences among teachers. The

discussions were facilitated by the researcher, guided by a flexible protocol, and documented through both audio recordings and field notes.

During the entire data collection process, ethical principles of confidentiality and respect were observed. Teachers' identities were anonymized in transcripts and reports, with codes replacing actual names. Secure storage of recordings and transcripts was ensured through password-protected files. As noted by Hernandez and Cruz (2022), protecting participants' privacy was crucial when dealing with sensitive issues such as mental health. The researcher maintained professional boundaries and ensured that participants felt safe and respected throughout the process.

Finally, triangulation was observed by combining individual interviews, FGDs, and document analysis of school programs relevant to mental health. Fernandez and Gomez (2023) stressed the importance of triangulation in strengthening the credibility of findings by comparing data from different sources. This procedure ensured that the study did not rely solely on one method but instead captured a fuller picture of teachers' experiences in supporting learner mental health within schools.

## **Data Analysis**

The data analysis for this study followed the phenomenological method articulated by Colaizzi, which emphasized a rigorous and systematic exploration of lived experiences to uncover their essential meanings. Colaizzi's approach, first detailed in 1978, had been widely used in qualitative research involving reflective, emotional, and deeply personal narratives because it

provided clear, structured steps that honored participants' voices while producing a coherent description of shared meanings. This method was well aligned with the study's aim of understanding teachers' narratives about the challenges and best practices in supporting the mental health needs of learners. By applying Colaizzi's structured procedures, the researcher transformed raw data gathered from in-depth interviews and focused group discussions into rich thematic descriptions that captured both the individual complexity and collective significance of teachers' lived experiences.

The first step in Colaizzi's method involved thoroughly reading all interview and FGD transcripts to gain an initial sense of the participants' experiences. This immersion allowed the researcher to enter the emotional and professional worlds described by teachers. Colaizzi (1978) emphasized that researchers had to read the narratives repeatedly to fully appreciate the context, tone, and nuances of the participants' stories. This phase ensured that the researcher approached the data with openness and without imposing premature interpretations, creating a foundation for authentic meaning extraction.

Following this, the researcher identified significant statements from the transcripts. These statements were direct expressions from teachers that related specifically to the research questions and described their experiences in supporting learner mental health. Statements such as noticing early signs of distress, navigating limited resources, or encouraging peer mentoring were gathered systematically. According to Colaizzi (1978), this step honored each participant's contribution by giving equal weight to all statements relevant to the phenomenon. Studies such as those by Bautista and Cruz (2024) and Torres and Villanueva (2024) highlighted the richness of teachers' narratives,

showing that these significant statements often contained both descriptions of challenges and expressions of resourcefulness.

The next step involved formulating meanings from each significant statement. This required the researcher to interpret what teachers intended to communicate while ensuring that the meanings remained faithful to their actual words. For instance, descriptions of burnout indicated emotional overload, while narratives about collaborative efforts reflected teacher resilience. Colaizzi (1978) stressed the importance of balancing interpretation with fidelity to participants' perspectives. At this stage, the researcher began connecting individual meanings to emergent patterns, which contributed to the formation of themes.

Once meanings had been formulated, Colaizzi's method required clustering these meanings into thematic categories. These clusters included themes such as systemic barriers, emotional labor, professional growth, classroom strategies, peer collaboration, and advocacy for student well-being. Thematic clusters allowed the researcher to see how individual experiences related to broader issues across the school environment. This step was supported by literature showing that teachers' lived experiences often reflected overlapping themes of struggle and innovation (Fernandez & Gomez, 2023; Calderon, 2024). Clustering enabled the researcher to integrate narratives about mental health stigma, lack of training, compassion fatigue, classroom adaptation, and student trust into coherent categories that reflected the wider phenomenon.

After themes had been organized, the researcher developed exhaustive descriptions. This step involved integrating all thematic clusters into a detailed narrative that captured what teachers experienced. In this phase, the researcher described teachers' emotional, cognitive, and relational experiences, such as noticing signs of student distress, making referrals, facilitating supportive

conversations, or dealing with personal emotional strain. De Guzman and Ramos (2023) and Hernandez and Cruz (2022) emphasized that teachers' stories often revealed both vulnerability and strength, and exhaustive descriptions allowed these complexities to emerge fully. The aim was to produce a vivid, comprehensive, and faithful portrayal of the lived experiences shared by participants.

Colaizzi's method then required the researcher to produce a fundamental structure or essence of the phenomenon. This structure synthesized the exhaustive descriptions into a concise statement that captured the core meanings underlying all participant experiences. According to Colaizzi (1978), deriving the essence involved distilling the phenomenon to its most essential psychological, emotional, and contextual characteristics. For this study, the essence described how teachers navigated their dual roles as educators and emotional caregivers, how they managed systemic limitations while supporting distressed learners, and how their compassion and professional judgment intersected in daily practice. Insights from Aruta and Antazo (2021) suggested that synthesizing experiences allowed researchers to articulate meanings that went beyond surface-level descriptions and illuminated the deeper nature of human experience.

The final step in Colaizzi's process involved returning the results to participants for validation, also known as member checking. This step ensured that the descriptions and essence accurately represented what participants intended to express. Colaizzi (1978) emphasized that validation enhanced the study's credibility because participants themselves had the opportunity to confirm, clarify, or refine the interpretations. Gonzalo and Alibudbud (2024) noted that in education-based mental health studies, participant validation was especially important due to the

emotional sensitivity of the data and the potential influence of contextual factors such as resource limitations in schools.

Throughout the entire analysis, reflexivity was practiced to ensure that the researcher remained aware of personal biases, assumptions, and perspectives that could influence interpretation. This reflective stance aligned with Colaizzi's insistence on researcher self-awareness and was supported by scholars such as Fernandez and Gomez (2023), who emphasized that studying mental health support required attentiveness to the subtle ways researcher impressions might shape interpretation. By following Colaizzi's structured steps with careful attention to reflexivity, the study ensured that the results authentically captured the lived experiences of teachers supporting learner mental health.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations were fundamental in qualitative research, particularly when the study involved human participants who shared sensitive and deeply personal experiences. In the context of this study, ethical protocols were designed to safeguard the rights, dignity, and welfare of teachers who participated. Since the study addressed the topic of mental health, it recognized the heightened ethical responsibility of ensuring that participants were not subjected to harm or undue distress during data collection and dissemination. Every stage of the study, from recruitment to reporting, was guided by institutional policies, national standards, and international codes of ethics in research.

### **Social Value**

The principle of social value underlined that this research served a purpose beyond academic requirements. It was expected to generate findings that contributed to improving mental health support within schools and to inform stakeholders such as supervisors, principals, teachers, and policymakers. By centering the voices of teachers, the study provided insights into real challenges and effective practices that could directly benefit schools in the district. In doing so, the research ensured that its outcomes were meaningful and applicable, supporting the development of educational policies and practices that enhanced learner well-being and teacher capacity.

### **Informed Consent**

Informed consent was a cornerstone of ethical research. All teacher-participants were fully briefed about the objectives, scope, and methods of the study before they decided to take part. Consent forms explicitly stated the voluntary nature of participation, the right to withdraw at any time, and the absence of negative consequences for non-participation. Information also clarified how data were collected, stored, and reported. By ensuring that consent was both informed and freely given, the study upheld respect for the autonomy of participants.

### **The Vulnerability of the Research Participant**

Teachers were not typically considered a highly vulnerable group in research, but their participation in a study on mental health presented unique concerns. Some participants felt apprehensive about sharing experiences that could be perceived as reflections on their professional competence. To address this, the researcher provided reassurance that responses would remain confidential and that findings would not be used for evaluative or disciplinary

purposes. By acknowledging this potential vulnerability, the study ensured a supportive and respectful environment during participation.

### **Risks, Benefits, and Safety**

The study involved minimal risks, primarily the possibility of emotional discomfort when discussing sensitive topics related to mental health. To mitigate this, interviews and discussions were conducted in safe and supportive environments, with the researcher remaining sensitive to participants' cues. If discomfort arose, participants were allowed to pause or discontinue their involvement. The potential benefits outweighed the risks, as findings could guide schools in strengthening mental health programs and supporting teachers more effectively. Safety protocols such as secure data handling and responsible reporting were also observed.

### **Privacy and Confidentiality of Information**

Maintaining privacy and confidentiality was essential in research dealing with mental health. Teachers' names and identifying details did not appear in transcripts or reports. Instead, codes were used to anonymize responses. All data were stored in password-protected files accessible only to the researcher. Confidentiality was maintained not only during the study but also in dissemination, ensuring that individual identities remained protected while presenting findings.

### **Justice**

The principle of justice required fairness in the selection and treatment of participants. Teachers from diverse backgrounds and school settings were invited to participate to ensure balanced representation. No group was unduly burdened or excluded without reason. Participation was voluntary, ensuring that teachers were not coerced into involvement. The study thus upheld fairness in both opportunity and responsibility.

### **Transparency**

Transparency was practiced by providing participants with clear and comprehensive information about the study's goals, methods, and expected outcomes. Teachers were encouraged to ask questions and were given feedback on the progress of the study. Findings were also shared with participants and schools upon completion, reinforcing the openness and accountability of the research process.

### **Qualification of the Researcher**

The researcher's qualifications were also an ethical consideration. As a graduate student, the researcher had undergone training in research methods, ethics, and qualitative inquiry, equipping them to handle sensitive data responsibly. The researcher's familiarity with the educational context also ensured that the study was conducted with cultural and professional sensitivity. This competence strengthened the integrity of the process.

### **Adequacy of Facilities**

Adequate facilities were necessary to maintain privacy and comfort during data collection. Interviews were conducted in private spaces within schools or through secure online platforms when needed. Recording devices and storage systems met institutional requirements for ethical research. By ensuring the adequacy of facilities, the study protected participants' confidentiality and comfort.

### **Community Involvement**

Community involvement was an essential ethical dimension of this research. While teachers were the direct participants, the broader school community stood to benefit from the findings. Engaging with school leaders and sharing outcomes with stakeholders ensured that the research

gave back to the community. This reinforced the idea that the study was not extractive but collaborative, contributing knowledge and insights that could serve collective well-being.

### **Trustworthiness of the Study**

Trustworthiness in qualitative research ensured that the findings were credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable. In this study, the trustworthiness of the results was safeguarded through systematic methods and ethical rigor. Teachers' narratives about mental health support were subjective and contextual, which made the assurance of trustworthiness critical for the validity of the study's contributions.

### **Credibility**

Credibility referred to the accuracy and believability of the findings. This was achieved through prolonged engagement with participants, careful triangulation of in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and relevant documents, and member checking in which participants reviewed portions of the findings for accuracy. By confirming that interpretations aligned with participants' intended meanings, credibility was reinforced.

### **Transferability**

Transferability related to the extent to which findings could be applied in other contexts. While the study focused on teachers in a specific district and division, thick descriptions of participants' experiences, school settings, and cultural contexts were provided. These detailed accounts enabled readers to judge the applicability of the findings to other educational contexts, whether in other Philippine divisions or internationally.

### **Dependability**

Dependability ensured that the study's processes were consistent and could be replicated under similar conditions. The researcher maintained an audit trail, documenting every step from participant recruitment to data analysis. This included preserving interview guides, transcripts, and coding frameworks. Dependability was also supported by peer debriefing, in which academic mentors reviewed the research process to ensure methodological soundness.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability focused on ensuring that the findings emerged from participants' narratives rather than the researcher's biases. Reflexive journaling was employed, wherein the researcher recorded personal reflections and potential biases throughout the research process. This allowed for continual self-checking to prevent undue influence on data interpretation. Confirmability was also reinforced by retaining clear documentation of how conclusions were drawn from raw data, ensuring that others could trace the logic of the findings.

### **Potential Bias of the Study**

In qualitative research, potential bias was a natural concern because the study relied on the researcher's interpretations of participants' narratives. In the context of this study, one potential bias arose from the researcher's prior knowledge or assumptions about the state of mental health support in schools. Personal beliefs about how schools should manage learner well-being could have shaped the framing of questions, the probing during interviews, and even the interpretation

of findings. Such bias might have limited the extent to which participants' experiences were authentically captured.

Another source of potential bias came from participant selection. The study focused on teachers who met specific inclusion criteria. While this ensured relevance, it may have excluded perspectives from teachers who had not been directly engaged with mental health programs but may still have held valuable insights. This focus could have led to findings that reflected more of the perspectives of actively involved teachers, rather than the broader teaching population.

Social desirability bias may also have occurred, as teachers might have provided responses that they believed were expected or more favorable, especially when discussing sensitive topics such as their role in addressing mental health concerns. Teachers may have emphasized their supportive practices while minimizing challenges to protect their professional image. Such tendencies could have skewed the data toward more positive accounts, even if their lived realities were more complex.

The researcher's role as the primary instrument of data collection also introduced potential bias. Interview techniques, tone of questioning, and even non-verbal cues during interactions may have influenced participants' responses. Teachers may have adjusted their narratives depending on how comfortable or supported they felt in the presence of the researcher. Reflexivity, therefore, became crucial in mitigating such biases.

Lastly, the context of the research site contributed to potential bias. Since the study was conducted within a specific district and division, the cultural and institutional environment may have shaped both participants' willingness to share and the researcher's interpretation of their narratives. What was perceived as a best practice in one school context might have been interpreted differently in another, which could have led to overgeneralization if not carefully addressed.

## **Limitations**

The limitations of this qualitative study were acknowledged to situate the findings within their proper scope. First, the study focused only on teachers as participants. While this provided depth into the professional role of educators in mental health support, it limited the breadth of perspectives from other stakeholders such as learners, parents, or counselors. The findings therefore reflected only one dimension of the broader ecosystem of school mental health support.

Second, the study was geographically bounded to a specific district and division, which restricted the transferability of findings to other contexts. Schools in urban areas, for example, might have had more resources and different challenges compared to rural schools. While thick descriptions were provided to aid readers in assessing applicability, the findings were not designed to represent all schools in the Philippines or elsewhere.

Another limitation related to the sensitivity of the topic. Teachers might have hesitated to fully disclose negative experiences due to concerns about confidentiality or fear of repercussions. Despite reassurances, there was the possibility that some accounts remained partial or guarded. This could have limited the depth of insight into the challenges teachers genuinely faced.

Time constraints also posed limitations. Qualitative research demanded prolonged engagement, but the researcher's availability and the schedules of teachers might have restricted the number and length of interviews or focus group discussions. This may have reduced the opportunity for deeper exploration of certain themes.

Finally, the study relied on self-reported narratives, which were subject to memory lapses or selective recall. Teachers might have unintentionally omitted important details or emphasized certain aspects over others based on personal perception. This limitation was inherent in qualitative research but could be mitigated through triangulation and careful thematic analysis.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This chapter presented the outcomes of the qualitative phenomenological inquiry that examined the lived experiences of teachers in supporting and enhancing mental health support for learners in school settings. It focused on organizing and presenting the data obtained from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions in a systematic and coherent manner. Guided by the phenomenological approach, the chapter aimed to surface participants' meanings, insights, and perspectives as expressed in their narratives, providing a structured foundation for the presentation of findings and the subsequent discussion within the context of school-based mental health support systems.

#### **Teachers' Lived Experiences in Supporting Learners' Mental Health**

Table 1 presents the thematic analysis addressing Research Question 1. The table synthesizes teachers' narratives into four major themes: Mental Health Concerns as a Daily Classroom Reality, Teachers as First Responders, Emotional Labor Between Fulfillment and Exhaustion, and Relational Support Practices. Collectively, these themes illustrate that mental health support is not peripheral but embedded in the everyday realities of teaching. The table highlights how teachers consistently encounter learners' emotional, behavioral, and psychological struggles, assume frontline caregiving roles, experience emotional strain alongside fulfillment, and rely heavily on relationship-centered practices rather than formal clinical interventions. These findings establish mental health support as a lived, continuous, and emotionally charged dimension of classroom life.

### **Mental Health Concerns as a Daily Classroom Reality**

This theme captures teachers' shared experience that learners' mental health concerns were not occasional disruptions but persistent and routine aspects of classroom life. Teachers described encountering anxiety, withdrawal, bullying, mood instability, academic disengagement, and trauma-related behaviors on a daily basis. These experiences framed mental health as inseparable from teaching and learning, influencing lesson delivery, classroom management, and learner engagement. Rather than viewing mental health concerns as external problems to be referred elsewhere, teachers experienced them as immediate realities requiring attention within instructional spaces. This theme underscores that mental health issues directly shaped learners' readiness to learn and teachers' instructional decisions:

*"I encounter emotional and behavioral struggles almost every day, and it affects how I plan my lessons because I cannot teach well if my students are anxious or withdrawn. I have learned that mental health is not separate from learning; it is part of the classroom experience." (ID11.1.1)*

*"I see changes in my students' moods and behaviors regularly, such as sudden silence, anger, or lack of focus, and these are signs that something deeper is happening. These situations demand immediate attention before academic instruction can continue." (ID11.1.2)*

*"I deal with bullying, anxiety, and emotional breakdowns so often that it has become part of my daily routine as a teacher. It reminds*

*me that teaching is not only about academics but about understanding what learners are going through emotionally.” (ID11.1.5)*

*“I notice that when learners are emotionally distressed, their academic performance drops, and attendance becomes irregular. This makes mental health concerns impossible to ignore inside the classroom.” (ID11.1.4)*

*“I experience mental health issues among learners as ongoing realities rather than isolated cases, and this has changed how I view my role as an educator.” (ID11.1.3)*

The recognition of mental health concerns as a daily classroom reality implies that schools must move beyond reactive, referral-based approaches toward proactive, classroom-embedded mental health support systems. Teachers’ experiences suggest that mental health literacy and basic intervention skills should be integral components of teacher preparation and professional development. Curriculum design, assessment practices, and classroom management strategies must be flexible enough to accommodate learners’ emotional needs. Furthermore, school policies should acknowledge that mental health support is a core instructional concern, requiring time allocation, institutional backing, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Failure to address mental health as a daily reality risks exacerbating academic inequities, disengagement, and long-term psychosocial harm.

This theme gains support from the findings of Alibudbud (2023), who documented widespread anxiety and emotional distress among Filipino learners, particularly in school transitions and post-crisis contexts. The results corroborate the study of Buenaventura and Lim (2023), which emphasized that untreated mental health concerns significantly disrupt academic functioning. This is congruent with the findings of Malolos (2021), who asserted that mental health challenges among learners are embedded in daily school experiences rather than isolated clinical conditions. Similarly, Garcia and Manuel (2021) revealed that anxiety-related behaviors frequently manifest within classroom settings, reinforcing teachers' accounts.

### **Teachers as First Responders**

This theme reflects teachers' perception of themselves as the first individuals to identify and respond to learners' mental health concerns. Teachers experienced their role as extending beyond instruction into observation, emotional support, and initial intervention. They described acting as "second parents" and trusted adults who notice early warning signs before any formal support system is activated. While acknowledging professional boundaries, teachers accepted this role as a moral and relational obligation rooted in daily proximity to learners. This theme highlights the centrality of teachers in school-based mental health ecosystem:

*"I see myself as the first responder because I am the one who notices changes in behavior and emotions before anyone else. When learners start withdrawing or acting out, I feel responsible to respond immediately." (IDI1.2.1)*

*“I act as a second parent to my students because they often come to me first when they are struggling emotionally. They trust me, and I cannot ignore that responsibility.” (ID11.2.2)*

*“I may not be a mental health professional, but I am the first to observe warning signs and to provide initial support. This role comes naturally because of my daily interaction with learners.” (ID11.2.3)*

*“I believe my role is to bridge learners to proper help, but that bridge starts with me listening and caring. Without teachers, many concerns would remain unseen.” (ID11.2.4)*

*“I feel that being a teacher means being emotionally present for learners, especially when no guidance counselor is available.” (ID11.2.5)*

The positioning of teachers as first responders necessitates institutional recognition and capacity-building. Schools must provide teachers with foundational mental health training, clear referral pathways, and access to support personnel to prevent role overload and ethical dilemmas. Policies should clarify teachers' responsibilities while protecting them from being expected to function as therapists. Additionally, strengthening collaboration between teachers, guidance counselors, families, and administrators becomes essential. Without systemic support, teachers' willingness to act as first responders may lead to burnout and compassion fatigue, undermining both teacher well-being and learner support.

This theme is supported by Abad and Villanueva (2022), who emphasized teachers' frontline role in school-based mental health initiatives. The findings are congruent with Espino and Torres (2021), who identified teachers as primary identifiers of learner distress in the absence of sufficient counseling staff. This is consistent with Hernandez and Cruz (2022), whose study revealed that teachers frequently assume mental health support roles despite limited training. Internationally, Johnson and Smith (2024) affirmed that teachers globally function as first responders in school mental health systems.

### **Emotional Labor Between Fulfillment and Exhaustion**

This theme captures the dual emotional experience of teachers who find mental health support deeply meaningful yet emotionally taxing. Teachers described fulfillment from seeing learners improve, regain confidence, and feel supported. Simultaneously, they reported emotional fatigue, stress, and feelings of being overwhelmed, particularly when cases were complex or unresolved. This theme highlights emotional labor as an inherent aspect of teaching, intensified by mental health responsibilities.

*“I feel fulfilled when I see a learner slowly regain confidence, but at the same time, I feel emotionally drained after carrying their struggles with me.” (ID11.3.1)*

*“I experience joy when I help a student, yet the emotional weight of repeated cases sometimes overwhelms me.” (ID11.3.2)*

*“I love supporting my learners, but there are days when the emotional burden affects my own well-being.” (ID11.3.3)*

*“I feel a strong emotional attachment to my students, and while it gives me purpose, it also causes exhaustion.” (ID11.3.4)*

*“I struggle to balance my emotional involvement with self-care, especially when resources are limited.” (ID11.3.5)*

The emotional labor described by teachers underscores the necessity of institutional mechanisms that support teacher well-being. Schools must integrate teacher self-care, peer support, and workload management into mental health initiatives. Ignoring the emotional toll risks teacher burnout, reduced instructional quality, and high attrition. Mental health programs must therefore be designed not only for learners but also for educators, recognizing that sustainable support systems depend on emotionally healthy teachers.

This theme is supported by Jacinto and Morales (2021), who documented emotional fatigue among teachers involved in learner support initiatives. The results corroborate Valdez and Ramos (2023), which highlighted the emotional demands of supporting learner resilience. This is congruent with Bautista and Cruz (2024), who identified emotional labor as a defining feature of teachers’ mental health work. Gonzalo and Alibudbud (2024) further emphasized that low-resource contexts intensify emotional strain among educators.

### **Relational Support Practices**

This theme reflects teachers’ reliance on empathy, trust, and consistent relationships as primary strategies for supporting learner mental health. Teachers emphasized that meaningful connections, safe classroom environments, and daily emotional check-ins were more effective than

one-time programs. Mental health support was experienced as relational, ongoing, and embedded in instructional routines:

“I support my learners by building trust and listening without judgment, because that is when they open up.” (IDI1.4.1)

“I create a safe classroom where students feel valued, and this helps reduce anxiety and fear.” (IDI1.4.2)

“I believe consistent care and empathy matter more than formal programs.” (IDI1.4.3)

“I use positive reinforcement and emotional validation to make learners feel secure.” (IDI1.4.4)

“I see mental health support as part of my daily teaching practice, not a separate task.” (IDI1.4.5)

This theme implies that mental health initiatives should prioritize relational pedagogy and sustained teacher-learner connections. Training programs must strengthen teachers’ interpersonal skills alongside mental health literacy. Policies should allow time for relationship-building, recognizing it as foundational to both learning and well-being.

This finding is congruent with Cabrera and Santos (2022), who emphasized the effectiveness of social-emotional learning integration. The results corroborate Lopez and Santos (2022) on peer mentoring and safe spaces. This is supported by Aruta and Antazo (2021), who highlighted relational support as central to resilience.

**Table 1. Thematic Analysis of Teachers' Lived Experiences in Supporting Learners' Mental Health**

Issues Probed	Codes / Categories	Significant Statements	Themes	Meanings / Interpretations
Everyday classroom encounters related to learners' mental health	Emotional distress; Behavioral difficulties; Psychological struggles	"I often encounter everyday situations that require addressing emotional, behavioral, or psychological concerns like anxiety, withdrawal, and sadness." (IDI1) • "Bullying, poor concentration, anxiety, depression, and self-harm are very common." (IDI6)	Mental Health Concerns as a Daily Classroom Reality	Teachers experienced mental health concerns as routine and embedded in daily teaching rather than as isolated incidents.
Teachers' immediate responses to learners' distress	Observation; Initial intervention; Classroom-based support	"We notice mood changes, withdrawal, or sudden decline in performance." (IDI8) • "Teachers are the first to see early warning signs." (IDI7)	Teachers as First Responders	Teachers functioned as frontline identifiers and immediate support providers for learners' mental health needs.
Emotional impact of providing mental health support	Emotional fulfillment; Compassion fatigue; Stress	"Supporting students is fulfilling but emotionally exhausting." (IDI4) • "It gives joy but can also be overwhelming." (IDI9)	Emotional Labor Between Fulfillment and Exhaustion	Teachers' lived experiences involved both emotional reward and psychological strain.
Daily classroom practices related to well-being	Listening; Trust-building; Safe spaces	"Building trust is the first thing I do before learning can happen." (IDI5) • "Active listening helps students open up." (IDI11)	Relational Support Practices	Teachers relied on relationships and empathy as primary tools for mental health support.

### Teachers' Meaning-Making of Their Mental Health Support Experiences

Table 2 presents the interpretive dimension of the findings corresponding to Research Question 2. Unlike the first table, which focused on the descriptive "what" of teachers' lived

experiences, this table emphasizes the interpretive “how” and “why” how teachers internally process, understand, and ascribe meaning to their engagement in mental health support. The themes that emerged, Teachers as Holistic Caregivers, Teaching as a Moral and Emotional Commitment, Systemic and Cultural Constraints, and Negotiating Professional Boundaries—collectively reveal that teachers’ experiences are deeply reflective, value-driven, and shaped by broader institutional and cultural forces. These themes demonstrate that teachers do not experience mental health support as a series of isolated actions; rather, they construct meaning around their roles through moral reflection, emotional engagement, and constant negotiation between personal commitment and systemic limitations. Table 2 therefore provides a critical bridge between lived experience and professional identity, illuminating how teachers understand themselves and their work within school-based mental health support systems.

### **Teachers as Holistic Caregivers**

The theme *Teachers as Holistic Caregivers* reflects how participants interpreted their experiences by redefining their professional identity beyond traditional instructional roles. Teachers made sense of their involvement in mental health support by viewing themselves as caregivers responsible for learners’ emotional, psychological, and social well-being in addition to academic development. This meaning-making process emerged from daily interactions with learners who displayed emotional distress, behavioral challenges, or psychosocial vulnerabilities. Teachers recognized that learning could not occur in isolation from mental and emotional states, leading them to conceptualize teaching as an inherently holistic practice. By framing themselves as “second parents” or emotional anchors, teachers assigned relational and moral significance to their actions, positioning care, empathy, and attentiveness as core elements of effective teaching.

This theme illustrates that teachers' understanding of their role evolved through experience, resulting in an expanded identity grounded in whole-child education:

*"I see myself as more than just a teacher because my students depend on me emotionally, especially when they are struggling. I feel that my role includes caring for their feelings, listening to their problems, and helping them feel safe so they can learn properly." (IDI2.1.1)*

*"I interpret my experience as being a second parent in school because learners often open up to me about problems they cannot share at home. This makes me realize that teaching involves nurturing the whole child, not only delivering lessons." (IDI2.1.2)*

*"I believe my responsibility goes beyond academics because when students are emotionally unstable, learning cannot happen. I make meaning of my role as someone who supports their emotional needs so they can function better in class." (IDI2.1.3)*

*"I see myself as a caregiver because many learners lack emotional support outside school, and they rely on teachers to fill that gap. This realization changed how I understand my role as an educator." (IDI2.1.4)*

*“I feel that being a teacher means guiding learners emotionally and psychologically, not just intellectually. Supporting their mental health is part of who I am as a teacher.” (IDI2.1.5)*

The theme of teachers as holistic caregivers carries profound implications for educational systems, teacher preparation, and policy development. If teachers understand their role as inherently holistic, then teacher education programs must be redesigned to intentionally prepare educators for this expanded responsibility. Professional development should include mental health literacy, emotional intelligence training, and caregiving competencies, rather than focusing exclusively on pedagogy and content knowledge. At the institutional level, schools must formally acknowledge and support this caregiving role by providing access to guidance counselors, clear referral mechanisms, and emotional support for teachers themselves. Without structural recognition, teachers' self-concept as holistic caregivers risks leading to role overload, emotional exhaustion, and ethical tension. This theme also challenges narrow definitions of teacher effectiveness, suggesting that educational success should be measured not only by academic outcomes but also by learners' emotional well-being and psychosocial growth.

This finding gains strong support from Bautista and Cruz (2024), whose study revealed that teachers perceive well-being support as an integral part of effective teaching practice. The results corroborate the findings of Abad and Villanueva (2022), who emphasized that school-based mental health initiatives rely heavily on teachers' caregiving roles, particularly in contexts with limited counseling personnel. This interpretation is congruent with Aruta and Antazo (2021), who found that holistic support enhances learners' coping and resilience. Similarly, Isidro and Velasco

(2023) highlighted the importance of teacher-family-school collaboration in addressing learners' psychosocial needs, reinforcing the notion of teachers as central caregivers within the educational ecosystem.

### **Teaching as a Moral and Emotional Commitment**

The theme *Teaching as a Moral and Emotional Commitment* captures how teachers interpreted their mental health support experiences as deeply rooted in ethical responsibility and emotional investment. Teachers did not frame their involvement as merely fulfilling institutional expectations; instead, they viewed it as a moral obligation arising from their professional values and human concern for learners. This interpretation reflects a strong sense of vocation, where supporting learners' mental health was perceived as "the right thing to do," regardless of workload, recognition, or formal training. Teachers' meaning-making emphasized compassion, responsibility, and moral agency, suggesting that mental health support is intertwined with their sense of purpose as educators. This theme highlights that teachers' engagement is sustained not only by policy directives but by deeply held ethical beliefs about care, justice, and responsibility toward vulnerable learners:

*"I feel morally responsible to help my students when they are struggling emotionally because ignoring them would go against my values as a teacher. Supporting their mental health feels like a duty I cannot set aside." (IDI2.2.1)*

*"I interpret my involvement as meaningful because it allows me to help students not just academically but as human*

*beings. This makes my work feel purposeful and ethically grounded.” (IDI2.2.2)*

*“I believe that teaching is not just a job but a commitment to care for learners, especially those who are emotionally vulnerable. That belief guides how I respond to mental health concerns.” (IDI2.2.3)*

*“I feel emotionally invested in my students’ well-being, and this commitment motivates me to go beyond what is required. It gives deeper meaning to my role as an educator.” (IDI2.2.4)*

*“I see mental health support as part of my calling as a teacher, because education without compassion feels incomplete.” (IDI2.2.5)*

Viewing teaching as a moral and emotional commitment has both empowering and risky implications. On one hand, moral commitment fosters dedication, empathy, and sustained engagement in learner support. On the other hand, when institutions rely excessively on teachers’ moral drive without providing adequate resources, this commitment can lead to emotional exploitation and burnout. Schools must therefore balance ethical expectations with institutional responsibility, ensuring that teachers’ moral commitment is matched by tangible support systems. Ethical leadership is essential in creating environments where care is valued, shared, and supported

rather than individualized and taken for granted. This theme also calls for embedding ethics of care within educational leadership, curriculum design, and policy frameworks.

This interpretation is supported by Reyes and Santos (2021), who emphasized teaching as a moral practice grounded in advocacy and care. The results align with Gonzalo and Alibudbud (2024), who argued that mental health initiatives in low-resource settings rely heavily on educators' ethical commitment. This finding is also consistent with United Nations (2015), which frames well-being as a moral imperative within SDG 3 and SDG 4. Furthermore, Johnson and Smith (2024) highlighted that moral commitment among teachers is a key driver of effective school-based mental health interventions across global contexts.

### **Systemic and Cultural Constraints**

The theme *Systemic and Cultural Constraints* reflects how teachers made sense of the limitations they encountered while providing mental health support. Teachers interpreted their experiences as shaped by institutional shortcomings, cultural stigma, and policy gaps that often conflicted with their desire to help learners. These constraints included lack of training, insufficient counseling services, heavy workloads, unclear protocols, and cultural norms that discourage open discussions about mental health. Teachers' meaning-making involved recognizing that their challenges were not personal failures but manifestations of broader systemic issues. This theme demonstrates teachers' critical awareness of the structural and cultural contexts that frame their professional practice:

*"I want to help my students more, but I feel restricted by the lack of training and resources in our school. This makes me realize that the*

*problem is not just at the teacher level but at the system level.”*

*(IDI2.3.1)*

*“I interpret my difficulties as systemic because we are expected to support mental health without proper preparation or support from the institution.” (IDI2.3.2)*

*“I feel that cultural stigma around mental health makes it harder for students and families to seek help, which limits what teachers can do.” (IDI2.3.3)*

*“I see how policies, workload, and class size affect my ability to respond effectively to students’ mental health needs.” (IDI2.3.4)*

*“I make sense of my experience as a constant negotiation between my commitment to students and the limitations imposed by the system.” (IDI2.3.5)*

This theme underscores the urgent need for systemic and cultural reform in school-based mental health support. Addressing teachers’ challenges requires more than individual capacity-building; it demands institutional investment, policy clarity, and stigma reduction efforts. Schools must provide sustainable support structures, including mental health training, access to professionals, and culturally sensitive programs. Policymakers must also address workload and resource inequities that hinder effective support. Without systemic change, teachers’ efforts—no matter how committed, will remain constrained and potentially unsustainable.

This finding is strongly supported by Fernandez and Gomez (2023), who documented systemic challenges in implementing the Philippine Mental Health Law in schools. The results corroborate Cleofas and Oducado (2021), who highlighted the impact of stigma and misinformation on mental health engagement. This is congruent with Buenaventura and Lim (2023), who emphasized fragmented mental health care systems for Filipino youth. Additionally, Calderon (2024) and Gonzalo and Alibudbud (2024) reinforced the importance of context-driven, system-level solutions in low-resource educational settings.

### **Negotiating Professional Boundaries**

The theme *Negotiating Professional Boundaries* captures teachers' reflective understanding of the limits of their role in mental health support. While teachers accepted responsibility as first responders, they also recognized that they were not mental health professionals. Teachers made meaning of their experiences by carefully navigating the boundary between providing emotional support and referring learners to appropriate specialists. This negotiation involved ethical awareness, self-regulation, and collaboration with counselors, parents, and administrators. The theme reflects teachers' effort to balance care with professional boundaries to protect both learners and themselves.

### **Illustrative First-Person Accounts**

*"I understand that my role is to provide initial support, but I know my limits and when to refer students to professionals." (IDI2.4.1)*

*“I make sense of my responsibility as supporting learners without overstepping into the role of a therapist.” (IDI2.4.2)*

*“I believe it is important to recognize boundaries so that students receive proper help and teachers avoid burnout.” (IDI2.4.3)*

*“I see referral and collaboration as part of responsible mental health support.” (IDI2.4.4)*

*“I feel that knowing my limits helps me support students more effectively and ethically.” (IDI2.4.5)*

This theme highlights the importance of clear role definitions, referral protocols, and interprofessional collaboration in school-based mental health systems. Teachers need guidance and institutional backing to navigate boundaries confidently and ethically. Clear policies protect teachers from unrealistic expectations and ensure that learners receive appropriate care. This theme also emphasizes the need for collaborative mental health frameworks where responsibility is shared rather than individualized.

This interpretation is supported by Espino and Torres (2021), who emphasized the complementary roles of teachers and guidance counselors. The findings align with Hernandez and Cruz (2022), who highlighted the importance of teacher readiness and boundary awareness. This is congruent with Zamora and Cruz (2022), who advocated for school-wide approaches that clarify roles and reduce stigma. Johnson and Smith (2024) further stressed the importance of coordinated mental health systems in schools.

**Table 2. Thematic Analysis of Teachers' Meaning-Making of Their Mental Health Support Experiences**

Issues Probed	Codes / Categories	Significant Statements	Themes	Meanings / Interpretations
Interpretation of teachers' roles	Caregiver identity; Holistic educator; Second parent	“Teachers serve as second parents.” (IDI1) • “We act as caregivers, not just instructors.” (IDI3)	Teachers as Holistic Caregivers	Teachers perceived their role as extending beyond academics to emotional and psychosocial care.
Emotional and professional significance of involvement	Purpose; Responsibility; Moral obligation	“It strengthens trust and makes me feel responsible for the whole child.” (IDI1) • “It gives deeper meaning to my profession.” (IDI10)	Teaching as a Moral and Emotional Commitment	Teachers attached deep moral and emotional meaning to supporting learner mental health.
Influence of institutional and cultural factors	Policy gaps; Stigma; Resource limitations	“We are expected to act but not equipped to act.” (IDI1) • “Stigma affects how students seek help.” (IDI4)	Systemic and Cultural Constraints	Teachers made sense of their experiences as shaped and limited by systemic realities.
Balancing care and professional boundaries	Referral awareness; Role limits	“We are not therapists but first responders.” (IDI7) • “We know when to refer.” (IDI15)	Negotiating Professional Boundaries	Teachers understood their role as supportive but bounded, requiring collaboration with professionals.

### Teachers' Personal Insights Gained from Supporting Learners' Mental Health

Table 3 presents the thematic interpretation corresponding to Research Question 3. While Tables 1 and 2 focused on teachers' lived experiences and meaning-making processes, Table 3 captures the reflective outcomes of these experiences—what teachers learned, realized, and came to understand about themselves, their profession, and the educational system as a result of sustained engagement in learner mental health support. The themes that emerged—Transformative

Professional Growth, Mental Health as an Embedded and Relational Practice, The Importance of Teacher Well-Being, and A Call for Structural and Systemic Support—reveal that teachers’ experiences with mental health support were not static but deeply transformative. These insights demonstrate how prolonged exposure to learners’ emotional and psychological needs reshaped teachers’ professional identities, pedagogical priorities, and advocacy orientations. Table 3 thus illustrates that mental health support work functions as a powerful site of reflection, growth, and critical awareness among teachers.

### **Transformative Professional Growth**

The theme *Transformative Professional Growth* reflects teachers’ realization that engaging in learners’ mental health support fundamentally reshaped their professional identities and personal dispositions. Teachers described how repeated encounters with learners’ emotional struggles deepened their empathy, patience, emotional intelligence, and reflective capacity. Rather than viewing mental health support as an added task, teachers came to understand it as a formative experience that altered how they approached teaching, classroom management, and learner relationships. This transformation involved a shift from performance-oriented teaching toward holistic, learner-centered practice, where success was defined not only by academic achievement but by learners’ emotional stability, confidence, and sense of belonging. Teachers recognized that their own growth as educators was inseparable from their involvement in supporting learner well-being.

*“I realized that supporting my students’ mental health changed me as a teacher because I became more patient, empathetic, and*

*understanding. These experiences helped me grow not only professionally but also personally.” (IDI3.1.1)*

*“I learned that emotional intelligence is just as important as subject knowledge, and this realization transformed how I teach and interact with my learners every day.” (IDI3.1.2)*

*“I see my role differently now because helping students through emotional struggles taught me to value holistic development over academic results alone.” (IDI3.1.3)*

*“I became more reflective in my practice because mental health support forced me to examine my reactions, assumptions, and teaching strategies.” (IDI3.1.4)*

*“I feel that my experiences with learner mental health shaped my identity as an educator who prioritizes compassion, understanding, and growth.” (IDI3.1.5)*

The transformative growth reported by teachers has important implications for professional development and teacher leadership. Mental health engagement can be leveraged as a powerful catalyst for reflective practice, emotional intelligence development, and values-based teaching. Schools and training institutions should intentionally create spaces for reflection, mentoring, and shared learning that allow teachers to process and articulate these transformations. Recognizing mental health work as professional growth rather than emotional burden reframes teacher development in more humanistic terms. However, this transformation must be supported

structurally; without institutional reinforcement, the emotional labor required for growth may become unsustainable. Embedding reflective practice into professional learning communities can help sustain positive transformation while preventing burnout.

This theme gains support from Bautista and Cruz (2024), who found that teachers' involvement in learner well-being initiatives enhances empathy and professional identity. The results corroborate the findings of Reyes and Santos (2021), which emphasized the role of mental health advocacy in shaping reflective and values-driven educators. This interpretation is congruent with Valdez and Ramos (2023), who reported that resilience-focused engagement fosters both learner and teacher growth. Similarly, Aruta and Antazo (2021) highlighted that supporting mental health promotes deeper self-awareness and adaptive coping among educators.

### **Mental Health as an Embedded and Relational Practice**

The theme *Mental Health as an Embedded and Relational Practice* reflects teachers' insight that effective mental health support is not delivered through isolated programs or one-time interventions but is woven into everyday classroom interactions, routines, and relationships. Teachers emphasized that consistency, trust, and daily emotional presence were more impactful than formal activities alone. Mental health support was understood as relational work sustained through listening, empathy, positive reinforcement, and inclusive classroom climates. Teachers recognized that when mental health practices are embedded in instruction and classroom culture, well-being becomes a natural by-product of teaching rather than a additional responsibility:

*“I realized that mental health support works best when it is part of everyday teaching, not just special programs or activities. Small daily actions matter the most.” (IDI3.2.1)*

*“I embed emotional check-ins and supportive conversations into my lessons because consistency builds trust and safety for my students.” (IDI3.2.2)*

*“I see that relationships are the foundation of mental health support, and without trust, no program will work effectively.” (IDI3.2.3)*

*“I believe that creating a safe and caring classroom environment every day helps sustain learners’ well-being more than one-time interventions.” (IDI3.2.4)*

*“I learned that mental health becomes natural when it is integrated into classroom culture and daily routines.” (IDI3.2.5)*

This insight calls for a shift in how schools design and evaluate mental health initiatives. Rather than focusing solely on standalone programs, schools should prioritize relational pedagogy, social-emotional learning integration, and classroom-based practices that promote emotional safety. Teacher training should emphasize relational skills, trauma-informed practices, and consistency in emotional support. Additionally, school leaders must recognize that time spent on relationship-building is not a diversion from instruction but a prerequisite for effective learning. Policies and curricula should therefore allow flexibility and space for relational practices that sustain learner well-being.

This theme is strongly supported by Cabrera and Santos (2022), who demonstrated the effectiveness of integrating social-emotional learning into daily instruction. The findings corroborate Lopez and Santos (2022), which emphasized the role of safe spaces and peer mentoring in sustaining learner wellness. This interpretation is congruent with Perez and Aguilar (2022), who found that classroom-based mindfulness practices are most effective when embedded in routine instruction. Additionally, Torres and Villanueva (2024) highlighted the sustainability of peer-driven and relational mental health initiatives.

### **The Importance of Teacher Well-Being**

The theme *The Importance of Teacher Well-Being* captures teachers' realization that sustaining learner mental health support is impossible without attending to their own emotional and psychological well-being. Teachers recognized that prolonged exposure to learners' distress, coupled with heavy workloads and limited resources, placed them at risk of emotional exhaustion and burnout. Through reflection, teachers came to understand that self-care, boundary-setting, and emotional regulation were not acts of selfishness but professional necessities. This insight marked a shift from self-sacrificing narratives toward a more balanced understanding of care that includes both learners and educators:

*"I realized that I cannot effectively support my students if I am emotionally exhausted and overwhelmed." (IDI3.3.1)*

*"I learned that taking care of my own mental health is essential if I want to continue helping my learners." (IDI3.3.2)*

*“I became aware that setting boundaries protects both me and my students from harm.” (IDI3.3.3)*

*“I now understand that teacher well-being is directly connected to learner well-being.” (IDI3.3.4)*

*“I believe that self-care should be recognized as part of professional responsibility, not a personal weakness.” (IDI3.3.5)*

This theme underscores the urgent need for schools to institutionalize teacher well-being within mental health frameworks. Professional development should include stress management, emotional regulation, and peer support systems. Workload policies must consider the emotional demands placed on teachers, and leadership practices should promote supportive, non-punitive environments. Ignoring teacher well-being risks undermining the sustainability of mental health initiatives and contributing to burnout, absenteeism, and attrition. Schools that invest in teacher well-being are more likely to sustain effective learner support systems.

This finding is supported by Jacinto and Morales (2021), who documented the effectiveness of stress management initiatives for educators. The results align with Gonzalo and Alibudbud (2024), who emphasized protecting teacher well-being in low-resource mental health contexts. This interpretation is congruent with Valdez and Ramos (2023), who highlighted the reciprocal relationship between educator resilience and learner outcomes. Bautista and Cruz (2024) further emphasized that sustainable well-being initiatives must include teachers as primary beneficiaries.

### **A Call for Structural and Systemic Support**

The theme *A Call for Structural and Systemic Support* reflects teachers' collective realization that individual effort and goodwill are insufficient to sustain mental health support without strong institutional backing. Teachers articulated the need for formal training, clear referral protocols, adequate counseling services, manageable class sizes, and supportive policies. This insight demonstrates a shift from personal coping toward advocacy for systemic reform. Teachers recognized that sustainable mental health initiatives require coordinated action at the school, division, and policy levels:

*“I realized that no matter how committed I am, mental health support will not work without proper training and clear systems in place.” (IDI3.4.1)*

*“I believe schools need stronger policies and programs to support both learners and teachers.” (IDI3.4.2)*

*“I learned that collaboration with counselors, parents, and administrators is essential for effective mental health support.” (IDI3.4.3)*

*“I feel that structural support empowers teachers to act confidently and responsibly.” (IDI3.4.4)*

*“I see the need for long-term investment in mental health systems, not just temporary solutions.” (IDI3.4.5)*

This theme highlights the necessity of systemic investment and policy alignment to sustain mental health initiatives. Educational leaders and policymakers must translate awareness into action by allocating resources, strengthening guidance services, and embedding mental health into school improvement plans. Training programs should be continuous rather than episodic, and referral systems must be clear and accessible. This call for structural support aligns with broader goals of equity, inclusion, and holistic education, ensuring that mental health support is not dependent on individual teachers alone.

This interpretation is supported by Abad and Villanueva (2022), who emphasized strengthening school-based counseling systems. The results corroborate Fernandez and Gomez (2023), who identified policy and implementation gaps in Philippine schools. This finding is congruent with Zamora and Cruz (2022), which advocated for school-wide mental health approaches. Additionally, Gonzalo and Alibudbud (2024) highlighted the importance of systemic reform in advancing education-based mental health in low-resource settings.

**Table 3. Thematic Analysis of Teachers’ Personal Insights Gained from Supporting Learners’ Mental Health**

Issues Probed	Codes / Categories	Significant Statements with Attributions	Themes	Meanings / Interpretations
Personal and professional growth	Empathy; Self-awareness; Emotional intelligence	“It deepens my empathy and self-awareness.” (IDI1) • “I became more patient and reflective.” (IDI6)	Transformative Professional Growth	Mental health support experiences reshaped teachers’ professional identities.

Issues Probed	Codes / Categories	Significant Statements with Attributions	Themes	Meanings / Interpretations
Insights on effective mental health practices	Consistency; Relationships; Daily integration	“Well-being works when it is embedded daily.” (IDI7) • “Small actions make a big impact.” (IDI4)	Mental Health as Embedded and Relational Practice	Teachers emphasized sustained relational practices over one-time programs.
Reflections on sustainability	Self-care; Boundaries; Support systems	“Teachers need self-care too.” (IDI4) • “We must set boundaries.” (IDI7)	Importance of Teacher Well-Being	Teachers recognized that sustaining learner well-being requires caring for educators as well.
Recommendations for system improvement	Training; Policies; Resources	“We need mental health training and clear protocols.” (IDI1) • “Schools must invest in counseling services.” (IDI14)	Call for Structural Support	Teachers’ insights pointed to the need for systemic reforms to sustain mental health initiatives.

## Synthesis of Results

This qualitative phenomenological study explored teachers’ lived experiences, meaning-making processes, and personal insights in supporting the mental health needs of learners in school settings. Drawing from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions and analyzed using Colaizzi’s method, the synthesis of results revealed that mental health support in schools was a deeply relational, emotionally demanding, morally grounded, and systemically constrained practice. Across the three thematic analyses, a coherent picture emerged showing that teachers occupied a central yet vulnerable position in school-based mental health support. They navigated daily learner distress through empathy and care while operating within limited institutional structures. The synthesis highlighted the interconnectedness of experience, interpretation, and

insight, demonstrating that teachers' engagement in mental health support was both transformative and taxing, shaped by personal values and broader educational systems.

At the level of lived experience, teachers consistently described mental health concerns as a daily classroom reality rather than exceptional occurrences. Emotional distress, behavioral difficulties, and psychological struggles were embedded in routine teaching situations and directly influenced learner engagement, classroom management, and instructional flow. Teachers experienced themselves as first responders, often becoming the initial point of recognition and support due to their constant presence in learners' lives. These experiences were accompanied by significant emotional labor characterized by a tension between fulfillment and exhaustion. Despite this strain, teachers relied heavily on relational support practices, emphasizing trust, empathy, and the creation of safe classroom environments as the most effective means of supporting learner well-being. These findings affirmed that mental health support was not peripheral to teaching but integral to everyday classroom life.

Building on these experiences, teachers' meaning-making processes revealed how they interpreted and internalized their roles in mental health support. Teachers constructed their professional identity as holistic caregivers, viewing mental health support as inseparable from instruction and learner development. Teaching was framed as a moral and emotional commitment driven by ethical responsibility and compassion rather than by institutional mandates alone. At the same time, teachers demonstrated a critical awareness of systemic and cultural constraints, recognizing that limited training, stigma, policy gaps, heavy workloads, and resource shortages shaped and often restricted their capacity to act. This awareness led to ongoing negotiation of professional boundaries, wherein teachers balanced care with ethical self-regulation and referral

to appropriate professionals. These interpretive processes illustrated that teachers' engagement in mental health support was reflective, values-driven, and continuously shaped by both internal convictions and external conditions.

The synthesis of personal insights further demonstrated that sustained involvement in learner mental health support resulted in transformative professional growth. Teachers reported heightened empathy, emotional intelligence, patience, and reflective capacity, often redefining success in teaching beyond academic outcomes toward holistic learner well-being. Mental health support was understood as an embedded and relational practice, most effective when integrated into daily routines, classroom culture, and consistent relationships rather than delivered through isolated programs. At the same time, teachers gained critical insight into the importance of their own well-being, recognizing that emotional exhaustion and burnout threatened the sustainability of learner support. This realization prompted greater attention to self-care, boundary-setting, and peer support as essential professional practices.

Teachers' reflections also culminated in a strong call for structural and systemic support. Participants emphasized that individual commitment and compassion were insufficient to sustain mental health initiatives without institutional investment, clear policies, adequate training, manageable workloads, and access to mental health professionals. Teachers articulated the need for coordinated school-wide systems that distribute responsibility across leadership, counselors, families, and policymakers rather than placing the burden solely on classroom educators. This insight underscored the importance of aligning school-based mental health efforts with broader educational goals of equity, inclusion, and holistic development.

When synthesized as a whole, the findings revealed a dynamic and interconnected process. Teachers encountered mental health concerns daily, interpreted these experiences through moral, relational, and professional lenses, and derived insights that reshaped their identities, practices, and advocacy orientations. The essence of the phenomenon lay in the relational and transformative nature of school-based mental health support, where teachers acted as compassionate first responders within constrained systems, drawing meaning from care while bearing significant emotional and professional demands. This synthesis highlighted a central paradox in teachers' experiences. Their deep commitment and personal growth enabled effective mental health support, yet these same qualities rendered them vulnerable in the absence of adequate systemic support.

Finally, the synthesis affirmed that enhancing mental health support for learners required a whole-system approach that recognized teachers as central agents while simultaneously protecting their well-being and professional boundaries. Mental health support needed to be understood as a shared responsibility embedded in classroom practice, reinforced by school leadership, supported by policy, and aligned with broader goals of holistic and inclusive education. This integrated understanding provided a strong foundation for the conclusions, implications, and recommendations presented in the succeeding chapter.

## CHAPTER IV

### IMPLICATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This chapter presented the implications and directions for future research arising from the focus of the study on the lived experiences of teachers in supporting and enhancing mental health support for learners in school settings. It situated the discussion within the broader context of school-based mental health systems, teacher roles and responsibilities, and the implementation of mental health-related policies and programs in schools. The chapter emphasized the importance of examining mental health support practices through a contextual and educator-centered lens, recognizing the complex emotional, professional, and ethical responsibilities assumed by teachers in addressing learners' well-being. It also highlighted the role of educational institutions, school leadership, and governing authorities in shaping supportive mental health systems that enable teachers to perform their roles effectively. Finally, the chapter underscored the need for continued scholarly inquiry that deepens understanding of school-based mental health support, informs evidence-based policy and practice, and strengthens capacity-building initiatives across diverse educational contexts.

#### **Implications and Directions for Future Research**

##### **On the Lived Experiences of Teachers Regarding Mental Health Support for Learners**

The findings on the lived experiences of teachers highlight that mental health support is embedded in the daily realities of classroom life. This has significant implications for educational

practice, as it suggests that mental health concerns are not peripheral issues but integral to teaching and learning processes. Schools must therefore recognize mental health support as part of teachers' core responsibilities and integrate it into everyday instructional planning. Institutional acknowledgment of this reality can encourage the normalization of mental health conversations in classrooms and promote supportive environments where learners feel emotionally safe. Studies by Alibudbud (2023) and Malolos (2021) emphasize that untreated mental health concerns directly affect learner engagement and performance, reinforcing the need for schools to respond proactively to teachers' lived realities.

From a policy perspective, these findings imply the necessity of strengthening school-based mental health frameworks that reflect teachers' actual experiences. Policies must move beyond aspirational statements and address practical concerns such as class size, workload, access to guidance counselors, and availability of referral systems. Fernandez and Gomez (2023) and Buenaventura and Lim (2023) underscore that policy implementation gaps continue to constrain teachers' capacity to respond effectively to learner mental health needs. Aligning policy with lived experience ensures that mental health initiatives are grounded in operational realities rather than theoretical expectations.

Teacher professional development also carries important implications based on these lived experiences. Since teachers encounter mental health concerns daily, training programs must equip them with foundational competencies in mental health literacy, early identification, and basic supportive strategies. Hernandez and Cruz (2022) and Reyes and Santos (2021) emphasized that teachers often feel underprepared despite being at the frontline of learner support. Professional

learning programs should therefore be continuous, practice-based, and responsive to classroom realities rather than limited to one-time seminars.

In terms of school leadership and administration, the findings imply that principals and supervisors must adopt leadership approaches that are sensitive to the emotional demands placed on teachers. Nieves and Rivera (2024) highlighted the role of leadership in promoting supportive mental health environments. Administrators should foster collaborative cultures where teachers can share experiences, consult with colleagues, and access institutional support without fear of judgment or overload. Leadership responsiveness is crucial in translating teachers' lived experiences into sustainable school-wide practices.

Future research should expand the exploration of lived experiences to include comparative studies across different educational contexts. Studies may examine variations between urban and rural schools, public and private institutions, or elementary and secondary levels to identify context-specific challenges and strengths. Longitudinal qualitative studies are also recommended to examine how teachers' lived experiences evolve over time, particularly as mental health policies and programs mature. Such inquiries would deepen understanding of how sustained exposure to learner mental health needs shapes teaching practice and professional identity over the long term, as suggested by Calderon (2024) and Gonzalo and Alibudbud (2024).

### **On Teachers' Meaning-Making of Their Experiences in Providing Mental Health Support**

Teachers' meaning-making processes reveal that mental health support is understood as a moral, emotional, and professional commitment rather than a purely technical task. This has

important implications for teacher identity and ethics in education. Teacher education institutions should incorporate ethical frameworks of care and responsibility into pre-service and in-service training to help educators reflect on their values and boundaries when supporting learners' mental health. Bautista and Cruz (2024) and Aruta and Antazo (2021) emphasized that reflective practice strengthens teachers' capacity to respond empathetically while maintaining professional integrity.

The findings also imply that meaning-making is shaped by systemic and cultural conditions within schools and communities. Teachers interpret their roles in relation to institutional expectations, cultural attitudes toward mental health, and available support systems. Cleofas and Oducado (2021) and Zamora and Cruz (2022) highlighted how stigma and misinformation influence both teacher and learner engagement in mental health initiatives. Addressing these cultural factors requires school-wide and community-based interventions that promote mental health awareness and normalize help-seeking behaviors.

Another implication concerns the negotiation of professional boundaries. Teachers' awareness of their limits suggests the need for clearer role definitions and referral protocols within schools. Educational systems must ensure that teachers are not implicitly expected to function as mental health professionals without appropriate training or support. Espino and Torres (2021) emphasized the importance of collaboration between teachers and guidance counselors, while Johnson and Smith (2024) stressed coordinated mental health systems as a global best practice. Clear boundaries protect both learners and teachers from ethical and emotional risks.

Meaning-making also has implications for teacher well-being and retention. When teachers internalize mental health support as a moral obligation without sufficient institutional backing, they may experience emotional strain and role conflict. Valdez and Ramos (2023) and Jacinto and

Morales (2021) noted that sustained emotional labor without support contributes to stress and burnout. Schools must therefore balance moral expectations with structural support to ensure that teachers' sense of purpose does not become a source of exhaustion.

Future research should investigate meaning-making processes using narrative inquiry or longitudinal phenomenological designs to capture how teachers' interpretations change over time. Comparative studies may also explore how meaning-making differs across cultural contexts or policy environments. Additionally, research may examine how teachers' meaning-making influences their instructional decisions, classroom climate, and advocacy behaviors. Such studies would contribute to a deeper understanding of the psychological and ethical dimensions of teaching in mental health-responsive schools, as suggested by Flores and Kim (2022) and Gonzalo and Alibudbud (2024).

### **On Teachers' Personal Insights from Supporting Learners' Mental Health**

Teachers' personal insights point to the transformative impact of mental health support on professional growth and self-awareness. This has strong implications for rethinking teacher development models. Schools and training institutions should recognize mental health engagement as a legitimate pathway for professional learning, reflective practice, and leadership development. Bautista and Cruz (2024) and Reyes and Santos (2021) emphasized that experiences with learner well-being enhance empathy, emotional intelligence, and pedagogical sensitivity, all of which are critical competencies in contemporary education.

The recognition of mental health support as an embedded and relational practice also carries implications for curriculum design and classroom pedagogy. Teachers' insights suggest that mental health is most effectively supported when integrated into daily routines and instructional practices. Cabrera and Santos (2022) and Perez and Aguilar (2022) demonstrated that social-emotional learning and mindfulness practices are more sustainable when embedded in regular classroom activities. Curriculum frameworks should therefore allow flexibility for relational and emotional work without framing it as an add-on to academic instruction.

Another key implication relates to teacher well-being as a prerequisite for learner support. Teachers' reflections revealed a growing awareness that self-care and boundary-setting are essential professional responsibilities. Educational institutions must respond by institutionalizing teacher wellness programs, peer support systems, and workload management strategies. Jacinto and Morales (2021) and Gonzalo and Alibudbud (2024) emphasized that protecting teacher well-being strengthens the sustainability of mental health initiatives and improves overall school climate.

Teachers' insights also highlight the need for systemic and structural reform. Participants consistently emphasized that individual commitment cannot substitute for institutional support. This implies that policymakers must invest in counseling services, training programs, and clear mental health protocols. Abad and Villanueva (2022) and Fernandez and Gomez (2023) underscored that effective mental health systems require coordinated policy action, adequate funding, and leadership commitment. Structural support ensures that teachers' insights translate into practice rather than remaining aspirational.

Future research should build on these insights by examining the long-term impact of teacher engagement in mental health support on career trajectories, leadership roles, and retention. Mixed-methods studies may explore how personal insights correlate with measurable outcomes such as teacher resilience, job satisfaction, and learner well-being. Research may also investigate how schools that institutionalize teacher insights into policy and practice differ from those that rely solely on individual initiative. Such inquiries would contribute to evidence-based approaches for sustaining mental health support in schools and advancing holistic education aligned with SDG 3 and SDG 4, as articulated by the United Nations (2015) and Johnson and Smith (2024).

### **Overall Implications and Directions for Future Research**

The overall findings of this study have important implications for educational practice, leadership, and policy, as they collectively demonstrate that mental health support for learners is an essential and inseparable component of teaching. Teachers' lived experiences, interpretations, and personal insights reveal that mental health concerns are embedded in everyday classroom realities and directly influence learning, behavior, and relationships. This implies that schools must move away from viewing mental health as an auxiliary service and instead recognize it as a foundational element of quality and inclusive education. Integrating mental health support into instructional planning, classroom management, and school culture aligns with evidence showing that learner well-being is a prerequisite for academic engagement and success (Alibudbud, 2023; Garcia & Manuel, 2021; Malolos, 2021).

From an institutional and leadership perspective, the study implies the need for stronger, more coherent school-based mental health systems that support teachers in their frontline roles. While teachers demonstrate commitment, empathy, and moral responsibility, their efforts are often constrained by limited training, lack of guidance counselors, heavy workloads, and unclear protocols. Educational leaders and governing authorities must therefore provide enabling structures such as continuous professional development, access to mental health professionals, clear referral mechanisms, and supportive leadership practices. Research by Abad and Villanueva (2022), Espino and Torres (2021), and Nieves and Rivera (2024) emphasizes that effective mental health support requires coordinated action at the school and system levels, rather than reliance on individual teachers alone.

The findings also highlight significant implications for teacher education and professional development. Teachers' meaning-making processes and personal insights suggest that mental health support work contributes to professional growth, emotional intelligence, and reflective practice. Teacher preparation programs should intentionally incorporate mental health literacy, ethics of care, boundary-setting, and trauma-informed practices to prepare educators for the realities of contemporary classrooms. Hernandez and Cruz (2022) and Reyes and Santos (2021) underscored that teachers often feel unprepared despite being expected to respond to learner mental health needs. Embedding these competencies in both pre-service and in-service programs can strengthen teacher confidence and effectiveness while protecting their well-being.

Another critical implication concerns teacher well-being and sustainability. The study shows that prolonged emotional labor without adequate institutional support places teachers at risk of stress and burnout. Schools must therefore institutionalize teacher wellness initiatives, peer

support mechanisms, and workload management strategies to ensure that mental health programs are sustainable. Jacinto and Morales (2021), Valdez and Ramos (2023), and Gonzalo and Alibudbud (2024) consistently found that supporting teacher well-being enhances the effectiveness and longevity of learner mental health initiatives. Protecting teachers' mental health is not only an ethical responsibility but also a strategic investment in school effectiveness.

In terms of policy, the findings imply the need for stronger alignment between national mental health policies and school-level implementation. Although policies such as the Mental Health Act signal commitment, gaps remain in translating these mandates into operational support within schools. Fernandez and Gomez (2023) and Buenaventura and Lim (2023) emphasized that policy success depends on adequate funding, capacity-building, and context-sensitive implementation. Policymakers must ensure that schools are equipped to operationalize mental health initiatives in ways that reflect local realities and cultural contexts, including efforts to address stigma and misinformation (Cleofas & Oducado, 2021; Zamora & Cruz, 2022).

With regard to directions for future research, several areas warrant further scholarly inquiry. Future studies may expand the scope of participants to include learners, parents, guidance counselors, and school leaders to provide a more holistic understanding of school-based mental health systems. Comparative studies across regions, school types, and educational levels could illuminate context-specific challenges and effective practices. Longitudinal qualitative research is also recommended to examine how teachers' experiences, meaning-making, and insights evolve over time, particularly as mental health policies and programs mature (Calderon, 2024; Gonzalo & Alibudbud, 2024).

Future research may also adopt mixed-methods approaches to examine the relationship between teachers' qualitative experiences and quantitative indicators such as teacher resilience, job satisfaction, learner engagement, and academic outcomes. Additionally, intervention-based studies could evaluate the effectiveness of specific training models, relational practices, or school-wide mental health frameworks. Cross-cultural research, as suggested by Flores and Kim (2022) and Johnson and Smith (2024), may further enrich understanding by situating Philippine experiences within global perspectives on school-based mental health.

Finally, the implications and directions for future research underscore the need for a whole-system, evidence-based, and human-centered approach to mental health support in schools. Recognizing teachers as central agents while ensuring adequate structural support is essential for sustaining learner well-being and achieving inclusive and equitable education. Continued scholarly inquiry in this area will contribute to the development of responsive policies, effective practices, and supportive educational environments aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 3 on well-being and Sustainable Development Goal 4 on quality education (United Nations, 2015).

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